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Blitzing a trail through cyberspace

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THE Internet has often been heralded as the last free space on the face of this planet. Unless someone figures out a way to pull the power cord out of the entire system that has over 70 million connections, then free speech will continue to thrive on the Net.

The Establishment realises this, the Opposition has made good use of it, and now Umno Supreme Council member Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad is fully exploring the potentials of taking politics to cyberspace.

Driving around the swanky Desa Sri Hartamas business area in Kuala Lumpur, largely populated by restaurants and cafes, one can hardly miss a large neon sign which reads: www.shahrir-umno.com

Though just several months old, the website has received over 17,000 hits. Quite impressive, seeing that several independently set up Umno websites, have trouble breaching even the 1,000-hit barrier.

So what makes Shahrir's website different from the rest of the pack? The most probable answer: Shahrir himself.

A party maverick known (and often abhorred) for his fiercely independent views, Shahrir had developed his little space on the World Wide Web as an extension of his own political psyche, offering forthright analysis and criticism on current issues and party affairs.

"I want to show another face of Umno, unlike those seen in other (Umno-oriented) websites. We (Umno members) can have independent views," said Shahrir, who is also the Johor Baru Umno division head.

Shahrir does not seem to be perturbed by the possibility of anyone disagreeing with his views, and instead, would lead us to believe that he actually looks forward to the opportunity of an online dialogue. Neither does he seem to be concerned about the repercussions his views might invite from those within and outside Umno.

"I have nothing to lose. As I have said many times before, I have no ambitions for higher office. People find this hard to believe," said Shahrir, when met at the office of Saske Associates Sdn Bhd, the company in Desa Sri Hartamas which manages www.shahrir-umno.com.

Indeed, we do not doubt Shahrir, 51, for the man has pretty much walked his talk. Throughout his controversial political career, Shahrir has proven to have taken a less conventional path, and one many would deem risky or even politically suicidal.

Recently, he incurred heavy criticism from some party leaders for remarks published in online newspaper *malaysiakini*. Shahrir was reported to have said the main cause of BN's defeat in the Lunas by-election was the "character" of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Today, one cannot blame Shahrir if he is smug about the fact that he was successfully elected by members into Umno's highest governing body despite his firebrand ways and his estrangement from the party between 1987 and 1989.

"Today, the only reason why I am active in politics, is because I feel I have not fully repaid my gratitude to the people who have supported me, especially in Johor Baru, for their trust in me all these years.

"I think my being elected into the Supreme Council is a reflection of the members' desire to see an independent voice. And everyone I meet tells me to continue speaking up," said Shahrir, who at 34, was once the country's youngest MP and Minister.

But it is a lonely mission in cyberspace, for he laments the difficulty

of getting others to contribute to www.shahrir-umno.com

"People do not seem to like to write. I cannot understand this. We can talk for hours at the stall, discussing politics, but no one really wants to put their thoughts down in writing." Of course, he says this with a knowing smile.

He shrugs at the lack of politicians willing to contribute and says he will welcome anonymous contributions, provided the articles are well argued.

The effort to establish the website was mainly driven by his concern that senior Umno members may have lost the ability to communicate with the younger generation who today constitute a large proportion of Internet denizens.

"I thought of going to cyberspace to articulate my views. Maybe I can contribute some of my experience. I want to show, that in Umno, there is more than just one view," said Shahrir.

"Umno is like a Parliament, a democracy. Democracy in this sense means that you have the right to speak your mind, responsibly and with facts. Leave it to the people to judge.

"Those who wish to listen to me have the right to enter my website. Those who don't, well they don't have to enter it. It is democracy in its purest form. You have a choice!"

Regarding the reliability of information found on the Internet, Shahrir has faith that the public can judge for themselves.

"You have to be able to differentiate what is opinion and what is fact. But I believe we are educated enough to differentiate (between the true and the false)."

The open forum that the Internet allows is much welcomed by Shahrir, who believes that such free discussions can be beneficial to the country.

"It is good that we can talk, but we must set aside our emotions, and not take comments personally. You must also read the reasons behind why comments are made. This is the first lesson I learnt in politics - that I have to take comments without being emotional."

The website has undergone several improvements, including a more printer-friendly presentation to enable visitors to quickly print selected articles, while a feature has been added to enable easy forwarding of articles to others. Readers' letters sent to the website are promptly posted, but with their real names omitted and known only to him. He also personally replies any e-mail sent to him.

Visitors to the website can hardly miss the prominent masthead, which features a portrait of Shahrir, and the tagline Yang Terbaik Di Kalangan Kita (The Best Among Us).

Saying that the tagline does not allude to him, Shahrir said it was chosen based on the Islamic practice of choosing the most knowledgeable person to lead a group prayer. This concept, he maintains, embodies the essence of politics and Government.

Armchair or part-time observers of Malaysian politics would perhaps find it worthwhile bookmarking www.shahrir-umno.com in their browser; for beyond the legible text, there lies a barometer from which one can gauge some of the undercurrents affecting the party.

The Best Among Us? Well, if it were to apply to the website, for its commendable attempt at being independent, www.shahrir-umno.com could just possibly meet the mark.

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