



## Politics and the Media in Malaysia

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the relationship between the state and the mass media in Malaysia through an analysis of the March 2004 general elections that led to the victory of the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition party and its leader Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Through restrictive laws that limit press freedom and the concentration of press ownership among a limited group of pro-BN individuals, the Malaysian state has been exercising control over the mass media, thus impeding the Malaysian electorate's democratic right to freedom of information. Through an investigation of mainstream and Chinese media coverage of the 2004 elections, it can be observed that the Malaysian press overwhelmingly presented a sympathetic, and often flaunting, bias in favor of the incumbent BN while providing insufficient coverage of the views of—or even demonizing—the opposition parties. Like other ruling entities of developing countries, the BN government justifies its intrusion over the mass media by invoking the need for national stability and security in order to successfully lead the Malaysian nation-state toward modernization, development, and economic prosperity. Under the Badawi administration, despite its intimations in favor of political openness and reform, this state manipulation of the media has continued unchanged.

**KEYWORDS.** Malaysia · 2004 general elections · *Barisan Nasional* (BN) · state control of media · modernization and development · press freedom

### INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that the mass media, like any other social institution, do not operate in a social vacuum. There are forces in society that interact with the media, each trying to gain access to the media in the hope of exercising influence and control. This often involves the state, political parties, corporate entities, lobby groups, and civil society groups, among others. In many cases, particularly in countries where democracy is fragile, the relationship between the state and the mainstream mass media has become so strong over the years that it threatens media freedom and credibility. And this relationship, as in the case of Malaysia, is made more apparent in situations such as general elections when the political hegemony of the ruling party requires urgent protection and promotion.

Malaysia's eleventh general elections held in March 2004 provided a much-needed opportunity for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the newly appointed prime minister, to seek a fresh mandate from the Malaysian electorate. The election was vital for Abdullah since in the popular imagination he was then still perceived as someone who merely took over the baton from someone else, i.e., Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who had been running an extremely long race.

This transition also meant that Abdullah was technically acting president of the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) component party and acting leader of the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (National Front [BN]) coalition party. The key component parties of the BN are the ethnic Malay-based UMNO, the ethnic Chinese-based Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the ethnic Indian-based Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the ethnic Chinese-based *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (Malaysian People's Movement [Gerakan]), and other smaller parties. The impending general elections were therefore crucial for Abdullah. BN's electoral triumph, especially an overwhelming one, would help consolidate his position in UMNO and BN, and will prove his mettle as a leader.

Moreover, the situation then was such that not only would Abdullah need to garner votes that would return the BN to parliament by at least two-thirds majority (the kind of overwhelming majority that the BN has been accustomed to over the years); he would also have to wean some Malay voters from UMNO's political foe, the Islamist, and traditionally Malay-based party, the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (Islamic Party of Malaysia [PAS]), and, to a limited extent, from *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party [Keadilan]), which was and still inspired by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim. And given the hitherto uncertainty as regards some Malay votes in certain mixed constituencies, Abdullah would also have to seriously woo the Chinese voters and to a lesser degree, the Indian electorate.

No less important is that this election had a tinge of difference: the Malaysians would be going to the polls for the first time in 22 years without Mahathir Mohamad as leader of the incumbent BN and the caretaker government. Hence, an air of excitement and anxiety greeted the new leadership in the BN under *Pak Lah*—as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is affectionately referred to. The mainstream media were expected to help “welcome” this changing of guards. This was the political backdrop against which Malaysia's mainstream media operated.

## THE STATE-MEDIA SYMBIOSIS: THE ROOT CAUSES

This paper aims to show that the generally pro-BN coverage of the mainstream press in particular and the media in general is a crude manifestation of the symbiotic relationship between the state and the media, especially at a time when Malaysia was in the midst of an election. This paper examines the underlying causes of this close relationship, which provides the background to the kind of media reportage that emerged during the general elections. Finally, it explores the challenges and potential for some changes in Malaysia's media landscape.

### **Media, development, and democracy**

National development and modernization have obviously been the overriding concerns and objectives of most political leaders, especially in the developing world. As a result, many countries have drawn up their periodic economic plans that provide directions for the development of their national economies. In the case of Malaysia, successive economic policies have been designed by government leaders ever since independence in 1957.

Very much informed by the thinking of communications scholars in the West—particularly the United States, such as Wilbur Schramm (1964) and Daniel Lerner (1958)—of the modernization persuasion, leaders of the developing world have regarded the mass media as vital instruments, if not catalysts, of modernization and socioeconomic development. Implicit in this approach to modernization is the notion that the traditional beliefs and attitudes of the ordinary people in developing societies are a stumbling block to modernization and therefore have to be replaced by “modern values and attitudes.” And, so goes the argument, the media have an important role to play in breaking down those old values and attitudes.

This perception of the media explains why the media are considered important in the context of national development. Many government leaders in the developing world justify their control over the media in terms of jealously guarding and guiding its members toward the supposedly noble path of national development and to ensure that the media do not fall into the “wrong hands.” In other words, state control over the mainstream media has clearly been justified in the name of national development as well as national security.

In this regard, Malaysia's BN government has often reminded the mainstream media of their social responsibility to partner with the

government in this collective project of nation building (Mohd Safar 1996, 104-14). Or, at the very least, the media were, and still are, not expected to play an adversarial role in their interaction with the state. This warm relationship has been sustained in a manner that encouraged the compliant media to sing praises of the government's economic endeavors and discouraged even genuine and constructive criticisms of the government and its developmental policies and projects.

Thus, during general elections, the government expects Malaysia's mainstream media not only to publicize but also to flaunt to the whole country the BN government's achievements, particularly in the area of socioeconomic development. The mainstream press depicts the government leaders as having a "naturalised" affinity with the general populace in terms of socioeconomic aspirations and goals. This wide public pronouncement of the incumbent BN's economic successes is facilitated by the media's deliberate narrowing, if not closure, of access for the other contesting political parties. The opposition parties' stand on some issues and their policies on economic, political, and cultural matters are hardly heard by the electorate. Worse, the coverage of the opposition parties by the mainstream media often resulted in the former being depicted in the most negative light possible. This situation only reinforces the argument of British cultural scholar Stuart Hall (1986, 9) about the misrepresentation by the mainstream media of groups and individuals considered to be in the margins of society.

As a result, Malaysians in general had been deprived of the opportunity to make informed choices when they went to the polls. Equally important is that the public sphere in Malaysian society has been further constrained so that ordinary citizens and concerned civil society groups have not been able to fully express their views and to directly participate in the country's democratic processes. Political rallies, for example, are generally banned in Malaysia. Official organs of the opposing political parties are confined to their respective memberships only. In this respect, the mainstream press and other media were, and still are, instrumental in helping to promote the state's hegemonic influence over the society. It is evident then that the mainstream Malaysian media contribute to the erosion of the Malaysian electorate's democratic right to information.

As intimated above, it is also in the name of national development—and also national security—that a slew of restrictive laws were put in place to govern the media industry. As a result, the freedom of

expression and the freedom of the press have been severely curbed. Another major consequence of this is the concentration of media ownership in the hands of groups closely aligned with the ruling coalition, or individuals who are friendly to the powers-that-be.

### **Legal controls and media ownership**

There are a number of laws that are enforced in the name of protecting and promoting law and order, internal security as well as national development. The multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious nature of Malaysia also provides convenient justification for the state to make use of these laws. The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), whose predecessor is the Printing Presses Ordinance of 1948, is a primary piece of legislation that governs the press industry. PPPA stipulates that all newspapers and regular publications should possess a publishing permit issued by the Ministry of Internal Security, which has to be re-applied annually. Prior to 1984, the law gave the minister of internal security the power to grant a permit for no less than 12 months. After an amendment in 1984, the minister is empowered to grant a permit for a more limited duration if he deems it fit. PPPA also empowers the minister of internal security to revoke the permit of a publication should he decide that the publication concerned has acted in a manner “prejudicial to the nation’s security.”

In 1988, the PPPA was further amended to preclude any judicial review of the internal security minister’s decision if the minister revokes or suspends a publishing permit on the grounds that the publication is prejudicial to public order. This indicates the dominance of the executive over the judiciary. At present, the minister’s decision is final and cannot be challenged in any court of law, as stated under section 13, subsection 13B, of the PPPA.

Apart from this, section 7 (1) of the amended PPPA empowers the minister to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution, or possession of a publication. The minister may do this if he believes that a publication can threaten morality, public order, security, or national interest, conflicts with the law, or contains provocative materials (International Law Book Services 1998, 5).

The Official Secrets Act (OSA) is another law that obstructs journalists who, in their professional duty, seek information especially from government establishments. Their routine task becomes more overwhelming especially when the law—that went through a series of amendments over a period of time—is made more vague, or all-encompassing, in terms of its very definition of “official secrets.”

Another piece of legislation that has an adverse effect on press freedom and freedom of expression is the Sedition Act. Originally designed to curb expressions that could incite ethnic hatred and social disorder, especially after the tragic May 13, 1969 ethnic riots, this Act, or the way it has been implemented over the years, suggests that it could also be applied to curb genuine and sincere criticisms of some government policies. In short, it is a piece of legislation that can muzzle critics and dissenters.

The PPPA as well as the Sedition Act have been used to intimidate people from articulating their views. For instance, Lim Guan Eng, former member of parliament and deputy secretary-general of opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP), was charged in early 1995 under the Sedition Act and the PPPA for “publicly criticising the government’s handling of the allegations of statutory rape against former Melaka Chief Minister Rahim Tamby Chik in 1994” (Suaram 1998, 225). In February 1995, Lim was charged under the Sedition Act for encouraging “disaffection with the administration of justice in Malaysia” and was further charged under section 8A (1) of the PPPA for “maliciously printing” a pamphlet containing allegedly “false information” (Suaram 1998, 226).

The PPPA is also instrumental in promoting an unhealthy trend in the Malaysian media industry, in particular a concentration of press ownership in the hands of a few who are closely aligned with or friendly to the government. Given the immense power that the internal security minister wields, it follows that most publishing permits have been conveniently issued to applicants who are deemed friendly to the powers-that-be. This is especially so when it comes to granting a publishing permit for a daily newspaper.

A cursory look at the media ownership pattern in Malaysia (see, for instance, Wang 1998; Zaharom and Anuar 1998) gives an indication of the degree of involvement of the various partners of the ruling coalition and also of their economic allies. The major players of Malaysia’s mainstream media industry are the following:

1. Media Prima owns the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd (NSTP)—which publishes the English-language newspapers *New Straits Times*, *New Sunday Times*, *Malay Mail*, and *Sunday Mail*, and the Malay-language newspapers *Berita Harian*, *Berita Minggu*, and *Harian Metro*—the Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Bhd (or popularly

known as TV3), the new channel 8TV, Channel 9, and the recently acquired ntv7. This group is said to be close to UMNO.

2. Huaren Management Sdn Bhd, an investment arm of the BN component party, MCA, owns the *Star*, *Sunday Star*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *China Press*, and the radio station *STAR Rfm*.
3. Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd group owns *Utusan Malaysia*, *Mingguan Malaysia*, *Utusan Melayu* and *Kosmo!* (apart from magazines such as *Mastika*, *Wanita*, etc.). It has close links with the dominant party, UMNO.
4. The Ministry of Information controls TV1, TV2, and all government radio stations.
5. Timber tycoon Tiong Hiew King owns Sin Chew Media Corp Bhd, which publishes the popular *Sin Chew Daily* and *Guang Ming Ribao*, apart from other media interests in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. This Sarawakian media magnate is well connected to the state's political elite.
6. Another Sarawakian, timber tycoon Lau Hui Kiang was given permission by Mahathir to operate the Chinese *Oriental Daily* as a way of checking the growing influence of Tiong in the Chinese community (Gomez 2004, 482).
7. Ananda Krishnan, a Mahathir friend, owns the satellite TV Astro and Maxis Communications Bhd that operates cellular services.
8. The Tamil newspaper *Tamil Nesan* is published by the wife (Indrani S. Vellu) of the current president, Samy Vellu, of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), a component party of the ruling BN. Another Tamil daily, *Malaysia Nanban*, is also closely allied with the MIC;
9. Mahathir's close allies Vincent Tan Chee Yioun and Tong Kooi Ong jointly control Nexnews Bhd that owns *The Sun*, a free paper (that is distributed freely via selected outlets); *The Edge*, a weekly; and *Asia Inc*. Vincent Tan has also launched MiTV in late 2005 to compete with the satellite TV Astro.

The close relationship between the state and the media signals state interference in the affairs of the media industry. Editors of some major newspapers had been removed at the behest of the political leaders, particularly if the views of the former did not square nicely with those of the latter. A recent example is the sacking of the *New Straits Times* (NST) group editor-in-chief Abdullah Ahmad on November 20, 2003. The official explanation given for his dismissal was that an article he wrote on November 12, 2003, angered the Saudi government and soured bilateral relations. He was replaced by Kalimullah Masheerul Hassan in January 2004, a man said to be close to the present prime minister. To demonstrate this closeness, on August 31, 2004, during the 47th Independence Day of Malaysia, NST published an article by Kalimullah alongside an article by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on its front page.

When dissidents challenge the state's hegemony, the media become a tool for containing dissent. For example, in the wake of the sudden dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir's deputy, the full weight of the controlled mainstream media's manipulation fell on Anwar Ibrahim and his followers. The mainstream media deliberately humiliated Anwar as exemplified by the manner in which his street demonstrations and court trials were covered by the media in Malaysia. For instance, in an attempt to smear the image of Anwar as a Muslim leader who was allegedly involved in extramarital affairs (including homosexual relations), the media, especially the electronic media, constantly flashed into the living room images of a semen-stained mattress that was supposedly used for his sexual trysts. The mattress was literally carried—nay, paraded—to the court as a piece of incriminating evidence. Additionally, 'sodomy', which was linked to the Anwar trial, became a household word in a Muslim-majority Malaysia, thanks to the repeated use of the term by the mainstream media.

### THE MAINSTREAM PRESS AND THE 2004 GENERAL ELECTIONS

This paper examines the coverage of Malaysia's 2004 general elections by four mainstream newspapers, the *New Straits Times* (NST), *The Star*, *Berita Harian* (BH) and *Utusan Malaysia* (UM) (and their Sunday editions as well), particularly during the run-up to the general elections. Specifically, the study investigated these newspapers from March 13, which was the nomination day, until the polling day on March 21, 2004. The electoral campaigning period was only eight days, the



Table 1. Proportion of coverage bias within newspapers during the 2004 Malaysian general elections (percent)

Newspaper	<i>New Straits Times</i>	<i>The Star</i>	<i>Berita Harian</i>	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>
Total number of news items	93	103	86	89
Positive toward the Barisan Nasional (BN)	40.9	44.7	59.3	31.5
Negative toward the BN	1	3.8	1.2	1.1
Neutral toward the BN	20.4	7.8	2.3	29.2
Positive toward the Opposition	9.7	10.7	1.2	2.2
Negative toward the Opposition	14	24.3	33.7	28.1
Neutral toward the Opposition	14	8.7	2.3	7.9
Total	100	100	100	100

shortest in the history of Malaysian elections. These mainstream newspapers were selected primarily because they individually and collectively command an immense readership that comprises both Malay-speaking and English-speaking audiences, apart from the fact that they are closely associated with the ruling BN.

This analysis of the newspapers is made up of two parts: the first is quantitative while the second, which is rather more important as far as this study is concerned, is qualitative. In the first part, six categories (as shown in the Table 1 and 2)—namely (i) “positive toward the Barisan Nasional” (BN+); (ii) “negative toward the Barisan Nasional” (BN-); (iii) “neutral toward the Barisan Nasional” (BN ntrl); (iv) “positive toward the Opposition” (Opp+); (v) “negative toward the Opposition” (Opp-); and (vi) “neutral toward the Opposition” (Opp ntrl)—were created in order to get some indication of the editorial and political slant of the dailies concerned. In this regard, only news items were studied. Category (i) refers to news items of statements made by individuals and/or groups that expressed support for the BN; category (ii) refers to statements made by individuals and/or groups that attacked or were critical of the BN party and/or politicians; category (iii) refers to statements expressed by individuals and/or groups about the BN party and/or politicians that were neutral or balanced; category (iv) refers to statements made by individuals and/or groups that were supportive of the opposition and/or its politicians; category (v) refers to statements made by individuals and/or groups that criticized the opposition and/or its politicians; and category (vi) refers to statements expressed by individuals and/or groups about the opposition and/or its politicians that were neutral or balanced.

In terms of a newspaper’s reporting slant, individually the mainstream dailies concerned were more supportive of the incumbent

Table 2. Proportion of coverage bias across newspapers during the 2004 Malaysian General Election (percent)

Newspaper	Number of news items	<i>New Straits Times</i>	<i>The Star</i>	<i>Berita Harian</i>	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	Total
Positive toward the Barisan Nasional (BN)	163	23.3	28.2	31.3	17.2	100
Negative toward the BN	7	14.3	57.1	14.3	14.3	100
Neutral toward the BN	55	34.5	14.5	3.6	47.3	100
Positive toward the Opposition	23	39.1	47.8	4.3	8.7	100
Negative toward the Opposition	92	14.1	27.2	31.5	27.2	100
Neutral toward the Opposition	31	41.9	29	6.5	22.6	100
Total	371					

BN. Of the 93 news items that were investigated, 40.9 percent were pro-BN in the *NST*, 44.7 percent in *The Star*, 59.3 percent in the *BH*, and 31.5 percent in the *UM*. The two Malay-language newspapers, *BH* (33.7 percent) and *UM* (28.1 percent), which are closely associated with UMNO, were much more opposed to the opposition compared to the two English-language newspapers, *NST* (14 percent) and *The Star* (24.3 percent), given that the Malay-Muslim-based PAS, and to a certain extent Keadilan, were perceived to be a considerable electoral threat to UMNO in particular and BN in general. On the other hand, the English-language newspapers (*NST*, 9.7 percent; *The Star*, 10.7 percent) were relatively more generous toward the opposition in terms of the number of positive news. This could be attributed to the fact that the readership of the English-language press goes beyond the ethnic Malay electorate and, therefore, had to cater to the needs of Malaysians in general.

When compared across the newspapers, the news items that were positive toward the BN dominated the mainstream dailies, particularly in the case of *BH* (31.3 percent). Predictably, the news items that were negative toward the opposition came second in terms of total number (92), led by *BH* (31.5 percent), followed by *The Star* and *UM* (both 27.2 percent). Such an inclination from the Malay-language newspapers may be seen in the context of the dominant UMNO in particular trying to woo voters in the Malay heartland where there is PAS presence, and elsewhere in the country. Not surprisingly, news items in all of the newspapers that were negative toward the BN were patently minimal (seven).

A sample of the headlines in these newspapers would give us some indication of their editorial and political preferences: “Malaysians

prefer Pak Lah's vision of Islam" ( *NST*, March 15); "Najib: BN's concept has served people well" ( *NST*, March 15); "Karpal's way out of style, says Ong" ( *The Star*, March 15); "Unions and NGOs pledge to back BN" ( *The Star*, March 19); " *Manifesto pembangkang tidak praktikal: Pakar ekonomi*" (Opposition's manifesto isn't practical: Economic expert) ( *BH*, March 14); " *Manifesto bukti Pas menipu rakyat: Pak Lah* " (PAS's manifesto evidence of the party's trick on the people: Pak Lah) ( *BH*, March 17); " *Perlis merana jika pilih pembangkang* " (Perlis suffers if opposition is voted) ( *UM*, March 16); and "PM *azam majukan bangsa* " (PM committed to develop race) ( *UM*, March 20).

In other words, the overall coverage by these mainstream newspapers of the general elections points to a predictable bias—as was the case in past general elections (see, for example, Mustafa 1990, 2002, 2003)—toward the incumbent BN to the extent of demonizing the opposing parties. Additionally, this pattern of coverage also indicates a narrowing of the democratic space for in-depth discussions of issues of the day that would involve not only the politicians but also the ordinary citizens who were about to exercise their democratic rights to vote. However, if there is indeed a shade of difference in this election as opposed to the previous ones, it is the less crude approach of winning the hearts and minds of the voters that was employed by the incumbent BN and, consequently, reported by the mainstream press. It is this kind of reportage that needs to be uncovered via qualitative analysis.

For the purpose of qualitative investigation, some news items, supplements, articles, and political advertisements in the newspapers were selected for textual analysis. This is aimed at showing how certain ideological inputs were weaved into these editorial and advertising items, i.e., the subtle approach used that was designed to promote the dominant coalition party's hegemony over the society.

In a newspaper article published on March 11, 2004, *New Straits Times* writer Chok Suat Ling revealed that it was a deliberate policy of the BN under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that its electoral campaign would employ "clean, soft, and kind" approach; "clean" meaning no blatant or crude attacks, "soft" meaning subtle, and "kind" meaning gentle and informative.

According to Chok, the selling points in the BN's political campaign in the run-up to the recent general elections were:

1. Its policy of inclusion and power sharing among the ethnic groups and religions.

2. Its priority of unity and a single system of government for all, as opposed to the opposition's pursuit of Islamic laws for Muslims and separate laws for non-Muslims.
3. Its war against graft and its pledge to improve public services.
4. Its track record since 1957 in developing the country.

A close examination of the election coverage by the newspapers concerned shows that the above points were advocated in various ways through news reporting, supplements, articles, and political advertisements, among others.

As intimated above, in many ways the BN political campaign—that was invariably covered by the mainstream press—revolved around the “Pak Lah” factor. This is understandable given that the incumbent BN has just “acquired” a new leader prior to the general elections and there was an urgent need to consciously promote this new leadership. There was also, to reiterate, the desire to show the glaring contrast between Abdullah and his predecessor, particularly in terms of personality, demeanor, style of leadership, and emphasis on some policies—especially when the predecessor and his UMNO party were immersed in past controversies, particularly Deputy Premier Anwar's infamous dismissal, which left a bad taste in the mouth.

In other words, there was a deliberate move to push Abdullah out of the shadow of Mahathir Mohamad in this electoral campaign. Indeed, unlike Mahathir, Abdullah is not abrasive, or at least that is the way he is made out to be by the BN spin doctors and the mainstream press. “Pak Lah,” as he is popularly known among Malaysians, was portrayed as being clean, nonconfrontational, humble, gentle and affable. In short, he was painted as a people-friendly leader. A *Bernama* (Malaysia's national news agency) report on March 27, 2004, said that the “soft-sell” election campaign of the BN was “coordinated by two of BN chairman Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi's aides—an ex-banker and a political scientist—the media blitz used the creative input of three or four advertising companies and covered TV, radio, print media, billboards and, for the first time, direct mail.”

As in all general elections in Malaysia and elsewhere, politicians and political parties predictably run their electoral campaigns to win the hearts and minds of the voters. The campaigns are obviously waged by the contesting parties to promote in the public imagination that

they, if elected, would champion the cause of the electorate and be accountable to the latter. For the incumbent party especially, conscious efforts are made to convince the people that they still share similar ideals, aspirations, and dreams with the ordinary people. Any gaps, politically and ideologically, between the incumbent party and the people that might have prevailed over the years of rule would be glossed over or de-emphasized through intense electoral campaign.

For the incumbent BN, the recent election was the time to convince the people, especially those who felt alienated by the actions of the previous Mahathir administration, that it was still ready and willing to listen to, and care for, the people, their grievances and needs. This is why the man of the moment, Abdullah, made a tactical move to remind the people to “work with me, not for me.” Central to this exhortation is the notion of togetherness and closeness between the caretaker prime minister and his party on the one hand and the ordinary Malaysians on the other, one that defies hierarchical and ideological obstacles in society. Indeed, the Malaysian voters were reminded of the supposedly caring BN through a one-page political advertisement in many of the mainstream dailies, one of which was *UM*. It ran a political advertisement on March 20 that stated: “ *Bekerja bersama saya, bukan untuk saya* ” (Work with me, not for me).

This theme also ran through another one-page political advertisement in *BH* on March 18 (3) that showed a picture of Abdullah giving out what appeared to be a sack of rice to a man presumably from a village. These words were flashed in the advertisement: “ *Kita akan memastikan tiada golongan yang dipinggirkan* ” (We will ensure that no groups will be marginalized). Quite often, such an assurance was given a personal touch, as exemplified by a news story that graced the front page of the *NST* on March 17, with the headline: “Empower BN to deliver.” Here Abdullah was said to have made a pledge in his meeting with farmers, fishermen, and fish breeders that he would keep his promises (to further develop the country and raise living standards) if the people would give him a strong mandate.

The characterization of Abdullah as the man of the people was also found in a two-page pictorial essay of Abdullah’s routine in the run-up to the general elections in *The Star* (32-33) on March 19. The blurb said: “A general election is the time when a political leader must make numerous speeches, shake countless hands, and [attend to] nonstop invitations to meals. But Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi does it all easily, thanks to his natural and down-to-earth way with the *rakyat*

(people).” The pictures showed Abdullah in a number of meetings with the people, armed with his gentleness, warmth, and disarming smile.

On March 19, the *NST* flashed a one-page banner headline, “KLCI breaches 900-point mark.” This piece of news was supposed to imprint the “feel good” element in the psyche of the Malaysian electorate. The news story stated that the “KL Stock Exchange Composite Index rose 1.3 percent to breach 900-point level today as investors bet on a comprehensive victory for the Barisan Nasional in Sunday’s general election.”

As if to reinforce and sustain this “feel good” factor, the same newspaper carried a story on the same day, headlined “Malaysia now a model for [the United Nations] UN, World Bank” (7). It claimed that the World Bank and the UN were keen to use Malaysia as a ‘benchmark’ for other countries to emulate. In an effort to give this story an authoritative edge, the newspaper acquired concurring views of the executive director of a pro-establishment think tank, the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre. And on the same day, the *NST* published a political advertisement that reminded voters about “47 years of security, peace and unity” (9).

A day earlier (March 18), *The Star* ran an extensive advertisement that showcased the socioeconomic and political achievements that Malaysia witnessed and enjoyed under the BN party (31-34). These developments indeed squared nicely with the BN manifesto that was unveiled by Abdullah, suggesting a continuity of policy and purpose. As with the other major papers, *The Star* carried on its front page on March 15, 2004 the unveiling of the BN manifesto that was titled, “Towards a Malaysia of Excellence, Glory and Distinction.”

Still along the lines of the BN government’s economic achievement, the *NST* on March 7, 2004 carried a so-called advertorial, headlined “Tourism now a top money spinner” (13). In this piece the readers were told of the Johore state that was bustling with economic activities spurred by tourism. On page 16, another advertorial, headlined “The place for flora, fauna study,” focused on the state of Malacca where efforts had been made to preserve the natural beauty of the land that could also attract tourists.

The kind of economic development associated with Abdullah, as stated above, has also given emphasis to the agricultural sector, which, to many Malaysian observers, had been neglected by the Mahathir administration. Abdullah was supposed to reactivate the agricultural and rural sector partly as a political move to attract the largely Malay

electorate who were previously courted by PAS. Hence, a special supplement in the *NST* on March 20, 2004 where readers were told that “[f]armers can be rich and successful” (8). Here Agriculture Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the government’s “new thrust for agriculture would be a major transformation of the landscape, with modern farmers, large-scale commercial farms, high technological input and mechanisation.” In the same supplement, there was also an article on fishermen who form a part of a modernization drive to uplift their living standards.

Fighting corruption has also been closely associated with Abdullah, especially in the wake of allegations of massive corruption in the previous Mahathir administration and, to be sure, it had also received immense media attention especially at the beginning of Abdullah’s premiership. In a sense, this anticorruption drive under Abdullah was calculated to steal the thunder from the Anwar-inspired *reformasi* movement, which clamored for transparency and good governance. This larger political context gives the reader a better understanding of why Abdullah’s public aversion to corruption merited front-page coverage. On March 18, 2004 on the front page of *BH*, a headline ran, “PM *arah BPR siasat*” (PM instructs ACA to investigate). This refers to an allegation that an UMNO member tried to bribe an opposition candidate in Johore. Abdullah instructed the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) to investigate, a move to indicate the BN party’s seriousness in fighting corruption. And as if to reinforce this message, a political advertisement ran on the *NST* on March 17, 2004: “You’re not alone in fighting corruption. We’re beside you every step of the way” (5). In this one-page advertisement, four ordinary Malaysians expressed their support to Abdullah for his antigraft crusade. In short, Abdullah’s social concern resonates with the ordinary people, a man of the people.

To be sure, this support for Abdullah’s fight against corruption has gained widespread backing from Malaysians, especially women. At least this was one of the major findings of the *NST* Election Survey 2004 conducted prior to polling day. The survey claimed that those who favored the antigraft stand of the incumbent BN were likely to vote for the party.

Women generally gained high profile particularly in the BN campaign as reported by the press. It is understandable because it was imperative for BN to show the world that it welcomed women’s participation in all spheres of public life. This contrasts with what had been claimed to be PAS’s mixed feelings about women’s participation.

Thus, although on March 17 an *NST* article, headlined “PAS women to the fore” (12), discussed briefly the PAS’s women candidates, it nonetheless center-staged UMNO women candidates and leaders. And if this was not enough to convince the reader, the paper’s *Life and Times* section carried a piece, headlined “Women, let’s move it,” that traced the political achievements of former women leaders in UMNO since its inception. It was meant to flaunt the women’s wing of the incumbent party.

The youth were also not left out in the political calculation of BN. There were news stories as well as articles that mentioned the youth and their contribution to the country’s future. These are complimented by political advertisements such as the one that appeared in the *NST* on March 18. In this one-page advertisement, these words stared at the reader: ‘A leader who cares for our youth and their future’. Below it appeared the political endorsement for Abdullah (whose picture was in the advertisement) from two mothers and two youths.

Abdullah’s religious upbringing was brought to the fore in the reportage as well as in the political advertisements. For example, there was a one-page advertisement that showed Abdullah praying to God and seeking guidance, spiritual strength, and patience. Such piety, which is attributed to a supposedly moderate Muslim such as Abdullah, is aimed at linking it to moral uprightness, an attribute that is useful in an effort to build trust and confidence not only among fellow Muslims but also among non-Muslims in the country.

In the context of an intense electoral contest, one would argue that the BN spin doctors might have capitalized on the seeming virtues of moderation and compassion of its leader for electoral gains. Thus, the following political advertisement can be seen in this light: in a one-page advertisement in *The Star* on March 19, these words attempt to attract the reader: “Malaysia is for all. Today’s Government is shared by all races.” The picture showed Abdullah and his cabinet that consisted of members from various ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In short, it is an indirect invitation to the Malaysian electorate to celebrate such a diversity that is found in Malaysia.

There were, to be sure, deliberate distortions and omissions of facts committed by certain mainstream newspapers in an effort to demonize political parties running against the incumbent BN or to protect the image of the incumbent party. For example, on March 20, 2004, *BH* splashed a big photograph on its front page of three smiling ethnic Chinese men drinking beer in front of a PAS election center,



which was accompanied by a banner headline, “*Markas PAS sedia minuman keras*” (PAS election center provides liquor). The photo was a reproduction of the one that was already published by the daily *China Press* a few days ago. This was calculated to cause maximum political embarrassment, if not losses, to the Islamic PAS party, particularly for the consumption of *BH*'s Malay readers. Alcoholic drinks are prohibited in Islam. Although the denial and criticism of such insinuation from PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang appeared in the same issue of the *BH*, it was, however, buried on page four.

Another instance involves electoral slip-up of the MCA in the run-up to the general elections. It was learned that the component party of the BN had put up its posters in the Bukit Bintang district of Kuala Lumpur that carried Chinese words derogatory to mothers. The MCA quickly removed the posters after the Chinese community in the city expressed their anger. Opposition (ethnic Chinese-based) Democratic Action Party (DAP) took out an advertisement in the (Chinese) *Oriental Daily* asking: “Why does the Bukit Bintang MCA insult our mothers?” This incident was carried by *The Sun* on March 17, 2004. The MCA-owned *The Star* as well as the *NST* did not cover it, presumably to save the MCA from political shame.

## THE CHINESE LANGUAGE PRESS

A textual investigation of the Chinese-language dailies was also conducted, although rather briefly, with the aim of ascertaining their overall performance in the run-up to the general elections vis-à-vis the Malay- and English-language newspapers. There were attempts by the Chinese press as a whole to provide balanced reporting of both the incumbent party and the opposing parties. However, the political reality was such that many of the Chinese dailies succumbed to promoting the BN at the expense of marginalizing, if not demonizing, the opposing parties, especially for the spell nearing the polling day.

Predictably, the MCA-owned *Nanyang Siang Pau* played up the party's “achievements” for the Chinese community. For example, on February 20, 2004, the daily gave wide coverage to the allocation of funds for Chinese resettlement villages. On February 22, the paper reported the government's move to allow Chinese students to have a special 10 percent allocation of places in the Malay-based Mara educational institutions that year.

There was also an attempt by the Chinese press as a whole to promote phobia of Islam, particularly the variety closely associated with PAS. On March 14, all the mainstream Chinese newspapers carried four one-page advertisements, many of which were calculated to promote fear of PAS within the Chinese community, and also to highlight the purported political tie between DAP and PAS. These two parties parted ways prior to the 2004 general elections because of irreconcilable political ideologies. Nonetheless, the equation that was being promoted here by the Chinese dailies, with the intention to tar both opposing parties' image, is: a vote for DAP is a vote for PAS (*Malaysian Media Monitors' Diary*, March 2004).

### MEDIATING HOT AIR?

As intimated above, an air of euphoria filled Malaysia when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi succeeded Mahathir Mohamad in November 2003 after the latter stepped down from his 22-year premiership. The Abdullah administration came to the fore with the promise of not only wanting the people "to work with him, and not for him," but also to hear the truth from the people. But developments since then have merely reinforced the suspicion that the government was not committed enough to political reform and wider democratic space. This is especially so when one takes a look at some of the following things that occurred in recent times:

1. In May 2004, Information Minister Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir reminded the media of the fact that "the government has given the mass media 'wide freedom' and it does not aim to curb this." He cautioned them not to "abuse this freedom and must be aware of their limitations such as publishing reports that could threaten racial unity" (*Malaysiakini*, May 14, 2004). A month earlier, the same minister warned media organizations that the government "could revoke their permits" should they report on issues that jeopardize racial unity. Official statements such as this shows that the government possesses unchallenged powers in determining media contents as well as the kind of media that can survive. It also reflects the kind of patronizing thinking that press freedom is not to be taken as a given or to be

- fought for, but to be “granted” at the government’s discretion.
2. In its June 8, 2004, news report, *Malaysiakini* said that “The Internal Security Ministry has strongly hinted that it will not approve an application by online daily *Malaysiakini* for a print publication, citing fears that the publication will be prejudicial and jeopardise national security and public order.” This is an indirect reference to the January 20, 2003, police raid (under the provisions of the Sedition Act) on the news portal’s office in Kuala Lumpur, following a police report lodged by UMNO Youth alleging that a letter (written by “Petrof”) published by *Malaysiakini* questioned Malay special privileges and contained allegations that the government was unfair to other ethnic groups in Malaysia. This episode goes to show that the Internet is not immune from government interference.
  3. In response to Malaysia’s Human Rights Commission’s (Suhakam) recommendations on the promotion of media freedom, the government insisted that printing licences and publishing permits are granted (by the government)—under the powerful Printing Presses and Publications Act—as a *privilege* and not as a *right* (*Malaysiakini*, June 2, 2004). In other words, the government clearly does not recognize the right of the ordinary people to have a free flow of information and the right to express opinions.
  4. State-owned Radio-Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) censored in February 2004 a special feature on Chinese-language newspapers to avoid “creating confusion” in the community (*Malaysiakini*, February 3, 2004). Titled “Chinese dailies and their cultural role,” this feature was meant to address the issue of stiff competition among Chinese-language dailies in the country. Deputy Information Minister Donald Lim curiously argued that the government “don’t want RTM to get involved in the Chinese dailies’ competition.” It was also revealed in the same news report that *Oriental Daily* columnist Chang Teck Peng, who was interviewed in the RTM feature, was banned again by the Internal Security

Ministry from writing in the same newspaper. Once again, this illustrates the government's penchant for meddling in the process of news production of media organizations.

5. Deputy Information Minister Donald Lim warned the national news agency, Bernama, that it had no prerogative to direct the local media not to report on a bird flu outbreak in Kelantan. Also in this warning, Lim reminded—as if to confirm a long-standing suspicion—that Bernama, “as a state-owned news agency, could report on ‘sensitive issues such as bird flu and Japanese encephalitis’ only if it received a cabinet directive to do so” (*Malaysiakini*, August 25, 2004). This case shows the dominance of the executive in matters of news dissemination and censorship.
6. The international press freedom watchdog, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) revealed that there was a “high level of self-censorship and control of editorial policies by media owners loyal to the (Malaysian) government” (*Malaysiakini*, May 4, 2004). This form of news and information control is much more pernicious as it gives the wrong impression that the state is completely unaccountable for such a situation.

The above developments are examples suggesting that business is generally as usual. This is to say that, despite initial overtures made by the Abdullah administration indicating an appreciation for political openness and reform, the state of media freedom—of flow of information and of transparency—in the country thus far has not changed much. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that because of this and other factors, the alternative media and the Internet became, and remain to be, hot favorites especially among those who care for freedom of expression and wider democratic space. These alternative media and the Internet became especially vital in the wake of the sacking of former Deputy Premier Anwar Ibrahim. In terms of Internet usage, there has been a phenomenal increase. The Internet World Stats reports that in 2000, there were 3,700,000 users as opposed to 10,040,000 users in 2005, when Malaysia's current population stands at 26,500,699.

This explains in part why alternative publications such as the *Harakah*, the organ of the Islamist party PAS, still maintain a sizeable

following. Its readership includes not only PAS membership but also members of the general public, although the law stipulates that the sales of the publication are to be confined to party members only. Apart from *Harakah*, there are also other party publications that provide alternative and critical information and views. Publications from civil society groups, such as *Aliran Monthly* and *Utusan Konsumer*, also command some following.

Malaysia's only online newspaper, *Malaysiakini*, which started a few weeks before the 1999 general elections, and other web sites and web logs have also become important sources of alternative news and views for many Malaysians. There is relatively a lot more freedom on the Internet primarily because the Mahathir administration had made a promise particularly to foreign investors—in its effort to attract interest in the much-touted Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project—that no censorship on the Internet would be exercised. However, recent events such as the police raid on the *Malaysiakini* office and the political intimidation against a Malaysian blogger suggest that the Internet is not really a safe haven.

## CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

As discussed above, it is business as usual as far as the status of the media industry and its relations with the Malaysian state is concerned. Laws detrimental to democracy such as the PPPA, the Sedition Act, the OSA, and ISA (Internal Security Act) are still in place and applied by the government over time in response to certain circumstances in Malaysian society. Often the application of these laws meant the muzzling of useful criticisms and legitimate dissent. Over the years, these laws, particularly the PPPA and the OSA, have proved to be instrumental in creating a credibility deficit in the mainstream media, especially at the height of the *reformasi* movement, to the extent that, as mentioned above, it has compelled many to resort to the Internet and the alternative media.

It is also important that civil society groups raise media consciousness and literacy among the nongovernment organizations and ordinary citizens. Such awareness can not only alert the people to problems of journalistic distortions and media credibility gap but also help create a group of discerning audience or critical readership. Groups such as the Centre for Independent Journalism and Charter2000-*Aliran* have made some initiatives to help raise the

people's media sensitivity and literacy through advocacy work and media monitoring, respectively. It is hoped that such activities can also help make the people understand that the fight for press freedom and for freedom of information and communication is very much part and parcel with their human rights' struggle, and should concern every citizen in the country.

Given the inclination of the ruling party to keep and use these laws to protect its own vested interests, media advocacy groups, media professionals, civil society groups and others ought to work hand in hand in their pursuit of media freedom and freedom of information. Some degree of communication and exchange of ideas has been established by these groups via the Internet and other alternative media of communication.

Local initiatives of community groups such as the Broga's "no-incinerator" community and the Anti-Penang Outer Ring Road (Anti-PORR) group are but a few examples of ordinary people trying to push the envelope. Their use of the Internet and pamphlets to publicly air their grievances can also be interpreted as one of the ways of challenging the lack of content diversity and conservatism of the mainstream media.

Another example of such local initiative is the case of the local self-help group in Georgetown, Penang, called Save Ourselves Penang (SOS). SOS launched its first alternative publication, *Aiyoh Penang*, in May 2002 aimed at raising issues, such as the repeal of the Rent Control Act, that are not normally covered or sufficiently reported by the mainstream media. To avoid the complications of having to seek publication permit, SOS changes the name of its publication every time so as not to be considered a periodical (which requires publication permit).

Finally, social activists and media-freedom advocates need to press for media and political reforms via institutions such as Malaysia's Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) and journalistic fraternities. One of the pressing problems is the issue of concentration of media ownership, which has resulted in the erosion of diversity in media content. Unless addressed urgently and adequately, the problem would only heighten the marginalization of minorities and other disadvantaged groups, and the violation of their basic human rights. ❁

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