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Update NRD information to beat phantom voters

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THE statement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed that there are 2.8 million phantom voters in the country is disturbing more than somewhat. In the first place 2.8 million represents about 25 per cent of registered voters and the incidence cannot therefore be coincidental.

Secondly, it is said that the existence of phantom voters has been going on for the last 30 years and infringes on the independence and integrity of the Election Commission.

As leader of Umno and the Barisan Nasional, Dr Mahathir's concern is understandable because according to him, the existence of phantom voters has affected the results of the election in some constituencies. Of greater concern is the PM's contention that phantom voters is the work of Opposition political parties in order to win seats they are contesting. He further says that the situation would not have been possible without the connivance of officials in the Election Commission.

Who then is a phantom voter? He is a citizen who is otherwise qualified to vote at a general election (or by-election) but is registered to vote in a constituency different from that he is residing at.

In the past, registration of voters was held annually for a fixed limited period. To register, the intending voter had to be physically present and produce his identity card to the election official. The address given in his identity card determines the constituency at which he can vote.

As a general election is held once in four to five years, the voter may have moved in the meantime to another constituency arising out of his employment or business and failed to notify the Election Commission of his new address. On polling day he turns up to vote at the constituency in which he is registered. The Election Commission cannot be faulted when original voters subsequently become "phantoms" either by choice or default.

In the past, however, there have been instances when voters in one constituency have been "transferred" en bloc to another constituency and the discovery only made on polling day. It was said at the time that this was due to computer error.

The contention of Dr Mahathir that such "transfers" were actually engineered by Opposition parties is serious. How could this be done? In the past, during the voters' registration period, workers of political parties assisted in the registration of voters by going from house to house to register voters. Could it be that false addresses were given in the application form so that the voter could vote in a constituency other than his own?

However, bearing in mind that everybody wants to vote at a place nearest to his house, then the voter must be a consenting party to the fraud to vote at another place. And a political party that perpetrates such a fraud can only do so with the connivance of active party members or supporters.

How can the phantom voter be exorcised?

The basic requirement is that personal information data of citizens held by the National Registration Department must be absolutely up-to-date. And of course more effective enforcement of the law which requires that people who change their address must notify the NRD within a certain period.

Failure to do so is an offence but it has been some years now that there have been prosecutions for this offence. The photos of wanted dangerous

criminals appearing in newspapers and television are frequently that of 12-year-olds!

The law should require that every person should change his identity card every 10 years, that is to say at age 20, 30, 40, 50 and 60. His latest photo must be taken at the NRD office at the time of application for renewal. The importance of correct and up-to-date information held by NRD is crucial to the records held by the Election Commission and especially during polling itself.

The EC has since introduced a system of continuous voter registration throughout the year. Persons on attaining the age of 21 can now register as voters at any post office with the address as given in the identity card to determine the constituency he will cast his vote. Any change of address should be notified to the EC which will cross-check with the NRD and subject to confirmation by the voter. On polling day, if the voter produces his identity card which has an address which is not within the constituency, he should not be allowed to vote.

Every political party should make it their business to scrutinise the electoral rolls regularly and bring to the attention of the EC any inaccuracies found. Indeed that is the purpose of the EC publishing the electoral rolls periodically.

In this day of computerisation, adequate laws and administrative transparency, there is no room for inaccuracies or phantom voters in our electoral rolls.