

DATE: 12/3/2008

# Cyberspace is now the new frontline

NST - 12/3/2008

ON Saturday night, as he flew over the Indian subcontinent, a Malaysia Airlines pilot asked for the regular update on weather conditions at home. What he received from Malaysian air traffic control included unexpected news — that three states had swung to the opposition.

The updates had obviously been culled from Internet news websites, as official results had yet to be released at the time.

So great was the demand for news of the results that online news portals such as *Malaysiakini* and the new Malaysian Insider, were overwhelmed and crashed on Saturday night.

A bit player in the 2004 elections, the Internet in Malaysia came of age with the 12th general election.

While the Barisan Nasional was retained in government, it saw its worst result since 1969.

It failed to retake Kelantan, and lost Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor, which fell to a ragtag alliance of opposition parties.

Indeed, retired BN leader Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik on Monday acknowledged that BN's opponents had skillfully exploited the Internet.

"The opposition used the blogs to reach the voters," said the retired Gerakan president and former energy, water and communications minister, referring to web-logs or online journals.

This is what Gerakan, which was almost completely routed, must master to win back the electorate, Lim said.



## COMMENT

By Lee Siew Lian

The power of cyberspace was apparent months ago, even before polling began on Saturday. Secretly filmed clips of former health minister Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek saw hundreds of thousands of hits on the video-sharing website YouTube, for instance.

So did the so-called "Lingam clip" of a man purportedly fixing judicial appointments.

Testament to the reach of this medium is how the best-known phrase from the clip — "correct, correct, correct" — became a refrain among voters who turned up in unprecedented numbers for DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat campaign rallies in urban areas.

The Internet has been available in Malaysia since the early 1990s, but penetration remained low for years.

The Internet played a relatively small role in the 2004 election, but Internet penetration has surged since then with the continued roll-out of high-speed broadband facilities.

Last year, there were more than 13.5 million Internet users, or just under one in two Malaysians. This was a third more than in 2005, when there were 10 million users.



The worldwide web has allowed parties like the DAP, PKR and Pas, which have long complained of bias in the traditional media, to reach voters in their offices and homes.

It enabled young, first-time candidates, such as DAP's Hannah Yeoh and PKR's Loh Gwo-Burne to draw record crowds of more than 10,000 to their hastily organised ceramah in USJ, Selangor, in the first week of campaigning.

Yeoh won the Subang Jaya state seat, and Loh, who had filmed the infamous Lingam clip, the Kelana Jaya parliamentary seat.

Compared with the opposition's regularly updated web-logs, BN component parties had hardly any web presence.

Google searches on the DAP, PKR and Pas far outstripped those on BN, Umno and other component parties. Google searches on Pas and PKR in Malay far outnumbered those in English, and were highest in the smaller cities and towns such as Kuantan and

Kajang in Selangor.

The English website of MCA's Chew Mei Fun had two event items — the launch of the site in late February and a meet-the-people session on March 5.

In contrast, her opponent from the DAP, the web-savvy technopreneur Tony Pua, had months before garnered a loyal following through his web-log where he posted campaign updates and video clips of ceramah.

He won the Petaling Jaya Utara parliamentary seat, beating Chew by almost 20,000 votes.

For the party's e-campaign, the DAP put blogger-turned-politician Jeff Ooi, who won a seat in Penang, in charge.

But it was what happened on Saturday night that underscored how Malaysia has come to rely on cyberspace for information.

Frustrated by the slow release of official results, legions of voters turned away from television broadcasts to news websites. Indeed, TV news anchors themselves eventually began citing unofficial results carried by Internet news websites.

"Television just wasn't cutting it, so everyone turned to the Internet," said P'ng Hong Kwang, editorial director of Malaysian Insider.

Quietly launched just a month ago, the website saw traffic jump almost immediately. On Friday, the eve of polling, traffic surged 10-fold, which P'ng said was "exceptional".

He had no data for Saturday, and the site remained inaccessible until

yesterday.

Unlike its newly fledged counterpart, the popular *Malaysiakini* news portal, now nearly a decade old, was prepared for the surge of volume.

Its adviser, technopreneur Dinesh Nair, was on hand to set up mirror websites, alternative copies of the *Malaysiakini* site, as a temporary measure to cope with the sudden increase in traffic.

"Instead of reviving a site when it crashed, we just moved on to a new mirror site," said Nair.

*Malaysiakini* eventually crashed, too, but it was due to an unrelated attack on the US server hosting its website, he said. Until it crashed, it was receiving up to a million hits an hour.

Cyberspace is now the new frontier for BN.

Within BN, Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad, of Umno, has perhaps the most committed online presence. He has faithfully, if irregularly, posted entries and news on his weblogs and kept an online itinerary of events since 2006.

Claiming the honour in 2005 of being the only BN leader to maintain a blog, Shahrir has even updated his online journal with pictures taken at the counting centre on Saturday night.

The BN component parties will need many more people with his kind of savvy if it is to make headway in this new world.

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