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Spinning venom and the art of the possible

By Syed Nadzri

BOOKS - the sort written with pens gleefully dipped in venom - provide some of the most glaring signs about the often rancorous art of Malaysian politics. And when these books surface on the front shelves in the shops as they do now, they offer a quick reminder that the Umno elections are not too far away.

You surely can't find titles more colourful or more ridiculous than some of them - Nasi lemak for the VIP, Daulat Umno (Long live Umno), Mahathir berhenti, Pak Lah ganti, siapa mati (Mahathir retires, Pak Lah takes over, who dies), Pak Lah pilih siapa? (Who will Pak Lah pick?), Mahathir mudah lupa (Mahathir forgets easily), etc.

Some are crude. But not all of them are so maliciously intended as to provide perfect fodder for the libel lawyers. And the mere fact that such books are in the market, in addition to the pages and pages of poison-pen letters being circulated or gigabytes of disparaging materials on the Internet, is enough to show the intensity of Malay politics and the passion it drives even in the innocent bystander.

It reflects to a certain extent too, from the prolific products of some writers, how their fertile minds work.

Just the other day Umno Information chief Tan Sri Megat Junid Megat Ayob spoke on this subject, saying candidates who sponsor writers to boost their image ahead of the party elections will face disciplinary action.

For reasons that are not quite clear, the veteran politician did not touch so much on mercenary writers on an attacking spree but appeared more concerned about writers who apple-polish or act as spin doctors for candidates.

"Asking people to write good things about you when you are vying for posts contravenes the party's election ethics," the NST quoted him on Friday.

Sure. Asking people to write or say only the good things about you is downright disgraceful under any circumstances and not just restricted to glory-seeking politicians in party elections. But it remains to be seen how this regulation is going to be enforced since even a simple story in the newspapers about, say, a Datuk X, could be interpreted in many ways and misconstrued as campaign propaganda or spin-doctoring, and is thus against the code of ethics.

Worse, it could be the work of Datuk X's main rival to do him in and get him disqualified. And don't forget. This is the cyber age where a message on the Internet or on the cellphone is like a needle in a haystack.

It is understood that at least one aspirant has started his campaign in earnest, producing among others a VCD conveying the good stuff about himself. What's wrong with that? But he could run foul of the regulations if it comes down to splitting hairs.

Guidelines just issued by the Umno secretariat on the code of ethics for the elections in fact appear to be the toughest ever in the history of the party.

For instance, under Clause 3.1 dealing with abuse of power and money politics, a party member is not allowed to use his position to garner support for himself or for anyone else. In short, no direct campaigning. On top of that, the receiving or giving of gifts (monetary, services, travel fares, entertainment) is strictly prohibited even if the gifts have got nothing whatsoever to do with the elections. And this ban extends to the

member's spouse and children as well as his agent.

Under Clause 3.3, there shall be no campaigning or slandering through the media or through the publication of books and magazines.

It will be interesting to see how Umno members, most of whom are known to be so passionate about party politics especially in the company of their other colleagues when election is around the corner, would react to the various restrictions when the crunch begins. And the critical moment will start from next week till the third week of September when Umno holds its elections for the key office-bearers during the annual assembly.

The party's 19,232 branches throughout the country will hold their elections first next month, followed by the 191 divisions in July and, judging from the rumblings on the ground, this is going to be quite electrifying. It is the first under a new leadership, first after the general election where rewards and penalties count, first after the redelineation of divisions and, most significantly, one that could probably establish a lineage of the party's next echelon of leaders.

With four months to go, a few have already openly declared their intentions to contest for the vice-presidency (three posts) and many more for a coveted seat in the supreme council (25 elected posts).

The intensity of the challenge could be seen from the last party election because for the supreme council seats alone, 68 candidates contested. This time around, there is likely to be more. Even with the various restrictions on campaigning, members are attuned to making it the art of the possible.

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