

## INTERVIEW WITH POLITICAL LEADERS

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A survey was conducted in several electoral constituencies predetermined earlier to gauge the opinions of political leaders regarding the role of the media in the 1990 general elections.

To elicit data, a set of questionnaire was prepared to serve as a guideline for assistant researchers to conduct interviews. This form was also prepared to ensure uniformity of the questions posed to the respondents. In addition, this would also facilitate the analysis of the interview later on.

Out of 40 questionnaires distributed only 31 were returned (78 percent return). Out of this total percentage, 87% were male respondents and 13 percent female.

### PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Out of the total questionnaires returned, the majority (35.5%) comprised of party campaign managers and 29% were party workers. The total number of candidates interviewed were 19.4% while 12.9% comprised of party leaders.

Judging from party membership, the majority of respondents were from Barisan Nasional (51.6%). The second largest member of respondents were from *Semangat 46* (29%) followed by PAS (12.9%) and DAP (.5%).

### ANALYSIS

To obtain further information, respondents were asked several questions pertaining to the media, its content, role and perceived influence during the 1990 general elections. Results of the survey conducted were given below.

### QUESTION 1

Do you think that the media mass has an important role to play in the elections?

All respondents from the DAP (.5%) and *Semangat 46* (29%) agreed that the mass media has an important role in the elections. However, among the Barisan Nasional respondents, only 6.5% agreed.

If YES to this question, describe briefly how you see this role?

Although the majority of the respondents (all?) from the *Semangat 46* and DAP admitted the important role played by the media in the elections, they could not provide any details on some of the role played by the media.

### QUESTION 2

In your opinion do you think the people believe what is said by the mass media?

The majority of the Barisan Nasional respondents (22.60%) believe that the people would believe most of what was said by the mass media. On the other hand, out of 45.2% respondents who said that the influence was not much, the majority of them (19.4%) were from *Semangat 46* followed by 16.1% from Barisan Nasional. However, several Barisan Nasional respondents were of the opinion that the people would not believe the mass media at all.

If NO to question 2, what is the reason?

The one and only reason cited by the respondents from Barisan Nasional was the ownership of the media by the government.

### QUESTION 3

Does your political party have a comprehensive plan regarding the use of the mass media during this elections?

The majority of the respondents (41.9%) confirmed that their party have a comprehensive plan regarding usage of the media during this election. On the contrary, the majority of the respondents who said otherwise were respondents from *Semangat 46* (19.4%).

If YES to question 3 please explain this plan.

#### *Semangat 46*

1. Explaining the manifesto to the people.
2. It won't get published even though there is a plan.

#### DAP

1. There seems to be a realization on the need for a comprehensive plan but the lack of professionalism was the main obstacle towards achieving this aim.

#### Barisan Nasional

1. Explaining issues in the newspaper
2. Work flow of the elections
3. Explaining the manifesto to the people
4. Party leaders plan this
5. Campaigns
6. Collecting facts from the media and using it during the *ceramahs*

**Pas**

1. We do not use the government mass media.
2. We make use of our newspaper *Harakah* and ignore the rest.

**QUESTION 4**

How much does your party allocate for the media campaign?

**Barisan Nasional**

The majority of the respondents do not know the total amount allocated. However, there were respondents who said that their allocations were from \$80,000 to \$100,000 (\$30,000 for State Legislative Council and \$60,000 for Parliamentary seat).

**Semangat 46**

Most of the Semangat 46 respondents said that their party allocated \$20,000 to \$50,000 for media campaigns. There were also respondents from this party who cited allocations totalling \$10,000.

**PAS**

Respondents from PAS did not provide any feedback regarding this question.

**DAP**

Respondents from DAP cited that their party allocated \$3,000 for media campaign.

**QUESTION 5**

Can you give a break-up of the allocation according to the media below. Separate allocation at the national level, state and the respective constituency. Describe the level meant according to the respondent.

In general the respondents said that they mainly made use of the media at the national level by making use of posters and other print media. However a detail break-up of the budget allocation of each constituency was not provided.

**QUESTION 6**

Among the following media which one do you think is most effective in influencing voters decision?

There seems to be a general consensus among respondents here. Television was cited by a majority (45.2%) of the respondents as the most effective in influencing voters decision. However, among Barisan Nasional's respondents, 16.1% said that newspapers were more effective than television (12.9%) in influencing the decision of the voters including face-to-face communication and *ceramahs*.

**QUESTION 7**

In your opinion does the mass media help the people determine who to vote?

There seems to be a major agreement among the respondents (45.2%) that the mass media has helped the voters determine who to vote. There were also respondents (29%) who were of the opinion that the mass media has the possibility of influencing this decision.

Only a small number of respondents representing all the parties (6.5%) did not agree with the influence of the mass media in this aspect.

### QUESTION 8

Do you think that the party which spends the most money on the mass media can win the elections?

It was also agreed among the majority of the respondents (35%) that the party which allocates a lot of money for media usage can win the elections. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents from the opposition parties, especially PAS could not agree with this statement. Of interest here was the opinion of two respondents from Barisan Nasional who felt that if anything is not true and a lot of money is spent on usage of the mass media, it will not help and is not necessary.

### QUESTION 9

On what basis would an individual make a decision to vote?

Two main techniques mentioned by respondents were the information from the mass media like radio, television and newspaper (45.2%) and listening to politicians and party workers during rallies (34.5%).

### QUESTION 10

Of the many issues raised by the mass media, what in your opinion influence voters decision most?

Respondents representing all the parties concerned (45.2%) agreed that news regarding the economic achievement of the government very much influenced voters decision. However, among the *Semangat 46* respondents, the majority of them (12.9%) thought that accusations of corruption in the government was the influential factor. There were also responses given like statement by Dr. Mahathir on the split within the party, competition with the opposition, economic achievement at the international level, Internal Security Act (ISA) and pressure.

### QUESTION 11

In general, do you think the mass media is fair in reporting news and events about the elections?

Seventeen of the respondents said that in general the media was not fair in reporting news and events about the elections. Almost all (13 out of 15 respondents) from the opposition, agreed with this. An interesting fact here is that, there were also of the ruling Barisan Nasional who agreed with this statement. However, eight respondents from Barisan Nasional and one respondent felt that the media was fair.

### QUESTION 12

Can you evaluate the fairness or the unfairness of the following media? (Radio, Television, Newspaper)

Among BN respondents, the majority of them agreed that television (12 out of 16) followed by radio (11 out of 16) was fair. However, there were also Barisan Nasional respondents who did not agree that the media was fair. Four respondents said that radio and newspapers were not fair followed by three for television.

Respondents from the opposition unanimously agreed that the media was not fair. Among them, it was agreed that the newspapers were most unfair followed by radio and television. Respondents from DAP unanimously agreed that the media was not fair all the media listed was unfair.

### QUESTION 13

Is there any indirect projection regarding the ruling party or candidates from the ruling party through radio and television?

There was also a high agreement among respondents regarding the projection of the ruling party or the ruling party candidates through radio and television.

### QUESTION 14

Are the ways in which newspaper report events influenced by the interests of the newspaper owners?

Among the opposition respondents, it was agreed by the majority of them that reporting of events by the newspapers were influenced by the interests of its owners. Among the BN respondents, only seven (50%) of them agreed that ownership influenced how news was reported while another seven (50%) said that they were not sure. A respondent from Semangat 46 said that the newspapers were owned by the government.

### QUESTION 15

Do the newspapers focus more on personalities rather than policies?

In general, the majority of the Barisan Nasional respondents disagreed with this statement (10 out of 16). On the other hand, it was agreed among the majority of the opposition respondents that personalities seemed to be more important than policies for the newspapers.

### QUESTION 16

Would you say that the mass media influence important/rich/educated people in their voting decisions and face-to-face communication influence the poor/uneducated/common people?

The majority (15 out of 31) respondents agreed with this statement while eight who were mainly from the opposition did not agree. Among Barisan Nasional respondents, only seven (59%) agreed that there is a difference between the impact of the mass media and face-to-face communication.

A respondent from the DAP cited that they have no choice because of the unfair coverage by the media. Thus, to ensure that their messages reach the masses it is better to turn to house to house campaigns and *ceramahs*.

### QUESTION 17

Would you say that common people are not very interested in information given by the mass media on the election?

The majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the common people were not very interested to know about the election from the mass media. However, there were nine respondents, mainly from the opposition who agreed with this.

### QUESTION 18

Would you say that for an average voter what is most important on deciding to vote is the caste or language or religion of the candidate rather than his/her abilities or education.

All of the *Semangat 46* and 11 of the Barisan Nasional respondents did not agree that caste, language or religion is more important over abilities and education in deciding for whom to vote. This differs from the stand taken by other members of the opposition party.

Among the DAP and PAS respondents some also reported that this would on PAS and Malay area, community and constituency.

### QUESTION 19

Would you say that the following characteristics of candidates are decisive in winning elections?

The majority of the respondents from Barisan Nasional and *Semangat 46* do not agree that caste and race were decisive factors in winning elections. The same goes with other factors like religion, language, sex and rich or poor.

All of the *Semangat 46* respondents do not think that caste is a decisive factor while nine of the Barisan Nasional respondents think that caste is not a decisive factor. Religion is also regarded by nine of Barisan Nasional as a decisive factor followed by eight from *Semangat 46*. However, among respondents from PAS factors like caste/race, religion and locality were regarded as decisive factors in winning elections.

Among the Barisan Nasional respondents there was also a high agreement on the importance of factors like locality, education and family background in winning elections. Eleven respondents agreed that education, 11 agreed on the importance of locality and eight agreed on the importance of family background.

There were also other comments like one respondent from DAP who said education actually depends on the area and community. Another respondent from Barisan Nasional reported that sometimes, religion is not the decisive factor at all.

### SUMMARY

This interview of 31 political leaders and party workers about the role of the mass media in the 1990 general elections reveals the following major findings:

- a) Respondents generally agreed that the mass media has an important role in the elections.
- b) Contending parties generally had comprehensive plans regarding the use of the mass media during elections and allocated considerable funds for media campaigns.
- c) The vast majority of respondents felt that the mass media is unfair and biased in reporting and commenting upon the elections.
- d) With regard to the candidates' characteristics, respondents agreed that locality, education and family background are important personal attributes which influence voters' choice.