

7. THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

We discovered that the media's role was not only significant but was presented to us as one of the problem areas in the election campaign. Wherever we went, we heard complaints about it and it was clear that there was a widespread perception that important sections of it were biased - a situation we could not ignore.

Malaysia, like many other countries, has a large body of legislation regulating the activities of the media. Some give powers to prohibit the printing and distribution of any publication deemed to be prejudicial to public order; others require newspapers and even printers to apply annually for licenses. The implication of this is to make publishers and printers unsure as to whether they will get another licence with all its commercial and investment consequences.

The Media in Malaysia

(a) Print Media

The major daily newspapers are published by two big newspaper groups, the New Straits Times and Utusan Melayu. Political parties including the dominant party in the ruling coalition, UMNO, have interests in them. **The New Straits Times** publishes three well-known English language dailies - **The New Straits Times**, **Business Times** and the afternoon **Malay Mail** as well as, among others, the **Shin Min Daily News** (Chinese) plus **Berita Harian**, a Malay language daily and its Sunday edition **Berita Minggu**. The Utusan Group publishes newspapers in the Malay script and in romanised Malay. The other English language daily, the Star and its Sunday Star, and two Tamil language newspapers have close ties with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) respectively, which are both in the ruling coalition. Other less well-known newspapers are aligned to Opposition parties, such as the **Monthly Rokat**, published by the Democratic Party (DAP) in English and Malay, and the bi-monthly **Harakah** published by the Islamic Party (PAS), while **Watan**, is a twice-weekly English language newspaper.

(b) Radio and Television

Broadcasting facilities fall under the Ministry of Information where a Department of Broadcasting runs Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). RTM has two television networks, which broadcast mainly in Malay, but have news and some other programmes in English, Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil. Radio Malaysia broadcasts throughout the country in four languages, through four main networks - National, Blue, Red and Green. There are two regional broadcasts, some partially in the main native languages of Sabah and Sarawak and other services such as FM stereo broadcasts. There is also a privately owned television Channel TV3, belonging to the Group of companies which publishes the New Straits Times stable of newspapers and whose news

broadcast policies differ little from those of RTM or the New Straits Times Group.

(c) National News Agency

The National News Agency **Bernama** which is partially Government-owned reports in both Malay and English. It has correspondents in all parts of Malaysia and all the major international news agencies service Malaysia through Bernama.

(d) Foreign Press

Foreign newspapers and magazines, including those which deal fairly extensively with internal political, economic and financial issues in countries such as Malaysia, are freely sold. Many have correspondents in Malaysia. They have freedom of movement and their reports are independent. Under a special Act, local agents acting as distributors must apply for a distribution license annually and the Government has a legal right to refuse to grant such a license.

Assessment of Coverage

In order to assess how the media conducted itself during the period leading up to polling day we had to adopt certain criteria, which would enable us to make a judgement on whether the media were treating all the participants in the election as fairly as possible in the circumstances. For instance, some of the information we sought was whether all political parties and candidates had access to space in the media not only through reports of their activities but through advertisements; whether reporters were given access to political meetings and could report freely on what was said; and lastly whether the views of all the parties were fairly reported in the print media.

Radio and television which normally play an important role in election campaigns, provided restricted coverage. Air time on radio was strictly rationed, with a limited number of party political broadcasts. These were not allowed at all on television. It was observed however that while political coverage was not permitted, the three television networks transmitted programmes on the election campaign and covered in the news the activities of Government Ministers as they toured the country. It appeared that these arrangements virtually denied access to the Opposition and information about their personalities and policies - save as described by Government-run television and radio - was prevented from reaching the electorate through the electronic media.

Political broadcasts rather than news reports of campaign activities on the radio were curtailed until a week before polling day when Radio Malaysia announced that agreement had been reached with the main political parties on how the limited radio time set aside for the campaign would be shared out.

The agreement provided that radio political broadcasts, restricted to the presentation of party manifestos, would be allowed for half an hour after every news programme, providing a total of 3 or 4 such broadcasts every day for 7 days prior to the election. This facility would be free and open only to parliamentary candidates, who could however elect someone to speak on their behalf. Only parties which had 20 or more candidates in the election were eligible, and air time would be allotted according to a formula of one broadcast for every 20 candidates. This meant that only the BN, DAP, Semangat 46 and PAS, of all the political parties and 79 independent candidates contesting qualified; none of the smaller parties or independent candidates was allowed this facility.

According to press reports the main opposition party's Secretary-General was unhappy with these arrangements and regretted that RTM did not allow the political parties to broadcast "live". He added that he had submitted a counter-proposal that RTM should allow "live" broadcasts, equal air time to all parties and television coverage.

One of the difficulties facing us in assessing how the campaign was being covered by all the print media was the fact that many newspapers were published in languages with which members of the Group were unfamiliar.

We monitored coverage in the two mainstream English language newspapers - in particular the New Straits Times, and the Star. We followed closely such news items as the launch of the two manifestos, the Declaration by a group of Opposition parties, the coverage given to the leaders of the coalitions, and the treatment of the candidates in news stories.

We received widespread complaints about perceived media bias. We had representations from concerned individuals, from Opposition supporters and even from some representatives of parties which are in the ruling coalition that the mainstream media, radio and television were blatant in their support for the BN. We were told of the disadvantages the Opposition faced during the campaign because access to the mainstream media, radio and television, were denied to them. Except for the few permitted radio broadcasts on their manifesto, the Opposition alleged that their campaign was poorly and unfairly covered and that mainstream newspapers even refused to accept advertisements from them.

Following our observations it appeared that the media, particularly television, overwhelmingly favoured the Government, giving almost exclusive coverage to Ministers in particular. The Opposition was not given an opportunity to put its message across nor was it able to buy time on radio and television.

Opposition parties also complained that no daily newspaper would accept their advertisements. We had no way of verifying this but on the final days prior to polling, full page BN advertisements appeared in the dailies. We saw no similar Opposition advertisements.

General Conclusion

We concluded that the denial to the voters of adequate coverage of the personalities and policies of the Opposition prevented them from getting a balanced picture of all the issues raised in the election campaign. We, therefore, express the hope that in future campaigns Opposition parties would be allowed greater access to the media, especially television, which could accommodate party political broadcasts. Such a decision would undoubtedly strengthen the electoral process in Malaysia.

8. PREPARATIONS FOR CONDUCT OF THE POLL

The general election of 1990 was the eighth held in the states of Peninsular Malaysia since independence. For Sabah and Sarawak it was the sixth occasion on which a Federal general election was held since the two states became part of Malaysia. Polling in the states of the Peninsular was completed in one day, whereas two days were required to complete the poll in Sabah and Sarawak. The people and the terrain were important determinants of the kind of arrangements made for the conduct of the poll.

Polling Centres

A total of 14,645 polling centres were established for the 1990 elections. This was more than twice the number (of 6,613) used in the 1986 elections. This was a very substantial enlargement of the provisions previously made and was designed to cater for a voter population which had increased by approximately 14 per cent since 1986.

As is its practice, the Election Commission took early steps to determine the suitability of existing polling centres and a revised list was gazetted for the information of the public on 27 September 1990. In order to ensure that the voting public was not unnecessarily inconvenienced, the Commission normally allows changes to be made to polling centres even a few days before polling. Most of the buildings used as polling centres were centrally located or reasonably accessible public buildings, usually schools, community centres and halls. We were told that in the absence of suitable buildings in some rural areas it was necessary to construct temporary sheds in some polling districts. Similarly, in efforts to reach outlying voters in Sarawak, polling stations were placed in villages only accessible by boat.

The presiding officer at each polling centre is required to affix a notice in a conspicuous place outside the centre stating the name of the constituency, the time and date of polling, the places of polling and the names and details of the candidates. Another notice in the national language or understandable script is also exhibited outside the polling centre to give guidance to voters. It is the duty of the returning officer to provide at each polling station proper facilities for the electors to enable them to mark their votes, screened from observation and able to