MEDIA AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN MALAYSIA

By
DR. BAHARUDDIN HAJI AZIZ & SANKARAN RAMANATHAN
School of Mass Communication
Institut Teknologi MARA

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Malaysian general elections of October 1990 was noticeably different from the six previous general elections held in Malaysia since 1963 (in 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, and 1986) for the following reasons:-

Increased size of electorate

As with any newly-emerging democracy, there was a greater number of young franchised people, many of them exercising their vote for the first time. As Table 1 indicates, the total number of eligible voters had increased from 6.9 million voters in 1986 to 7.9 million voters in 1990, while the number of those who actually went to the polls increased from 4.7 million voters in 1986 to 5.7 million voters in 1990.

In terms of voter participation in the electoral process, this represented an increase of more than four percent (68.1 percent in 1986 as compared to 72.4 percent in 1990), and one of the best levels of participation since 1963. (Note: voting is not compulsory in Malaysia).

Strong opposition

In the 1986 elections, the opposition had been expected to do well, as the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), had been wracked by internal strife following the resignation of the then Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Musa Hitam from the Cabinet just six months before the election. Furthermore, the country had been in the throes of a bad recession, with little prospects of an immediate recovery. However, the opposition challenge, particularly that of the fundamentalist Islamic party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), did not materialise

with PAS winning only one out of 99 seats it contested. Although this was compensated somewhat by the performance of the other leading opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which picked up five additional seats, the ruling BN increased its majority in the Dewan Ra' vat (Lower House) and was returned to power in each of the 13 Malaysian states.

Prior to the 1990 elections, it was also widely speculated that the ruling BN may lose not only its comfortable two-thirds majority but may even fare worse than that. This was because the split in the ruling BN, especially the coalition's dominant partner and leading Malay party, United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) had steadily worsened, beginning from the UMNO's 1987 triennal elections when the post of the party president was contested by a political heavyweight, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a prince from Kelantan state and former Finance Minister. In this election, UMNO had been split into two camps, one led by Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed and his deputy, Ghafar Baba (Camp A) and the other led by Dato' Musa Hitam and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Camp B). The victory of Camp A candidates led to a party purge, including the sacking of several Camp B candidates from Cabinet posts.

Following this, Camp B supporters challenged the legal validity of those elections, a move which led to protracted court battles in 1987-88 and the deregistration of UMNO itself. Arising from this, former Camp B supporters established a party called Semangat 46 (Spirit of 46, the year when UMNO was formed) and made clear their intentions to challenge UMNO for Malay political supremacy in the 1990 elections. Led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Semangat 46 indeed posed a formidable challenge to UMNO, especially in bastions of Malay political power which had previously been deemed to be safe seats.

Bolstered by the presence of Semangat 46, the other opposition parties, notably PAS and DAP agreed on an electoral pact and formed a coalition known as Gagasan Rakyat (Peoples' Front). This was the first time in the country's political history that opposition parties had formally banded themselves into a coalition. The opposition parties' hopes were strengthened by the mid-campaign pullout from the ruling coalition (BN) of the Sabah-based Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS). Thus the last few days of the campaign (October 10-21, 1990), were especially intense, with varying predictions about the outcome of the elections.

c) Presence of observer groups

For the first time also, the electoral process was being monitored by various groups, particularly a group of observers appointed by the Commonwealth (referred to hereinafter as the Commonwealth Observer Group, COG). Even before the campaign, opposition parties had criticised Mahathir's leadership style as being autocratic, accusing him of being dictatorial in wanting to curb fundamental freedoms and restricting the independence of the judiciary. Hence, as part of the efforts in trying to counter these accusations and projecting himself as a liberal leader, the Prime Minister had agreed to the presence of the COG. This would also minimise or even negate accusations that the electoral process was corrupt

or incorrect. Hence, because of these factors there was great interest, both within and outside the country, in the outcome of the 1990 general elections.

This paper reports the results of a research project entitled "The Role of the Media in the Malaysian General Elections of 1990", which was largely funded by the Research and Consultancy Center of the Institut Teknologi MARA. Additional funding was provided by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in Singapore, which also permitted the research team to use various research instruments such as the questionnaire and content analysis guidebooks which had been used in previous AMIC-sponsored studies in India and Bangladesh. While the entire research project covered 11 parliamentary constituencies and is wider in scope, what is reported in this article are the findings related to four parliamentary constituencies.

Studies on the electoral process

The electoral process is a subject of study in all countries which subscribe to the democratic tradition, for periodic elections constitute a vital ingredient in the practice of democracy. As early as 1944, Lazarsfeld, Berelsen and Gaudet, who studied 3,000 respondents in Erie Country, Ohio, found that the personal influence of opinion leaders was important in helping the people make up their minds during campaign periods. Jennings and Ziegler have emphasised the importance of ethnic politics, the influence of the mass media and campaign issues influencing the results of Congressional elections in the United States. As her ascertained that party identification, campaign issues and candidates, mass media campaigns and financing of campaigns were major issues affecting the outcome of presidential elections in the United States from 1964 to 1976.

The close relationship between coalition strategies and citizen choice in determining the outcome of elections has been emphasized by Kessel, who criticises electoral studies which rely completely on voting data and do not undertake voter surveys to gauge the perceptions and attitudes of voters. He identified the level of citizens' knowledge about candidates and issues, influence of the mass media and party identification as important variables in determining the people's choice.

More recent studies have tended to downplay the direct influence of the mass media. For example, in studying the British general elections of 1983, Butler and Cavenagh found that the share of news about the Conservative and Labour parties in the British press was about almost equal, while the newspaper coverage reflected the "familiar tripartite division", that is, working class tabloids, social tabloids and quality papers. 8

In studying the Malaysian general elections of 1986, Sankaran Ramanathan and Mohamad Hamdan Adnan found that although the mass media had been labelled as the "devil's mouthpiece" by PAS, their survey of 1,000 respondents pointed to the wrong tactics adopted by PAS at the national level as the main reason for its

nation-wide drubbing. Further, a candidate's personal attributes and qualities, local loyalties, voting traditions and the develop mental record of the ruling coalition government had influenced the people's choice in the 1986 elections.

From this brief review of the above studies, it can be seen that it is important not only to comment about election results but also to study votes in the making and find out why people voted the way they did. These studies also indicate that while the role of the mass media is important in the electoral process, it is not paramount in determining the final choice of the voter.

Run-up to the 1990 Malaysian General Election

Just as in 1986, there had been speculation about the 1990 general election in Malaysia long before it was due to be held. Although the BN's term of office was not constitutionally due to expire until August 1991, the election fever had been running high for some time before October 1990. However, unlike the situation in 1986, when the actual announcement of Parliament's dissolution caught many by surprise, all political parties had been in a state of preparedness for some time.

From the beginning of the year 1990, the mass media and political parties were involved in a guessing game about the exact date of the elections. Part of the reason for this guessing game stemmed from the pronouncements of the Prime Minister himself, who had suffered a heart attack in 1988 and undergone coronary by-pass surgery. Or. Mahathir had repeatedly stated that he would like a fresh mandate and a clear line of succession established soon.

The second reason was the buoyant state of the economy, which had recovered rapidly following the recession in 1986. The economy began to pick up in 1987 and continued its recovery through 1988 and 1989, such that growth rate for the first quarter of 1990 was 11%, a level the country had not achieved since 1980. Even the *Proton Saga* (national car) project, which had been criticised at its inception in 1983 by many quarters (and had been used by the opposition as a election issue in 1986) had proven to be a profitable venture. The same applied to the Penang bridge project, highway construction and toll collection, other heavy industrialisation projects and the various moves towards privatization, all of which had been criticised by the opposition, but which were now beginning to be profitable.

Another development was a more liberal attitude on the government's part in areas and subjects where it had previously exercised great control. This included greater toleration of opposition criticism, to the extent that the application by PAS to publish its own newspaper, *Harakah*, was approved and the newspaper made its appearance in late 1989.

Further, although a considerable number of opposition politicians including Lim Kit Siang, the Oppostion Leader, had been placed under preventive detention in October 1987, almost all were released in early 1988. Finally, the government's acquiesance to the presence of the COG boosted the image of Dr. Mahathir as a liberal leader.

Election campaign and results

The announcement of the dissolution of Parliament was made by the Prime Minister on Friday, 5th. October, 1990 barely a week after the conclusion of a hectic Parliament session. On the next day, the Elections Commission announced that polling day for Sabah and Sarawak (the East Malaysian states) would be 20th. October, while it would be 21st. October for the 11 Peninsular Malaysian states. Nomination day was fixed for 11th October, which meant that the campaign period was nine days in Sabah and Sarawak and 10 days for Peninsular Malaysian states. This was similar to the situation in 1986, when the campaign period was also nine and 10 days respectively. With regard to the number of Federal (Parliamentary) seats, these had increased from 177 in 1986 to 190 in 1990, which is considered a marginal increase (see Table 1). However, the number of state seats and their electoral boundaries remained the same as in 1988, viz. a total of 351 seats (see Table 2). It is to be noted that elections for the state seats in Sabah and Sarawak have traditionally been held at a different date from the Federal (Parliamentary) elections.

When nominations closed on 11th. October, it was apparent that the ruling BN coalition was going to have a very tough battle, for only two BN candidates were returned unopposed. This compared unfavourably with the situation in 1982 and 1986, when eight and six BN candidates respectively had been returned unopposed. Furthermore, unlike the situation in previous elections, the BN candidates were involved mostly in straight fights with opposition candidates, an ominous indication that the major opposition parties had succeeded in forging an electoral pact, despite their ideological differences. Another indication was that the Opposition parties were fielding fewer candidates than in the past election. For example; PAS which had been charged with spreading itself too thinly in the 1986 elections by fielding 99 candidates was now fielding only 30 candidates, almost all of them in Kelantan and Terengganu.

The fears of the ruling coalition were realised when the three leading opposition parties, Semangat '46, PAS and the DAP (together with three minor parties) announced the formation of the Gagasan Rakyat (Peoples' Alliance) and a joint manifesto based on the theme Selamatkan Malaysia (Save Malaysia). These fears were further compounded by the PBS pullout from BN, which was announced on October 10th. This pullout sent shock waves throughout the nation and resulted in many repercussions, which are discussed in Chapter 3.

The highlights of the election itself can be categorised as follows:

(a) A closely-contested battle in Penang state between the DAP and its BN opponents, principally MCA and Gerakan. In fact, Lim Kit Siang had identified this as the *Tanjung Two* project, whereby he himself would stand against the incumbent Dr. Lim Chong Eu—Penang's Chief Minister since 1969— in the Padang Kota state constituency while other DAP heavyweights would also stand in various state seats. The aim was for the DAP to win enough state seats so that it could form the next state government. The genesis of the idea was laid in the 1986 elections, when Lim Kit Siang spearheaded the *Tanjung One* project, which failed. Now,

Kit Siang vowed that he would resign as DAP secretary-general if the *Tanjung Two* project failed. As it turned out, the *Tanjung Two* project failed, but only just.

- (b) The battle for supremacy between the Malay political parties in the East Coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu. While in the past, the battle had been confined largely to UMNO and PAS, Semangat '46 had now entered the fray and it was a formidable foe particularly in Kelantan, which is its leader Tengku Razaleigh's home state. There were also strong indications that the Kelantan royalty was solidly behind the renegade prince.
- (c) The challenge posed by Semangat '46 candidates in constituencies previously considered safe seats, particularly in the West coast states of Peninsular Malaysia. Not only were these constituencies Malay-majority areas, but a considerable number of Semangat '46 candidates were the incumbents who had commanded a strong following prior to the deregistration of UMNO. To many observers, this was in fact the pivotal battle on which the outcome of the whole elections hinged, particularly as the Semangat '46 fielded the largest number of Opposition candidates (61).

In the event, the Semangat '46 challenge fizzled out, with many stalwarts losing to hitherto unknown UMNO candidates. Although the party won eight parliamentary seats, these were either in the state of Kelantan (where the combined might of the opposition resulted in UMNO's total annihilation) or in neighbouring Trengganu. Nation-wide, the Semangat '46 party's maiden performance was considered poor, as only 13.1 percent of its candidates won.

PAS also won its seven parliamentary seats in these two states and captured enough seats in Kelantan to form the state government (Table 2), a feat which had not been unexpected. However, it did not win any federal seats outside Kelantan and Trengganu. Because of the PAS and Semangat '46 success in Kelantan and Trengganu. UMNO's strength in Parliament fell from 83 seats in 1986 to 71 seats (Table 1), a decline of 14.5 percent.

Nevertheless, the consistency of the ruling BN coalition was demonstrated once again when it obtained more than the two-thirds majority in Parliament, which the opposition Gagasan Rakyat had asked the electorate to deny. It did not matter that the total number of votes obtained by the BN declined from 57.3 percent in 1986 to 53.4 percent (Table 3) or that Kelantan state had fallen to the opposition; the BN had warded off the strongest challenge to its supremacy at the national level.

MEDIA AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN MALAYSIA

As a number of Malaysian scholars have repeatedly stressed, any attempt to understand the role of the Malaysian mass media must take into consideration the plural nature of Malaysian society. Compounded to this is the differing

ownerships of print and electronic media. For example, two television channels are owned and operated by the government while the third channel, popularly known as TV 3, is operated by a publicly-listed company known as Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad (STMB), in which the majority shares are owned by corporations set up by the leading parties in the ruling coalition. Further, the majority of shares in the leading newspapers are owned by individuals or corporations connected to the leading parties. Hence, it is easy to charge the mass media with being partisan in nature.

For example, the Commonwealth Observer Group (COG) had stated that opposition parties were given inadequate access to the mainstream media. The Prime Minister replied that "the Chinese and Tamil newspapers gave favourable report [sic] to the opposition." He added that these vernacular newspapers are more widely-read compared to English newspapers.

Before discussing the veracity of the above statements, it would be appropriate to describe the study that we undertook.

The study dimensions

The project is titled, "The Role of the Media in the Malaysia's General Elections of 1990". Four methodologies were utilised, viz.,

- (a) Survey of 1060 voters from 11 constituencies based on a standard questionnaire;
- (b) Interviews with approximately 50 candidates, party campaign managers, party workers, local journalists, etc., based on a standard interview guide;
- (c) Content analysis of the following:
 - i) Campaign literature advertisements, surat layang (poison-pen letters), posters, banners, manifestos, etc.,
 - ii) Reports in newspapers and magazines concerning the elections and the campaign (October 6-22, 1990),
 - iii) News, currents affairs, documentary and other special programmes concerning the elections and campaign aired over radio and television in Malaysia (October 6-22, 1990), and
 - iv) Selected ceramahs at these constituencies; and
- d) Observation at ceramahs, public meetings, house-to-house campaigns, as

well as field observations at these constituencies during the campaign period (October 11-20, 1990).

Since the study encompasses a wide range of information concerning the role of the media during the 1990 elections campaign, this article summarises only the main findings related to the above aspects of the study.

Some theoretical considerations

Basically, we have utilised a functional approach to the study of the media in the electoral process, along the lines initially propounded by American sociologists Lasswell, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) and subsequently expanded upon by Wright (1964) ¹⁴. In the context of Malaysia, Wan Abdul Kadir (1988) ¹⁵ has utilised a similar approach to explain the effects of popular culture upon society in Malaysia especially among the urban and rural Malays, while Syed Arabi I did has stressed the importance of the functional perspective of the press system. ¹⁶

Media can be categorised according to whether they are "mass" or "interpersonal". A number of Malaysian scholars have postulated that the concept of "massness" as applied to, the widely-circulated and attended media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television in Malaysia is not the same as that which exists in a more homogenous society such as that in the United States. In fact, there is no truly "national" newspaper or magazine in Malaysia, while the audiences for radio and television are "pluralised" according to the language and type of programme used.

Further, there are also significant differences in ownership of both the print and electronic media, as has been pointed out earlier. Hence, it is not easy to establish the relationship between intent and content of the media, particularly the print media.

We can further distinguish between latent and manifest functions. For example, the concept of "reading between the lines" demonstrates that there are intended and unintended consequences resulting from the communication of a particular event. An illustration is the campaign to promote tourism in Malaysia through well-publicised events such as Visit Malaysia Year (VMY), Malaysia Fest and so forth. The manifest function of that campaign would be to promote tourism in Malaysia, there by hoping that Malaysia can compete with Thailand. The latent function can be that the people in the East Coast states, particularly Kelantan and Terengganu became increasingly concerned by the influx of foreign tourists and hence rejected one of the ruling party's strategies to promote development in these states. This can party explain the BN whitewash in Kelantan. The functional theory also assumes that any single act may have both functional and dysfunctional effects. Therefore, we can view the pullout of the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and its subsequent reportage in the media as having both functional and dysfunctional effects, depending upon the nature, heritage and norms of the various sub-groups. Another example is the much-publicised refusal of Semangat '46 President Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to have any dealings with reporters from TV3, especially his attempts to push away the microphone held by a TV3 crewman at a press conference and the alleged rough handling that TV3 personnel received at the Bangsar

Complex (a big public meeting place in Kuala Lumpur city where a Gagasan Rakyat ceramah was held on the eve of the general elections).

While TV3 and its allied organisation the *New Straits Times* had a field day trying to project a negative image of Tengku Razaleigh (manifest function), they also confirmed the status of Tengku Razaleigh as a newsworthy person (statusconferral, a latent dysfunction in this case).

Hence, the functional perspective emphasises the various needs met by, and provided for, by the differing institutions and audience members. In the content of the variegated Malaysian media system and its role in the Malaysian general election of 1990, the functional perspective helps to explain how the media cater to the needs of the multi-ethnic Malaysian electorate.

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Table 1 Malaysian General Election Results (Parliament), 1986 and 1990						
Political	Number of seats		Number of seats %			
Parties		ested 1990	won 1986	1990	1986	1990
Barisan Nasional						
UMNO	84	86	83	71	98.8	82.6
MCA	32	32	17	18	53.1	56.3
MIC	6	6	6	6	100.0	100.0
Gerakan	9	9	5	5	55.6	55.6
Hamim	2	n.a.	1	n.a.	50.0	n.a.
PBB	8	10	8	10	100.0	100.0
PBDS	5	4	5	4	100.0	100.0
SNAP	5	5	4	3	80.0	60.0
SUPP	7	8	4	4	57.1	50.0
USNO	6	6	5	6	83.3	100.0
PBS	14	n.a.	10	n.a.	71.4	n.a.
Sub-total	178	166	148	127	83.6	71.4
Opposition						
Parties						
PAS	99	30	1	7	1.0	23.3
DAP	64	58	24	20	37.5	34.5
Semangat '46	n.a.	61	n.a.	8	n.a.	13.1
SDP	19	n.a.	€	n.a.	0	n.a.
Berjaya	8	n.a.	2	n.a.	0	n.a.
PRIM .	4	3	*	0	0	0
Nasma	4	n.a _®	#	n.a.	0	n.a.
MOMOGAM 2		n.a.	π.	n.a.	0	n.a.
PLUS	2	1	2	n.a.	0	0
PBS	n.a.	14	n.a.	14	n.a.	100.0
Independents	51	6,1	4	4	7.8	6.6
AKAR	n.a.	4	n.a.	0	n.a.	0
IPF	n.a.	1	n.a.	0	n.a.	0
Sub-total:	253	233	29	53	16.4	9.4
Total:	431	399	177	180	100.0	100.0

Note:

n.a.-not applicable; PBS left the BN coalition to become an opposition party in the 1990 election while Hamim, Nasma, MOMOGAM, SDP and Berjaya did not contest in 1990.

Table 2
RESULTS OF STATE ELECTIONS (1986)

State	Total Seats	Bari No.	san %	Oppo No.	osition %
Johore	36	35	97.2	1	2.8
Kedah	28	25	89.3	3	10.7
Kelantan	39	29	74.4	10	25.6
Melaka	20	17	85.0	3	15.0
Negeri Sembilan	28	24	85.7	4	14.3
Pahang	33	32	97.0	1	3.0
Penang	33	23	70.0	10	30.0
Perak	46	33	71.8	13	28.2
Perlis	14	14	100	0	0
Selangor	42	37	88.1	5	11.9
Terengganu	32	30	93.8	2	6.2
TOTAL:	351	299	85.2	52	14.8

Note: The DAP won 37 and PAS 15 of the opposition seats. PAS's best showing was in Kelantan where it won all 10 opposition seats. The DAP won all 10 opposition seats in Penang and all 13 in Perak.

Table 3

VOTES AND SEATS WON BY GOVERNMENT COALITION
IN FOR PENINSULAR MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 1955-86

Details of Seats					
Year	% Votes	Total of Seats	Seats Won	% Seats Won	
1955	79.6	52	51	98.1	
1959	51.8	104	74	71.2	
1964	58.5	104	89	85.6	
1969	48.6	104	66	63.5	
1974	61.5	114	104	91.3	
1978	57.1	114	94	82.5	
1982	61.3	114	103	90.4	
1986	55.8	133	112	73.8	

SOURCE:

Sankaran Ramanathan and Mohd Hamdan Adnan, *Malaysia's* 1986 General Elections, The Urban-Rural Dichotomy, Singapore; Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988.

TABLE 4

TOTAL NUMBER OF VOTES OBTAINED BY VARIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES CONTESTING IN THE MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS OF 1986 AND 1990

COMPONENT PARTIES OF THE BARISAN NASIONAL		VOTES OBTAINED (1000) NO.		%
UMNO MCA MIC Gerakan Hamim SANP SUPP PBDS PBB USNO PBS Sub-total;	1986 1,474 589 105 150 30 34 93 25 48 27 74 2,649	1990 1,700 681 114 178 n.a. 36 103 23 101 50 n.a. 2,986	1986 31.9 12.8 2.3 3.3 0.6 0.7 2.0 0.5 1.0 0.6 1.6 57.3	1990 30.4 12.2 2.0 3.2 n.a. 0.7 1.8 0.4 1.8 0.9 n.a. 53.4
Opposition Parties PAS DAP Semangat 46 n.a. PBS SDP Nasma PSRM/PRM PLUS Berjaya MOMOGUM Independents Permas IPF AKAR Sub-total:	719 968 835 n.a. 45 10 59 1 20 1' 147 n.a. n.a. n.a.	375 960 n.a. 128 n.a. n.a. 56 n.a. n.a. n.a. 115 32 33 13 5,593	15.6 21.0 14.9 n.a. 1.0 0.2 1.3 0.01 0.4 0.01 3.2 n.a. n.a. 100.0	6.7 17.2 2.3 n.a. n.a. 1.0 n.a. n.a. 3.1 0.6 0.6 0.2 100.0
Total: Spoilt votes: Total Number of Registered	4,620 126	5,593 156	100.0 2.65	100.0 2.71
Voters:	6,969	7,938	n.a.	n.a.

n.a.: notapplicable