

Internet, The Malaysian Political battlefield
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By Alan Ting

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 7 (Bernama) -- It has undoubtedly become the Malaysian political "battlefield". The Internet, of course.

Almost everyone is using the Web to disseminate political information.

Has the situation gone out of control? Well, some media observers think so.

"There is no way one can censor the flow of information, either on Twitter, Facebook or YouTube," says MCA Central Committee member Datuk Ti Lian Ker.

Messages can be conveyed to readers around the world at the click of the computer mouse, and there is no control over content, he says.

"This is definitely a cause for worry for most of the regulators and the government as the identity of the users and message senders can be concealed," he adds.

Ti feels that many of the problems associated with the Internet have not been properly handled.

Says Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) senior lecturer Dr Jeniri Amir: "The move by the government to tighten control over the traditional media has prompted more people to pursue the so-called 'truth' online, enabling the minor online media to dominate public opinion."

He says that even the Barisan Nasional (BN) has appointed some bloggers to balance the one-sided voice on the Internet but adds that this has not been as effective as desired because the arguments of the group against the authorities are more appealing.

"Also, the online attackers of the government seem to be a more concerted group that works for the opposition parties, harping on specific issues, truths or untruths aside," he tells Bernama.

This, he says, raises an alarm because the trend is for some of the young Internet users to just blindly accept and believe what they read online, thus making it difficult to put forward a rational and civilised debate.

The "battlefield" has extended even to the Malay voters in the villages who, despite not being Internet-literate, are easily kept informed by their IT-savvy children of what is going on online, including all sorts of rumours, half truths and even made-up stories tarnishing the government's image.

Dr Jeniri cites the July 9 illegal rally in Kuala Lumpur as a case in point.

"Stories and visuals of ordinary citizens participating in the rally have been spread widely as heroic deeds while mocking video clips have been posted on YouTube. These have proven to be a great challenge for the BN," he says.

He says that while the Internet can be a tool to disseminate information, the majority of Malaysians still needs to learn how to use the Web properly, particularly in relation to conveying political messages as there is a need for rational discussion and balanced viewpoints.

"If some netizens continue to distort the concept of democracy, the authorities will not listen to their abusive remarks while mature voters will also reject them after some time, upon realising that they are already so horrible before they have even come to power," he said.

The Internet "battlefield" can also lead and mislead, he points out, saying that given the vast amount of information, many still opt to simply follow the herd whenever they fail to distinguish right from wrong.

"Like having got lost in an ocean, they can only trail others in the hope that they can eventually reach land or, at least, not feel lonely in their swim to shore. This shows that there is a lack of independent judgment and thinking," he says, adding that many mistake information for knowledge.

Some politicians argue that many people still blindly accept whatever is put up on the Internet without giving much thought, and they regard it as the truth and share the information with their peers.

As Kota Belud MP Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan says, the "truth" becomes increasingly intense, and people gradually find it difficult to accommodate other views and approaches and cannot tolerate any grey areas.

"In this age of information, people must train themselves to think and analyse before actually accepting the information presented to them.

"Before we fully believe it, we must raise some doubts, thoroughly identify the nature of the message and, if possible, verify it," he says.

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