

MASS MEDIA PERFORMANCE IN MALAYSIA'S 1990 GENERAL ELECTIONS: LESSONS AND PREDICTIONS FOR 1995

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This chapter begins with an overview of major political development in Malaysia in the period 1986 to 1990. It then discourses the 1990 general elections focusing on the findings of the research project *vis-a-vis* the role of the media. The final section draws some lessons and makes some predictions for the forthcoming 1995 general elections.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN MALAYSIA 1986-90

The major political problem in this period was the split in UMNO which came out in the open during UMNO's party elections in April 1987. According to many political observers, there were two camps, one led by Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Ghafar Baba (known as Camp A) and the other led by former finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former deputy prime minister, Musa Hitam (known as Camp B). The victory of Camp A candidates led to purge of Camp B candidates from ministerial and key party posts and to the subsequent court battles, which in turn lead to the deregistration of the old UMNO. This prompted former members of the old UMNO to reorganise themselves into two parties, the "new" UMNO and a party called *Semangat 46* (Spirit of 1946, the founding date of the old UMNO).

Led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Musa Hitam joined the "new" UMNO), the *Semangat 46* aligned itself with opposition parties principally the DAP and PAS and made public its intentions to contest as many seats as possible in the 1990 election. While most observers felt that it would not win enough seats to form the next government, they rated its chances of winning in Kelantan (Razaleigh's home state) as quiet good. Hence, the split within the old UMNO, its deregistration and its replacement by two parties resulted in a weakening of Malay political unity.

Another area of concern for all parties in the ruling coalition had been the state of the country's economy. The effects of the recession in 1986 continued to be felt for most of the following year. However, the economy began to pick up in 1988 and continued to do so in 1989, as a result of which the economic situation in 1990 became

much better. (Growth of the first quarter of 1990 was 11%, a level which the country had not achieved since 1980). Even the *Proton Saga* (national car) project, which had been criticised at its inception by many quarters (and had been used by the opposition as an election issue in 1986), had proved to be a profitable venture. The same applies to the Penang bridge project, other heavy industrialisation projects and the various moves towards privatisation.

Hence, Malaysia is regarded by many as having obtained the status of an NIC (Newly Industrialised Country), a recognition which the Prime Minister does not want so soon (*New Straits Times*, Aug. 21, 1990, p.2). The Prime Minister was elaborating his earlier statement that Malaysia is ranked fifth among the developing countries.

Another development is more liberal attitude on the government's part in areas and subjects where it had previously exercised control. This includes a greater tolerance of opposition criticism, to the extent that applications by opposition parties to publish their own newspapers were approved, resulting in the appearance of *Harakah*, the PAS publication. Further, although a considerable number of opposition politicians (including DAP leader, Lim Kit Siang) had been detained under the Internal Security Act following the **Operation Lallang** (in Oct. 1987), almost all were released. There are now very few people (less than 50 according to government figures) under preventive detention. According to the government, these detainees are hard-core criminals and suspected drug addicts and drug-pushers.

Because of these developments, the mood of the people in 1990 indicated that the ruling coalition (the BN) and particularly the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed had performed well over the intervening four years despite the numerous problems that both the coalition and the Prime Minister had to overcome.

THE 1990 GENERAL ELECTION

Although the term of office of the Barisan Nasional government headed by Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed was not due to expire until August 1991. Malaysia was in the grip of a strong election fever for nearly six months prior to the actual election itself. The mass media and political parties were involved in a guessing game about the exact date from as early as the beginning of the year 1990.

Part of the reason for this guessing game stemmed from the pronouncements of the Prime Minister himself. He had suffered a heart attack and undergone coronary bypass surgery in 1988 and had hinted on numerous occasions that he would like to see a clear line of succession established soon. Another reason was the buoyant state of the country's economy, as mentioned earlier. A third reason was the desire of the new UMNO, to deal with the challenge posed by *Semangat 46* as quickly as possible.

The speculations proved correct when the Malaysian Parliament was dissolved in September 1990, eleven months before the expiry of its term. The seventh Malaysian general elections were held on October 20, 1990.

The Research Project

The project is titled "Role of the Media in Malaysia's General Elections 1990". The project proposal, funded by a research grant from the Bureau of Research and

Consultancy MARA Institute of Technology (ITM) was approved in the middle of 1990. Eleven constituencies in peninsular Malaysia were purposively selected on the basis that there would be a keen contest between candidates of the incumbent (ruling) parties (components of the BN) and the opposition parties. The constituencies were: Bachok (Kelantan), Marang (Terengganu), Arau (Perlis), Sik (Kedah), Jelutong (Penang), Parit Buntar (Perak), Jelebu (Negeri Sembilan), Shah Alam (Selangor), Ampang Jaya (Selangor), Titiwangsa (Federal Territory) and Johor Bahru (Johore).

Four methodologies were utilised, viz.

- (a) Survey of 100 voters 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" (anonymous person pen letters), posters, banners, manifestos, etc.).
 - ii) Reports in newspapers and magazines concerning the elections and the campaign (6-22 October, 1990).
 - iii) News, current affairs, documentary and other special programmes concerning the elections and campaign aired over radio and television in Malaysia (6-22 October 1990).
 - iv) Selected *ceramahs* at these constituencies (about 40 *ceramahs*)
- (d) Observation at *ceramahs*, public meetings, house-to-house campaigns, as well as field observations at these constituencies during the campaign period (11-20 October, 1990).

Earlier chapters in this issue carry the full findings of the different aspects of this research.

Some Theoretical Considerations

Basically, we have utilised a functional approach to the study of the media in the electoral process, along the lines initially advocated by American sociologists LASSWELL, LAZARFELD and MERTON (1948)(1) and subsequently expanded upon by WRIGHT (1964)(2). In the Malaysian context, WAN ABDUL KADIR (1988)(3) has utilised a similar approach to explain the effects of popular culture.

Media can be categorised according to whether they are "mass" or "interpersonal". This writer has argued 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 homogeneous society such as in the United States (4). 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.

With regard to the functions of both "mass" and "interpersonal" communication, the following have been identified:

- (a) Surveillance of the environment
- (b) Correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment.
- (c) Transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next.
- (d) Entertainment
- (e) Status-Conferral
- (f) Enforcement of Social norms (ethicizing)

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 the **Visit Malaysia Year (VMY)**, **Malaysia Fest** and so forth. The manifest function of this campaign would be to promote tourism in Malaysia, thereby hoping that Malaysia can compete with neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand. The latent function can be that the people in the East Coast states, particularly Kelantan and Trengganu, became increasingly-concerned with the influx of foreign tourists and hence rejected one of the ruling coalition's strategies to promote development in these states. This may be one of the reasons to account for the unexpectedly-heavy defeat of the ruling BN coalition in the state of Kelantan.

The functional theory also assumes that any single act can have both functional and dysfunctional effects. Therefore, we can view the mid-campaign pullout of the **Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS)** in 1990 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** (in Kuala Lumpur) during the height of the election campaign.

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 (status-conferral, a latent dysfunction in this case).

Hence, any communicated event can have manifest and latent functions or dysfunctions, depending upon the society which it affects as a whole as well as subgroups, individuals and cultural systems that are found within that society.

Quite often, the media are blamed for what they do or do not do, or even for what they should or should not do. We do not propose to hold a watching brief for the media, neither do we propose to join the ranks of those who flagellate the media. Suffice it to say that we as academics should come to terms with the existence (some would say the intrusion) of the media, and seek to understand how they function. We only wish that greater numbers of politicians would learn to understand the media and how they function.

Media and the 1990 Malaysian General Elections.

Although the actual dissolution of Parliament was quite sudden, it was not entirely unexpected, as indicated earlier. The short campaign period was also not unexpected. What was unexpected (by almost everybody) was the total wipeout of BN candidates in Kelantan and the strong showing of the opposition in nearby Terengganu.

The DAP failed in its **Tanjung II** project (to capture the state government in Penang), for which Lim Kit Siang has accepted full responsibility. He is now talking of a **Tanjung III** project (*Post-Script*: The Tanjung III project for the recently concluded 1995 Malaysian General Elections, also failed). The ruling BN coalition has yet again been returned with a comfortable two-thirds majority, leading one foreign journalist to observe that Dr. Mahathir has repeated his Houdini act. (see Table 6)

With regard to the media and the political process, the following points can be noted:

- (a) PAS changed its election tactics in Kelantan and Terengganu. Instead of holding large open *ceramahs*, it used intense house-to-house campaigns, most of which were closed-door meetings where specific provincial issues seemed to have been discussed. Nevertheless, its flags, posters and banners (as well as those of *Semangat 46*) vastly outnumbered those of the BN.
- (b) Anonymous leaflets distributed during the campaign period had tremendous effects, e.g. the photograph of Tengku Razaleigh together with Joseph Pairin Kitingan, (the leader of *Parti Bersatu Sabah*) wearing a big cross seemed to have had a tremendous effect upon many Muslims in the West Coast states, while leaflets about Dr. Mahathir's alleged anti-Islamic nature seemed effective in Kelantan and Terengganu (e.g. "Mahathir Mengiktirafkan Raja Judi Malaysia" and "Fitnah Mahathir Terakhir"). (Mahathir seen with Lim Goh Tong, the head of Genting Malaysia, which is the site of a Casino; the heading reads - Mahathir gives official recognition to the king of gambling in Malaysia).
- (c) Control of the "mass" media by the government has had both functional and dysfunctional effects upon the electorate, depending upon whether they were urban Malays, urban non-Malays or rural Malays. For example, while the credibility of *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* (the leading Bahasa Malaysia newspapers) may not be high among urban non-Malays, and some urban Malays, these publications are widely read by rural Malays, and are regarded as highly credible. However, the publication and distribution of *Harakah*, the PAS newspaper, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu, has helped to strengthen the position of the opposition and contributed to the BN wipeout in Kelantan.
- (d) The PBS switchover seemed to have negatively affected the opposition, e.g. DAP lost four seats in Sabah, while sectors of the Malay urban electorate became frightened of the possibility that there may be too strong

an opposition. The mid-campaign announcement's effects can be explained in terms of the "primacy-recency effects of communication", i.e. the most recent message received will tend to displace earlier messages, depending upon the perceived importance of the message.

- (e) The partisan nature of the press seems very clear e.g. *NST* and *Utusan Melayu* group in favour of ruling parties, *Harakah*, *Rocket*, *Aliran* and other papers extremely critical of the government. Hence, the credibility of the so-called mass media in Malaysia seems to be very low.
- (f) There seems to be greater evidence of an urban-rural dichotomy in Malaysian politics, evidence of which was beginning to emerge in the 1986 elections.

To summarize, the following statements can be made about the media and the electoral process in Malaysia, particularly in the context of the 1990 general elections :

- (a) Control of the "mass" media by the government seems to have had both functional and dysfunctional effects.
- (b) The publication and distribution of *Harakah* helped to contribute to the BN wipeout in Kelantan.
- (c) Anonymous leaflets distributed during the campaign period were effective.
- (d) The PAS strategy of holding closed-door meetings as opposed to large open *ceramahs* seems to have worked very well in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu.
- (e) Interpersonal channels of communication seem to be more effective than "mass" media during the actual campaign itself.

Notwithstanding the above, it can be stated that the Malaysian electorate seem to have made up their minds based upon campaign issues and personalities contesting in the elections rather than by the way these issues and personalities were highlighted through the interpersonal and "mass" media.

Another point relates to the discussion about the role of the "mainstream media". The **Commonwealth Observers Group (COG)** had alleged that opposition parties were given inadequate access to the "mainstream media", while Dr. Mahathir 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 (*New Straits Times*, Nov. 12 1990). Semantics aside, both groups are partly correct. If "mainstream media" is taken to mean radio and television, it may be true that the opposition was given inadequate access to the media (there can be some argument about the definition of "inadequate"). But, as has been pointed out, this can result in dysfunctional effects.

With regard to the newspapers, those in Bahasa Malaysia, such as *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *Harakah*, *Watan*, *Harian Kota*, *Bacaria*, etc. are collectively

the most widely-read group of newspapers, and they have enjoyed increases in circulation. The circulation of Chinese and Tamil newspapers has either remained stagnant or has declined, while their readership has definitely declined over the years.

However, we noticed that newspapers controlled by the **Fleet Group** and **Utusan Group** gave more favourable reports to the BN parties, while *Harakah* supported the opposition front. The *Rocket* and *Aliran* generally supported the opposition. The Tamil newspapers supported the BN, while the Chinese newspapers gave nearly equal coverage to the BN parties (with emphasis on coverage for the Malaysian Chinese Association) and opposition parties (with emphasis on coverage for the Democratic Action Party). Thus, all the Malaysian newspapers are partisan in varying degrees.

With regard to the role of the mass media in the electoral process, there is sufficient cause to believe that the Malaysian electorate is not easily influenced by what they see, hear or read in the mass media. Neither do they seem to be influenced by intense interpersonal appeals launched especially by opposition parties during the election campaign periods. They seem to make up their minds based upon campaign issues and personalities contesting in the elections. This finding was substantiated through the studies on the role of the mass media in Malaysia's 1986 and 1990 general election.

LESSONS AND PREDICTIONS FOR THE FORTHCOMING 1995 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The speculation about the date of the forthcoming elections had been rampant for more than six months before the actual resolution of Parliament on April 6, 1995. In fact, a number of observers have stated that the Malaysian stock market has been affected by speculation about the elections date since October 1994.

Be that, as it may, the actual election dates i.e. 25th and 26th April 1995 have surprised a few observers, as the 1995 election was the first to be held in mid-week. Some observers had also feared that the campaign period might prove to be the shortest in Malaysia's election history, but their fears proved unfounded as the campaign period of nine days (15th to 24th April) is of the same duration as that for the 1990 elections.

Major Political Developments, 1990-95

The outstanding political development is the decline power and subsequent ousting from control of the Sabah State government of the *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) following the 1994 Sabah State election. This was a reprisal by the BN for the mid-campaign pullout of the PBS in the 1990 election. Hence, not only is Joseph Pairin Kitingan out of office as Chief Minister (having been replaced by Datuk Salleh Said Keruak), his brother Dr. Jeffrey Kitingan has been wooed to join the BN. Hence, the battle for Sabah federal seats in the 1995 elections turned out to be a keen one.

Another major development has been the emergence and growing strength of Anwar Ibrahim and his *Melayu Baru* supporters, particularly after UMNO's triennial elections in 1993. This has led to the replacement of Ghafar Baba as Deputy Prime Minister by Anwar Ibrahim. Further, a number of UMNO party stalwarts such as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Sanusi Junid have had to depend upon the Prime Minister for determining

their political futures. Most observers feel that a younger group of UMNO leaders captained by Anwar is certain to emerge after the 1995 election. This group of leaders seems destined to lead Malaysia into the 21st century.

Lessons and Predictions

At the close of nomination on 15th April, the BN had won eleven parliamentary and 19 states seats uncontested. This seemed to augur well for the BN, particularly *vis-a-vis* its strength in Sarawak. Considering that the BN won only two uncontested parliamentary seats in the 1990 general elections, it can therefore be predicted that the BN will increase its majority in the Dewan Rakyat after the 1995 election.

With regard to the contest at state level, however, the BN can expect a tough fight in Kelantan, where it is widely speculated that the ruling PAS will capture the majority of state seats. The contest for state seats is also expected to be close in Penang with Lim Kit Siang spearheading the challenge against Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon.

One of the lessons which the opposition should have learnt from the 1990 general elections is that they must carefully refrain from giving the BN - controlled media any major issues which could be exploited mid-way through the campaign. As pointed out earlier, the mid-campaign pullout of the PBS gave the mainstream media a golden opportunity to exploit this issue to the fullest in the 1995 election.

Another lesson which is more pertinent for the ruling BN parties to observe is not to take the voters for granted, particularly in the rural constituencies, such as those in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis. Campaign workers must exercise public relations skills when dealing with voters in face-to-face situations, such as door-to-door campaigns, *ceramahs* and other meetings. Furthermore, campaign workers manning party election officers in areas throughout the country must have at least basic knowledge of public relations skills, which can make them more effective in dealing with voters, particularly the "fence-sitters" and last-minute deciders.

With regard to media owners and managers, they must take steps to ensure that media reports and analysis about the election campaign are not unduly-biased or unbalanced. As our study shows, the average voter is easily turned off by unduly-biased media reporting, and this often negatively influences his voting choice.

Finally, we hope that opposition parties will be given proportionate media time, particularly on radio and television to make their appeals to the electorate, which is shown to our study to have become increasingly mature and sophisticated about the key issues during an elections campaign which can affect their choice of candidates.

Post-Script

This paper was completed in early April 1995, a week before the Malaysian General Election of 1995. Subsequent developments have shown that almost all the predictions made in this paper have come true.

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