

THE MALAYSIAN 1990 GENERAL ELECTION: THE ROLE OF THE BN MASS MEDIA*

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Pilihanraya umum 1990 di Malaysia adalah satu pertandingan yang diambil bahagian oleh parti Barisan Nasional (BN) yang memerintah, khususnya UMNO Baru, dan gabungan parti-parti pembangkang yang diketuai oleh Semangat '46. Pertarungan pilihanraya ini menjadi lebih hebat dengan wujudnya persaingan sengit di antara Mahathir Mohamed dari UMNO Baru dan Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah dari Semangat '46, kedua-duanya yang cuba menawan hati dan fikiran masyarakat Melayu khususnya dan pengundi-pengundi Malaysia amnya. Di dalam konteks pergelutan politik inilah peranan media massa 'mainstream' dikaji. Di sinilah penulis menganalisis strategi-strategi yang digunakan oleh media 'mainstream' ini untuk mengembangkan ideologi parti pemerintah. Adalah didapati bahawa, berbanding dengan parti BN, gabungan pembangkang pada keseluruhannya mendapat peluang yang kurang untuk menyampaikan mesej-mesej politik mereka melalui media massa 'mainstream', dengan tujuan untuk mempengaruhi para pengundi. Walau bagaimanapun, kejayaan parti-parti pembangkang PAS dan PBS dalam menawan negeri-negeri Kelantan dan Sabah menunjukkan mereka dapat mematahkan propaganda media 'mainstream' itu. Ini adalah disebabkan oleh beberapa faktor, seperti kewujudan media alternatif atau pinggir. Ini menyebabkan penulis memperkatakan potensi media alternatif dalam hal membawa satu perubahan sosial di Malaysia.

The 1990 Malaysian general election was largely a contest between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), led by the newly-established UMNO Baru, and the Opposition coalition led by the newly-created Semangat '46. This electoral competition became very intense with the rivalry between UMNO Baru's Mahathir Mohamed and Semangat '46's Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, to win the hearts and minds of the Malay community in particular and the Malaysian voters in general. It is within the context of this political struggle that the role of the mainstream mass media in the peninsula is examined. The writer analyses the strategies employed by these mainstream media to propagate to a large degree the ideology of the ruling party. Unlike the ruling BN, it was found that the Opposition as a whole lacked accessibility to the mainstream mass media in its attempts to convey its political messages to the voters. However, the fact that the PAS and PBS, both opposition parties, succeeded in taking over the state governments of Kelantan and Sabah respectively suggests that the propaganda role of the mainstream media had been checked to a certain degree. This was due to several factors, one of which was the alternative or fringe media. The writer comments on the potential of these alternative media in bringing about some social change in Malaysia.

For the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition¹ in general, Malaysia's 1990 general election was a contest that transformed into what was perceived as a fierce battle, particularly because the hitherto disparate opposition parties successfully managed to form a viable opposition coalition.² More specifically, for UMNO Baru, the ruling coalition's dominant partner - and especially its president (and, by tradition, Malaysia's prime minister), Dr Mahathir Mohamed - this election was especially significant and vital as it was the first time since its recent creation (after the old UMNO was declared illegal by the High Court on February 4, 1988)³ that its popularity and true political strength were to be tested on a nationwide scale. But, more importantly, this political test was especially significant to UMNO Baru as it would confirm or refute the fear that Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and his breakaway Semangat '46 party were strong and influential enough to pose a serious threat and challenge⁴ to UMNO Baru's and, by extension, Mahathir's claim to being the only credible and powerful champion of the Malay community⁵ and its interests. In other words, the hegemonic position that was hitherto held by the ruling BN seemed to have been variously undermined by the opposition parties and other groups outside the formal political arena, at a point when the whole nation was about to vote for the next government.⁶

This paper attempts to examine the position of Malaysia's mass media, in particular those existing in the peninsula, within the context of the political struggle that was being waged by the contesting political parties on the ideological terrain. To be sure, this ideological struggle witnessed the Opposition as a whole being pitted against immense, though not totally insurmountable, odds. The Opposition had to compete rather unequally with the incumbent BN whose party machinery was well organised and financed; whose access to the mass media was, and remains, relatively unhindered; and whose desire to make use of the state machinery or apparatus was, to say the least, less restrained.

It is stressed at this juncture that it is not the intention, nor is it within the scope of this paper to evaluate the extent to which the mainstream mass media were successfully able to convey messages and images that helped promote the public standing of the incumbent BN party - and consequently influence voters - during the period concerned. In other words, this paper attempts to illustrate the ways and means used by the mainstream mass media in particular to propagandize in the overall interest of the ruling party. It attempts a critical reading of some - though invariably not all - of the strategies employed by the mainstream media in framing issues, events and personalities during the ten-day campaign period. In a nutshell, the *effectiveness* of these strategies - in terms of influencing voters, changing voter attitudes, reinforcing attitudes, for example - is *not* what this paper seeks to discover. Instead, its more modest aim is to provide some analysis of the strategies used, per se, the maps of meanings or frameworks of explanation offered, the selective discourses made available to the

audience. Although the concern of this paper is primarily with the mainstream media coverage during the official campaign period that stretched from nomination day on October 11, 1990 to polling day on October 21, 1990 in the peninsula, an assessment is also made of the period immediately after the dissolution of Parliament on October 5, 1990 to see how events and issues leading up to the campaign period proper were covered by the mainstream media.

As in many previous cases, the 1990 general election once again demonstrated, in an oft-declared democracy no less, the unequal access given to political parties by the Malaysian mainstream media, particularly in the case of the Opposition.⁷ It also indicated the ability of the ruling coalition - given its easy access to the media by virtue of its ownership and control of much of the print and electronic media - to utilise the mainstream media in its endeavour to promote its public image and to construct its own version of the Malaysian social reality for its own political ends. No less important is the fact that the election campaign of the ruling party conducted through the mainstream media had, in certain respects, reached a new level of sophistication by 1990. In addition, especially during periods of electioneering the socio-cultural and political significance of the mass media are further enhanced in a society like Malaysia where public rallies remain banned, and their poor and restricted substitute, *ceramahs* (in-door political lectures) are conducted in ways that only exact heavy constraints on the financial and human resources of especially the opposition parties.

The Media and the Struggle for Hegemony

What is immediately apparent is that both the print and electronic media, in particular those owned and controlled by the ruling party,⁸ provided massive and positive coverage of the ruling party during the campaign period. While the danger of economic determinism is consciously recognised by a perspective that sees a connection between ownership and control of the media, this approach, nonetheless, does maintain that the general pattern of the media practices during this period suggests that the mainstream media worked in such a manner as to satisfy the 'underlying economic and political imperatives' of their corporate owners. As Graham Murdock (1980:57), commenting on the British media situation, argues, 'proprietors and other capitalists do not need to intervene in newspaper production since the logic of the prevailing market structure ensures that by and large the output endorses rather than opposes their general interests'. In Malaysia, these 'general interests' of the mainstream media owners are firmly protected and promoted not only by market logic, but also by the fact that, unlike the British case, the proprietors also happen to be members and/or friends of the ruling group.⁹

As implied above, a ruling group consciously attempts to maintain and promote its ideology via, say, schools and the mass media, in the civil society in its endeavour to strive for a hegemonic position. And for this ideological

manoeuvring to be more effective, the ruling group has to be portrayed as being close to the people. As Bocock observes

Hegemonic leadership involves developing intellectual, moral and philosophical consent from all major groups in a nation. It involves an emotional dimension too, in that those political leaders who seek hegemonic leadership must address the sentiments of the nation-people and must not appear as strange or alien beings who are cut off from the masses (Bocock 1986:37).

An ideological struggle (for hegemony) here implies, therefore, that the ruling group should as far as possible attempt to win the consent and support of the people or the dominated classes via such institutions of the civil society as the mass media - without having to resort to coercion. And to achieve this, social problems and contradictions must be masked, displaced, and naturalized (O'Shaughnessy 1990:96) by the media concerned so that, as intimated above, the crucial ideological and emotional gap between the ruling group and the people can be reduced or eliminated. And the fact that hegemony is unlikely ever to be complete - because of possible counter-hegemonic endeavours from the dominated classes - makes this ideological struggle and manoeuvring tense and never ending.

The following sections consist of the writer's analysis of media contents and the manner in which these contents were presented by the mainstream media between October 5 and October 20, 1990. The aim is to examine in what manner these contents may have reflected and re-produced particular interests - those of, say, the media's owners or even those of the incumbent BN party.

NEWSPAPERS

(i) News reports

Not surprisingly, the activities of the component parties and the leaders of the ruling coalition were highlighted (i.e. between October 5 and October 20, 1990) in the best possible manner on the front and important inside pages of the mainstream press, and on the prime time slots of the electronic media. For example, on 5th October 1990, the *New Straits Times (NST)* and *The Star* reported on their front pages Prime Minister Mahathir's declaration of the dissolution of Parliament and state assemblies, and at the same time both newspapers also publicised the Barisan Nasional manifesto that was revealed by Mahathir. Even when some aspects of the manifesto of the Gagasan Rakyat made it to the front page of *The Star* (13/10/90), they were, nevertheless, dwarfed by a major news item (and a photograph of Prime Minister Mahathir and his deputy) that covered the unveiling of BN's manifesto.¹⁰

Malaysian readers were also encouraged by the mainstream press to easily recall the many reportings of incumbent politicians of the ruling party 'handing out' development projects and promises to the electorates. In one news report, for example, the Selangor Menteri Besar revealed that 'A Fisheries Master Plan has been drawn up to take Selangor to the forefront in the aquaculture industry (NST 5/10/90).' In yet another example, the incumbent Energy, Telecommunications and Post Minister S. Samy Vellu promised that 'About 90 per cent of rural areas in the country will have access to telephones by 1995. (ibid.)' The conscious blurring by the incumbent BN of the line between party and government activities further enhanced its media exposure. In other words, a simple official opening of a school function, for example, received media attention to the point of it being orchestrated in such a way that the government activity also doubled up as a party event.¹¹ Furthermore, some of the BN candidates, especially the 'new faces', were thrust into the limelight by the mainstream media, and their professional and academic background and experiences widely reported.¹² In short, activities of the ruling coalition easily caught the print media's attention, thereby automatically constructing the political and socio-economic significance and 'relevance' of these activities to the 'national interests'. In other words, the predominant strategy employed by the mainstream media here was to drive home the idea that it is *only natural* to expect government leaders to be concerned about the welfare of the people and to be seen and reported as being so. As stated above, it is in the primary interest of the ruling group to seek ideological and emotional affinity, irrespective of the degree of superficiality or orchestration, with the people in its overall design to seek hegemonic fulfilment.

On the other hand, the Opposition as a whole - as implied earlier - suffered from a lack of media coverage and, worse, media distortions. While it would be dishonest to assert that the Opposition did not get a certain measure of media exposure (including that given by the respective party organs¹³), it would be equally fallacious to disregard the fact that many a time the Opposition was consciously put in a bad light by the mainstream media. For instance, the unexpected resignation of the DAP's deputy secretary-general and Member of Parliament for Bukit Bintang, Lee Lam Thye, on September 29, 1990 received the immediate and unwavering attention of the mainstream media, the slant taken being the depiction of the DAP as a party riddled with internal conflicts and dissension.¹⁴ Another example of a mainstream media promotion of a certain viewpoint was the depiction of the various opposition parties apparently 'scrambling' for seats in the states concerned.¹⁵ PAS, too, complained of being a victim of distortions by certain quarters of the mainstream media. For instance, PAS denied making any press statement to the mainstream media about its alleged willingness to have a reconciliatory dialogue with UMNO Baru 'for the sake of Malay unity'. PAS (*Watan* 20/10/90) suspected that such a wild allegation was motivated by the desire of the ruling coalition to create confusion among supporters of PAS and Semangat '46, and, by implication, to split electoral votes between the two, particularly in Kelantan. An article headlined,

'Semangat '46 tidak boleh diberi undi Islam' (Semangat '46 must not be given the Islamic vote), in the *Berita Harian* (18/10/90) alleged that there was mutual understanding and appreciation between UMNO Baru and PAS of the urgent need to have a dialogue 'for the sake of Islam'. This was a direct attack on Semangat '46's 'collaboration' with PBS, a party depicted by the ruling BN and the mainstream media as having sentiments that were inimical to the growth of Islam in Sabah in particular, and the country in general. The depiction of political parties in the Opposition coalition as ones that were disparate, and lacking consensus and direction only reinforces the stereotype of the Opposition as being unreliable, unqualified to govern the country. And this, therefore, implies that only the BN party can provide the much needed moral and intellectual leadership that the people 'deserve'. The ruling group, in other words, is capable of catering to the needs of the people.

The leader of the Malay-based Semangat '46, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, was not spared either from the savage criticisms and damning allegations of the ruling coalition and, in turn, from the somewhat 'predatory instincts' of much of the mainstream media. The Malaysian people were told in no uncertain terms by the BN leadership that, for instance, cassette tapes would be distributed to reveal that Tengku Razaleigh was planning to 'kill' his allies, PAS and DAP. *The Star* (3/10/90), for instance, reported that UMNO Baru would distribute to its 9,000 branches (in Kelantan) copies of the cassette tape in which Semangat '46 president, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, allegedly said he would destroy all opposition parties if he came to power. Razaleigh, however, did respond to this, as reported in the *Watan* (4/10/90) on its front page, by saying that he had never made any statement that revealed any intention of 'killing' PAS, and that this was all a lie and a false accusation. (He had earlier challenged Mahathir to present the tape concerned and broadcast its content through radio, television or publish it in newspapers (*Watan* 25/9/90).)¹⁶ The close relationship between the mainstream media and the ruling party necessitated the former as a whole to invariably reproduce the latter's electoral messages that were essentially designed to 'attack' Tengku Razaleigh, the person who was seen as a direct challenge and threat to Mahathir and to UMNO Baru's political survival and, by implication, to the political dominance of the ruling coalition. Tengku Razaleigh, in other words, was portrayed by the mainstream media as a politician whose sincerity should be questioned not only by the voters but also by members of the Opposition coalition. This took the form of the mainstream media merely reporting as well as, in certain cases, sensationalizing this 'issue' (of Razaleigh planning to 'kill' his allies) that was already defined by the ruling BN.

The mainstream media also diligently highlighted the UMNO Baru leadership's allegation that Tengku Razaleigh was directly involved in the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal and also his alleged mishandling of government finances when he was the Finance Minister of the Mahathir administration. It is significant that this financial scandal was 'resurrected' by the ruling BN about

two or three days after PBS announced its 'shocking' decision on October 15, 1990 to withdraw from BN and align itself instead with Tengku Razaleigh's Semangat '46. For instance, the *Utusan Malaysia* (19/10/90) carried photographs of four letters allegedly connected to the BMF scandal, all of which were addressed to Tengku Razaleigh when he was Finance Minister.

The election campaign and the mainstream media's unrelenting onslaught against Razaleigh (and, by implication, his Opposition coalition) reached a high pitch when Razaleigh, as leader of the Gagasan Rakyat, visited Sabah on October 18, 1990 after PBS indicated its desire to join the Opposition coalition. It was here that Razaleigh was seen wearing an ethnic Kadazan headgear (*sigah*) that was given to him by PBS leader, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan. The mainstream media coverage was slanted in such a way as to make the traditional headgear appear to have a cross on it, thereby giving the Malaysian public, particularly the Malay-Muslim voters, the impression that Razaleigh was then in cohort with a political party whose members are predominantly Christian. In short, Razaleigh's 'ethnic-Malay commitment' and (Islamic) religiosity were being questioned. The *Utusan Malaysia* (19/10/90) ran a front-page headline: 'Orang ramai marah Razaleigh pakai tengkolok bersalib' (People furious over Razaleigh's wearing of crossed headgear), thereby giving the notion that many people, particularly Malay-Muslims, were hurt by Razaleigh's 'insensitive' action. In these cases, neither the tape (to prove Razaleigh's plan to 'kill' PAS) made its appearance nor was Razaleigh given ample and equal access to the mainstream media in order to respond adequately to those criticisms and allegations.¹⁷ And when Razaleigh responded in part to these media distortions and unfairness through what might be interpreted by some as rudely barring TV3 crew from covering his political functions, TV3 cried foul and claimed, subsequently, that Razaleigh was already showing his inclination to dishonour his manifesto pledge to guarantee press freedom!¹⁸ Hence, what we have here is a consistent construction by the mainstream media of an image of a Razaleigh whose political and religious commitment and sincerity were suspect. It was a conscious attempt by the ruling BN, via the mainstream media, to politically marginalise Razaleigh and, to some extent, newly-found ally, PBS, particularly during the remaining days of the campaign period. In other words, it was an aggressive BN attack against Razaleigh and his coalition whose popularity at that time was perceived to have the potential to undermine BN's political credibility and dominance in the Malaysian society.

The reporting and reinforcing of racist and religiously-insensitive election campaigning were plainly evident in this general election, in particular in the Malay mainstream press. As implied earlier, soon after PBS took UMNO Baru and BN by surprise by pulling out of the coalition a few days before polling day, the mainstream peninsular media were quick to portray PBS as a party that had the underlying motive of proselytizing Muslims,¹⁹ thus threatening to jeopardise and erode Malay unity and, more importantly, Malay-Muslim dominance and

supremacy in the country.²⁰ On the front page of the *Utusan Malaysia* (19/10/90), for instance, ran a banner headline, 'Nasionalis2 seru UMNO PAS bersatu semula' ([Malay] nationalists urge UMNO and PAS to unite again). In this news item, groups of 'Malay nationalists' were reported to have expressed deep concern over what they termed 'as the political threat against Malay political dominance, arising from the Semangat '46-PBS alliance. Consequently, they urged UMNO Baru and PAS to bury their differences so as to preserve Malay political dominance. On page four of the same *Utusan Malaysia*, Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba was quoted as expressing his disappointment over what he perceived as Malay dominance being jeopardised by Malays themselves (in reference to Semangat '46), with the help of non-Malays (i.e. PBS whose members are predominantly non-Muslim Bumiputeras). And finally, the editorial of the same newspaper on the same day echoed the political concern of these Malay nationalists.

The implication of the above media coverage is that the emotive element of 'race' was constantly brought into the Malaysian political discourse and the consciousness of most Malaysians. In other words, the politics of 'race' and ethnic divisions was, and remains, utilised by certain politicians and political parties for their own ends, irrespective of its grave social and political repercussions. And in the process, such political discourse of the politicians concerned became part and parcel of the mainstream media discourse. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Christian Federation of Malaysia was moved to express concern and regret over 'the deliberate introduction of religious and communal elements into the (election) campaign'. It added: 'We are deeply distressed that speeches, news items and full-page advertisements have appeared in the media which have a tendency to incite one section of our society against another. (*The Star* 21/10/90)' Seen in this light, the political alliance of PBS with the peninsular Gagasan Rakyat was posed, especially by the mainstream Malay press, as an untenable political proposition for many, if not all, Malay-Muslim voters in the peninsular. What was marginalized - even conveniently ignored - by much of the mainstream press was the fact that PBS withdrew from the ruling coalition essentially because it was dissatisfied with present federal-state relations.²¹ Hence, the primary strategy employed by the mainstream press - that of consistently projecting a particularly skewed image of the Opposition (individuals and parties) - was in harmony with the need of the ruling coalition to distance the Opposition from the electorate. The Malay opposition parties were, on the one hand, depicted as anti-Malay (i.e. Razaleigh and Semangat '46) and thus 'traitors' to their 'own kind' and, on the other, portrayed as radical, fundamentalist Muslims (i.e. PAS) who, therefore, were a threat to 'secular Malaysia'. In either case, the opposition parties were depicted as deviants, who needed to be marginalized, indeed shunned, by 'all Malaysians'. Such stereotyping and negative labelling of the Opposition help to reinforce the hegemonic bloc.

(ii) Advertisements

As with the last general election, the ruling party mounted an aggressive advertising campaign of not only promoting a subjective image of itself, but also of running down the Opposition during the campaign period. For instance, major newspapers like the *NST* and *The Star* carried full-page advertisements that appealed to the Malaysian readers, and hence voters, to 'Vote Barisan for a peaceful, stable and prosperous Malaysia'. As for the portrayal of the Opposition, these major newspapers published the 'Marriage of Convenience' caricature that depicted an Opposition that was made up of seemingly incompatible partners, i.e. Semangat '46, DAP and PAS. While the ruling coalition was able to advertise its manifesto and promote its public image without a hitch and on a regular basis, the Opposition, on the other hand, had a difficult time trying to buy space to reveal its 'Save Malaysia' manifesto to the general public. With the exception of the *Watan* and a few other fringe newspapers, including the Chinese ones, no other mainstream press were willing to advertise the Opposition's manifesto.²² *The Star* (19/10/90) did provide - although only once throughout the campaigning - some space for the DAP's election promises to the Penang electorates, but even this was shadowed by Gerakan's political manifesto which, in contrast, was strategically positioned and adequately highlighted in the same newspaper on the same day. Advertisements were another media mode or technique that served to reinforce the positive images and messages of the ruling BN that were already found in the regular columns of the newspapers. In an age when advertisements have aggressively become part and parcel of Malaysian life, the slogans, catchy phrases and eye-catching pictures of these political advertisements - as in any other forms of advertisement -- work towards reminding Malaysians of the need to 'buy' the BN messages of stability, prosperity, etc.

(iii) Press analyses and letters

Print media analyses, such as they were, about the contesting political parties, essentially functioned as a thin camouflage for the ruling party's propaganda. Political analyses and commentaries on the editorial page of mainstream newspapers normally had an inherent bias towards the ruling party. For example, the *New Sunday Times* (14/10/90) carried an article, headlined 'Kit Siang's final dash', which was critical of DAP's resolve to form the next (Penang) state government and, by implication, the BN was in a better position to run the state. An editorial in the *NST* (16/10/90) ridiculed the electoral manifesto of the Gagasan Rakyat. And in the *Utusan Malaysia* (15/10/90), the commentary, 'Komentari Pilihanraya 1990', was equally biting in its criticism of the Opposition, in particular PAS. Opinion pieces in the mainstream press usually were an editorial mechanism for boundless promotion of the ruling party.²³

In marked contrast, a few marginal tabloids made some attempt to provide balanced discussions and analyses of the contesting political parties. The *Watan* (18/10/90), for instance, not only provided discussion of the Gagasan Rakyat's 'Save Malaysia' manifesto but also carried advertisements of the manifesto. While these marginal tabloids may pose as counter-hegemonic elements in the realm of the Malaysian mass media and ideological struggle, their inadequate finance, limited circulation, restricted frequency (in the form of weekly, bi-weekly and tri-weekly - as opposed to daily), relatively small distributing network, and lack of skilled personnel dampen to some extent their impact on the Malaysian society.

Through the normal facilities of selection, omission and editing, the letters columns during the campaign period many a time carried letters, purportedly from concerned citizens, that were not only full of praise for the ruling coalition, but also unceasingly attacked the Opposition.²⁴ Press analyses and letters to the editors are, therefore, the means by which the print media are empowered to frame events or issues, and also to exclude certain sources from the public discourse. In other words, these press analyses and letters may serve as ideological mechanisms to promote the political image of the group(s) concerned.

TELEVISION

(i) News reports

The Malaysian electronic media displayed a dubious commitment to 'investigative journalism' when it came to covering the Opposition during the campaign period. For example, before the parties in the Gagasan Rakyat even had time to reach a consensus on their electoral pact and manifesto, TV3 journalists and camera crew consciously 'detected' and publicised a certain discrepancy in the statements made by a few leaders of the Gagasan Rakyat, with the apparent aim of depicting lack of cooperation and a poor sense of direction among its leaders. In another instance, TV3 demonstrated its 'concern' over and eagerness to cover the sudden resignation of the DAP's deputy secretary-general Lee Lam Thye. The television station concerned went to the extent of focussing, in its news bulletin, on Lam Thye breaking down at a private family function to celebrate his son's birthday in a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur.

In contrast, the mainstream media as a whole seemed less inquisitive to wonder why, for example, MIC leader Samy Vellu dropped the party's key figures from the electoral contest and what possible repercussions this could have on the party's unity and political future.²⁵ In another case, the broadcast media, although presumably mindful of their journalistic canons and solemn responsibilities, nonetheless, were a bit unconcerned about the dropping of

certain UMNO Baru candidates from the recent electoral contest, and the curious 'political pullout' of UMNO Baru's Musa Hitam, a former deputy prime minister, and his close associates from the general election.²⁶

In other words, the broadcast media, in this case TV3, displayed a penchant for selective 'investigative journalism'. This kind of 'selective journalism' indeed serves to mask or even 'naturalize' social problems and contradictions faced by the ruling group, thereby projecting an image of a united and stable BN, while at the same time this kind of journalism can also be employed to highlight or even exaggerate problems or contradictions within the Opposition with the desired aim of depicting the Opposition as political deviants.

(ii) Commentaries and talk shows

Television commentaries and talk shows were bent on promoting the ruling party's image by, for instance, inviting 'respectable' political analysts and BN-inclined 'political observers' to give their supposedly impartial views of the election and the political parties. This televisual and ideological pattern was evident in TV3's 'Menjelang Hari Mengundi' (Before the Polling Day), 'RTM Bersama Anda' (RTM With You) and RTM's 'Wawancara' (Interview). Here the television stations concerned pretended to play the role of neutral, even disinterested, hosts to a group of invited and well-informed guest speakers. Again, as a shrewd way of pretending to observe journalistic impartiality and balance, RTM, for instance, screened - as it always does in normal times - the highlights of the day's mainstream newspapers (i.e. RTM's 'Keratan Akhbar'), which in essence corresponded to its political preferences and simultaneously the ideology of its political masters. And all this conveniently conducted without RTM having to make much or any editorial comment, or reveal its political bent.

The commentaries and talk shows served to give the impression that the viewers were given their democratic right to televised debates and discussions of political matters that were balanced and impassioned. What was not explicitly said is that these discussions and debates already had their terms of reference or 'maps of meanings' (Hall et al 1981:337) defined to a large degree by the ideology of the ruling party. In short, the act of steering such discussions and debates - in which oppositional and alternative views were displaced or de-emphasised - was masked.

(iii) Development documentaries

The hackneyed use of television 'development documentaries' was evident on both television stations. These documentaries, like TV3's 'Memo', were primarily aimed at jogging the presumably short memory of the Malaysian audience about the various development projects that the 'strong' and 'stable' BN government was able to implement in the last four years or so. Here, individuals

and groups, interviewed by television journalists, were portrayed as people who were satisfied enough to say nothing but good things about the BN government. Furthermore, the BN government, as in the case of the mainstream press coverage, gained greater broadcast media exposure with the former's constant blurring of the line between party and government activities. The implied message behind all these documentaries was that more of these 'beneficial projects' would be coming the audience's way if they voted the ruling party into power again. Television documentaries have in many ways an 'aura' of being topical, educational, and socially significant. It was in this context that the 'development documentaries' were broadcast by the television stations. And it was through these documentaries that the development objectives and programmes, and selected 'achievements' of the ruling BN were depicted as being socially significant, 'commonsensical', and consonant with the needs and aspirations of the viewers, the electorate. In short, the ruling party was portrayed as being ideologically close to the people.

(iv) Filmlets

While these television 'development documentaries' appear to be somewhat crass advertisements of the ruling party's past performances, the use of filmlets (that were normally accompanied by some catchy tunes and songs) present a sophistication of sorts of the ruling coalition's public relations machinery and its propaganda practices. The shrewd use of the old 'Barisan Kita' ('Our Barisan') filmlet and song, with the accent on 'Barisan', served in many ways as a constant reminder to the general viewers of the ability of the ruling BN to forge ahead with socio-economic development and preserve the political stability and security of 'our' country. 'Our Barisan' also masked the primary strategy of the ruling group to promote and emphasise the image of a resourceful and energetic 'Barisan' Nasional.

In addition, the television stations carried filmlets that not only showed groups of Malaysians that were considered as contributing to the general well-being of 'the nation', but also conveyed the impression that the BN *does* care for these groups. Hence, there were filmlets about underprivileged and economic fringe groups such as fishermen, farmers, and rubber tappers. And there was also a filmlet on the police force that was depicted as a group of dedicated and committed people who would, in the line of duty, even sacrifice their lives for the sake of ensuring the survival of 'the nation'.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the groups portrayed in these filmlets were predominantly Malay because their votes were vital in a general election where both UMNO Baru and Semangat '46, let alone PAS, were fiercely competing for a solid political recognition, affiliation, and support from the Malay populace. As another cinematic technique, images of Mahathir in a number of these filmlets were juxtaposed with the Malaysian flag to equate Mahathir and, by

extension, the BN, with 'the nation' and all it stood for. In other words, the ruling group was trying via the electronic media to depict a BN coalition that was sufficiently sensitive to the needs of the electorate, in particular the majority Malay community.

This 'caring theme' was also conveyed to the viewers just prior to the campaign period when RTM conducted the Telethon ('Jantung Hatiku') programme, a phone-in charity show that lasted for a week, inviting good-hearted Malaysians to donate cash for those heart and kidney patients who needed medical attention and treatment. The conspicuous presence of members of the ruling coalition (like Information Minister) and their wives (like Mahathir's) on the Telethon served to further reinforce this 'BN-cares-for-you' theme. This Telethon filmlet served to portray a BN party that cared for the ordinary human beings, all of the Malaysian people.

Filmlets that showed images of happy (and contented), trouble-free and carefree Malaysians, be they toddlers, children, mothers, loving couples and grandmas, and the filmlet promoting 'Visit Malaysia Year', all in all were geared to convey the impression that all is well in this land of lights, merriment and abundance ('What a wonderful world', went a song accompanying a filmlet) - and to vote for a political change (i.e. the Opposition) was tantamount to entertaining a mischievous and disastrous thought. Besides, what was there for the ordinary viewers to grumble about when the ruling party was invariably, albeit indirectly, associated with the emphasis on 'Quality' in life?²⁷ As for the 'Mr Universe' filmlet, its manifest intention was to promote the importance of having a strong, healthy body in conjunction, no doubt, with an international body-building contest, whilst its latent message was the conjuring up of an image of a 'strong' and 'stable' (BN) government that was supposedly good for all Malaysians. In other words, as O'Shaughnessy (1990:97) aptly remarks, 'Television constructs a view of the world but *naturalizes* that view, makes it normal, by hiding its own means of construction, its editing, selection, and camerawork. (emphasis in the original)' It is a mainstream media viewpoint that equated happiness, prosperity, stability and strength of 'the people' and 'the nation' with the ruling BN party.

In addition, terms used in these filmlets such as 'our', 'our nation', 'our Malaysia' and also 'my Malaysia', and the images of the Malaysian flag and ordinary people had the potential of making viewers feel involved, and attached to a consensual view of society. The 'people' or the viewers were, to borrow an Althusserian term, 'hailed' to be part of this process of 'nation-building'. The message being hammered across incessantly was that 'we' (the people and the BN) were working together, were one and the same, inseparable, a unit. That is, this was an endeavour by the ruling group to strive for hegemony by constructing for the society as a whole, in a given historical moment, a particular philosophical

world-view that would ensure the group's dominance through the use of ideological apparatuses such as schools, mass media, etc.

In other words, the main question these film sequences posed was, how could 'we', citizens of 'our' beloved country, disagree with the 'good things' televised (and also publicized in newspapers) that were being associated with the BN government? For, surely, to criticise the messages and images conveyed through the electronic and print media was, and remains, an act of being unnecessary deviants and social nuisance and/or, worse, disloyal and anti-'national'. It is *only natural*, therefore, that 'we' - the BN and 'the people' work towards the good of 'our nation'. This is, indeed, one of the techniques used to portray, as Bocock argues, the ruling group as being ideologically and emotionally close to the people.

RADIO

(i) Political party broadcasts

As if to exhibit its evidently newly-discovered commitment to the democratic principle of freedom of expression, which it never had and showed interest in previously, RTM allocated 13-minute radio airtime for the major political parties, including the Opposition, to make their political party broadcasts. The political scripts for broadcast, however, were subject to scrutiny by the radio stations, 24 hours before the broadcast proper. This allocation of political airtime could be interpreted as a mockery of justice and fairness, given the fact that leaders of the ruling party (who happen to be ministers of the caretaker government) all this while had been gaining political mileage out of each and every official government function which was assured of wide media coverage, particularly by the electronic media.

Besides, these political party broadcasts were not advertised beforehand. Hence, a listener could only tune into such a political programme by chance, thereby reducing greatly the political significance and value, and media impact of these broadcasts. This therefore suggests the ruling coalition's appreciation of the radio's relative decreasing popularity and the political disadvantage of a highly 'structured' broadcast. That is, a radio exposure of this nature for the Opposition could not necessarily jeopardise the BN's struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of the people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the messages and images of the BN conveyed by the mainstream press and broadcast media - through their news reports, analyses and commentaries, advertisements, documentaries, and filmlets - were not only aimed at enhancing the public standing or reputation of the ruling coalition, but also, more importantly, assisting the BN in developing the consent and consensus of the majority of the people. Put another way, the ruling coalition's struggle for an ideological and political dominance was in many ways conducted with the depiction of the Opposition as a whole as being deviant, anti-'national', anti-'development', and inimical to 'national unity and stability' and, consequently, to the development of a 'Malaysian nation'.

Having said this, it should be realised that despite its vantage political position and relatively easy access to the mass media and other state apparatuses, the ruling BN only managed - as the election results showed - to obtain 52 per cent of the popular vote at the parliamentary level. Not only that, the ruling BN party lost to the PAS-Semangat '46 coalition and the PBS in its attempt to 'capture' and, consequently, form government in the respective states of Kelantan and Sabah. In this respect, the BN and the mainstream media seemed to have failed to effectively persuade the voters of the states concerned to vote the 'BN way'.

This electoral upset can be attributed to factors such as state identities, state loyalties, Islamic resurgence, socio-economic grievances and, to a certain degree, the marginal press (such as the *Watan*, *Harakah*, *Mingguan Kota* and *The Rocket*). In Kelantan, for instance, where Malays are predominant in numbers, and thus are politically dominant and secure, the 'sigah episode' and the psychological fear of a threat against Malay political dominance (ensuing from the political alliance between the Gagasan Rakyat and the PBS) that were propagated by the ruling BN through the mainstream media did not seem to have made much impact upon the minds of the majority of the Malay Kelantanese people. This sense of political and cultural security amongst most Kelantanese are reinforced by the knowledge that Malay culture and Islam are very much entrenched in Kelantan. In addition, the people of Kelantan, like those of Sabah, have been unhappy over what they see as deliberate neglect of the state by the BN-led Federal Government in matters such as socio-economic development and aid.

As far as democracy in Malaysia is concerned, the ruling BN's conscious effort to utilise and, in many cases, monopolise the mainstream media necessarily implies that freedom of the press and of expression were, and still are, mainly confined to and enjoyed by the politically and economically powerful in the society, thereby subsequently marginalising fringe economic groups and other minorities. Such access to the media is certainly unfair, unequal and undemocratic. This inegalitarianism is no surprise for it only reflects the

situation of the larger society where, as implied earlier, political and economic power are unevenly distributed. Nonetheless, as intimated earlier, the marginal and, to a certain extent, alternative media have potential in providing some 'space' for social change in society.

Finally, for as long as there exists this economic, political and cultural gap between the rich and the poor, the mass media will be used - and also abused - by the ruling group for the purposes of not only concealing or 'naturalizing' social contradictions but also of intensifying its ideological strategies in its attempt to acquire consent of the subordinate groups in society.

NOTES

*The writer wishes to thank Zaharom Nain for his valuable comments.

- 1 The coalition consists of UMNO (United Malays National Organization) Baru, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), United Sabah National Organization (USNO), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (Berjaya), Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu Sarawak (PBB), Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), and Sarawak National Party (SNAP).
- 2 There are two broad groupings of the Opposition coalition: One, the *Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah* (APU), consists of Semangat '46, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Berjasa and Hamim, whose guiding principles essentially derive from Islam. The other, the *Gagasan Rakyat* (People's Might), is composed of Semangat '46 and its 'secular partners': Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), All Malaysian Indian Progressive Front (AMIPF), and Malaysian Solidarity Party (MSP). Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) joined towards the end of the election campaign period. Semangat '46 functions as the vital link between these two large groupings.
- 3 The sudden death of the old UMNO was essentially brought about by an internal power struggle between one group led by Mahathir and the other by party rival Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.
- 4 The election results indicated that the political strength and popularity of Semangat '46 were mainly confined to Kelantan and certain areas in Terengganu.
- 5 This sense of being part of a political and cultural community among many, if not most, Malays has always been nurtured and cultivated by ethnic based parties such as the old and the new UMNOs. Benedict Anderson (1983)

argues that the sense of belonging to a political community is 'imagined', not because it is artificially manufactured or false, but because it is a sense born out of ideological construction. In describing a nation, Anderson asserts that 'It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (ibid.15; emphasis in the original). And, he adds, 'print-capitalism' - that led to printing technology and mass publication of books and newspapers - facilitates this imagination of communal belonging as people are brought together or given a strong sense of togetherness by these mass media.

- 6 Apart from the 'UMNO Baru-Semangat '46 tussle', the BN government also suffered a 'crisis of credibility' recently (prior to the recent general election) over the imposition of toll charges -which constitutes part of the government's privatisation policy - on the use of a stretch of highway in predominantly-Chinese Cheras area in Kuala Lumpur. This action subsequently invited the wrath of the local residents (who were composed of people from various socio-economic background and ethnic origins). They in turn staged demonstrations. This socio-economic dissatisfaction gained support and sympathy from especially the opposition parties such as the DAP, Semangat '46, PAS and PRM. To quell this popular protest and, with an eye on the forthcoming general election and, hence, its political survival, the government swiftly employed the abhorrent Internal Security Act (which empowers the state to detain individuals without legal trial) to silence critics and dissent. This step was taken, insisted the government, to maintain national security and ethnic harmony.
- 7 Prime Minister Mahathir, however, insisted, during his election campaign, that there was press freedom in Malaysia: 'Newspapers published by opposition parties which criticise the Government from page to page are allowed to exist. Even the pressure groups have their publications. (*The Star* 13/10/90)' This argument disregards the fact that, firstly, compared to the BN-owned and BN - controlled mainstream media, the marginal newspapers and magazines (published by the Opposition and non-governmental organizations) are severely confronted by problems of finance, insufficient manpower and limited distribution network; and finally, these fringe publications which are not published daily, are no match to the mainstream media. In other words, the contest for disseminating ideas between the ruling group and the Opposition was unequal and undemocratic.
- 8 The New Straits Times Press (M) Berhad, one of the major subsidiaries of Fleet Group (an UMNO Baru's main investment arm) - that was later acquired on 30 April 1990 by a newly established UMNO Baru conglomerate, Renong - publishes and markets newspapers, magazines, periodicals, and books. The following are some of the groups's publications:

The *New Straits Times*, *New Sunday Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Sunday Mail*, *Berita Harian*, *Berita Minggu*, *Business Times*, *Shin Min Daily News*, *Her World*, *Malaysian Business*, *Jelita*, *Her World Cookbook*, *Her World Annual*, *NST Annual*, *Home Scene*, and *Information Malaysia*. The group also has a substantial stake in Malaysia's only private television station, Sistem Televisyen (M) Berhad, or popularly known as TV3. For a detailed study of UMNO Baru's corporate activities, see E.T. Gomez (1990), and for an excellent account of Renong's activities, see E. T. Gomez (1991:8-22).

The daily tabloid, *The Star*, is published by the Star Publications Sdn Bhd, which is owned by Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd, an MCA holding company (Gomez 1991:96).

Although Radio-Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) is a public broadcasting organization, the fact that it is under the care of the Ministry of Information necessarily implies that the former is under the direct control of the BN government.

- 9 See E.T. Gomez (1990), particularly pp.51-106, for a good account of the close relationship between UMNO (Baru) and its media-related Fleet Group.
- 10 While the unveiling of the Gagasan Rakyat's manifesto was again reported on the front page of *The Star* (14/10/90), the *NST* (14/10/90), on the other hand, reported about the unveiling of the Opposition manifesto on its page 2, and this with a touch of cynicism and incredulity. PAS's unveiling of its manifesto was also given coverage by, for example, the *New Straits Times* (16/10/90). Apart from the reported cynical and critical remarks made by the ruling party leaders such as Umno Baru president Mahathir, MCA president Dr Ling Liong Sik (on the front page of *The Star* 15/10/90) and Umno Baru's Daim Zainuddin (*NST* 16/10/90) regarding the Opposition's manifesto, little attempt was made by the mainstream press to provide their readers enlightening and balanced analyses or discussions of the Opposition's manifesto. If any, like the commentary written by NST's P.C. Shivadas (*NST* 16/10/90) regarding the Gagasan Rakyat's manifesto, it was more an unrestrained praise for BN's past socio-economic programmes and present electoral manifesto than an intelligent debate about the Gagasan Rakyat's political pledges.
- 11 For instance, the Pahang Deputy Menteri Besar, Datuk Abdul Aziz Rahman said, after officiating a parent-teacher association day at the Jalan Bahagia (Temerloh) National School, that the state government would allocate \$3,100 million for rural development projects in the state under the Sixth Malaysia Plan (*Watan* 9/10/90). Another example: speaking at the Penang Chinese Girls' High School graduation day, then Penang Chief Minister Dr Lim Chong Eu urged Penang people to continue support the (BN) state government 'as it had brought them development. (*New Sunday Times* 14/10/90)'

- 12 See, for instance, *The Star* (11/10/90).
- 13 The DAP has its party newsletter, the *Rocket*, while PAS, the *Harakah*.
- 14 'Lam Thye Quits All Posts' ran *The Star's* (3/10/90) headline on its front page. Again, on 5th October 1990; *The Star* wrote a headline on page 3: 'Lam Thye's Decision (to quit politics) a Big Blow to DAP. Party likely to be badly affected in general election'. See also *Berita Minggu* (7/10/90) for similar 'negative media coverage'. The *NST* (5/10/90) also carried similar story with a negative slant and an accompanying picture of weeping Lam Thye on its page 2.
- 15 See, for example, *The Star* (8/10/90).
- 17 Razaleigh said that he would understand why Umno Baru-controlled dailies did not cover his party Semangat '46, but he, however, expressed regrets over the depicting of an unfavourable picture of the Opposition. PAS responded by saying that Mahathir's allegation that Razaleigh planned to destroy PAS was essentially motivated by the former's desire to split the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (*Harakah* 5/10/90). Razaleigh (*Berita Minggu* 7/10/90) since then filed a libel suit against Mahathir, and the *New Straits Times*, *Utusan Melayu* and *Utusan Malaysia*, which in turn prompted Mahathir to accuse Razaleigh of attempting to 'muzzle' people from talking about the 'tape issue' (ibid.:7/10/90).
- 17 The *Watan* (20/10/90) reported that many Sabahans expressed amazement at the way certain members and supporters of the ruling BN made an issue out of Razaleigh's wearing of the Kadazan headgear, given the fact that Mahathir, too, was given similar headgear to wear - without much fuss and controversy - during his state visit a week before this incident. On the other hand, the *Utusan Malaysia* (19/10/90) reported that its main office and offices in other states were deluged with telephone calls expressing anger and disgust after the callers themselves saw Razaleigh wearing the headgear on television. One caller was quoted as saying that he could no longer bring himself to watching Razaleigh on television, one whom he considered as having sold out his own dignity, religion and race.
- 18 In one case, Razaleigh stopped a TV3 crew from covering a press conference held to launch the Gagasan Rakyat's Manifesto, remarking that the television station concerned was biased in its reporting of the Opposition and that, 'You (TV3) distort my statements... you are not going to get any more. You can tape the event but no voice. (*New Sunday Times* 14/10/90)'

- 19 Mahathir (*Utusan Malaysia* 19/10/90) and Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin (*Berita Harian* 18/10/90) alleged that the motive behind PBS's request for a television station in Sabah was to make the station a vehicle for 'Christian propaganda'. The ruling party's criticisms of PBS - and the media coverage of these criticisms - went beyond polling day even if a few of them were based on hearsay. For instance, the *Utusan Malaysia* (31/10/90) reported on its front page that Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba had 'heard talk of "cracks" developing in Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) following the decision of the party to withdraw from the Barisan Nasional' (emphasis added). *The Star*, on the same day, too, published the same report.
- 20 See, for example, the *Utusan Malaysia* (19/10/90) which ran a front-page headline that read: 'Nasionalis2 seru UMNO PAS bersatu semula' (Nationalists urge UMNO and PAS to re-unite).
- 21 *The Star* (16/10/90) provided a relatively smaller space to a report about PBS leaving BN after Mahathir refused to entertain the former's request over certain state rights.
- 22 Tengku Razaleigh complained: 'We have been unable to buy advertising space in most major Malay, English and Tamil newspapers. (*Sunday Star* 14/10/90)'
- 23 See, for example, some of V.K. Chin's (of *Sunday Star*) political comments.
- 24 See, for instance, letters published in NST's *Times Letters* page on 10 Oct. 1990.
- 25 Although *Sunday Star* (10/10/90), for example, did report on its front page that MIC deputy president S. Subramaniam and MIC vice-president K. Pathmanaban had been dropped from the party's contenders list, there was, however, no serious analysis of this apparent party conflict.
- 26 Mahathir only quoted Musa as saying that the latter decided not to contest in this general election because he wanted to quit politics altogether. For a report of this, see, for instance, the *Berita Minggu* (7/10/90). There was little discussion about Musa's 'political exit' in *Sunday Star* (8/10/90), for example.
- 27 This refers to a particular filmlet that showed Malaysians working in factories, plantations, padi fields, offices, etc, with the apparent awareness on the significance of quality products and services to Malaysia's image (and, hence, economic standing) abroad and at home.

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