

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This article examines the basis for continued government control over the mass media in Malaysia, even though many of the main outlets are privately owned. The peculiar features of the Malay polity, with its official policies of assistance for Malays, as opposed to people of Chinese and Indian origin, is outlined as an essential background to understanding the mechanisms of media control. In the press, the combination of political party ownership of the main publications, and extremely stringent licensing conditions mean that alternative voices struggle to gain a hearing. In the case of broadcasting, a strong state sector is complemented by commercial companies that are owned by associates of the ruling party. The Internet has provided more problems for the government. Despite the fact that the main local ISP collaborates very closely with the government in tracking activity on the web, and the fact that there have been cases of persecution directly following from this surveillance, oppositional forces have had some online successes. Alongside the web of ownership, the government also has a battery of legal measures that it uses to control the media. Both press and broadcasting must be licensed, and this power is held by ministers who do not have to give any reason if they decide to revoke a permit. Most repressive of all is the Internal Security Act, bequeathed by the British and still in active use today. One measure of how effective these levers of control are is the performance of the media in elections, where they systematically foreground and praise the ruling party while denigrating or ignoring oppositional parties.

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The advance of democracy is a positive development for the nation which should not be impeded because of its effects on the fortunes of those currently in power in Malaysia. Basic rights and due process must trump political expediency in any true democracy. To continue to deny citizens their rights and freedom is to indulge in an ultimately fruitless battle against the people.

ARDA -- The Alliance for Reform & Democracy in Asia

Introduction

As Malaysia moves into the new millennium and the era of globalisation, it does so with much trepidation. In the last three years the country was hit by both economic and political crises and these situations have inevitably spurred a crisis in access to information.

When Southeast Asia's tiger economies began to crash in July 1997, Malaysia was one of those hard hit. The country's media was, as expected, in constant denial of the seriousness of the crisis. A very optimistic and, of course, official version of the economic situation was constantly provided to the populace in the local media. The mainstream newspapers at that time were constantly reporting on ministers choosing a simpler lifestyle and accepting a cut in their allowances to help the economic situation. More serious analysis and reporting of why the stock market crashed, and the implications of Ringgit devaluation on Malaysians at large were however virtually absent. It was only when the GDP growth registered a negative 6.8%, the Ringgit depreciated over 30% against the US dollar, and public funds such as the Employee's Provident Fund were used to bail out some companies related to those in the ruling elite and prop up the share market, that people began to cry out for more transparency and information.

The economic crisis inevitably led to a political crisis, particularly at the point when the Prime Minister sacked his Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. The subsequent arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, initially under Internal Security Act and later on charges of sodomy and corruption, was widely publicised and sensationalised in the mainstream media. Even before the alleged crime was tried in court, the media already carried out its own trial, and this raised concerns in the Bar Council as to whether this would allow the court to conduct a fair trial of the case.

If these events illustrate how a lid is put on the local media, the foreign media is certainly not spared censorship and control. The Prime Minister has often reacted with anger when the foreign media provided negative accounts of the country's economic situation. Rather than counter with accurate facts and figures, the Home Ministry prefers to censor dissenting views. For example, BBC's world news programme is not subscribed to because it insists that its programme be aired without censorship (*New Straits Times*, May 16, 1996). Furthermore, all foreign programmes transmitted through satellite MEASAT have to undergo a one-hour filtration period to enable censorship of negative elements (*The Star*, July 5, 1997). Apart from insistence on censorship, the government has also disallowed and intercepted transmission. During the Commonwealth Games, foreign broadcasters tried to send video footages of street demonstrations by the pro-reform movement formed subsequent to Anwar's arrest. However, the broadcasts was jammed, and the Minister of Information argued that while there is free flow of information, foreign media could not have full and uncontrolled access to government facilities (*The Star*, September 24, 1998).

The Prime Minister believes that the local media has a vital role to play and that this is to positively project the government's development plans so as to woo international capital flows and foreign investment in this age of globalisation. The foreign media has no business in meddling with the affairs of another state.

The spate of events not only gives us a glimpse of the authoritarian culture we are in but also the ineptitude of the mainstream media to serve in furthering the democratic process.

Raymond Williams (1962) aptly pointed out that in a democracy, freedom to do and freedom to answer have to be provided, and one way of ensuring a balance between freedom and responsibility is to make sure that as many people as possible are free to reply and criticise. He further maintains that no one group should be given the monopoly to exercise that responsibility for us, but we ourselves have to exercise the right to reply, the right to criticise and compare, and the right to distribute alternatives.

However, the Prime Minister does not share this sentiment. For he states that: "Democracy is not the easiest way to govern a country, More often than not it fails to bring about stability, much less prosperity. It is disruptive because it tends to encourage sudden changes in policies and directions with each change in government" (*The Malaysian System of Government* 1995, 9). He has never failed to impress on the local media that: "for a society precariously balanced on a razor's edge, where one false, or even true word can lead to calamity, it is criminal irresponsibility to allow that one word to be uttered" (Mahathir Mohamad 1985). These statements reflect his belief that some form of authoritarian rule is necessary to ensure economic and political stability and good governance, and this includes stringent control of the media and other institution in the country.

This is not unusual, as many leaders of developing nations adhere to this ideology, which very much stems from modernisation and growth theory; where proponents like Ithiel de Sola Pool (1967, 26) believed that "order depends on somehow compelling newly mobilised strata to return to a measure of passivity and defeatism from which they have been aroused by the process of modernisation. At least temporarily, the maintenance of order requires a lowering of newly acquired expectations and levels of political activity." Authoritarian rule is thus seen as a necessary evil for the time being to ensure the development of traditional societies, which includes Malaysia.

This aspect of authoritarianism has been well entrenched in post-independence Malaysia. To understand why undemocratic procedures and institutions are sustained, we need to understand the complex interplay of race and politics in contemporary Malaysian society. There are three major ethnic groups in contemporary Malaysia: the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. With a population of just over 21 million, the Bumiputeras (literally meaning "sons of the soil," include the Malays and other indigenous minorities such as Kadazans, Ibans, Muruts and Bajaus who are settled in East Malaysia and the Orang Asli); made up 62 percent of the population while the Chinese made up 26 percent and Indians and others made up 10 percent. During the time of colonial rule under the British, the Chinese and Indians were brought in to work in the rich tin mines and rubber plantations (see Jomo 1987 and Hua 1983). This has affected the social configuration of the country.

The years following Malaysia's gaining independence in 1957 saw rapid economic growth. However, there was widespread belief that there was a situation of growing inequality among the different ethnic groups. The Malay community was confined to the rural areas, whereas the Chinese dominated the towns and also much of the economy. The economic dominance by the Chinese was seen as the main cause of the economic backwardness of the Malays. Although this belief is over-simplistic and sweeping, it was accepted as the ruling logic.

On the other hand, the Chinese community perceived the Malays as holding the political reins of the country, dominating the civil service, and therefore being in a position to endorse policies that discriminated against the Chinese.

This belief regarding both communities originated from the "divide and rule" strategy of the British colonialists, where business opportunities were opened for the elite Chinese capitalists while at the same time upper-class Malays were streamed into the civil service. This demarcation of roles according to ethnic backgrounds laid the base for ethnic consciousness as well as conflict.

Tensions between the two ethnic groups erupted into riots after the elections in May 1969. Following the riots, a strong central government structure was set up in which the Executive dominated and controlled democratic practices. Subsequently, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to ratify inter-ethnic relations through its two pronged objectives of:

1. Reducing and eventually eradicating poverty by raising income levels of all Malaysian, irrespective of race; and
2. Accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance so as to reduce and eventually eliminate identification of race with economic function.

It is in this light, that the government took steps to provide privileges like quotas for government jobs, licenses, contracts and scholarships, to help elevate the economic status of the Malays. More specifically, the government projected that by 1990, the Bumiputeras should have a 30 percent stake in the corporate sector. Hence, trust agencies such as Perbadanan Nasional Bhd (Pernas) and Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB), were set up to acquire corporate assets for the Bumiputera as a community.

One impact of the implementation of the NEP on politics is that it lends credence to the notion that the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), understands the problems and complexity of the country's multi-racial society, due to its commitment to different races and their needs. The Barisan Nasional, or National Front, is a coalition of 14 political parties in which the three main component parties represent the three main ethnic groups. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) represents the Malays; the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) represents the Chinese; and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) represents the Indians.

Here, UMNO, the main component party in the coalition, portrays itself as the sole defender of Malay rights, while the other two main component parties, the MCA and the MIC, project themselves as the protectors of the Chinese and Indian interests respectively. Herein lies the ruling logic and ideology that the BN therefore deserves the support of Malays from both the urban and rural areas, and also the non-Malays that benefit from the development programme of the government.

However, Gomez (1999, 37) points out that with the implementation of NEP a number of measures were taken to help Bumiputeras acquire capital and land; improve their education and employment pattern; as well as imposing on companies to restructure their corporate holdings to ensure at least 30 per cent Bumiputera ownership. When many public enterprises were developed to accelerate Bumiputera participation, the Chinese capitalists soon realised that MCA could not be depended on to protect their interest by influencing policy decisions, particularly with such strong hegemony of UMNO. This resulted in Chinese businessmen having to find ways to accommodate Malays in order to have access to the means to accumulate wealth.

When Mahathir took over as Prime Minister in 1982, he had ambitious plans of turning the country into a nation that is fully developed and integrated into the global economy. This is clearly seen in his Vision 2020 programme that is supposed to provide the focus and direction for Malaysians, especially in the private sector, to set bigger goals for greater achievement. Within this scheme, collaboration between the private and public sectors is encouraged to ensure the sustenance of the nation's comparative advantage, and to promote its competitive edge in the global market. As such, the nation needs to overcome nine strategic challenges as laid out in the Vision:

1. Establish a united Malaysian nation made up of one Malaysian race;
2. Create a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society;
3. Foster and develop a mature democratic society;
4. Establish a fully moral and ethical society
5. Establish a mature, liberal and tolerant society;
6. Establish a scientific and progressive society;
7. Establish a fully caring society;
8. Ensure an economically just society, in which there is fair and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth, and
9. Establish a prosperous society with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

Within the wider scheme to push the country fully into a market economy, which is envisaged to become fully integrated into the global economy as well as to fully pursue the NEP objectives, privatisation and liberalisation plans were on the policy agenda of Mahathir's government. Although privatisation moves seem quite in opposition to the earlier steps taken to create public enterprises with the view to redistribute wealth and create opportunities for the Malays, Jomo (1997, 80) contends that privatisation may have been pursued by Mahathir as a policy tool for the promotion of Bumiputera capitalism.

Taking the example of the privatisation of Telecoms Malaysia, Kennedy (1989,12 quoted in Lent 1991) proved that its main objective is to create a Bumiputera-dominated private telecommunications industry. Not only does she conclude that privatisation encouraged Bumiputera domination in a particular industry, but it also gives favours only to a particular group of Bumiputera. She points out that this is done first by limiting the field of players to Bumiputeras and then separating the greater from the lesser through turnkey contracts. Consequently, the government was faced with increasing pressures to accelerate the flow of resources to the chosen elite. She argues that privatisation, in conjunction with mar-

ket-entry restrictions provided by the new regulatory bureaucracy, essentially created a legitimised mechanism for dividing the spoils between the key players. Whether it truly promotes the goals of NEP has to be seen in the light of the discriminatory nature of the selection process that invariably favours some Bumiputeras over others.

However, such liberalisation policies, which minimise state intervention, were well received by Chinese capitalists. Gomez (1999, 135) points out that while government patronage still persist through privatisation, inter-ethnic business co-operation between Chinese capable of implementing contracts and Malays with access to state patronage was encouraged. And according to Gomez (1996) again, this inter-ethnic business co-operation, and government's economic and cultural liberalisation initiatives, have benefited UMNO leaders as well in terms of electoral support from non-Bumiputeras, particularly the urban middle class Chinese.

Verma (2000) argues that the assistance given by the state bureaucracy and government machinery to the Malays who entered late into capitalist production enabled the political elite to forge links between the different ethnic communities by involving itself in alliances and consociational politics over the last two decades. And although members in the alliance broke away, the structures of competition and patronage were retained, and this has allowed the alliance to easily control or regulate other potential agencies for political representation that were not part of this structure. This has allowed UMNO to strengthen its hegemony in the ruling coalition and it is within this structure that authoritarian rule is sustained.

Through patronage and accommodation, capitalists from the different ethnic groups accumulated wealth (see Gomez 1990, 1991) and it is in this context that licenses to operate media organisations have been given out to those who are well connected to political elites.

Ownership and Control of the Mass Media in Malaysia

The Press

The state control of media in Malaysia can also be traced back to the restructuring of the economy of the country through the NEP, which produced a group of politically well connected Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera business people. In the early 70's, the Bumiputera trust agency, Perbadanan Nasional BHD (Pernas) acquired an 80 percent stake in the Straits Times Press. A majority of the shares was later transferred to Fleet Holdings, an investment arm of UMNO. The Straits Times Press was renamed New Straits Times Press (NSTP) when it was listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange in 1973. In the same year, Fleet Holdings also held shares in Utusan Melayu Press.

Although these investments brought in good returns, Gomez (1994) argues that the acquisition of these publishing companies was intended to control the editorial content of both the newspapers. In effect, the ownership of New Straits Times Press and Utusan Melayu Press gives UMNO control of the major newspapers in Malaysia.

New Straits Times Press publishes the national dailies such as *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* and the English dailies, *New Straits Times* (NST), *Malay Mail*, *Business Times*, and the Chinese daily, *Shin Min Daily News*. Weeklies published by NSTP

include *Berita Minggu*, *New Sunday Times* and *Sunday Mail*. Utusan Melayu Press on the other hand publishes dailies such as *Utusan Malaysia*, and *Utusan Melayu* and weeklies such as *Mingguan Malaysia* and *Utusan Zaman*.

Apart from UMNO having substantial interests in the publishing industry, the other two main component parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC) also control a substantial part of the mainstream media. MCA, through its official holding company, Huaren Holdings Sdn. Bhd, has a 58% stake in Star Publications, which publishes the other mainstream English daily, *The Star*, the rival newspaper to the NST, which has a circulation of 206,832 and a readership of 869,000. *The Star* began as a regional paper in Penang in 1971 but moved to the capital of Kuala Lumpur and became a national daily in 1978.

The Star in the early eighties used to be able to exert some autonomy in raising issues through some critical veteran columnists and editors. However, after a spate of arrest under what is called *Operasi Lalang*, and the revoking of publishing license of two newspapers, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, critical reporting came to an end. Like the NST, *The Star*, being allocatively controlled by a component party of the ruling coalition, invariably propagates the agenda and policies of its owners in order to maintain the hegemony of the ruling group.

An analysis of *The Star* newspaper on the coverage the Hudud Law revealed that *The Star*, substantially owned by MCA, employed the issue of Hudud Law to attack the opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP). The Hudud Law controversy dates back to the 1990 Malaysian General Election. At that election, the opposition parties PAS and PBS, succeeded in taking over the state government in Kelantan and Sabah respectively. The success provided PAS the opportunity to implement Islam teachings, one of which is Hudud Law. Hudud Law encompasses punishment such as whipping, stoning and amputation of limbs for a variety of offences, including adultery, theft, the renunciation of Islam by a Muslim, and the drinking of alcohol. This has caused concern among the community in Kelantan. Ironically, for an English daily that hardly focus on religion let alone the Muslim practices, there was massive press coverage of the issue.

The English daily carried content that discredited the opposition party, and accusations that it was incapable of championing the rights of the Chinese community. Juxtaposed to the images of the opposition as villains and traitors, were images of the MCA as protector of the Chinese community (Wang Lay Kim, 1992). Time and again, the newspaper has played up ethno-religious sentiments to gain support for the party. This vilification of the opposition parties by the media is consistently seen in the mainstream media.

Another daily English newspaper, *The Sun*, is owned by Vincent Tan. Gomez (1999, 112) revealed that Tan was given a license to establish the English newspaper because of his connection with a former UMNO minister. He was also allocated a 20 percent stake and 17 percent stake in *The Star* and TV3 respectively. Malaysian media licenses are tightly controlled by the state and renewable on a yearly basis. They can be revoked at will by the Minister of Information. This control certainly makes sure that owners of media companies toe the official line.

The other main component party in the Barisan Nasional, MIC also has a substantial control of the Tamil press. Ownership of Tamil press rests mainly in the hands of MIC president Samy Vellu and his wife.

Clearly, there is a tight relationship between the press and the political parties in the ruling coalition. There are several implications here. One, the party-owned newspapers, as it was illustrated, get their cues from the powers that be. The allocative control of the media by political parties allows them to decide on the scope and nature of the media content. This is particularly blatant during periods of crisis of hegemony. The press in a situation of control becomes inept in playing the adversarial role of watchdog. Consequently, this situation makes it difficult for citizens to exercise their right to information and their right to making informed choices.

The only alternative sources of information are from *Aliran*, a monthly English-language magazine published by a social reform group, *Harakah* and *Rocket*, party papers of the opposition PAS and DAP respectively. *Aliran* focuses on human rights issues and social reform, while the party papers focus on party matters and the critique of the component parties in Barisan Nasional. Their circulation is small, and for the moment they are tolerated, but support shown to alternative media has always unnerved the government. Since the onset of the economic and political crisis, demands from different sections of the society for more transparency and accountability from the government and a boycott of the mainstream media for not acting as a credible source of information has driven people to the alternative media. Both *Aliran* and *Harakah* experienced a marked increase in their circulation. *Harakah* was said to have hit a 300,000 mark, a circulation figure that is higher than the national English daily, NST, which has a circulation of over 200,000. This increased circulation is carried out illegally, as *Harakah's* publishing license only permits it to reach party members. This popularity did not go down well with the government because there are an estimated 8 million Malaysian adult who read newspapers daily, and of this the Malay population accounts for 55% (Media Guide 1998). It was entirely predictable that the Home Ministry slashed the PAS licence to publish twice a week to that of twice a month, and issued a stern warning that circulation be restricted to party members only. On the other hand although *Aliran's* circulation has not been as drastic as *Harakah's*, it also faces obstacles, particularly when the government warns that printers can also be taken to task if what they print is detrimental to national security. *Aliran's* problem is finding printers who are brave enough to take them on.

Clearly, any media alternative or otherwise, can be controlled both internally at the allocative and operational level as well as externally through coercion or legislation. The government has recently banned several publications such as popular tabloid *Ekklusif*; critical magazines like *Detik* and *Wasilah*. The Home Ministry also has the power to withhold permits or confiscate publications. Last November, the Home Ministry confiscated 640 copies of the tabloid *Al-Islah*. Recently, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek* had their distribution permit delayed for three weeks. The *Asiaweek* January issue highlighting "The Mahathir Dilemma" was considered too critical of the Mahathir administration.

Radio and Television

Radio and television has been owned and controlled by the government since its inception. Both radio and television comes under the charge of the Ministry of Information, which provided the following guidelines for their operation:

1. To explain in-depth, and with the widest possible coverage, the policies and programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public;
2. To stimulate public interest and opinion, in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of the government;
3. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture, and;
4. To provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment.

As with the print media, the structure and machinery of the broadcast media is very much inherited from the British, who set up the media as a form of control during the colonial years. The structure set up was one that supported the ruling elite and, even after attaining independence, there was no political will to really change the structure.

There are five national radio stations and 12 regional stations for Peninsula Malaysia owned by Radio Malaysia. The five national radio stations are Radio 1, Radio Muzik, Radio 4, Radio 5, Radio 6, while the local stations which cover all the states and the federal territory are Radio 3 Kangar, Radio 3 Seremban, Radio Three Shah Alam, Radio 3 Alor Star, Radio 3 Kota Bahru, Radio Three Ipoh, Radio 3 Pulau Pinang, Radio 3 Melaka, Radio 3 Johor Bahru, Radio 3 Kuantan, Radio Three Terengganu, Radio 3 Langkawi and Radio Kuala Lumpur. Regional radio in East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak include Radio Malaysia Kota Kinabalu which broadcast through different networks catering to different language groups such as Malay, English, Mandarin, Bajau, Murut, Dusun and Kadazan; and Radio Malaysia Kuching which broadcast in the Malay, English, Mandarin, Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Melanau, Bisaya and Lum Bawang language network. Although several language groups are catered for, this still does not cover all language groups in Sabah and Sarawak.

Since 1989, several private radio stations have been launched - THR, RFM, Hitz, Best 104, FMJB, Mix 94.5 FM, Light and Easy, Classic Rock, Talk Radio, CATS Radio (Sarawak). These stations provide a general fare of light entertainment, song and album promotion, and light chat and talk programmes. Most of the stations steer away from more serious or contentious issues. Deejays who steer away from conservative comments and who venture into more political issues can be silenced by taking them off air.

Radio is expected to play the role of connecting the government to the people. In other words, all broadcasting activities must promote government policies and fulfil aspirations of the government. Guidelines for broadcasting are laid down by the government. In the past, during elections, major political parties, including the Opposition, are allotted some airtime. However, scripts for broadcasting have to go through a holding period, to allow radio stations to act as government inspectors. In the last general election, however, even this policy was abandoned and the Opposition Coalition was not given access to airtime.

There are two government owned national television channels, TV1 and TV2, which commenced operation in December 1963 and October 1969, respectively. It has been asserted by Zaharom (1996) that television in Malaysia services the government by being its mouthpiece, and control of television is possibly even tighter

than in the press, because the viewership particularly among the Malay electorate is quite high. Almost 80% of viewers for TV1 are Malays with a 45% penetration in the rural area (see Table 1)

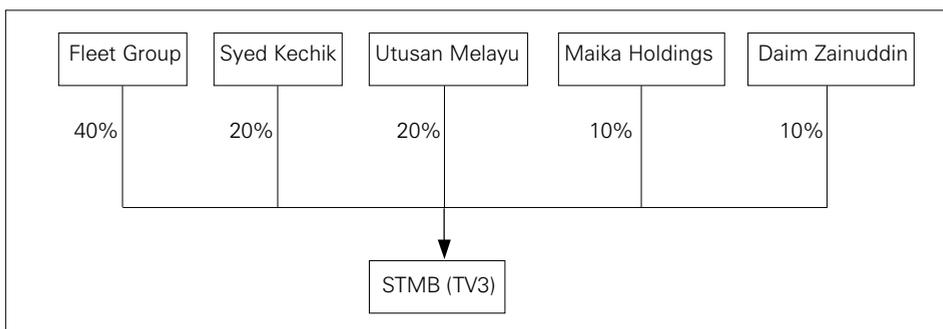
Table 1: Viewership by Ethnic Breakdown for Television Channels

	Station Watched Yesterday			
	TV 1	TV 2	TV3	Metrovision
Total Viewers in 000	6,202	7,707	8,664	1,584
By race	%	%	%	%
Malay	78.4	55.9	60.7	35.4
Chinese	13.1	33.4	29.3	46.9
Indian	7.8	10.1	9.4	17.2
Others	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.4

Source: '98 Media Guide

After more than 20 years of government control in the broadcast media, the first commercial television was introduced in 1984 under Mahathir's privatisation project. Gomez (1997:91) reveals that despite competition from other established companies, a licence was issued to a newly incorporated joint venture, STMB, to operate this private broadcast network. Not surprisingly, the major shareholder of STMB included UMNO's holding company, the Fleet group with 40 percent stake; Maika Holdings, the MIC-controlled investment holding company with 10 percent stake and Daim Zainuddin, the Finance Minister, whose holding company has a 10 percent equity; while Syed Kechik Foundation was given a 20 percent stake (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Corporate Structure of TV3 in 1984

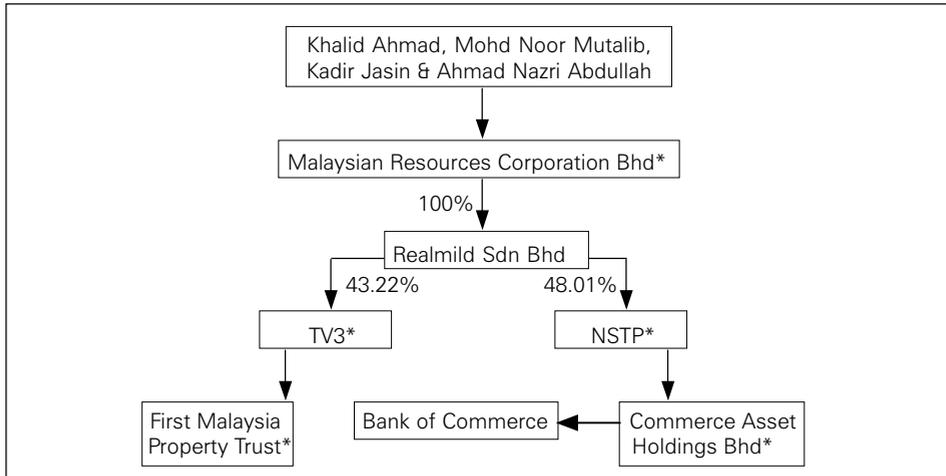


Source : adapted from Gomez (1994)

The shareholding structure of TV3 has changed since, and by 1994 the majority shareholder of the company was Malaysian Resources Corporation BHD (MRCB), a listed company controlled by businessmen closely linked to the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who was dismissed from office by Mahathir. There were a series of reverse takeoverx and management buy-outs (see Figure 2), that Gomez (1993) asserts were politically motivated moves by Anwar to gain control of the media in order to help him shore up support for the impending UMNO vice-presidential election. To be sure, coverage of Anwar before his sacking by the

mainstream is certainly extensive and positive due to his close association with the media.

Figure 2: MRCB's Corporate Structure after the Management Buy-Out of the New Straits Times Press and TV3



* Publicly-listed company
Source: Gomez 1994:136

Although reshuffling took place through takeovers, reverse takeovers, and merger, control of the mainstream media remains firmly in the hands of UMNO.

The second licensed private television network, Metrovision, which started operation in July, 1995 in the Klang Valley only, is jointly owned by a consortium of four companies closely linked to UMNO. City Television Sdn. Bhd., which operates Metrovision, is 50% owned by Melewar Corporation, 30% owned by Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd, 10% by Medanmas Sdn. Bhd and 10% by Diversified Systems SDI Bhd (The Star, May 26, 1995). Melewar is controlled by Tunku Abdullah, a close associate of Mahathir (Gomez 1997, 96). The television station has ceased operation since 1999 and there were talks of reviving it.

The latest commercial television, launched in April 1997, also has strong links with the state. Its chairman Mohd Effendi Norwawi served as managing director in the Sarawak State Economic Development Corporation (SSEDC) and is a loyalist to the ruling coalition (Sally Cheong 1993, 57). After the last election, he was appointed as the Agriculture Minister.

The country's first cable television, Mega TV, which provides Malaysia's first 24-hour multi-channel subscription service, is owned by a consortium comprising TV3 (40%), the Minister of Finance Inc (30%), Ibex TV Sdn. Bhd (12.5%), Eurocrest Sdn. Bhd (12.5%) and Sri Utara SDN. Bhd (5%) (The Star, 26 May 1995).

For a long time, the Malaysian government banned the use of parabolic dishes. However, with globalisation, the Malaysian government also recognises the role of global communication in achieving developed status, and hence has since worked towards enabling the country to take an active role in global communication. The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), Mahathir's pet project to develop a highly com-

petitive cluster of Malaysian multimedia and IT companies that would eventually become world class, is mooted for this apparent purpose. The first satellite broadcasting company, called the All Asia Television and Radio Company (ASTRO), was conceived within the MSC framework. The Measat Satellite System is to be the sole provider of satellite services to the Multimedia Super Corridor Project, (*The Star*, April 7, 1998). Therefore it is hardly surprising that the government conceded opening up the sky. By stipulating the use of a 60cm dish, the Information Ministry ensured that satellite television could be used to serve the business community and, at the same time, prevent the Malaysian public from resorting to banned dishes. At its launch, the Measat 1 satellite was owned by Binariang Sdn. Bhd., which in turn was owned by trusts associated with three Malaysians, T. Ananda Krishnan, the late Tun Fuad Stephen's family, and Tunku Mahmud Besar Burhanuddin. Up until mid 1998, Ananda's holding company Usaha Tegas held a 50% stake, while Denver based US West owns 20% share in Binariang (*New Straits Times*, May, 30, 1998). Ananda Krishnan also has close ties with political elites and was therefore able to secure gaming licences and a media licence. However, during the economic crisis, when the Malaysian government raised the maximum for foreign ownership in telecommunications to 61 percent, British Telecommunication bought over 33.3% of the shares at a price of RM1.8 billion on 24 July, 1998 (*Berita Harian Online*).

The Internet

The latest information technology, the Internet, has been hailed as the most viable alternative source of information not accessible in the mainstream media. Governments around the world are making special effort to join in the wired fray. It is reported in the press that Penang will be the first wired state in the country when the last of the fibre optics cable are installed. The Ministry of Information accedes to the idea that Malaysians should be exposed to the latest information that is vital to help realise the vision of becoming a developed country by 2020. However, of particular concern to the government are sites that provide a forum for negative comments and condemnation of the government. The government has indicated that it will closely monitor the activities of students abroad who are spreading misinformation on Malaysia through the net. The Education Minister has also threatened that scholarships may be terminated for students caught in this activity.

Attempts have certainly been made to control the use of Internet. Access to the Internet is via the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic System (MIMOS), a government body which administer the Joint Advanced Research Integrated Networking System (JARING). Services on the Internet are determined by what is offered on JARING. In a sense, access to this new media is controlled. In 1998, Mimos assisted the police in tracking down the four people suspected of circulating information on the Net about pro-democracy gatherings in Kuala Lumpur. The Mimos chairman and chief executive officer has stated that Mimos will continue to work with the authorities to discipline net abusers (*The Star*, September, 29, 1998), at the same time assuring Jaring subscribers that their privacy will be protected, as long as they abide by the rules.

Apart from this surveillance, Internet users are also under close scrutiny by other institutions related to the powers that be. For example, a university profes-

sor was called up by her institution to show cause why she posted comments about closure of Chinese school in Damansara. The school was closed with little consultation and the Chinese community in that area felt it was an infringement of the education rights of their children. The issue was, of course, ethnicised. However, it is a matter of major concern that suppressing private citizens from voicing their concerns on the Internet is to say the least, undemocratic. Moreover, this also raises serious questions on the invasion of privacy.

Despite attempts to control the net, it has nonetheless been very creatively used since early September, 1998, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad fired his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Tens of thousands of Anwar's supporters rallied at street protests. When Anwar was arrested on Sept 20, his wife was warned not to address public gatherings. The mainstream media was also not forthcoming in its information of the situation, however the number of new websites like *Sang Kancil*, *Anwar*, *Voice of Freedom*, and *Where is Justice* sprang up to fill the void in information left by the mainstream media. Many of the issues raised on the dismissal of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, which have never been either significantly nor sufficiently reported in the local press, have been made accessible to both the local and foreign populace through the Internet (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 8, 1998 and *Asiaweek*, October 2 1998). For those who were unable to get access to the net received the downloaded information through photocopies and faxes. Videotapes as well as audiotapes were circulated to provide alternative information. These ingenious ways of disseminating alternative information is an indication of the low credibility of the mainstream media.

Access to viewpoints that are usually blacked out in the mainstream media were made possible through the net and netizens were able to join in the debate on the political process. However, access to a pro-Anwar web site can and has been blocked, although Mimos has denied it is their doing. While the situation is closely monitored by the government, keeping track of the Internet is a colossal task since it is a global community of over 30 million.

While the task may be colossal, nonetheless efforts are made to discredit alternative media. For example, *Malaysiakini*, a news website which features independent analysis and investigative journalism is presently on "trial" by the mainstream media. *Malaysiakini.com* was launched in November 1999, shortly before the Malaysian general elections. The site was created by a group of journalists who are unhappy with bias in news coverage. Their objective is to test and push the boundaries of press freedom.

Television as well as the press reports that *Malaysiakini* receives funds from George Soros and is therefore painted as "an enemy of the state." Determined to further discredit the alternative media, the mainstream press also covered and sensationalised the resignation of a senior editor of *Malaysiakini* because of the funding issue. Ironically, more than two years ago, a month before the Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal as Deputy Prime Minister, the editors of two national dailies, Johan Jaafar of *Utusan Malaysia* and Ahmad Nazri of *Berita Harian*, both close political allies of sacked Deputy Prime Minister, resigned and those resignations were not covered in the press. The press would normally cover appointments and resignations of top executives in big corporations. The difference is that both are close allies of Anwar. Many read this as a clampdown on the press, because prior to their resignations, the two dailies had given wide coverage on the issues of corruption,

cronyism and nepotism. The Prime Minister articulated his displeasure over negative and sensational reporting and invariably, the press toned itself down. It is a known fact that top posts in the media are political appointments. In the case of *Malaysiakini*, it is not about to tone down but it countered allegations by disseminating information through the web.

As with the opposition party paper, *Harakah*, *Malaysiakini*, with 100,000 hits daily, has certainly caused some insecurity in the powers that be. While alternative media is tolerated, the powers that be nonetheless will continue to spread their tentacles of control over the media, both alternative and mainstream.

Legislative Control

If economic ownership and directives from the government do not curb the flow of adequate and accurate information, the laws are something to reckon with. There are laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, 1984, and the Broadcasting Act (1988), which impinges on the media's effectiveness in playing its role as disseminator of information and watchdog over the government of the day. In essence, these two laws curb press freedom. These laws not only instil fear among the journalists, they also prevent media professionals from practising investigative journalism and from playing any role as the custodians of truth. There further laws including the Societies Act, the Official Secrets Act, 1972 (OSA), and the most repressive of all, the Internal Security Act, 1960 (ISA), which can, and have, been used, to curtail access to adequate information.

The Printing Presses and Publications Act

The legislation that affects the press the most in Malaysia is the Printing Presses and Publications Act, 1984. This Act provides vast powers to the Home Minister to grant or to withdraw printing licenses. It was amended in 1987, adding further curbs on the freedom of the Press. For example, Section 8 A(2) presumes the published material to be malicious if the writer cannot prove that he had taken reasonable measures to verify the truth of the news, and Section 8A (1) stipulates a jail sentence of up to three years, or a hefty fine of up to RM20,000, or both, upon conviction. Both Section 8(B) and Section 8(C) provides for the government to apply to the court to:

- suppress, up to six months, any publication where an offence had taken place;
- suspend it pending a court hearing or until the acquittal of the accused; and
- convict anyone who contravenes the court order with a fine of up to RM10, 000 or up to two years jail or both.

Under this bill, applications for all printing and publishing licenses are made yearly, and the Home Affairs Minister has absolute power to suspend or revoke a license or permit, with no obligations to give a reason. Furthermore, the suspension or revocation may not be challenged in court. In addition, this bill also gives power to the government to control the import of foreign publications that it perceives as prejudicial to national interest, public order and bilateral relations.

In 1986, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* was suspended for three months for exposing the billion-dollar Bank Bumiputra Finance banking scandal, which was closely linked to the ruling coalition. Two of their correspondents John Berthelsen and

Raphael Pura were expelled and there was absolutely no legal recourse for them since the Home Affairs Minister was given the absolute power to act.

As has been alluded to earlier, two national dailies, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and a Malay bi-weekly, *Watan*, had their licenses revoked in 1987. The press were taking sides in their coverage of the Chinese education issue. This was escalated by ethnicised conflict between the dominant Malay party UMNO and Chinese parties, the MCA and the opposition DAP. The government decided to take control with a clampdown in which 106 people, including opposition members, NGO activists and educationists were arrested under the Internal Security Act. Although no journalists were arrested, some were called up for interrogation. The newspapers that were forced to close down were allowed to resume publication only after six months. The result of this was that *The Star* has become even more servile and compliant.

Journalists understand the importance of obtaining the yearly publishing permit from the Home Affairs Minister, who, at this point in time, is the Prime Minister. In the case of the resignation of the two media executives prior to Anwar's dismissal, the Bernama news agency quoted a senior Utusan reporter as being told by Johan Jaffar that it was better for him to resign, to prevent his presence from impeding the progress of the group's newspapers and publications.

Of even more concern now is that the Printing Presses and Publications Act can and has been used not on media organisation alone but also on individuals. The recent case is that of director of a NGO, Tenaganita, Irene Fernandez. Fernandez had distributed a memo to key ministers alerting them of widespread abuse in detention camps. She was arrested and charged with maliciously disseminating false information. She has been on trial since 1996 and if found guilty she could be sentenced to up to two years imprisonment.

The Broadcasting Act

The Broadcasting Act was enacted only in 1988 although broadcasting has been introduced for more than twenty years. According to Karthigesu (1995), the Broadcasting Act was brought into existence only after the introduction of TV3, in order to control the content of broadcasts. As a commercial television station, TV3's strategies were mainly to maximise profit, and as a result programmes shown had to appeal to a wide spectrum of the audience. Entertainment programmes containing violence and sex were prominent on this channel. As the viewership of this channel increased, the government channels were pressured to imitate TV3 in a bid to maintain their advertising clientele. It was in this context that the Act was passed.

The Broadcasting Act bestows enormous powers on the Minister of Information to determine who gets the license to broadcast and the nature of the content. The Minister is given the absolute power to determine the kind of content the broadcast media can or cannot air and he also has the prerogative to change any conditions stipulated in the Act. It is clear that the Act was put in place not just to weed out violence and sex on television broadcasting but generally allows the government the power to tighten its grip on the media as and when it is deemed necessary. This Act was later amended to the Communication and Multimedia Act in 1998. In essence it is an expanded version, which covers multimedia.

The Internal Security Act (ISA)

The Internal Security Act was introduced in Malaysia by the colonial British, who used this law against communist insurgents. In recent times, it has been used by the state against anyone perceived to be a threat to national interest and security. The ISA allows for the detainee to be held without being charged or have any access to legal recourse for period of two years – renewable every two years at the discretion of the Home Minister. In 1987, the ISA was used in a massive crackdown, termed *Operasi Lallang*, on political dissidents, members of social interest groups and religious bodies. During this time, when editors were summoned for questioning by the police, newspapers gave scant information on the crackdown. Newspaper editors were directed to keep news on the detainees to a minimum. The newspapers, by and large, complied with such directives (see Chandra Muzaffar 1990 and Rehman Rashid 1990).

The ISA has been utilised again in 1998. As was indicated earlier, four people suspected of inciting racial disharmony and threatening national security through the Internet were detained under the ISA. Thereafter ISA was used against the fired deputy prime minister and his supporters. Invariably, the newspapers mainly highlighted the official view of why the arrests took place, and reported that the ruling coalition is in unanimous support of the Prime Minister's decision. While dismissal of staff member is the prerogative of those in authority, nonetheless, the newspapers could have shown more balance to all parties concerned in their reporting (The Star, September 24, 1998 and NST, September 27, 1998). Instead they condemned the foreign press for its reporting.

The Official Secrets Act (OSA)

This piece of legislation has very vague provisions but nonetheless provides wide powers to the government of the day to act on anything labelled "official secret." Raja Aziz Addruse, former chairman of the Malayan Bar Council, describes the Act as the antithesis of the freedom of speech and of citizen's right to comment on and discuss government misconduct and incompetence. He goes on to say "In a democracy, no government can claim to be a credible government if it seeks to operate in secrecy. A government in a democracy must be prepared to account for its actions and to subject its acts and policies to public scrutiny and discussion" (Raja Aziz Addruse, 1990:24). However with such an Act in place, journalist are prevented from carrying out investigations, since any document labelled by the Executive as secret cannot be made known to the public. The OSA was used on the journalists Berthelsen and Pura from the *Asian Wall Street Journal* for reporting on business dealings between United Malayan Banking Corporation and the finance minister, as well as on the Maminco controversy, which was an attempt on the part of the Malaysian government to corner the world tin market.. Essentially this law curtails the freedom of the Press to act as the government's watchdog and prevents journalist from carrying out investigative journalism.

Contempt of Court and Lawsuits

More recently, different laws have been used to curtail investigative journalism and silence critics. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondent Murray Hiebert was sentenced to three months jail for what the judge called a contemptuous at-

tack on the Malaysian judiciary. This is certainly congruent with the government's reaction to the foreign media. And as mentioned earlier, after the dismissal of Anwar, transmission of civil disturbances by the foreign media was prevented (*The Star*, September 24th, 1998). Rodan (1998) accurately surmise that periodic rebukes of the international press from Mahathir and actions taken against journalists, are due to Mahathir's uncertain hold on power within UMNO. He was therefore not keen on the press adding to this problem. Rodan adds that the greatest risk for foreign journalists is personally offending Mahathir, especially if they dwell on corruption or racial politics. During periods of hegemonic crisis, journalists from the international press have been barred or expelled from government press conferences, subscriptions to publications have been withdrawn by government ministries, advertising bans by government departments have been imposed on particular publications, and threats of publication bans and even jail have been issued. Hiebert is the first foreign journalist to be sentenced to jail for committing contempt in the normal course of his duties, this is again symptomatic of the currently high level of repression. Although the international media is accessible to only a small portion of the population, the government continues to pay it close attention.

The situation of the Malaysian media quite clearly operates within the parameters set up political, social and economic determinants in the society. The next section will examine the actual performance of the media during an election.

Media Performance

As stated earlier, crisis situations invariably bring about tighter control of the media. Control of the Malaysian media can be enforced either internally by the owners or through legislation. This control will determine the kind of news covered and the position and perspective taken by the media as well as the space it provides for alternative and dissenting views.

In the case of the mainstream media, one conspicuous characteristic it bears is its consistent conservativeness. It takes its cue from the powers that be, and this is clearly seen during elections. Analysis of the 1990, 1995 and 1999 election by various people have shown that the mainstream media is consistent in portraying the ruling coalition positively, who also happen to be the owners of most of the media, and at the same time discrediting the opposition (see Mustafa 1990, Wang 1992, and Khoo 2000). Strategically, the ruling coalition has consistently utilised race and conflict to project itself as the true defender of all the ethnic groups and this was seen in the 1999 general election as well as by-elections.

Malaysia held its tenth general election on 29 November 1999. Khoo (2000) reasons that Barisan Nasional's electoral objectives were:

1. Preserve its customary two thirds majority in Parliament;
2. Retain power in all states except Kelantan (which was taken over by the opposition party PAS in the 1990 election);
3. Discredit the Alternative Coalition as a viable alternative.

The ruling coalition has consistently been able to maintain its two-thirds majority. Even during times of hegemonic crisis in the mid and late 1980's, it was able to maintain this majority, despite two states, Kelantan and Sabah, being taken by opposition parties, PAS and PBS respectively.

As in past elections, the Barisan Nasional argued that it was the only coalition able to preserve “Malay dominance” and safeguard against “ethnic violence” and (PAS’s) conservative Islamic state. The new feature in the 1999 election was that the Anwar affair had stimulated and brought together opposition parties and non-governmental organisations to provide direction for *Reformasi*. Following that was the formation of the Barisan Alternative (BA) or Alternative Front. BA is made up of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Party Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), and Parti KeADILan Nasional (National Justice Party) and several NGOs. Khoo(2000: 306) points out that, despite being ideologically heterogeneous and having different electoral goals, power sharing arrangements and collective leadership, BA was able to come up with practical solutions and viable strategies to stand as a unified opposition to Barisan Nasional. BA’s main objective was to deny BN its two thirds majority in order to end its monopoly of state power. It aimed to do so by providing a programme of political, economic and social reform that would deal with cronyism, corruption and nepotism, and review practises in privatisation and restore civil rights and liberties (Khoo 2000:307-309). Many of the strategies are designed essentially to redress the abuses of the ruling coalition.

In the usual manner, the mainstream media either reported negatively on the BA or blacked out its campaigns, and portrayed BN positively. There was no air-time allotted to the BA while radio and television became part of the electoral machinery of BN. BA had to put up with police restrictions on public rallies and public meeting places during the short campaign period (Khoo 2000:307).

BA failed in its aim to deny BN its two-thirds majority. Verma (2000: 2721) states several reasons:

1. The ruling coalition has held power since 1957 and has superior grass roots organisation and more access to financial resources;
2. The authoritarian culture which has set obstacles and hurdles on the path to media freedom and democracy;
3. Years of redrawing electoral boundaries have created “safe” parliamentary constituencies for BN and;
4. The ethno-religious factor which was still unresolved in the BA, particularly the PAS espousal of stricter Islamic laws, which did not go down well with moderate Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

To add one more reason to why BN won, Khoo (2000:308) concedes that the exclusion of 681,000 new voters in the 1999 election was a disadvantage to BA. The Election Commission had conducted a voter registration exercise between April and May 1999 but it announced that it could not prepare fresh electoral rolls on time for elections held before January 2000. It is believed that the 681,000 new voters were mainly young, opposition minded first time voters. The registration of these new voters was gazetted only after the election.

Although BN won 148 parliamentary seats while BA obtained 42 seats, (Parti Bersatu Sabah took three), Khoo’s analysis shows a decline in popular support for BN compared to 1995 election. BN’s dominant partner, UMNO performed badly. It won only 5 out of 13 seats it contested in Mahathir’s home state of Kedah, and lost all eight parliamentary seats in Trengganu . Four Cabinet Ministers and five deputy ministers were defeated in the election. Such bad performance is symptomatic of the disenchantment with the party.

Exactly a year after the general election, came the by-election in Lunas, a 42-year-old stronghold of Barisan Nasional in Kedah, the home state of Mahathir. As with the 1999 election, the media instantly took on its role as mouthpiece of Barisan Nasional. Several issues were played up by the press, namely:

1. Intra-coalition disputes arising from the choice of candidate by the Alternative Coalition. This is congruent to 1999 election objective of discrediting BA as a viable alternative ;
2. Barisan Nasional's sensitivity to the needs of the different ethnic groups it represents.

The press highlighted disputes over the choice of a candidate from the Barisan Alternative. Component members in the coalition expected their candidate to be chosen to stand for the by-election. However, in an analysis of *The Star* between 19 November to 29 November, 2000, ten days before the by-election, reveals that emphasis was given to disputes and intra-coalition strife in BA. This is one of those rare times that BA gets featured in the front page with large captions. Headlines such as "Bitter disputes: DAP and Keadilan lock horns over which party gets to contest in Lunas"; followed by front page news the following day reporting "DAP to contest Lunas seat."

Subsequently, Keadilan member Saifuddin Nasution was fielded. Being a Malay and Muslim, the choice of candidate received much press attention because the Lunas seat has traditionally been held by an Indian. The press grabbed the opportunity to paint the Barisan Alternative as undemocratic, insensitive to the different ethnic and religious groups. This can be seen in bold headlines quoting top party leaders in the Barisan Nasional.

Headlines carried official statements from leaders of the Barisan Nasional such as "Opposition parties are strange bedfellows, says Ling"; "Mahathir: Keadilan, DAP and PAS are racist parties"; "Ling: Opposition not democratic," "Lim: Opposition spreading lies." In the reports, Mahathir alleged that Keadilan and PAS were using race and religion to disunite the Malays (*The Star*, November 24, 2000) while Ling, the MCA president, reminded people that Barisan Nasional has a good track record of caring for the interest of the people regardless of their race or religion, and that opposition coalition's move to reject an Indian candidate from DAP showed the biases of component members in the opposition coalition. This was reported as an undemocratic act and against the spirit of multi-racialism (*The Star*, November 19 & 26, 2000). Ironically, BA was not the only party to utilise the politics of language, communalism and religion. In fact in other elections and bye-elections the same tactic has been used to win the hearts of the electorate. In the Teluk Kemang parliamentary contest, Indian voters rejected KeADILan's Malay candidate because the Indians feared that he would not be able to protect their interests, compared to BN's Indian candidate. In the Sanggang by-election, the PAS candidate was rejected because he was tagged as a religious fanatic and this frightened off the Chinese voters. The labelling of candidates based on their ethnic background and religion has been consistently carried out by the media. It is still a very powerful tool to blind voters from the real issues at stake.

Apart from negatively labelling the opposition, the press were in top gear highlighting the election promises from BN to provide for better roads and water supply and to construct a Tamil school for the Indian families (*The Star*, November 23 & 24, 2000).

On the day of election, Mahathir warned against using race and religion to gain votes (*The Star*, November 29, 2000). Still, news reports on that day alluded very strongly to race and religion with headlines “Kedahan will lose if Keadilan wins, says Chua” and “Self-respect of Indians at stake, says MIC” (*The Star*, November 29, 2000). To all intents and purposes such reports work on the Chinese fear of being taken over by an Islamic party like PAS, and support the MIC contention that if the Indians lose the by-election they will be further marginalised by the other races.

To be sure both the Barisan Nasional and Alternative Coalition utilised the issues of race and religion for political mileage. However, the ownership and control of most of the mainstream media by close allies of Barisan Nasional provided space for them to explain and disseminate their perspectives, as well as to discredit the opposition. BA did not have that luxury. This time, however, BA won the by-election. This result flies in the face of the dominant ideology view because it fails to explain why the near total control of the media by the ruling coalition through ownership and legislation failed to persuade the masses to the dominant view. Perhaps the events following the political and information crises spurred by the economic crisis of 1997 are beginning to make clearer that Malaysian society is indeed serious about democratic space and access to credible and alternative information. This at least is indicated in the way alternative media like *Malaysiakini.com* and *Harakah* have a circulation, and perhaps even readership that matches the mainstream media. It can only be hoped the motion set by these events in the last couple of years will continue to widen democratic space for Malaysians.

Towards Democratic Media

Raymond Williams (1962) pointed out that, for a democracy to thrive, there must be freedom to do and freedom to answer. One way to do that is to ensure that the press is free to write without fear or favour, and to foster an environment where citizens are free to reply and criticise. Granted that the press and people sometimes abuse that freedom, the way out certainly is not to clamp down on the press and people. This short analysis is by no means comprehensive, but it nonetheless indicates that the mainstream media performance is consistently conservative and takes its cue from the powers that be, particularly during election processes. This certainly prevents them from being fair, and journalists are prevented from taking on their task responsibly because of combination of control from ownership and from legislation

Certain urgent steps need to be considered before Malaysians can even hope for any real access to accurate information. Firstly, laws that give enormous amount of power to ruling elite would have to be amended or perhaps even removed. The ISA, OSA and the Printing Presses and Publications Act, all instil fear in journalist and hinder them from carrying out investigative journalism and effectively playing the role as the watchdog.

Secondly, the licensing system should be abolished. To check possible abuse by media organisations, independent media watchdogs such as a Press Council should be set up. Concentration of ownership in the hands of a small group of people or institutions must be monitored and controlled to prevent concentration of power.

Thirdly, to democratise the media, public service media must be established through public funds and freed from direct control of the government. The alloca-

tion of resources should be transparent and open to challenge and review.

Unless repressive laws that impede the work and responsibility of journalists are repealed and reformation takes place in the media industry, there will be no real democratisation of the media and the majority of the Malaysians will uninformed, ill-informed in this so call age of Information Society.

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