

04/03/2004

Polling in the electronic age

Syed Nadzri

FUNNY how quickly time has slipped away, when you get an SMS from your colleague saying some incomprehensible stuff like v r still @ EC. wll b L8.

I received that dispatch about 4pm yesterday from a reporter I had assigned to the Election Commission headquarters just after the Prime Minister had announced the dissolution of Parliament.

Although it took quite a while to figure out that all the reporter wanted to tell me was that he was still at the EC and that he would be back late, at least the message came quickly and, again in today's jargon, in "real time", whatever that means.

Welcome to the first general election of the 21st Century. It's my seventh as a newsman, the inaugural one being in 1978 when I excitedly performed mail-boy duties as a rookie reporter mostly doing sports stories in The Star.

Back then Parliament only had 154 seats (now it's 219), Kelantan had just recovered from a political storm which saw the bitter end of Pas' brief marriage to Barisan Nasional, the short-lived Berjasa was born, Tun Hussein Onn (then a Datuk) was Prime Minister and colour TV came to Malaysia.

The typewriter was king of the newsroom. And since mobile phones were unheard of and to be on-line meant to be talking on the fixed-line dial phones, election stories and results had to come the conventional way from our reporters on the scene. They called in to read out their stories and somebody on this side, with the phone held between the neck and shoulder, would type out.

In this age of laptop computers, broadband services and satellite TV, covering the election and getting information from the political parties is effortless. Your mobile phone will buzz all the day through with SMS messages about what's happening, some from people you don't even know.

Just yesterday the NST reported that Pas party organ Harakah is providing SMS news-alerts, while Malaysiakini has introduced its "news headlines" SMS service. Both services promise to deliver a minimum of between three and five news items daily to mobile users.

Most of the political parties have their own websites where the latest information is posted. The EC, too, has gone online, providing regular updates. Reporters on the ground now rarely have to queue up at the public phone booth to send their despatches. It's all done in a split second through cyberspace.

I was a reporter in Penang when elections were called in 1982 by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was the new Prime Minister then. Of course, Penang was riding on a wave of support for him as he had just pulled off a coup of sorts by getting Abim leader Anwar Ibrahim to join Umno and stand in the Permatang Pauh parliamentary constituency.

As in the other States, Barisan Nasional did well in Penang, winning 25 of the 27 state seats and seven of the nine parliamentary seats, including a huge win by Anwar in what was considered Pas territory in Seberang Prai.

I vividly remember being assigned to cover the result of the contest for the Pengkalan Kota state seat, where MCA stalwart Lim Kean Siew faced DAP first-timer Teoh Teik Huat. I can recall that the situation was very tense as there was counting and recounting past midnight at Dewan Sri Pinang - until Teoh was declared winner.

But there was even more excitement in the 1986 election. I was still in

Penang, Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu (then without the Tun) was firmly at the helm of the State Government and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was Umno liaison chairman.

Parts of Penang seemed to be in an anti-establishment mood at that time. Many university lecturers were card-carrying members of PSRM and DAP was gaining strength.

At the height of the election campaign, Lim would ask Koh Tsu Koon (then his political secretary and still without a Tan Sri) to call for a Press conference almost every day to ward off the DAP assault. And Lim's favourite tagline then was "We will dismantle every piece of the unholy alliance of DAP and Pas".

BN retained control of Penang - but only just, winning one less parliamentary seat than DAP and losing 10 seats to the opposition party in the state assembly.

But the excitement had only just begun because the formation of the State Government had to go through the extreme litmus test of BN solidarity as Umno and Gerakan were locked in a battle for dominance - until a formula was eventually reached and accepted after the intervention of federal leaders.

I was transferred south to Malacca just weeks before the 1990 election and was told to shadow Tun Ghafar Baba, who was Deputy Prime Minister, during the campaign.

Things were a lot better then in terms of logistics and communication. The newspaper bureaus were already phasing out the typewriters and hopping on the electronic age. Ghafar made it even easier because he used the simple straightforward approach when dealing with voters and the Press.

He would sometimes grab the microphone and address the congregation at the end of Friday prayers and rattle out "the Government is spending berbillion billion ringgit" stuff. And he would repeat that the following Friday at another mosque.

Malacca was, and still is, BN territory through and through, so the adrenalin was not flowing as much as it did in Penang, although DAP had quite a few vocal elected representatives like Lim Guan Eng and Sim Tong Him to provide the spark every now and then - especially against Chief Minister Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik.

The next two elections, in 1995 and 1999, must be still fresh in our minds. I went through both, just as I am doing now, at the NST headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

This time around, the TV stations are sure to give a minute-by-minute account of the situation on polling day and I just have to click on the computer to read what the Prime Minister had just said when he announced the dissolution of Parliament.

What's happening in Kedah right now? Wait, let me SMS Razak in Alor Star...