

Unfair Coverage

A look at the mainstream media's bias in the 1999 general election

by **Wong Kok Keong**

A contentious issue of the 10th general election in 1999 was whether the Malaysian media was fair and independent. The Alternative Front (AF) did not think so, accusing them of acting as propaganda for the National Front (NF). The media denied or ignored it. Who was right?

This was the basis of a study of which this report offers major highlights. Performed without funding from any source, it examined the coverage of *The New Straits Times* (or NST), *The Star* and *The Sun* from 12 to 29 November 1999. Although election campaigning officially started on 20 Nov, this study began on 12 Nov, a day after Prime Minister Mahathir dissolved Parliament, an act usually accepted by political parties and the public as the start of electioneering.

The research examined three areas—news reports, opinions (editorials, comments, columns) and letters to the editors—to determine how many items were focused or positive on the NF (denoted as "NF +") and the AF (denoted as "AF +"); negative on the NF (or "NF -") and AF (or "AF -"); balanced towards both (or "NF/AF"); and non-party related (or "NPR"). These areas must appear in the regular pages or sections of the

papers (e.g., Business, Metro, Sports) not special sections. Quantitative findings would be substantiated with analyses of major issues covered.

such letters. Or could it be that the readers could not be bothered because they had come to perceive the papers to be biased towards the NF?

Table 1: News Reports (in percentages)

	NF +	AF +	NF -	AF -	NF/AF	NPR	TOTAL
NST	51.1	1.6	0.5	5.8	11	20	100
Star	52	14.6	0.6	4	13.9	14.9	100
Sun	49.7	3.5	0.6	3.7	16.3	6.2	100

Table 2: Opinion Pieces (in actual numbers)

	NF +	AF +	NF -	AF -	NF/AF	NPR	TOTAL
NST	29	0	0	10	3	6	48
Star	7	0	0	3	5	4	19
Sun	28	0	0	5	17	8	58

Table 3: Letters To The Editor (in actual numbers)

	NF +	AF +	NF -	AF (-)	NF/AF	NPR	TOTAL
NST	10	0	0	7	4	2	23
Star	5	0	0	3	4	7	19
Sun	6	0	0	2	1	3	12

All three tables show that most of the news reports, opinions, and letters were favourable towards the NF ("NF +"). Table 1 shows "NF +" items were significantly more than balanced news items ("NF/AF"). Not a single opinion piece or letter was "AF +" just as none was "NF -" (Tables 2 & 3). Perhaps no readers wrote in with

The overwhelming amount of news reports, opinions and letters that were "NF +" would make even a casual observer hard pressed to defend the fairness of all three papers. (On the other hand, consider *malaysiakini.com*. Started in November 1999, it has no shortage of negative and positive letters on all political parties.)

One reason for the huge number of "NF +" items was the papers usually presented what the NF had to say unaccompanied by responses from the AF. The NF often accused the AF of lying, but the papers hardly looked into it. AF denials were rarely reported; when they were, they were not on the same day as the accusation but later without any explanation for the delay.

Lack Of Independence

Then there was the case of UM student Stephen Doss. A few days before voting, he quit Keadilan and denounced Chandra Muzaffar as a hypocrite (*The Star*, Nov. 27: 12; *The Sun*, Nov. 27:12; *The NST*, Nov. 28: 5). None of the papers carried Chandra's or Keadilan's response on the same day. The next time the issue resurfaced was on 29 November: the papers reported Doss's rebuttal to Keadilan's response to his earlier attack. Again, none bothered with Keadilan's response to counter Doss.

Why not carry Keadilan's response the very same day as Doss' criticism the first time? If they could not do it because of press deadlines, they could have stated that. Or, if Keadilan or Chandra was unavailable or unwilling to respond right away, they could just as easily have mentioned that. This is the standard practice of most papers in the world—at least those that strive to be fair. Not doing it showed a lack of professionalism. Emphasis on Doss' criticism and rebuttal also revealed the papers' bias.

The papers' lack of independence could be seen in their coverage of

NF's accusation of foreign embassies supporting the AF. The story first broke on 25 Nov that the embassies were "actively giving financial aid and moral support" to the AF. The embassies denied it, but that was mentioned in the same reports only in *The Star* and *The NST*. What about the AF? Only *The NST* ran a rebuttal response from the DAP on the same day.

Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar later said the NF had "substantial evidence" as proof. But what the NF had to support its claim was that embassy members had attended AF "ceramahs". The embassies said this was normal practice to familiarize themselves with the politics of the host country. True or not, the papers did not verify.

As for the AF receiving financial support, Mahathir mentioned the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) giving funds to the DAP. But Sweden was not one of the foreign countries first accused. And how was the SAP part of the Swedish foreign embassy? The three papers offered nothing. *The Star* (29 November) reported the DAP denying Mahathir's accusation and saying the funding was for a study tour of Sweden before the election and such tours were commonly made even by NF members. Again, the papers did not follow up to confirm one way or another.

Given Mahathir's well-known criticism of the western media, the NF predictably accused the western media of supporting the AF. *The NST*, *Star* and *Sun* played it up at every opportunity. On 19 Nov, the *NST* chastised western reporters for looking at the elec-

tion in a different way than that proffered by the NF and accused western media of conspiring with Malaysian "pseudo intellectuals" who were really supporters of the AF. It did not see anything amiss in accepting only the NF's definition of the election and the issues. And were not the editors and lead writers of the many *NST* articles (e.g. Nov. 20: 6) spinning on behalf of the NF "pseudo intellectuals"?

The NST was not alone in lacking fairness and independence. On 29 November, *The Sun* (as well as *The NST*) reported an exchange between Mahathir and a *Daily Telegraph* reporter. When asked whether Anwar had damaged his popularity, Mahathir retorted:

"I won't answer such a stupid question... What you are saying is that even if I win, Anwar has damaged my reputation...that is not a question...that is a statement being made by you because you already have this in your mind..."

The reporter denied it and continued with the question, to which, Mahathir finally said "no". *The Sun* headlined the story "Question on Anwar gets journalist a 'headache'". But how? It was Mahathir who appeared to lose his cool and belligerent; the reporter seemed unfazed.

Political promises are part of any elections. Whether they are delivered is another issue. But in the 1999 election, several long-standing NF promises would suddenly materialise during the campaigning. Many new ones were also made and sometimes delivered within that short period: building of new schools and bridges, in-

stallation of new school facilities, approval of housing permits, compensation to fishermen for loss of income with the development of a port, compensation to victims of fires that broke out before the election campaign. Were they not efforts at vote buying? The papers duly covered these NF photo opportunities, but not one questioned the ethics or fairness.

Chandra once tried to do that. *The NST* (Nov. 23: 9) headlined it "Approval of school questioned," and the first two of three paragraphs stated:

... Chandra Muzaffar today ques-

tioned the approval of a Chinese primary school ... claiming it was a political gimmick.

But in the same breath, the (keADILan) deputy president welcomed the approval of the school... However, he questioned its timing.

Whether a result of deliberately fudging the issue or bad writing, the presentation made the ethics or fairness of it ambiguous and a non-starter.

All three papers have more to do if they truly aspire to be fair and independent. This involves providing more space for political parties

and views other than those of the NF and undertaking more verification of claims made by whichever groups. This would benefit everyone, including the NF because it would encourage more feedback from the people. Of course, restrictive press laws must also be repealed. But, above all, there must be the will to commit to a vision of the press as serving the interests of the people and the country, not just those in power. □

Wong Kok Keong is a Malaysian and teaches mass communication in the U.S.


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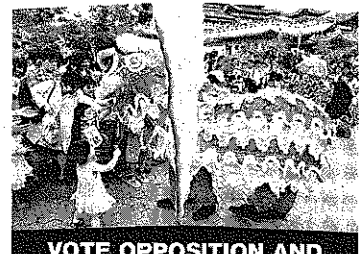


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VOTE OPPOSITION AND YOU VOTE AWAY YOUR CULTURAL FREEDOM.

There are three main political parties in Malaysia: the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Party (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The MCA and MIC are the main opposition parties to the UMNO-led government. The MCA and MIC have a long history of working together to promote the interests of the Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia. They have also worked together to promote the interests of the Malaysian people as a whole. The MCA and MIC have a strong record of leadership and service to the Malaysian people. They are the only political parties in Malaysia that have a long history of working together to promote the interests of the Malaysian people as a whole. They are the only political parties in Malaysia that have a strong record of leadership and service to the Malaysian people. They are the only political parties in Malaysia that have a long history of working together to promote the interests of the Malaysian people as a whole. They are the only political parties in Malaysia that have a strong record of leadership and service to the Malaysian people.

THE BETTER CHOICE

