

Najib: Election 2013 first social media election
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By Syed Jaymal Zahiid

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 27 — Election 2013 will be Malaysia's first "social media election", Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said today, echoing views that sites like Facebook and Twitter will be a key battleground to Barisan Nasional's (BN) defence of Putrajaya.

"The coming months will be a fascinating period for people in both politics and the Internet.

"I can confidently predict that this will be Malaysia's first 'social media elections'," the BN chairman (picture), who himself has more than 1 million followers on Twitter and some 1.2 million "likes" on Facebook, told the Malaysian Social Media Week event here.

The country's sixth prime minister had recently admitted that social media could be a double-edged sword for his party Umno, conceding that the net was among the chief causes of BN's record losses in the last polls.

In an interview with CNN anchor Fareed Zakaria at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Switzerland last month, Najib said that voters were getting more educated and critical, attributing this to the advent of information technology.

"I see the advent of ICT, social media as both something good, but also our bane... could be our Achilles' heel as well," he said.

BN lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the historic 2008 general elections that saw four states — Perak, Penang, Kedah and Selangor — falling to the loose coalition of PAS, PKR and DAP, that later formed Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

Political analysts have said that Malaysians are turning more to the Internet to get information, which has led to politicians setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts to reach out to voters, bypassing mainstream media that has seen lower newspaper circulation and smaller broadcasting audiences.

There are currently about 13.6 million Facebook users in Malaysia out of a 28.3 million-strong population, which is a 48 per cent penetration of the population, according to monitoring website socialbakers.com.

According to the Oxford Internet Institute, Malaysia along with Brazil, has the highest Twitter use in the world.

A total of 29 per cent of Facebook users in Malaysia are aged between 25 and 34 years.

Najib has about 1.3 million fans on his Facebook page, compared to Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's 428,371 Facebook fans.

Analysts said much of PR's success came from its pivotal early recognition and exploitation of the Internet as an effective campaigning platform.

To this day, the Internet is still seen an opposition-dominated domain.

But Najib said his coalition is fast catching up. Speaking at the forum, the BN chairman boasted about how his government had fully utilised social media to promote voter participation in policy-making.

He cited his use of social media through Google Moderator to seek public input on the 2013 Budget.

“Thousands of people took part, and a number of their ideas ultimately made it into the final Budget,” Najib told the forum.

Analysts said Najib’s savvy approach to social media, like inviting his Twitter followers to watch a live broadcast of his favourite football team, Manchester United, play at his official residence in Putrajaya, had charmed the younger demographic.

A recent survey released shows this demographic forms the largest pool of fence-sitters with about 5 million of them now registered voters. This new tech-savvy group will be the new kingmakers at Election 2013.

To tap into the numbers, both sides of the political divide have made it compulsory for their rank and file to set up Twitter accounts as a part of their campaigning key performing index.

The 13th general elections, which is expected to be the fiercest in Malaysia’s political history, will be called within weeks.

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