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## Feeding that addiction

### The Malaysian penchant for fast politics is growing stronger

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MALAYSIANS love their by-elections; and as Scandinavians like to say, “a cherished offspring is given many names”.

And so, we see how Malaysian by-elections get endlessly analysed, and how their significance gets exaggerated.

This enthrallment with by-elections is quite understandable if we consider how strongly the Barisan Nasional (BN) and the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) had dominated politics, and how politically sensitive information is kept inaccessible.

A pathological thirst for knowledge about political sympathies was bound to develop under such circumstances.

In the days before March 8, 2008, by-elections were interesting mainly for how much they revealed of the BN’s reputedly formidable and well-funded electoral apparatus. Instead of looking for shifts in voter support, one looked for the relative efficacy of government manipulation of voters and votes.

After that fateful date, the concern about by-elections is reminiscent of a tsunami watch. No doubt, we are talking about waves on little lakes, and not oceans, since a by-election involves only a restricted group of voters.

But nevertheless, an indicator is an indicator. It points to a certain direction, and so one can always stretch the line to reveal trends.

During the by-election period, every constituency somehow becomes representative of the national electorate.

Perhaps, this is an unavoidable effect of Mr Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s prolonged retirement from power, but also of his postponed reformation of a stubborn political establishment that suffered —and in many ways still suffers — from hubris. But more definitely, this is the result of the hastened pace of the consumption of political news.

In an age of fast food and fast fortunes (and misfortunes), five years between every general election is simply too long a time to wait. Loving politics as much as they do, and with the Internet exciting their craving for the latest juicy indication of political trends, Malaysians are now hooked on fast politics as well.

The latest by-election, and the sixth since Mr Abdullah became Prime Minister in October 2003, is taking place in Kuala Terengganu on Jan 17.

The first four were easily won by the BN. All happened during his first term in office. The fifth was held after the March 8 general election last year, and on Mr Anwar Ibrahim's home turf of Permatang Pauh. There, the BN lost badly.

Now, barely five months after Permatang Pauh, Malaysians are getting their next attack of ballot fever.

At a time when the state of federal politics remains foggy, the perceived national significance of the Kuala Terengganu by-election is necessarily exaggerated.

First, it is being considered, not as the last by-election of the Abdullah period, but as the first of the Najib Abdul Razak period. This is partially strengthened by the fact that Mr Najib, as Deputy Prime Minister, is commander-in-chief for BN's by-elections, including this one. A loss for BN would be seen as his personal loss.

Second, a BN victory would mean that Mr Najib does enjoy popular Malay support. A BN defeat will thus be taken as a sign that he lacks support outside Umno.

Third, a win for Mr Anwar's opposition — although only one seat is up for grabs — will be taken to mean that the voter revolt against the BN continues steadily. A defeat will not necessarily say the opposite because the parliamentary seat in question has been a BN seat.

Fourth, since the Chinese vote may turn out to be the decisive factor, a loss for BN will be taken as a sign that the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Umno's main ally, is once again failing to deliver the numbers.

A BN win, on the other hand, will indeed be taken to mean that the MCA is still a force to be reckoned with.

The thing is, someone has to win. That is the nature of the game. And in a case that is too close to call in advance of the campaigning itself, one should not take the result in itself to signify anything definite.

But besides the perceived and exaggerated significance of all the presently imaginable results, there are meatier matters that bear studying about the by-election. All these have to do with the campaign period itself.

How the parties and the coalitions behave and fare in the campaigning period is what is of greater interest. And the mass media, old and new, will be watching and reporting every step and misstep.

A clearer idea about the unity of the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Umno, or the lack of it, and the cohesion of Pakatan Rakyat and the BN, or the lack of it, can be gained when these bodies suffer the strain of campaigning.

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