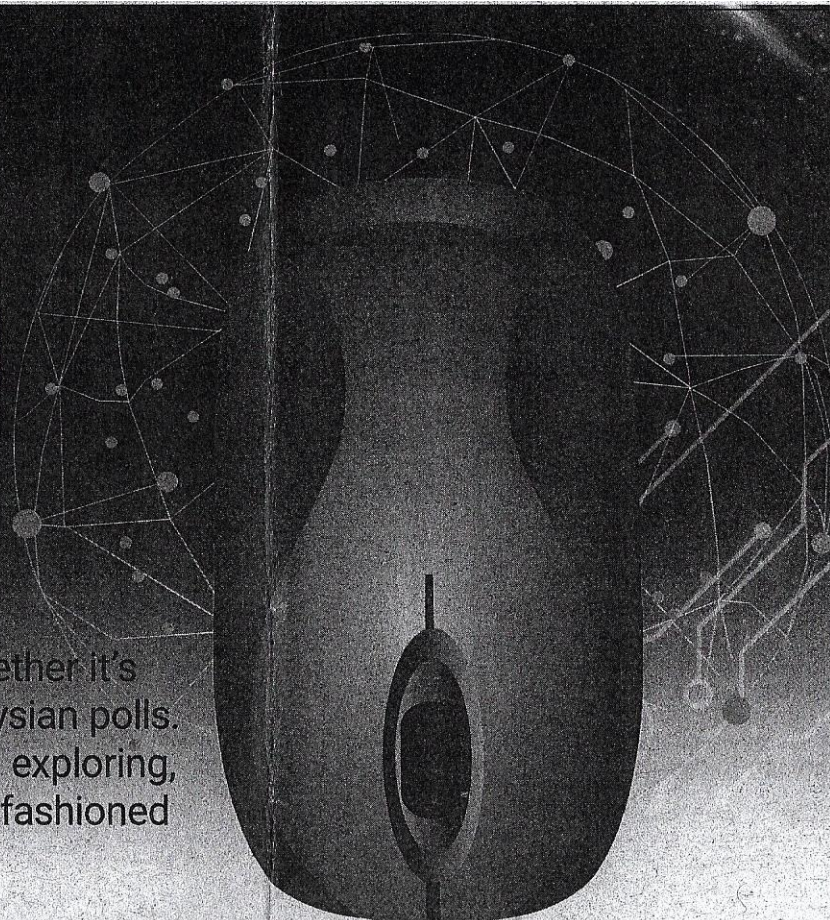


Electronic voting on the cards?

The Election Commission is studying whether it's feasible to have electronic voting in Malaysian polls. Some experts believe this option is worth exploring, while others say it's too risky and the old-fashioned ballot paper is still the way to go.



A lot more needed to make evoting work

EXPERTS are divided about using electronic voting (evoting) in Malaysian elections, with some citing the risks and stressing that public confidence must be won first.

Some say evoting is good and possible with blockchain technology, while others believe it is best to stick with the tried and true paper ballot. This is because although ballot papers are still at risk of being manipulated, it would be on a smaller scale compared with online votes, which could be severely compromised by cyberattacks.

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) political analyst Prof Datuk Seri Dr Syed Arabi Syed Abdullah Iddid says it is beneficial to have evoting but implementing it will be problematic.

"We need the infrastructure, facilities, manpower, management and the money.

"Currently, we do not have them and may not have them even in GE16," he says, referring to the 16th General Election; the coming general election is GE15.

Currently, Malaysia needs to improve its existing infrastructure, Syed Arabi feels.

"One example of this is when online classes are conducted and several areas do not have access to the Internet.

"In evoting, you need strong, steady infrastructure.

"You need to assure voters and

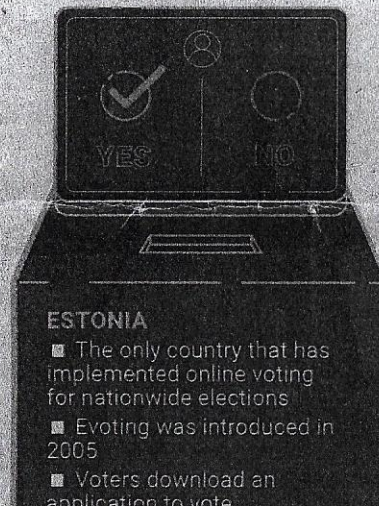
Stories by YUEN MEIKENG
meikeng@thestar.com.my

EVERY vote counts in an election, and there's a chance those votes could be cast electronically in Malaysia some day.

Electronic voting, or evoting, is when voters make their selection on a computer or digital device.

It can be done in two ways: using the Internet (also known as Ivoting) or without the Internet through designated voting machines.

The Election Commission (EC) is currently conducting studies on whether such electronic voting is reliable and viable for polls in Malaysia.



ESTONIA

- The only country that has implemented online voting for nationwide elections

- Evoting was introduced in 2005

- Voters download an application to vote

ing that more voters will be encouraged to exercise their right to elect their government when the time comes.

To increase voter turnout, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) urges the EC to give absentee voting

rights to all out-of-region voters, especially those from Sabah and Sarawak who are based in Peninsular Malaysia and the other way around.

"With absentee voting rights, we propose such out-of-region voters be allowed to vote in advance where these

and all necessary documents instead of having to rely on postal services to deliver the ballots," he says.

International Islamic University Malaysia law professor Prof Nik Ahmad Kamal says voter turnout depends on many factors, including a sense of responsibility and the realisation that voting is important to decide the future of the country.

"If the majority of the people have this attitude, turnout will be good.

"Party supporters will always have the motivation to vote in elections. But fence-sitters will usually come to vote to support political parties that they think

"At the moment, the EC has not made any decision yet since the study is still ongoing," the commission tells *Sunday Star*.

With Covid-19 cases still spreading, some have previously called on the election authority to introduce evoting to prevent crowded polling stations.

To this, the EC says, "We will work closely with the Health Ministry and the National Security Council to ensure the proper Covid-19 standard operating procedure is in place for GE15 (15th General Election)."

For now, the EC is focusing on preparations for the general election, which must be held by September 2023 at the latest.

application to vote

voters can vote at centres at

"The EC is expecting an increase in the number of polling centres, stations, election officials, logistical tools and equipment for the upcoming GE15.

"Currently, we are focusing on training election workers and officials on the ground," it said.

The EC says the need for more polling facilities and workers is due to the increase in voters – a result from the move to lower the minimum voting age to 18 and allowing automatic voter registration.

"With these moves, the number of registered voters spiked from 15 million to 21 million," it says.

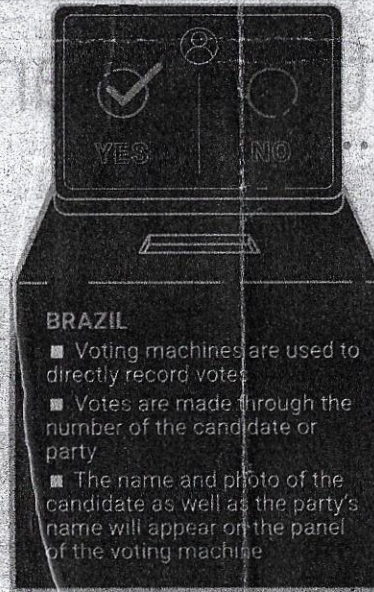
The lowering of the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 and automatic voter registration have been in place since Dec 15 last year.

On Monday, it was reported that the EC was studying the possibility of using electronic voting among methods that would allow Malaysians to vote while away from their home states. This includes those from Sabah and Sarawak who are in other states in Malaysia when elections are held.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law and Parliament) Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar said he had raised this matter with then EC chairman Tan Sri Azhar Azizan Harun.

For the time being, the EC encourages Sabahans and Sarawakians residing in Peninsular Malaysia or vice versa, to apply for a change of constituency based on their current place of residence.

Evoting or not, experts are hop-



least three days before polling day," Bersih chairman Thomas Fann says.

He believes such a system is better than postal votes, which is at risk of manipulation by politicians when money is offered for blank postal ballots.

"We also call for a total reform of postal voting for all Malaysians who are living overseas during elections.

"The current methods used by the EC to process postal vote applications is too archaic and manual," he says, adding that Bersih estimates that the potential pool of eligible overseas voters is about 1.7 million.

"We also call for the use of the MySPR portal (where voters can check their status, myspr.gov.my) to allow postal voters to download PDF version of ballots

will win the election, or candidates that they think have credibility and potential," he says.

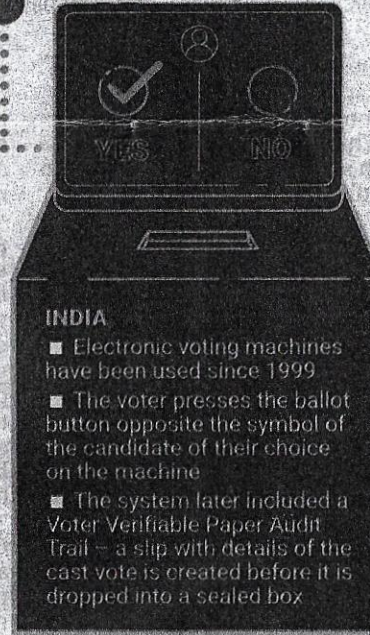
Young and new voters will likely come to vote to enjoy the feeling of voting for the first time and exercising their rights as citizens.

If voters are not happy with the political parties over certain matters, they may turn away as a mark of protest, Prof Nik Ahmad notes.

"But general elections in Malaysia have often garnered more than a 70% voter turnout.

"Unless something happens to deter the turnout, that percentage should be easily achieved for the coming GE.

"This time, 18-year-olds are eligible to vote. Thus, it is up to political parties to strategise to ensure that the new group of voters will come and vote for them," he says.



political parties that everything is above board and there is no suspicion at all of any wrongdoing or ill-intentioned acts," Syed Arabi adds.

Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) chairman Thomas Fann believes that evoting is certainly a means that is worth exploring for elections.

This is especially true with blockchain technology, which is a growing list of records called blocks, securely linked together using cryptography. The technology makes it difficult to alter data once it is recorded, making things like cryptocurrency (or virtual money) possible.

"I believe with the wide acceptance of blockchain technology it is not a question of if but when evoting will be a reality for elections.

"However, it is not something that should be hastily implemented without wide public support because the most critical element of an election is the level of public confidence in the process," Fann says.

People must have complete confidence that the voting platform is secure, secret and yet transparent to election monitors.

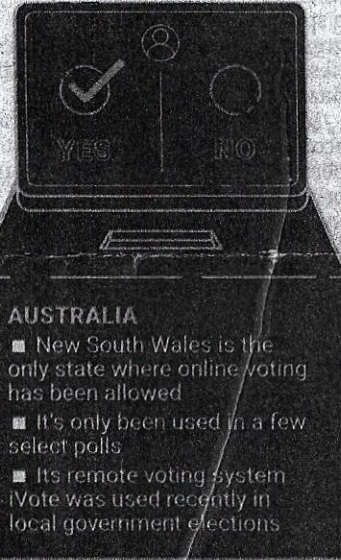
"To arrive at such a level of confidence, the EC has to engage the best technologists and all stakeholders," Fann says.

IIUM law professor Prof Dr Nik Ahmad Kamal Nik Mahmud says evoting has a lot of advantages, especially convenience and ease of use.

He believes it will also help increase voter turnout, especially for overseas voters and young voters aged 18 to 21.

"The young generation who are more IT savvy will welcome such a move.

"The older generation and people who are not as exposed to



Evoting in other countries

Sources: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, others.

technology will need to be taught and guided," he says.

Nonetheless, the main challenge of evoting is the problem of perception.

"No matter how secure and protected the system is, there will still be allegations of rigging and compromised security," he points out.

As such, it is important to deal with the trust deficit and bad perception of evoting before implementing any such system.

"Do it on a small scale first, such as in a by-election, local council election, or local university student election, and generally gauge the reception of voters and the public," suggests Prof Dr Nik Ahmad.

Old school is best

For Universiti Sains Malaysia senior lecturer Azmil Tayeb, conventional voting by ballot paper is still the way to go.

He believes this is true even with blockchain technology, which is said to be hacker-proof with a decentralized nature that makes it a much harder target.

"It still doesn't address the vulnerability at the front-end of the evoting process: voters' devices used to send the eballot.

"Once compromised eballots have been secured into blocks, they become permanent and unchangeable. That's the worry," he says.

Azmil says Estonia is the only country in the world that conducts evoting using the Internet for nationwide elections. He points out that most countries do not use completely online evoting (without special machines) as an option for high stakes elections.

Azmil says at present, evoting cannot offer a similar degree of

CALENDAR



Better planning:

In some countries, politicians don't see elections as a gamble or hope to ambush the Opposition by calling a surprise election.

— Freepik.com

In guessing election date, we plan to fail

When there's so much uncertainty and speculation over something as important as a general election, not much of the work of governing can get done.

confidence in the secrecy and verifiability of the vote compared with conventional voting.

“Our public Internet infrastructure is still highly vulnerable to outside interference.

“In evoting, interference can take place from the moment voters cast their eballots until election officials count those eballots,” he says.

Aznil says the weakest point in the evoting ecosystem is the voters’ own electronic devices.

“Unbeknown to voters, malware – software designed to wreak havoc and steal private information – might have infected their electronic devices.

“Malware in voters’ electronic devices can manipulate choices voters make on their eballots or attach themselves to eballots to infiltrate the central database used by election officials to store the votes,” he says.

To avoid external hackers and security issues, the evoting ecosystem could be disconnected from public Internet networks.

“This can be achieved by only carrying out evoting at polling stations or designated kiosks in selected government buildings.

“However, it means that voters would still have to make their way to public places to cast their votes, which is not ideal during a pandemic.

“Sadly, when it comes to evoting, this is as close as we can get to it, given the set of technical challenges we are facing now,” he says.

In May, PKR held its party elections through online voting but there were some attempts to hack into the Adil app that was used for voting.

The party’s election committee head Dr Zaliha Mustafa, however, says they managed to prevent such incidents. The committee also investigated alleged manipulation of the online voting process.

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

To avoid such failure, the human race developed calendars and clocks so that the future can be broken into years, seasons, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes and seconds. We limit uncertainty by planning our planting and harvest, our consumption, savings and investments.

You could even say that civilisation is a process of minimising uncertainties. That is even true of political life: leaders no longer serve till their last breath. They now have contract jobs.

So could you tell me: Why do we have to guess the date of the 15th General Election (GE15)?

Why can’t police and teachers plan their family holidays ahead knowing when they will be busy over the elections?

Why can’t investors and fund managers plan their portfolios knowing when elections will be called?

Most importantly, why can’t ministers plan their work in governing their country knowing when they will have to defend their seats?

Look at other countries where election dates are predictable. In the United States, since 1845, the presidential election always falls on the first or second Tuesday of November.

In 2007, Canada passed a law that requires general elections to be held on “the third Monday in October” every four years, and this has been true in two out of five elections since. All its provinces and territories have similar provisions.

Fixed election dates are natural for presidential countries like the United States because

the president and the lawmakers are separately elected and both are meant to serve full terms.

However, with some flexibility it is possible in parliamentary countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand, and in Malaysia too.

First, early elections must be made possible when the government loses its parliamentary majority. This is necessary if an ousted government believes that it currently enjoys popular support while the Parliament that ousted it has an outdated mandate.

Second, for whatever reason, if a supermajority, say two-thirds, in Parliament believes that they should have a new mandate or the voters should be given the chance to make their new choice, then Parliament must be allowed to seek early dissolution.

Why, in this idea of a full or fixed term Parliament, can only a supermajority – but not a simple majority government – seek an early dissolution?

If a government can shorten its lifespan to win a snap election, it is detrimental to the Opposition, which cannot choose the timing of the race. More importantly, this convenience would also incentivise governments to think short-term and make populist promises that may not be sustainable. The ultimate losers would then be the economy and society.

Now, in the Malaysian context, the royal power to reject an early election need not be affected. The idea is only to make early dissolution difficult, impossible without overwhelming support from the House. In the opposite scenario, the King

could still withhold his assent even if two-thirds of MPs back the prime minister in seeking dissolution.

Notably, curbing the unpredictability of the election calendar can be done even without Constitutional or legal requirements.

The German Bundestag is only expected to serve 36 to 48 months but all eight elections after the end of the Cold War (in the 1990s) have been held in the second half of September.

Like-wise, New Zealand’s general elections since 2005 have always been held within the months of September to November at a three-year interval.

How do countries like Germany and New Zealand get a regular or predictable electoral calendar without legally imposing it?

It is in their political culture. Their political elites do not see elections as casinos. They do not bet on a good time. When in government, they don’t hope to ambush the Opposition by calling a surprise election. Even when losing popularity, they finish their term because that is their duty.

This is possible because their citizens do not look at politics as pure Machiavellian games and laugh when, actually, they themselves are the sacrifice on the political altar.

Those citizens expect governments to govern, not play gimmicks. They won’t tolerate nonsense like “waiting for inspiration for a snap poll” or “going into an election with an undebated budget”.

It is time for Malaysians to reject sophistry like “we need an early election to produce a

strong government”. Who can guarantee an early election would not produce a hung Parliament if half of Malaysia is covered by water in November?

Should we have another election if no party again wins a simple majority? If we can then deal with another hung Parliament, why can’t we deal with it now?

Incidentally, post-Cold War Germany and New Zealand, from 1996 to 2000, always had hung Parliaments. But this has not stopped Germany from becoming Europe’s strongest economy or New Zealand from having one of the world’s best management of Covid-19.

For all their loud noises, those who want an early election may not have the power to enforce it. If Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaacob does not want to seek an early dissolution, can his party afford to sack him?

We are most likely to see the speculated election date being postponed from September to November, then to next March, and maybe next May, June, July or even August.

With such looming uncertainty, nobody can really plan for the months to come. Not police or teachers. Not investors and fund managers. Most importantly, not ministers when we need them to manage the 3Es – economy, epidemics and environment – Crisis.

So Malaysians, why must we continue to plan to fail?

Prof Wong Chin Huat is a political scientist at the Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development, Sunway University, Malaysia. The views expressed here are solely his own.