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Was this the election made on the Internet?

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THEY are calling it a political tsunami; a watershed election; a wave of change. On Sunday, Malaysians woke up to news that took their breath away — that the mighty Barisan Nasional was not so mighty after all, and that their challengers had succeeded in wresting away four states.

That the informal coalition of PKR, DAP and Pas will now have a substantial and potent voice in parliament. That old-timers and heavyweights from BN had been shown the door.

Even the most optimistic watchers did not envision the scale and magnitude of this unmistakable clarion call from Malaysians of all races and religions. Political winners were shocked, leaders of component parties flabbergasted.

How was it that nobody had seen it coming? I do not think it was due to overconfidence among the incumbents nor humble expectations among their opponents. While Malaysia does not have the sophisticated opinion polls or indicators of other developed countries, it had been generally accepted by all sides that there would be some telling defeats for the ruling coalition.

What was unexpected was that the slap on the hand turned out to be a big whipping and a punch in the stomach. But the reality is thankfully not as violent as this analogy.



The factors resulting in the defeat have been repeated many times — worries about the economy, higher prices, more co-operation among opposition parties, ethnic frustrations and dissatisfaction with the administration.

And while there were many disgruntled groups, history shows us that an unorganised or fractured civil society movement hardly succeeds in making dents.

This time, however, there was another actor in the play which shattered the glass; an actor who had been underestimated, not least by the powers that be.

The Internet movement is now a player in Malaysian politics, and those who refuse to believe that may have to rethink their views. Many may think the Internet influence may not reach outside the urban masses but this is rather simplistic. According to international statistics, Malaysia is now at a 60 per cent In-

ternet penetration rate. In our population of around 24.8 million, we had 3.7 million Internet users in 2000. Last year, this figure was nearly 14 million. This means that in eight years, we had a user growth of 302.8 per cent. These are figures about Internet usage and not computer ownership or Internet subscribers, which are related but different things.

The reality is that kampung folk and those in rural areas now have kith and kin who have moved to the towns and cities. And like a bad review of a restaurant that multiplies itself effortlessly by word of mouth, unflattering information, true or false, travels even faster with cyberworld denizens, who then spread the word outside it.

Whether the news is fact or fiction is another story. This time around, civil society organisations, activists, and the nation's youth had a powerful tool at their disposal, and they used it like a weapon. The fact that Malaysia now has members of parliament who are bloggers with no significant grassroots "bases" or previous political experience is something that has pricked the attention of international observers.

Various alternative news sites sprung up in the run-up to the election; youth organisations used multiple methods such as mass emails.

Facebook, blogs and networking groups to spread awareness about voting, and the opposition became a realm not one of parties alone, but one where the arts community, political bloggers, and civil society at large combined forces.

Ironically, the best gift that the government has given to our civil society, it would seem, is the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Bill, in which the government committed to ensuring there would be no Internet censorship.

Other countries like the United States and Britain have seen politicians seeking to reach the electorate via the Internet. That the US presidential campaigners have used the Internet to both bolster their own efforts and attack rivals, and that British parliamentarians are on Facebook, are telling signs indeed.

Malaysian politicians have a love-hate relationship with the Internet, and it has resulted in many angry denunciations from BN leaders. Information minister Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin's snubbing of bloggers several times did not go unnoticed in cyberworld, where there are infinitely more casual bloggers than sociopolitical bloggers. His speeches and his interview about the Bersih gathering with an international news network were also passed along with

much comment and ridicule for added effect, through many computers.

What are the lessons learned? That the Malaysian citizenry is far more sophisticated than the government figured. That the effects of development, globalisation and information through ones' fingertips have changed the landscape. The idea that the masses are generally simple-minded and easily influenced by "mob mentality" or fear should be rethought.

Even as the surprising results were still being calculated, many sites were already launching a pre-emptive strike as it were, calling for calm, asking for no public celebrations. Many Malaysians were already putting out caveats to new winners from PKR, DAP and Pas. "Make sure you fulfil your promises" is common. Another was a precise warning: "Rest assured, We vote you in, We can vote you out."

It is a simple but effective message that goes for all winners and losers of the election. That when the electorate speaks, it expects to be listened to.

Perhaps this is the strongest reminder for leaders, now that the tsunami has receded. It's time for the clean-up, and it's back to business.