Media Pluralism and Development in Malaysia: A Third Eye View

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Abstract

Malaysia commemorated 50 years of independence in 2007. In many ways the country is a success story in the model of a modern Asian nation. Poverty has been reduced from 50% of the population at independence to just 5% today. In Asia, only the nations of Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Brunei rank higher than Malaysia in the UN Human Development Index. Most importantly, Malaysia has kept peace between groups that include Muslim Malays (about 50%), Buddhist and Christian Chinese (roughly 25%), Hindu, Sikh and Muslim Indians (less than 10%) and many indigenous people of many faiths and ethnicity. The slogan 'Unity in Diversity' has long been going well with Malaysia but of late, the situation has slightly been changed. *Time* magazine in an article titled 'Identity Crisis' on December 10, 2007 said that "racial and religious tensions are forcing Malaysia to grapple with a vexing question: What kind of country does it want to be?" The magazine termed it a 'midlife anxiety'. Whatever the situation is in a country, media plays a big role in weaving the social fabric. Media pluralism is a key factor in this process.

Bangladesh is often compared with Malaysia in terms of development and modernization. In the late 50s and early 60s the social and economic conditions in Bangladesh and Malaysia were similar. But over the past several decades Malaysia has excelled towards progress and prosperity and left Bangladesh far behind. Media is part of this progress.

In seeking to explore the relationship between media freedom and pluralism, the study looks at the claims of leading media and political scholars on the liberal concept of democracy, libertarian and social responsibility, free press, and representative roles of the press. The theoretical perspective of the study strongly asserts that the press should reflect the pluralistic nature of a society, and not be dominated by any viewpoint or controlled by the government or any interest group. The press should make available the

information necessary for citizens to make informed choices, and provide the means whereby the public debate that underpins free and democratic societies can take place. The study also examines diversity in terms of media products and news coverage as two important factors in assessing the multifaceted role of media.

Introduction

In many ways Malaysia is a success story in the model of a modern Asian nation. The country commemorated 50 years of independence in summer 2007. In the same year country's first astronaut blasted into space. Poverty has been reduced from 50 percent of the population at independence to just 5 percent today. In Asia, only the nations of Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Brunei rank higher than Malaysia in the UN Human Development Index. Predominantly a Muslim country with a population of 28.31 million, Malaysia managed to keep peace between groups that include Muslim Malays (about 65%), Buddhist and Christian Chinese (26%), Hindu, Sikh and Muslim Indians (8%) and many indigenous people of different faiths and ethnicity. Malaysia is considered to be a truly multi-ethnic and multicultural country. The slogan 'Unity in diversity' has long been going well with Malaysia but of late, the situation has slightly been changed. *Time* magazine in an article titled 'Identity Crisis' (Beech 2007) said that "racial and religious tensions are forcing Malaysia to grapple with vexing question: What kind of country does it want to be?" The magazine termed it a 'midlife anxiety'. Whatever the situation is in a country, the media play a big role in weaving the social fabric. Media pluralism is a key factor in this process.

The GDP per capita is $3,850 while the literacy rate is 88.7 percent with growing urbanisation. According to 2000 census, the urban population has increased from 50.7 percent in 1991 to 62 percent in 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2009). In terms of the size of young population, Malaysia stands at 16 among 28 countries in the region - 34.1 percent under the age of 15 (Andrews 2008), and it is growing. The 2000 Census shows that 6.2 percent or 1.452 million people were aged 60 or over and the demographic ageing is occurring. By the year 2020, 9.5 percent of the country's population will be

aged 60 years and over (Sim 2008). Ethnicity, literacy rate, income and age groups are related to media use – both media and new media.

Media is seen as fulfilling a public service role, acting in the public interest as the *fourth estate* keeping a close eye on abuses of power by politicians, corporations and others (Article 19, UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights). It provides citizens a platform to discuss and debate issues which are important for common public good. On the other hand democracy entails freedom for citizens to express their views. A public dialogue is always essential for decision-making process and the public can do it through the media. Throughout the world media pluralism is considered as an essential ingredient for democracy. Media can ensure diversity in opinion and viewpoint of a society of cultural, religion and ethnic diversity. Pluralistic media is also considered as independent media. UNESCO has been promoting media pluralism for a long time. Given its importance of pluralism the European Union launched a media pluralism survey in 2009. It conducted an 18-month study to assess the state of media pluralism in 25 member states (Karstens 2009). In fact the issue of pluralism is so important in the globalised society that it is an ongoing debate in all the developed and most of the developing nations.

For a country like Malaysia, a pluralistic media is essential because of its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social texture and its aim of attaining the goal of becoming a developed nation by 2020. In this research I tried to find out the state of media development and media pluralism in Malaysia. The research on pluralism eventually led to two more vital questions 1) whether mainstream media (MSM) in Malaysia can now be called mainstream media? and 2) what role the new media is playing in shaping media pluralism? I tried to answer all these questions in this research. However, during entire period of research my observation on Malaysian media as a former media professional and journalist played a role in reaching the conclusion.

Methodology:
Both qualitative methods like group discussions, interviews, content analyses, and quantitative methods like surveys and published data are used to address the research

questions. Seven media professionals including journalists participated in 1st group discussion while 6 media academics participated in the 2nd group discussion. A total of 13 media professionals other than those participated in the two group discussions, were interviewed face to face using a semi-structure questionnaire. A survey among the 200 media users was also conducted to find out the pattern of media consumption. Weft-QDA software is used to analyse the qualitative data while Excel used for the analysis of short survey. Finally, two dissemination seminars – one in Malaysia and one in Bangladesh – were arranged to discuss the initial findings of the research. Existing literature and content analysis are used to identify the media bias and difference between the old and new media. Researcher's observation as an outsider has some influence in analysis and conclusion.

Pluralism and Media Pluralism

Definition, Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework:

Pluralism, as defined by Merriam-Webster is "a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization."

Curran and Gurevitch provide a useful definition of the pluralist point of view regarding media:

> The pluralists see society as a complex of competing groups and interests, none of them predominant all the time. Media organizations are seen as bounded organizational systems, enjoying an important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalised pressure groups. Control of the media is said to be in the hands of an autonomous managerial élite who allow a considerable degree of flexibility to media professionals. A basic symmetry is seen to exist between media institutions and their audiences, since in McQuail's words, the 'relationship is generally entered into voluntarily and on apparently equal terms'. Audiences are seen as capable of manipulating the media in an infinite variety of ways according to their prior needs and dispositions and as having access to what Halloran calls 'the plural values of society' enabling them to 'conform, accommodate or reject'.

Curran and Gurevitch (1977)

I.   Pluralism

focuses

- an engagement with diversity;
- tolerance with the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.
- dialogue that reveals common understandings;
- independence or autonomy of the groups to enhance the openness in the system;
- consensus or widespread agreement among political activists and leaders on democratic principles and values.

II.   Media Pluralism

highlights

- pluralist view that the media are independent;
- the independence of media from the government, pressure groups and big conglomerations;
- the relative independence of journalists in writing their articles;
- media freedom by reducing media ownership concentration, and by supporting more and diverse media voices;
- editorial independence in the mass media by supporting the efforts of journalists and media professionals to work freely and to resist all forms of internal and external pressure that undermine the quality and ethical standing of media;
- public engagement with media and policymakers in order to develop a more balanced, accessible and democratic media system;
- a comprehensive strategy for diversity to help media meet the challenge of improving levels of diversity, both in content and within media institutions, and among broadcasters;
- awareness of minority concerns and cultural identity among media professionals, and to promote dialogue between media and representatives of different communities.

Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. It is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across the lines of difference. Pluralism

is based on dialogue but dialogue does not mean that everyone at the 'table' will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table –with one's commitments.

Media pluralism is one of the most vital components of a democratic society, which in turn is a prerequisite for sustainable social and economic development. This fact has become more and more widely understood and accepted in May 1991, when African journalists gathered in the Namibian capital, Windhoek, for a regional seminar on promoting independent and pluralist media. The Windhoek Declaration became the first in a series of commitments, region by region, to uphold the freedom of people to voice their opinions, and their access to a variety of independent sources of information (UNESCO 1991).

Since 1991 the press in many developing countries has become more independent and pluralistic. The airwaves have been liberalized. Journalists and other media professionals began to concentrate more on professional development. People started gaining access to the Internet, a decentralized space for communication. These changes, indeed, have helped to establish and consolidate democracy in many countries by enabling citizens to make their voices heard. On the contrary, political and power elites, and other anti-social elements in many countries threatened journalists and created obstacles in carrying out their professional work. Even minorities, ethnic and religious groups, are prevented from using the media to communicate their views or express their identity. In this regard, an independent and pluralist media has an indispensable role to play in rooting out racism and xenophobia across the globe (UN General Assembly 1995).

The media is dependent on audience or consumers or users. The audiences are those who decide which media they will use or subscribe for their consumption of information. If they don't like what they see on TV or read in the papers, then the ratings and circulation figures fall, and the media organizations respond by 'giving the public what they want'. If there is any political bias in the media, then it stems not from the media themselves, but from audiences, and, in any case, the plurality of different viewpoints guarantees that

there is no overall bias - if you don't like one media outlet then you can go for another. A diverse and pluralistic media can give the users that power.

Four Theories of the press: *Highlights*

In the book, *Four Theories of the Press,* originally published in 1956, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm help give historical, philosophical and international perspectives of the press (Severin 2001).

Authoritarian Theory

- Developed in 16th & 17th century England;
- Supports and advances the policies of the government in power;
- Ownership can be either private or public.

The form of control the government exercises over media in authoritarian countries is the same as the control it has over the people who live there. The concepts are inseparable. That is, one follows the other.

Libertarian Theory

- Adopted in England after 1688, and in the U.S., and is influential elsewhere in the world;
- Purpose is to inform, entertain, sell, as well as discover truth and check on government;
- Ownership is chiefly private.

This theory takes the philosophical view that man is rational and able to discern between truth and falsehood and, therefore, can choose between a better and worse alternative. Man is capable of determining his own destiny, and given all the facts will make the right choice.

Social Responsibility

- Practiced in the US in the 20th century;
- Purpose is to inform, entertain, sell, but also to raise conflict to the plane of discussion;

- Ownership is private.

The social responsibility theory is an outgrowth of the libertarian theory. However, social responsibility goes beyond "objective" reporting to "interpretive" reporting.

Soviet-Totalitarian

- Developed in the Soviet Union, although some of the same things were done by Nazis;
- Purpose was to contribute to the success and continuance of the Soviet socialist system, and especially to the dictatorship of the party;
- Ownership was public.

The main difference is that under the Soviet-Communist system, the state owns or in some way controls all forms of mass media directly. Therefore, the authority for all mass communications is in the hands of a small group of party leaders (Eugene 2002).

Media, Politics and Censorship:

Media and politics are synonymous in Malaysia. Malaysia practices parliamentary democracy, a system inherited from the British. The country has a King who is elected from among the Sultans for a five-year term. It is a ceremonial position usually elected on a rotational basis from among the Sultans in nine out of 13 states. The states of Sabah, Sarwak, Penang and Malacca do not have a Sultan. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia is ruled by a coalition government known as the Alliance. Formed in 1951, the Alliance is credited for Malaysian independence from the British rule. In 1973, the Alliance was enlarged inducting some smaller parties and changed its name to Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front. Though, as of August 2009 the BN has 16 coalition members, the UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese ssociation) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) are the key players in the coalition. UMNO is representing the Malays, MCA representing the Chinese and MIC is representing the Indian communities in the coalition. Until 2008 general election the BN had absolute majority in parliament and state assemblies but on March 8 election the BN lost its two-third majority. In this election the BN secured a mere 51.2 percent of the popular votes as against 64 percent in the 2004 polls while the opposition improved its

performance and increased it votes from 9 percent to 37 percent. They competed for 222 parliamentary seats and 505 state seats across the country. The ruling coalition which had won 91 percent of the parliamentary seats and had control over 12 of the 13 Malaysian states in 2004 are down to holding 63 percent of the parliamentary seats and with a mandate to govern only 8 of the 13 states (Kuppuswamy 2008). It was the worst election result since 1957, and the new media played a big role in the election.

Theoretically, a free press exists in a country that practices full democracy (British example mentioned above). How much freedom the media enjoys is indicative of a kind of political system in which they operate. Media, in most countries in the world has to adapt to the political system. Most often, especially in the developing world, media is subject to influences and censorship by the incumbent regime, owners, advertisers and partisan politics. Malaysia is no exception. It falls into the category of authoritarian form of government that tends to control or regulate media by laws and regulations but allows certain degree of freedom. Journalists in Malaysia struggled for freedom in the early years of independence. In 1961, four years after the independence, journalists and press workers of Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu* locked in a fight with UMNO for editorial independence and freedom. But, UMNO which had majority share in the newspaper insisted that the newspaper should continue to give support to UMNO (Anuar 2000, p-100). A 93-day strike ensued, after which UMNO managed take over the control of *Utasam Malayu*. It was the beginning of a political party taking over a newspaper in Malaysia.

UMNO later took the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) which was originally in Singaporean shareholders' ownership. Taking cue from UMNO, another component of BN, the MCA began to acquire various media interests. It now has over 70 percent stake in Star Publications Sdn. Bhd, which publishes country's highest circulation English daily, *The Star*. It also has other Chinese and Malay language publications. Likewise a major Tamil-language newspaper *Tamil Nesan* is owned by the wife of the MIC president (Anuar 2000).

After the ethnic riot in 1969, the authorities took further restrictive measures on the pretext of maintaining social order. Following the riot, all the newspapers were shut down for two days from May 16 by the authorities. Government also brought amendments to federal constitution prohibiting public questioning of *Rukunegara* (national ideology) and certain 'sensitive issues' such as power and status of Malay rulers (ibid, p-101). The Sedition Act was also amended making the media professionals more vulnerable to committing 'crime' while carrying out their duties. Now, there are over a dozen laws relating to the media but the following are the most used in muzzling the media:

1. Printing Presses and Publications Act (1948);
2. Sedition Act (1948);
3. Official Secrets Act (1972);
4. Internal Security Act (1960);
5. Defamation Act (1957); and
6. Imported Publications Act

Since tightening the laws and amending the constitution, different newspapers and other publications experienced ban on a regular basis. However, the state intervention was further entrenched and enforced during the Mahathir regime that stretched from 1981 to 2003. In 1987, due to internal crisis in UMNO, the Internal Security Act was used in a massive crackdown called *Operasi Lalang* (Weeding Operation) in which 106 political dissidents, members of non-government organizations and religious bodies were arrested. The licenses of several newspapers including *The Star, The Sunday Star, Watan* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* were suspended for six months. The police questioned editors and journalists and were instructed to give minimum coverage on the detainees (Kim 2008). *Operation Lalang* was another landmark in restrictions on Malaysian media as it ended critical reporting on the government and its activities. Newspapers, television stations, radio stations became veritable mouthpieces of the government. As recent as on 23 March 2009 publications of two opposition newspapers were suspended by the Home Ministry for three months. *Harakh*, a publication of PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and *Suara Keadilan* of Anwar Ibrahim's PKR (People's Justice Party) were banned ahead of three crucial by-elections due to be held on April 7. Home Minister Minister Syed

Hamid Albar was quoted by Bernama news agency as saying that "the two newspapers were suspended because they had violated the conditions of their permit" (Malaysiakini 2009). *Suara Keadilan* was given permit just a year ago after the March 2008 general election in which the opposition parties did exceptionally well. Earlier the ministry had seized 20,000 copies of February 4-11 edition of *Keadilan* for publishing a report headlined 'Perak challenges EC to court'. It happened at the fag end of the tenure of Mahathir's successor Abduallah Ahmad Badawi who was known to be liberal on policy issues and on media.

Ownership is a form of media muzzling in Malaysia. When Badawi became the fifth Prime Minister taking over from Mahathir Mohamad, all free to air television were bought up by Media Prima. In 2003, the Media Prima, a company associated with UMNO, took over 100 percent equity interests in Malaysia's first commercial television station *TV3* launched in 1984. The company also took 43.5 percent stake in New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) (Staff Writer 2003). Successively, Media Prima acquired *8TV* in 2004, followed by *Channel 9* and *ntv7* in 2005. All these were done within a short span 3 years. Kamarulzaman, the former press secretary to the Prime Minister, was appointed the Executive Director of Media Prima (Kim 2008). This was a clear attempt to manage news content in order to legitimize views of the ruling elite and curb diversity of news content. Currently, Media Prima controls 54 percent of television audience in Malaysia followed by Astro 29 percent and *RTM 17* percent (Netto 2007). *RTM* is the state-owned radio and television broadcaster while Astro is owned by BN-friendly businessmen. Media Prima also owns the New Straits Times group, which owns the country's top-selling Malay-language newspaper, *Harian Metro*, and the English-language pro-government *New Straits Times*.

In the newspaper market, the 2.5 million daily circulations are mainly controlled by 5 companies. These are Sin Chew Media Group 30 percent (*Sin Chew Daily, China Press, Nanyang, Guang Ming*); NSTP Group 26 percent (*Berita Harian, Harian Metro, New Straits Times*); Utusan Media Sales 13 percent (*Utusan Malaysia, Cosmo*); Star

Publications 12 percent (*The Star*); Nexnews Group 12 percent (*The Sun, The Edge*); Others 7 percent (*Kwong Wah, Oriental Daily News*) (Compiled by the researcher 2009).

Basically 9 companies are controlling 90 percent of mainstream media. These are: 1.Media Prima, 2.Astro Group, 3.Star Publication (Malaysia) Berhad, 4.Utusan Group (M) Bhd, 5.Sin Chew Media Corporation Bhd, 6.Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd, 7.KTS Group, 8.Penerbitan Sahabat (M) SDN Bhd, and 9.Tamil Nesan. However, in April 2007 Sin Chew Media, Ming Pao Enterprise and Nanyang Siang Pao merged to form the largest Chinese media conglomerate in Malaysia- Media Chinese Intn Ltd which listed in both Malaysia and HK Stock Exchange.

Considering the above scenario we can easily say that Malaysian mainstream media system matches the authoritarian theory of the press as it supports and advances the policies of the government in power. Criticism of political machinery and official power are forbidden under the system (Severin 2001).

Media Independence and Media Bias

Malaysian mainstream media especially the newspapers, local television channels and radio stations have a history of having close links with the governing parties. Though there are numerous media organisations in Malaysia but once their owners are identified, it becomes evident that media ownership is highly concentrated with the ruling parties being a major stakeholder (Kenyon 2007). Indeed, Malaysian news media are largely owned or indirectly controlled by the 14 political parties which constitute the ruling BN or National Front. Moreover, in Malaysia's 'fettered democracy' (Netto, Media in divided soocieties 2002) mainstream media coverage of government policies is usually uncritical, while political opponents face limited reporting, particularly over calls for political reform. Print media outlets with relatively independent coverage have faced strong commercial pressures from established rivals that have significant links with government (Reporters sans Frontiers –RSF 2004). Under such a scenario media cannot

be independent. It was evident in election coverage of mainstream media in the last general election. The March 2008 election was a landmark event not only for the ruling coalition BN, which lost two-third majority for the first time in four decades, but also for mainstream media. The mainstream newspapers and television networks, both government and private, were full of flattering coverage of the ruling coalition ahead of 8th March election. However, the government-friendly media changed its tone after the shock election gains by the opposition to win back readers alienated by biased coverage (Sam 2008). The opposition figures were ignored or vilified by the MSM during the election campaign. It was a wake-up call for the mainstream media which should review its policies according to the general manager of the state news agency *Bernama* (Sam 2008). Malaysian media learned from this event what kind of government they want and what the kind of media they prefer.

A survey on news content published ahead of the election found that the MSM was heavily biased towards the ruing BN. Among the six newspapers covered, *Utusan Malaysia* dedicated the highest 82 percent space to BN and its candidate during time preceding the election. It was followed by *Malaysia Nanban* 70 percent, *Makkal Osai* 66 percent, *The Star* 63 percent, *NST* 60 percent, and *The Sun* 43 percent (Charter 2000-Aliran 2008). However, *Makkal Osai*, which was yet to get a new publication permit for 2008, also had the highest percentage of space for pro-Opposition stories - 23 percent. The content survey and analysis was conducted between 25 February and 8 March jointly by the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), Writers Alliance for Media Independence (WAMI) and Charter 2000-Aliran. It was again a setback for pro-BN media which took a 'propagandist approach' in its election coverage, and according to CIJ Malaysian media should now change along three lines: 1) return to the ethical and profesional standards of fairness, objectivity, balance and accuracy; 2) more competition in the form of more media being allowed; and 3) doing away with the laws that restrict the media (Charter 2000-Aliran 2008). Another survey shows that the Malaysians are ignorant about media freedom and independence. According to the survey 54 percent of the respondents do not understand the concept of media as a watchdog while 77 percent cannot name the laws that govern the media (Centre for Independent Journalism 2008).

The survey, which involved 1,203 randomly selected respondents aged 21 and above, was conducted by telephone from May 8 to 14.

Media and Mahathir:

Any discussion on Malaysia cannot be complete without Dr Mahathir Mohamad who left behind a 22-year legacy. He was the single most influential person in twentieth century Malaysia. His book *The Malay Dilemma* laid the ideological foundation of the 'New Economic Program', a positive discrimination scheme aimed at reducing poverty and redressing the economic balance between the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Published a year after the worst ethic riot in 13 May 1969, the book was taken almost as a prescription for solution of the ethnic problem. After a few years in the wilderness, Mahathir was readmitted to UMNO in 1972, and eventually rose to being Deputy Prime Minister in 1978 and Prime Minister in 1981. From then on until October 2003, he was the most powerful and talked about figure in Malaysian politics and in the media. His 22-year reign as fourth Prime Minister is largely responsible for today's Malaysia including economy, development as well as the media system.

Mahathir has a love-hate relationship with the media. He is often accused of muzzling the media while in power but even now media seek his opinion on almost each and every issue that makes news headlines. While in power in 1984 an amendment to the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) made it compulsory for newspapers and magazines to renew their permits every year. The Home Minister was given the power to revoke license any time at his discretion. Further amendments were made in 1988 which bar the judiciary to review the Home Minister's decision (Seneviratne 2007). These decisions hugely affected the media freedom in Malaysia. On the contrary, in a 10-point Bill of Right at the Communication and Multi-media Act 1998 he promised that the Internet will be free from censorship.

In 1998, the year he sacked his deputy Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir was named newsmaker of the year by *Time* magazine (Spaeth 1998). Even today, six years after his retirement he generates more stories than any other individual in Malaysia (if you ignore the protocol

stories of an incumbent Prime Minister). However, Dr M, as he is often mentioned in the media, was blacked out in the mainstream media when Abdullah Badawi came to power.

"I am the former party president yet they don't want me to talk to the (UMNO) members. I can't even meet them. Universities are barred from inviting me and newspapers are prevented from reporting about me. I am becoming a pariah in the party." Mahathir vented out his frustration (Writer 2006). At the Bloggers United Malaysia (BUM) conference 2009 on May 16 Mahathir explained that when he stepped down from the premiership, he expected to play an advisory and "father-figure" role to the succeeding administration; he did not want to pull the strings from behind the scenes, but hoped to be listened to (Hopkins 2009). But he found himself ignored by the government and being denied a voice in the MSM. He accused 'press supremo' of the government for preventing the press from mentioning him. Moreover, he added, barriers were put up to him meeting formally with UMNO, and people were discouraged from meeting him (Hopkins 2009). In fact out his frustration he turned to blogging and on 1 May 2008 he published his first post in his blog site *Chedet*. It was an instant hit and in the first moth thee were one million visitors. He began to relish the taste of free media! He also said that he had had his share of knocks from the bloggers and that he had wanted to shut them down, but he did not because blogs were not a significant force before he stepped down. In my opinion the sense of fear now prevailed in media professional is created by Mahathir regime. He successfully had used the mainstream media as a partner of development media and now using the new media to vent out his criticism to the authorities.

Turning the Table on MSM

Long before Mahathir had become a blogger, he started supporting the blogging community in Malaysia saying that "their websites are gaining credibility among Malaysians because people now turn to blogs for information suppressed by the mainstream media." (Hong 2007). The blogs have been a thorn for the government as these are publishing all kinds of stories which are embarrassing for the establishment.

Some issues like the purchase of a VIP jet and the murder of a Mongolian model Aaltantuya are taboo in MSM, but widely discussed in the blogs.

Of late Mahathir accused the MSM of withholding information from readers. He said his own statements had been blacked out. However, he defended the restrictive media laws that require newspapers to renew their licenses yearly, and his own record in the matter as prime minister. He said the laws were intended to keep the media from inflaming racial sentiment, or publishing pornography, but they were not meant to shut out dissenting views (Hong 2007). There is a sea-change in his attitude towards the media. Like some of the media rights group, he is advocating that the MSM needs to reinvent itself. In his own admission, a 'gagged and unexciting' MSM and a stormy political landscape made bloggers to thrive in Malaysia. The former prime minister said he had never issued directives to local editors (Zalkapli 2009) and accused them of practicing self-censorship. He also alleged that such censorship became worse after he stepped down in late 2003. Mahathir's comment on mainstream media generated widespread debate in mainly web-based media. Dr Lim Teck Ghee challenged the MSM establishments asking them to either confirm or deny the allegation of self-censorship by the former prime minster (Ghee 2009).

Media Consumption:

A short survey conducted among the media users shows that the Malaysians are happy with overall availability of the media products though the consumption is limited in line of ethnicity. The main ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indian – get their information from the media in their mother tongue. However, television channel *TV3,* largest circulation English daily *The Star* and the Internet newspaper *Malaysiakini* remained popular among all the races:

Race	TV3	The Star	Malaysiakini
Malay	92%	25%	73%
Chinese	44%	56%	76%
Indian	76%	27%	74%

More than two-third of the respondents said that they have internet connection either at home or in office where they can see the news of major events. More that 50 percent however said that they don't 'fully trust' what they read in mainstream media. A total of 200 respondents were selected in four different kiosks around Kuala Lumpur in March 2009. Ratio of ethnic composition was maintained in selecting and interviewing the respondents.

For Malay respondents, *Utusan Malaysia, Barita Harian* and *Harian Metro* are the favourite newspapers along with *TV3* as their main sources of news. The Audit Bureau of Circulation Report 2008 also shows these three are most circulation dailies in Malay language. Most of the Chinese respondents said that they read more than one newspapers to get different viewpoints of a particular event. In reply to the question of favourite newspaper 45 percent Chinese respondents mentioned *Sin Chew Daily* followed by *China Press* (15%). However, *8TV* is most favourite among the Chinese though they also watch *RTM* and *NTV7* as both channels broadcast news in Mandarin. Indian respondents' favourite newspapers include Tamil-language *Malaysia Nanban* (26%), *Makkal Osai* (20%) and *Tamil Nesan* (11%) while another 27 percent read English daily *The Star*. *RTM2* is also popular among the Indians for news (23%) but most watched TV channel among Indians is *9TV* (56%). *Malaysiakini* is the most popular news website among the respondents from all ethnicity followed by *Harakh, Malaysia Insider, Malaysia Today, Mardeka Review* and *Aliran Monthly*. More than 95 percent respondents said they listen to radio almost every. *Hotfm* and *ERA* are popular among Malay listeners while *MYFM* is popular among the Chinese and *MinnalFm* is popular among the Indian listeners. The respondents also mentioned English station *Hitz.fm* and two bi-lingual channels *THR Raaga/THR Gear* and *Red 104.9* in their listening list.

New Media:

Malaysia ranked 5th among 52 countries for being most-connected to digital media which put country in top 10 media consuming nations in Asia-Pacific region, according to an AC Neilson survey (Richmond 2009). Four other well-hooked countries from the region are Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and Singapore. In terms of those who spent more

than 20 hours a week watching, streamed or downloaded content from the Internet Malaysia ranked 3rd globally. They consume a copious amount of home entertainment, music, video games and digital media. These tech-savvy locals are also thoroughly hooked on the Internet, streaming and downloading digital media content on a regular basis (The Star Report 2009). The findings are part of the biannual Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, which reached 26,000 online users including 500 Malaysians.

Malaysia formally entered into the new media age with the enactment of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1989. The Act establishes a regulatory framework to promote national policy objectives for the communications and multimedia industry (Balaraj 2008). Though the mainstream media suffered from a series of restrictive laws, the internet-based new media was kept relatively free by the Mahathir administration except for a few isolated cases. The main objective was to make Malaysia a regional multimedia media hub. With that in mind it developed the satellite town of Cyberjaya. Malaysian did not look back or hindered in embracing multimedia and new media. Currently Internet penetration in Malaysia stands at 65.8 percent (MCMC 2008) which was 15 percent in 2000 and 37.9 percent in 2005.

In early 1996, J Bittner predicted that the rapid growth of Internet newspapers would create a provoking situation that newspaper publishing has to deal with (Cao 2006). Malaysian mainstream newspapers are facing such situation now. The 2008 general election was an eye-opener for the mainstream media. As mentioned above the government-friendly media was embarrassed by its own reporting of the election campaign. The MSM was hostile towards the opposition parties which got the support and sympathy of the voters in the cyberspace. Malaysia now has an estimated half a million bloggers. Some of them became so popular that a number of them were even elected to national parliament. It was the new media power that helped the opposition to win five states from the ruling BN (Sulong 2009). *Malaysiakini* is arguably the most popular and successful internet-based newspaper in region.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Theoretically media pluralism does not exist in Malaysia because the mainstream media is not independent. The concept of authoritarian theory is related to the control mechanism of publication materials through the patents of the monarch, licensing, direct censorship and self-regulation in earlier days to limit criticism to the rulers or the government. Under an authoritarian regime, press is required to support the policies of the government and serve the state. Malaysian MSM media was controlled by the successive regimes for decades under the same pretext that the press should support the national development programmes undertaken by the government. And the mainstream media did so, though initially it tried to resist government pressure, but after decades under authoritarian regimes, the MSM forgot its public service duties and lost its truth-telling abilities. It started suffering from a *takut-takut* syndrome, a term I borrowed from a former Malaysian journalist currently teaching in Australia. Dr Eric Loo pointed out that the Malaysian mainstream media discourse is shaped by 'service of power' than 'service of *rakayt'* (people) (Loo 2006) as the *takuk-takut* syndrome gripped the newsroom. Loo mentioned about this syndrome back in 2006 but this author found such fear-factor still exists in the newsroom of Malaysian MSM. Two such events are as follows:

1) On 10th March 2009 Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim had an unexpected meeting at a religious school in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur. In Malaysian political context it was a big story somewhat earth-shaking given the speculation that Mr Badawi would soon hand over power to his successor Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. There were speculations that Anwar might request the PM not to hand over power to his deputy as planned. It was the lead news in *Malaysiakini* and other web-based media but it was downplayed or blacked out in most of the mainstream media. The MSM however covered the story a day later when a clarification about the meeting came from the Prime Minister's office.

2) On 27 February 2009 Perak State Assembly Speaker V Sivakumar in an unprecedented move called for an emergency sitting of the assembly after the Opposition lost its majority as two of its members cross the floor to join the BN.

The emergency sitting was to discuss two motions seeking the dissolution of the state assembly. It was a serious development in Malaysian politics after the opposition *mentri besar* (grand minister) Mohammad Nizar was removed by the BN with its new-found majority. It is alleged that the BN 'lured' two opposition members after one BN member had joined the opposition Pakatan Rakyat. Perak was one of five states the opposition worn from BN in March 2008 general election. Most online media cover this political development as the lead story but the most MSM media downplayed the story mainly because the Speaker V Sivakumar was an opposition member. The largest circulation English daily *The Star's* font page lead story was 'Hike on hold: Govt puts off toll increases for five highways indefinitely'. It signifies the appeasing tendency of the MSM.

Andrew Aeria termed the MSM "trashy and compromised" and can only be compared with "lowlife media like Soviet TV news and newspapers Pravda (lit. The Truth) and Izvestia (lit. The News)" (Aeria 2009). I argue that Malaysian mainstream media has been maintaining a *status quo* for decades – they never criticize the government mainly in fear that their printing license may be suspended or may not be renewed. There are more self-censorship than censorship in MSM nowadays. I think the mainstream media cannot be called the mainstream any more considering its impact and agenda-setting abilities. Noam Chomosky in an essay titled 'What makes mainstream media mainstream' mentioned that setting the day's agenda is one of the main criteria of the mainstream media (Chomosky 1997). In Malaysia the new media set the day's news agenda, and the MSM takes the cue from them. Credibility is another major factor for the media to become acceptable to the mass audience. Hasbullah (2009) called it the 'believeliness' factor and Malaysian MSM has a very poor credibility level. Considering the above factors I argue that in Malaysia the mainstream media cannot be called the mainstream media anymore rather it can be called the traditional media.

Earlier, I argued that theoretically media pluralism does not exist in Malaysia. But considering the overall media scenario dominated by the new media I contend that media pluralism exists in the country. Malaysia currently has the most vibrant new media which

managed to influence the general election for the first time since independence in 1957. The country is among the top 10 media consuming nations in 52 countries surveyed across the globe, and 5th most-connected country in Asia-Pacific region. There are over half a million bloggers generating vast array of contents. The new generation, 100 percent of them, believes in new media, while 68 percent of total population believes in new media (Hasbullah 2009). Only 6.2 percent of Malaysia's 28.31 million people are 60 years of age or over. The public can consume the information and debate the issues on numerous internet sites. Over 70 percent voters were influenced by the new media during the last election (Sulong 2009). The last one decade witnessed the development of new media based on technologies like Internet and mobile phone. The country now has around 66 percent Internet penetration while mobile phone penetration is 104.2 percent (MCMC 2008). On an average a Malaysian send five SMSs (short message service) a day. Moreover, because of the language diversity, Malaysia has the highest number of magazine and periodicals available in the market in four languages (Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil). A kiosk in Bukit Bintang area in downtown Kuala Lumpur has over 2,000 titles on sale. Other than a few magazines like *Playboy* which is against Islamic sentiment, almost all sorts of tiles are available in the kiosk for the diverse Malaysian consumers. This is probably the largest kiosk in the region or even in the world as there are very few cities in the world where there are three strong ethnic groups with such language diversity.

Diversity in television channels and contents is also visible in Malaysia. *Astro* provides around 100 channels while progrmmes like 'Make Me A Supermodel', 'So You Think You Can Dance', 'American Idol', 'Baby Ballroom', '21 Jump Street' and other similar shows are being aired without any censorship. Indians and Chinese programmes are also widely available in different channels. Among the news and current affairs channels, *Al-Jazeera* stands out to be an independent channel which has set up its regional hub in Kuala Lumpur. Considering the above scenario I contend that media pluralism exists in Malaysia. Malaysians nowadays do not say that they are suffering from death of information, which is a sign of media pluralism. If we consider media development, we see development has only taken place in new media sector. The MSM are expanding its

web-based activities to stay in the market in completion with the new media. These are also signs of overall media development in the country.

Finally, I contend that Mahathir's 22 years of rule shaped the policy and practice of Malaysian media, and helped create a *takut-takut* syndrome in media sphere. It destroyed the mainstream media given its objective and responsibilities. The measures taken by Mahahir regime also helped maintain a *status quo* between the MSM and the authorities for the last three decades. In Mahathir's words the 'public good' is sacred, not the 'deadline' which some of the journalistic institutions may suggest (Khee 2000). He also told the International Conference on the Role of Media in Non-aligned Countries in Kuala Lumpur in 2000 that "the government of course should not control the media. It is morally wrong. But (put a question) is it morally right for certain people with their own agenda to control the press and use it to spread misinformation even?" He also said that the government in a democratic country is elected by the people but the people who really control the press are elected by no one. In fact, the issues of country's development, social order and racial harmony are often used as excuses for controlling the media. Any authoritarian regime believes that the national press should be an instrument of national development and nation-building, and must support development efforts of the government. In my view, the media muzzling by Mahathir regime started in 1984 when the Printing Press and Publications Act was amended to make it mandatory the renewal of publication licenses every year. Operation *Lalang* in 1987 re-enforced the control mechanism and generated a sense of fear among the media professionals. It cannot be said that Malaysian journalists are often arrested or persecuted for carrying out their professional duties but they are always afraid of such persecution or harassment if their stories go against the ruling regime. This sense of fear is embedded in them and it encourages them to take recourse of self-censorship. Mahathir's successor Abdullah Badawi was known to have very liberal attitude towards the media but even after that the media could not come out of the Mahathir legacy. In short, Mahathir helped develop the country but destroyed media. In my opinion, if the traditional media can change its mindset and get back its freedom and independence to serve the public rather than the

party then Malaysia will have the most vibrant, pluralistic and developed media in the region.

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