1 Malaysia: Promoting Unity among the Different Races

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Abstract. Malaysia is a relatively young country that achieved her independence in 1957. Due to massive migration in the last two centuries, Malaysia is a multi-racial country. Thus, this article describes how two dailies have played their role in promoting racial harmony among the different races in Malaysia. The discursive construction of the different races by the dailies may act as a form of barometer indicating the level of tolerance that exist among Malaysians and also, how the dailies try to reflect the cultural diversity of the different races to each other. In-depth interviews were conducted with two members of the press (i.e. senior news editor and a senior journalist) to find out the role of their respective dailies in promoting racial harmony and ethnic integration among Malaysians.

Keywords: unity, racial harmony, press, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-cultural society as a result of migration, colonization, merging of different states, integration of various ethnic groups, and also the combination of different governments.[1] We achieved independence fifty years ago in 1957. However, the issue of ethnic integration is still very much debated as the Government hopes to produce *Bangsa Malaysia* by the time we attain the developed country status in 2020.

The notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* was conceived before Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad stepped down from office in 2005. He stressed the theme of nation-building and the need for greater integration of the ethnic relations.[2] He has offered a vision of a Malaysian nation: a country that is "ethnically integrated, living in harmony with full and fair partnership, made up of one *Bangsa Malaysia*, with political loyalty and dedication to the nation".[2] This is the general consensus given that with the introduction of the National Development Policy in 1991 (as a replacement of the 1971 New Economic Policy), the pursuit of a national identity has shifted from one based on "advancing Malay cultural and Islamic symbols and practices[2] to an identity of a multi-ethnic society which will be more amenable to increasing globalization. Realizing this vision will require all races to cooperate under a "common and shared destiny" as one Malaysian race of *Bangsa Malaysia*.[3] Mahathir further affirms the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* in his articulation of *Wawasan 2020* (i.e. Vision 2020) to create a *Bangsa Malaysia* to achieve integration within a multicultural context.[1][2][4] In line with this vision, the media plays a pivotal role in helping the government promote racial unity among Malaysians.

The objectives of this study are:

To determine the extent of the role played by the press in fostering stronger racial ties among the different races in Malaysia;

To identify the strategies employed by the press when presenting news on the different ethnic groups in Malaysia

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2. Background to the Study

In Malaysia, despite the long years of British colonial rule, the re-drawing of boundaries and the manner in which the country obtained its independence, the Malaysian experience in nation-building at least in the initial decade was somewhat unique.[5] Ramasamy asserts that even though the political elite relied heavily on the British tradition in terms of creating and sustaining certain formal democratic institutions, the elements that went into determining the nature of nation-building were largely based on local circumstances. The role of Malays as an indigenous group and the large presence of immigrants such as the Chinese and Indians were factored in the derivation of a particular nation-building model constituted on the basis of inter-élite co-operation through the mechanisms of ethnic parties such as UMNO (United Malay National Organisation), the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and the MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) within the ethnic coalition of the Alliance party.[4][5] The three parties formed a coalition called the Alliance Party.[4] They worked out among themselves, without any interference from the British authorities, an agreement which has been called a "historic bargain"[4][6] in which the non-Malay parties accepted and upheld the British recognition of Malay sovereignty. They also agreed that Malays would enjoy a "special position" where they are accorded special privileges, Malay would be made the national language, Islam would be recognized as the official religion, and the Malay Rulers would become constitutional monarchs.[4][5] It was realized by the political elite of the various ethnic groups that without an attempt at co-operation, it was not possible to ensure political and economic stability. Former Prime Minster, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1970 mentioned the importance of harmony amongst different races and the Malay stability for the nation to be "secure".[7] Thus, it was the spectre of conflict and instability that provided the main impetus for the elite to experiment through an arrangement that has been popularly termed as consociationalism in the political science literature.[8]

The ethnic mindset has been studied in great detail in Malaysia.[3] Ethnic relations have been traced back to the colonial period. Tan[9] characterized Malaysia as a multi-ethnic society, comprising indigenous Malays and those who were then perceived as non-permanent settlers mostly Chinese and Indians,[10] living alongside each other in a single political unit. Ethnic relations in Malaysia is best described as "in a state of stable tension".[1] Shamsul states that this simply means that the different ethnic groups in Malaysia, through a continuous process of negotiation and conversation at all levels, structured and unstructured, within an accepted structural and institutional framework, have been able to strike a balance between "sharing and agreeing on certain things" and "agreeing to disagree on other things".[1] Therefore, there exists a social space for disagreement and dissent, sometimes openly expressed and at other times remaining subterranean. The negotiated consensus, says Shamsul,[1] gives the stability that dominates inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Nonetheless, everyone is aware of the fact that we do disagree on a number of issues. The disagreement has always found space for open public expression. Admittedly, such expression has been and could become the source of tension, but often not for long because it triggers further conversation and negotiation.[1] Because the whole exercise of conversation and negotiation is conducted in the public sphere, usually in the different vernacular mass media, it helps tremendously to reduce the tension before allowing it to develop into an open conflict that everyone knows has to be avoided at all costs. There exists what Wang describes as "distance and distrust" between the different ethnic groups in Malaysia.[1]

3. Methodology

The research chosen is qualitative in nature. The instrument used to collect data was the interview.

Data were collected from conducting two in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with a senior news editor and a senior journalist. The senior news editor is from the English daily, *The Star*, while the senior journalist is from another English daily, *The News Straits Times*. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on 27th June 2008 and 20 July 2008 respectively.

4. Findings

Both the interviewees were asked a similar set of questions. However, their answers to the questions are at times, rather different from one another.

4.1. Role in Promoting Unity

For the first question on the role of the newspaper in promoting national unity, the senior news editor said that they do not 'have any specific' strategies in promoting national unity. Instead, the daily chooses to publish articles 'based on newsworthiness'. For example, when the government increased fuel prices a year ago, *The Star* published many articles on this issue. However, to promote unity with regard to this issue, the daily interviewed people from 'various races'. This is 'to be fair to all' races so that a 'certain problem that's more unique' to a certain race can be highlighted in the report. As for the *The New Straits Times*, they help to promote unity by 'give(ing) them equal space' in their paper. This is to show the 'equal importance' of each race.

4.2. Communal Reporting

In the next question, they were asked if their daily practises communal reporting. Communal reporting is about how the paper report articles focusing on a certain race or mention the different races in their article. For example, an article on robbery. If the particular newspaper practises communal reporting, it will mention the race of the robbers. The senior journalist 'seriously doubt(ed)' that *The New Straits Times* practises communal reporting. This is because their 'readership is across the board: Indian, Chinese, everyone basically'. However, he pointed out that *The Star* does 'play up a lot of Chinese issues'. He adds that the reason could be 'their readers are mostly Chinese based'. Nevertheless, the senior news editor refuted claims that *The Star* practises communal reporting. He stated that they do not mention the race of the person featured in the article. For example, in their reporting on crime, they do not report the race of the robbers; they 'leave it out'.

4.3. Strategies used in Promoting Unity

The third question focused on the strategies used by the dailies in promoting national unity among Malaysians. The senior news editor stressed that *The Star* is and 'has been people's paper'. Thus, reporting in the daily 'involves all communities…from young and old, all facets of society'. In addition, '*The Star* has been organizing…corporate projects, then people-oriented projects'. These projects are the daily's contribution to promoting national unity. 'Like for instance, one of the long projects that (has) been on-going for years, Star Walk'. In other words, *The Star* promotes national unity not only through their reporting, but also through 'activities' where 'interaction' occurs among the different races. The senior journalist from *The New Straits Times* also concur that the daily does not prescribe a certain set of strategies in promoting national unity. Instead, they 'report and …educate' its readers. The senior journalist reiterates that they 'are taught' to give everyone 'fair coverage', regardless of race.

4.4. Stereotyping

In the final question on stereotyping of the races in their reporting, the two interviewees gave two differing answers. The senior editor from *The Star* 'think(s) there is no stereotyping' as they 'report as and when issues crop up'. He adds that the notion of stereotyping is very subjective as it is based on the 'individual's opinion'. As for *The New Straits Times*, the senior journalist strongly denied that there is stereotyping in the daily. He believes that if they stereotype, 'how are we going to attract new readers'? In brief, the daily's motto is 'to educate, report and sell our newspaper'. Thus, they believe in 'straight-forward reporting' to attain 'credibility' among their readers. In this way, the daily also hopes to attract new readers to their current pool of readers.

5. Acknowledgements

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