

**Dr M, Internet genie can't be put back in the bottle**

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COMMENT Once the pride of the nation and a signal-call that Malaysia was truly-headed for developed country status, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and the attendant promise of Internet freedom is now under review based upon a change of mind by its own architect.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the author of 'Blogging to unblock', said recently that there should be no absolute freedom as the Internet had the "power to create problems and agitate people".

We already know that there is no absolute freedom and one can be sued for defamation or, as a recent case reported in this news portal, charged and convicted for sedition! So, the idea that one can get away with publishing, disseminating or any other illegal activities because one is 'online' is a fallacy.

How come, readers must ask, our prescient and forward-looking former PM had not anticipated the "power of the Internet"? Here was a champion of free speech during the Abdullah Ahmad Badawi government who resorted to the Internet to highlight the shortcomings of his successor because there were apparently no other platforms for him to air his views.

Of course, Mahathir the blogger used the Internet very well to "create problems and agitate people" against former premier Abdullah. He is not shy to continue attacking his successor and, in Johor recently, he still attributed BN's weakness to the Abdullah legacy.

Mahathir also added, for good measure, that the Internet needs to be curbed to "prevent all this filth (pornography) from coming into our country". All this sounds really hollow especially when everyone knows that they can get access to all sorts of filth in the pasar-malam and even some major shopping complexes. It has been this way for the past decade and Malaysians have not gone sex-crazy for it.

Perhaps what is equally dangerous for the rakyat is all the Wikileaks-type of revelations about corruption that is destroying political careers as we speak. Surely this is a good thing?

More to do with BN's loss of support

Obviously, this sudden change of heart about the Internet has more to do with the BN's continual loss of support rather than the moral standards of Malaysians. The erosion has been so bad that by 2008, the ruling coalition actually lost its two-thirds majority in parliament. All polls, government related or otherwise, indicate that the BN has lost the middle-ground permanently.

The Internet, as Mahathir knows, is part of the advances in digital technology. It is irreversible and the changes associated with this new medium of communication are permanent. Governments around the world, China included, have had to adapt and change their style of

governance.

Even the most conservative governments like Burma have taken steps to open up and embark on political change. The country used to check every single email that was being sent out and some emails never reach their destinations because government censors were so overwhelmed that they simply deleted messages.

But the volume is so large and the technology so pervasive that even Burma decided that it was better to join the rest of the world rather than risk a violent overthrow like in the Middle-East.

Perhaps in this arena, older politicians like Mahathir and Rais Yatim need to give a wider berth to Najib Abdul Razak. The PM has a very strong personal rating because he engages with his public.

Obviously, as Mahathir himself said, Najib has to deal with a lot of legacy issues including those from Mahathir's 22-year rule. It is better for the government to deal with the erosion of support by way of government transformation rather than taking draconian and almost Luddite-type attitudes like internet censorship.

Of course, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is already saying that we need to distinguish between "censoring" and "enforcing the laws of the land". The reality is that the BN-led government continues to suffer from a crisis of credibility and its actions these past few months have not created much public confidence in its ability and the ability of its agents to be impartial.

Content more important than the medium

But most importantly, Mahathir and those who think like him must be reminded that the Internet is merely a medium of communication and the content and the person providing the content is far more important than the medium itself. Create all the firewalls but it will not ebb the erosion of support the BN is suffering from because there is now a very serious crisis of confidence in the ability of the government to lead the country, manage the economy and fight corruption.

The government is also perceived to be interested only in taglines and wonderful pronouncements. The transformation that it is suppose to bring is not felt on the ground. Yes, the economy seems to be growing at a healthy pace according to Bank Negara, and all the statistics indicate that we are doing okay but like in most high-middle income economies, the real improvements in living standards is felt mostly by the high-income groups.

At the time of the creation of the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998, there was every reason to believe that the Internet need not be censored and Mahathir probably believed that those who use the Internet would be middle-class, educated and had the best interests of Malaysia at heart. This was a period in time when it seemed impossible for the BN to lose the middle-ground, who prized stability over all else.

But 14 years later, a different generation of Malaysians has come of age and the Internet became

their preferred medium of communication as Mahathir envisioned. Malaysia is a richer and more materially-advanced country, with the bulk of its population living in urban areas.

But an unforeseen consequence has occurred - this new generation of Malaysians began to have aspirations beyond the car, condominium and cash. They want all of those things and more. Beyond mere middle-class aspirations is good governance, the fulfillment of the promise of a fair and equitable society that Mahathir promised in Vision 2020. This is the type of aspiration that has brought Mahathir's own daughter to the streets during the recent Bersih rallies.

It is really not enough to attempt to put the Internet genie back into the proverbial bottle. The government has to hold fast to its commitments to Malaysians and truly transform, getting their act right before the next general elections and run the risk of losing even more seats in parliament.

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