

Malaysian Media: Ownership, Control and Political Content

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Abstract

Following a brief overview of the culture and politics, this paper examines the contemporary electronic media in peninsular Malaysia. A general explanation of ownership patterns, regulatory/control trends, and consumption is presented as background for the current discussion. (A somewhat detailed content analysis of radio and television programming is included in the paper.) The implications for influences on political speech from formal and informal content controls are explored within the context of Malaysia's dynamic and emerging privatized media. Finally, media content from the 2000 Malaysian Parliamentary election is offered as evidence of the impact of privatization and content controls on political speech.

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This paper will examine the current ownership structure of Malaysia's electronic media, and specifically will seek to examine the implications of Malaysia's political environment on the media's political content. To understand the political milieu of contemporary Malaysia, we will first provide some brief historical and societal context.

Background

Malaysia is composed of thirteen states, eleven of which are located on the peninsula that extends south from Thailand, with the South China Sea to its east and the Indian Ocean to its west. Singapore lies at the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia. Two states, Sabah and Sarawak, are located on the island of Borneo and are known as "East Malaysia."

"Malaya" which had been under British influence since 1826 (British Broadcasting Network), gained its independence in 1957 when "the Federation of Malaysia" was established as a constitutional Monarchy, with the Supreme Head of State being the *Yang Di Pertuan Agong*, or the King, who is chosen from the states' sultans. The Prime Minister heads Malaysia's parliamentary government.

The effects of Great Britain's colonial rule are still evident in the racial make up of the people of peninsular Malaysia, as the British had immigrated ethnic Chinese and Indians to work the tin mines, rubber plantations and other holdings.

Thus, Malaysia's multi-racial society is composed (officially) of 61% Malays, 30% Chinese, 8% Indians, and 1% *Orang Asli* (i.e. "original man") and the diverse

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indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. Roughly eighty-five percent of Malaysia's twenty-two million people live on the peninsula, with the remainder inhabiting the states of Sabah and Sarawak (Malaysian Tourism Council, 1998).

Considerable disagreement exists regarding the accuracy of the minority populations reported above, as the provisions of the 1970 *New Economic Policy* (explained more fully below) require adhering to certain quotas, based on population estimates, in making hiring decisions and determining university admissions. Some non-Malaysian sources list the population of Malays at less than one-half the population, Chinese as over one-third, and Indians as 10%.

Malaysia's official religion is Islam, and in 2002 Prime Minister Dato Sri Doctor Mahathir Mohammed declared that Malaysia was a "Muslim State." But freedom of religious worship allows all religions to coexist, and indeed there are significant populations of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Animists throughout the country. Religious affiliations divide along ethnic lines with most Malays practicing Islam. Ethnic Chinese and Indians practice Buddhism and Hinduism respectively, as well as many of the Christian-based faiths. Orang Asli and other indigenous people are predominantly Animist.

Malaysian Politics

Malaysia's Parliament is headed by the Prime Minister Mahathir, as it has been since 1981. A "ruling coalition" or *Barisan Nasional (BN)* controls the Parliament. The *BN* is composed of three parties, which represent the three major ethnic groups. *UMNO*

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(the United Malay National Organization) exerts the most control, but the *BN* also includes the *MCA* (Chinese party) and the *MIC* (Indian Party).

The *BN* has effectively ruled Malaysia since 1969 by maintaining a two-thirds majority in the Parliament. This continued control has allowed the *BN* to amend the constitution at will, with one result being that power has become increasingly concentrated in the executive branch and with the prime minister. Parliamentary elections have long been subject to such gerrymandering that outside observers have concluded that elections are only called when the Prime Minister believes that such a clear majority exists for the *BN* that they are assured of maintaining their two-thirds majority and resultant control of the Parliament (United States Department of State, 2000).

In November 1999 Malaysian voters re-elected Mahathir to the office of Prime Minister, and maintained *BN* control in most states, in a “surprise” election that was called on short notice. Election observers noted that the timing of the election took advantage of a quirk in Malaysian election laws that left *thousands* of newly registered voters disenfranchised.

Most outside observers have thus characterized Malaysia’s government as *semi-authoritarian* to *authoritarian*, and ultimately leading to the conclusion that most civil liberties are allowed only as long as they do not threaten the control of the *BN*.

UMNO’s primary political opposition (and thus the *BN*’s primary opposition) comes from *PAS*, Malaysia’s more conservative Muslim/Malay party. *PAS* leadership encourages a shift toward the conservative interpretation of Islam, and advocates the adoption of the strict Islamic or *Shariat* Law. *PAS* has combined forces with other

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minority parties to form a weak opposition coalition, and has managed to achieve control of two states in peninsular Malaysia.

In the Malaysian state of Kelantan, state law now imposes fines for women who are seen in public without their covering, or *tudong*. Any mixing of the genders is strictly prohibited to the point of requiring separate male/female checkout lines at markets, and a prohibition on female barbers cutting male customers' hair.

Recent criticisms by PAS leadership of the liberal tendencies of UMNO have seemingly contributed to a shift toward conservatism throughout Malaysia, which is manifest in a general shift away from westernization and back toward traditional Malay/Muslim values. Malay women are now nearly always seen covering, and English has been de-emphasized to the extent that universities now provide instruction in only Malay. Some Malaysian Islamic scholars have concluded that the two parties are trying to “out Islam” one another.

New Economic Policy

Arguably one of Mahathir's most controversial and conspicuous pieces of legislation was the *New Economic Policy (NEP)*, enacted in 1970. The stated intent of the NEP was the “eradication of inequalities” between the ethnic Chinese and the Muslim Malays, who are given the designation of “*Bumiputera*,” or “sons of the soil,” or “princes of the land” (depending on interpretation).

Viewed by many critics as “affirmative action for the majority,” the NEP was initiated as a result of the realization that the ethnic Chinese population of Malaysia had

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achieved control of most the country's economy and wealth. One immediate mandate of the NEP was that all Malaysian corporations must have a majority ownership by Bumiputera, and thus required ownership realignment in many corporations.

Other provisions of the NEP called for interest free loans, government employment, free university education and reservation of real property for Bumiputera ownership. It is through the provisions of the NEP that ownership of all corporations is closely monitored and controlled, which we will see extends to the ownership of media. And it is largely through the NEP that the *BN* and the Prime Minister have conspicuously accumulated much of Malaysia's wealth.

Mahathir's "cronyism" has resulted in considerable dissension among the non-Bumiputera population. As an example, the recent construction of the "*Putrajaya*," or "people's city," or "prince's city," depending on interpretation, includes a palatial residence and executive building so lavish that critics have labeled it "Mahathir's Taj Mahal." And certainly many of Mahathir's close associates and family have benefited from the NEP.

Malaysian Electronic Media – Overview & Content

Malaysian television viewing options include over-the-air, or "*free-to-air*," signals from both government-owned (*Radio-Television Malaysia, or RTM*) and privately owned stations, subscription signals distributed by microwave, and satellite signals distributed by direct broadcast satellite. Free-to-air television signals include those from *RTM's TV-1* and *TV-2*, and signals from the privately owned *TV-3, Metrovision*, and *NCTV-7*. Signals from all these stations are available throughout peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia via *translator* transmitters that rebroadcast the signals.

