

Election and Ethnicity: a Comparative Analysis of Local Language Dailies and the Prevalence of Ethnic-Based Discourses during the 2008 Malaysian General Election

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ABSTRACT

The major mainstream newspapers in Malaysia are owned and/or under the control of the parties of the ruling coalition government, the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*). The 12th Malaysian election saw the National Front losing its two-thirds majority hence weakening its hegemony over the Malaysian public sphere. The negotiations articulated in the mainstream media are good starting points to observe the ruling class's presentation of ideas and justification of their dominance and leadership, notably in times of crisis.

The concept of hegemony has been used to describe and analyse how modern capitalist societies were organised, or aimed to be organised, in the past and the present, and that hegemonic leadership involves developing intellectual, moral and philosophical consent from all major groups in a nation. It is important to contextualise the fact that the ruling coalition government is helmed by three ethnic-based political parties.

This research studies the progress or changes in the post-election reporting style and how the print mainstream media reacted during the 12th General Election. The study looks at selected post-election headline news stories published in the English mainstream daily *New Straits Times* and the Malay mainstream daily *Utusan Malaysia* (and their week-end editions *New Sunday Times* and *Mingguan Malaysia*) as case studies to explore how the rhetoric of ethnicity is an active undercurrent in any reading of the Malaysian mainstream media.

Keywords: Hegemony, ideology, Malaysia, media, politics

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper studies the progress or changes in the post-election reporting style found in the print media to identify the rhetoric of ethnicity in the mainstream press during the 2008 general election. This paper also hypothesises that prevailing news selection and reporting angles found in pre- and post-general election reports can be identified by the language of the publication in Malaysia (which can also be attributed to direct or proxy media ownership and control by the government) and that the rhetoric of ethnicity is stronger in the local language (in this case, the Malay language) as compared to the English press.

Further, this paper uses a case study of comparing the front page headlines and news reports from the Malay language mainstream daily *Utusan Malaysia*, one of the few remaining broadsheet publications around, to the front page news reports of the English

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language daily *New Straits Times*. The analysis hopes to identify and recognise the prevailing rhetoric of ethnicity-based ideologies present in the news stories and the constructed representation of an ethnic 'divide' which is constantly repeated in language-based dailies (in this case *Utusan Malaysia's* presumed Malay majority readership) through a discussion of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. This concept will then be framed within the context of cultural studies perspectives of popular culture (and its co-existence with the mainstream media) as a site of ideological contestation.

However, the paper is limited insofar as its scope of analysis by virtue of comparing one Malay language daily with another English language daily in order to contrast the differing angles on the coverage of potentially similar issues or events with the readership's language being a determinant of the rhetoric used. The findings may serve as a potential enquiry into other local-based language dailies (including Mandarin and Tamil languages) and the rhetoric that may or may not be present in the Chinese, Indian and other communities.

2. OVERVIEW

The 2008 General Election on 8 March 2008 was a watershed in Malaysian politics, with the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) losing its two-thirds majority. A lot has been written and speculated about the election results. The general perception was that it was the ruling coalition's failure to deliver or the voters went ahead with a protest vote. As Farish A. Noor (2008) observed:

Four years on, there seems to be the widespread perception that the Abdullah administration has failed to deliver. Despite earlier promises that the long-standing cases of alleged corruption and nepotism between Government and the corporate sector were to be resolved, no major cases have been dealt with until now. Instead, the Malaysian public has been witness to a number of embarrassing revelations about the murky dealings within the governmental system. (p. 17)

The Malaysian public had evidently become disillusioned and questioned the legitimacy of the ruling coalition and the bureaucratic manner of addressing and dealing with the public via the mainstream media. The shift toward other forms of media sources for a more nuanced picture of what was going on gained momentum after the 1998-99 hegemonic crisis where in facing limited democratic space to voice their dissatisfaction, pro-Anwar supporters gravitated towards online media as an outlet. As Mustafa (2003:63-64) observed during the 1999 general elections:

The alternative media generally played a part in providing alternative news and views which often challenged the ones offered by the mainstream press. Notwithstanding the occasional unsubstantiated accounts and rumours that spread via the Internet, it introduced a new dimension to the electoral campaigns in the 1999 general elections... In addition, some of these websites were also instrumental in helping to organise public gatherings, talks, forums, and ceramah (speeches) at a short notice, activities that are vital to a democratic life.

The Internet has indeed created more than just a space where alternative news stories or reports could be found: it facilitated the development of virtual communities and networking in ways that not only traditional media but also traditional means of communication (e.g. telephone, mail, etc.) could not. The proliferation of Malaysian weblogs or blogs (both personal and political) offered the public (both local and non-local) more interesting (though quite often mundane and banal) and democratic perspectives of Malaysian life as compared to the more popular perspectives that are often lopsidedly portrayed in the mainstream media.

The sheer range of possibilities in a virtual environment itself is a testament to the potential that the Internet could offer and this very feature is one that could be (or probably has already been) detrimental to the public's perception of the mainstream media. Consequently, the Internet has been welcomed for marginalised voices as an outlet for their political views because of the government's stranglehold on the mainstream media (Tan and Zawawi, 2008: 16).

Any discussion of the mainstream media also needs to contextualise the role that the mainstream media plays in the collective consciousness of the public and its role in modern societies and modernity in general. The mainstream media (journalism in this case) and popular culture exist in a state of ongoing struggle between party politics versus everyday politics. Hartley (1996: 33-34) explains the linkages between journalism and modernity in these terms:

Journalism is the sense-making practice of modernity (the condition) and populariser of modernism (the ideology); it is a product and promoter of modern life, and is unknown in traditional societies...Journalism and modernity are marked by co-development of capitalisation and consumerism, market expansion...and is caught up in all the institutions, struggles and practices of modernity; contemporary politics is unthinkable without it, as is contemporary consumer society, to such an extent that in the end it is difficult to decide whether journalism is a product of modernity, or modernity is a product of journalism.

While ideology is generally defined as the social relations of signification (knowledge and consciousness) in class societies, a Marxist theoretical take on the concept (from whom Gramsci developed his take on hegemony) sees the knowledge of society as being produced and reproduced in the interests of those who are for the time being in a position of social supremacy, the ruling class (O'Sullivan 1994: 139-140). In this case, the practice of journalism (which is itself part and parcel of the mainstream media in the Malaysian context) and all of its textual components are ideal sources in which to track and identify the prevailing ideologies present in the Malaysian public sphere.

2.1 The Malaysian Press

The major mainstream newspapers in Malaysia are owned and/or under the control of the parties of the ruling coalition government, the Barisan Nasional (Loh and Mustafa 1996; Zaharom 2002). The 12th Malaysian election saw the Barisan Nasional (BN) lose its two-

thirds majority hence weakening its hegemony on the Malaysian public sphere. The negotiations articulated in the mainstream media are good starting points to observe the ruling class' presentation of ideas and justification of their dominance and leadership, notably in times of crisis.

To contextualise the mainstream media within the pre- and post-election discourse, it is important to identify the ownership patterns of the media. As Zaharom (2002: 253) noted:

Through a complex web of nominee companies, investment arms and individuals aligned to it (the media), UMNO currently holds controlling shares in two of the largest media conglomerates in Malaysia, New Straits Times Press (NSTP) and Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad (UM). NSTP publishes the Malay dailies such as Berita Harian and Harian Metro and the English dailies, New Straits Times Press, Malay Mail and Business Times and the Chinese daily, Shin Min Daily News. UM on the other hand, publishes Malaysia's top selling Malay daily, Utusan Malaysia and Malaysia's only Jawi newspaper, Utusan Melayu Mingguan... On the pretext of restructuring and increasing Bumiputra (indigenous) participation in the economy, much of the Malaysian media continue to be transferred to the hands of political elites and their business allies.

The media is governed notably by the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) (1984) and the events surrounding *Operasi Lalang* in 1987 – where more than 100 individuals including Opposition politicians, social activists, academics, religious and human rights activists and social workers were detained under the Internal Security Act – led to the suspension of three mainstream national newspapers, *The Star*, *Watan* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and the amendment of the PPPA in 1988, actions which illustrate the tightening stranglehold by the government on the media (Zaharom 2004 : 255).

The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few elites and the aforementioned Acts however, skews the news reports with news angles and rhetoric that are often biased or favoring those with links to the ruling coalition. Media reform has been difficult because such attempts would almost certainly not go down too well with the current circle of media owners who are, in most cases, closely linked to politicians and political parties in the ruling coalition. Furthermore, the concentration in the hands of politically affiliated companies and individuals has been the norm in Malaysia for a long time (Zaharom 2002: 266). However, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and *reformasi* movement (that was spurred after the sacking of the then-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim) brought about changes notably in the Malaysian public's perception of the mainstream media.

2.2 Concept of Hegemony

Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), used the concept of hegemony to describe and analyse how modern capitalist societies were organised, or aimed to be organised, in the past and the present, and that hegemonic leadership involved developing intellectual, moral and philosophical consent from all major groups in a nation (Bocock 1986). It is

important to contextualise and problematise the fact that the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) government is dominated by the three largest ethnic-based political parties, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), out of which UMNO, which purportedly represents the *Bumiputra* Malay majority population, is seen as the major player.

The ethnic categorisation of the major ethnic groups—the largest being the Malays, followed by the Chinese, Indian and ‘others’ (that do not fall into the criteria for categorisation, notably native and East Malaysians) – itself is a problem that deserves more discussion as it is itself a political definition rather than a biological one. As to what constitutes a ‘Malay’ is an entirely different issue. Historically, the terms of independence for Malaya included the transfer to the said three political parties and amongst the terms of independence negotiated in the Constitution is the enshrinement of special privileges for the Malays and that Islam would be the official state religion (Leong 2003 : 91).

Malays are constitutionally Muslims by birth and they represent the majority. It should be noted that social classes are often not discussed in the mainstream media and that even amongst the Malay majority, it is often the ruling Malay elites who benefit from the declaration in the Constitution. As a result, it becomes quite evident that, historically speaking, one dominant ethnic group had established the guidelines and rules that allowed for a hegemonic dominance and spurred the need to further maintain the dominance.

Hegemony involves a specific kind of consensus: a social group seeks to present its own particular interests as the general interests of the society as a whole and the concept is used to suggest a society in which, despite oppression and exploitation, there is a high degree of consensus (which results in social stability) where subordinate groups and classes appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives and political meanings (Storey 2006 : 63-64). In Malaysia’s case, UMNO can be seen to have the largest slice of the country’s economic, political and social pie, although it has repeatedly asserted that it represents the interests of all Malaysians and not just the Malays (although the *Ketuanan Melayu* issue can be primarily sourced to UMNO members and is still hotly debated). A majority of ministers, including the Prime Minister, are UMNO members (who are exclusively Malay) and have been perceived to be and should always be ‘traditionally’ so, an accepted aspect of the Malaysian political landscape and reality.

Hegemony is maintained (and must be continually maintained: it is an ongoing process) by dominant groups and classes ‘negotiating’ with, and making concessions to, subordinated groups and classes. Although hegemony implies a society with a degree of consensus, what the concept is meant to suggest is a society in which conflict is contained and channeled into ideologically safe harbours (Storey 2006 : 64). The dominance of UMNO politicians in the ruling coalition and the Parliament suggests that the rhetoric of ethnicity that can be found in the mainstream media (in this paper’s focus, the print media) often mirrors this ‘containment’ and ‘chanelling’ which tend to go into overdrive during the general election, when the need to gain or regain consensus (to maintain control) is the primary motive by a political party. And since hegemony naturalises what is historically a class ideology and renders it into a form of common sense, power can be exercised not as a force but as ‘authority’ and ‘cultural’ aspects of life are de-politicised (O’Sullivan *et al.*, 1994), something

that is present in the mainstream media's rhetoric. Rhetoric is central to maintaining the hegemonic consensus, as it is the practice of using language to persuade or influence others and the language results from this practice (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1994).

The existence of binary tendencies in journalistic discourses underlies the very real institutional structures within which media organisations operate as binary prejudices may, historically, structure a nation's whole cultural policy and thence its journalistic institutions (Hartley 1996). This has a direct effect on the practice of journalism in a democracy, as George (2006:56-57) notes:

The rhetoric of "Asian democracy" professes no contradiction in principle between market-driven economic growth and authoritarian government. Nevertheless, in practice, both governments were sensitive to a particular policy tension in their economic and political goals for mass media. On the one hand they wanted media organisations to serve and obey the market. After all, markets require efficient circulations of information. Furthermore, the media are industries in their own right, creating jobs, producing goods and services, and contributing to (or draining from) tax revenue. On the other hand, political and ideological imperatives nudged the governments to intervene in the industry, and to treat media as tools for maintaining hegemony and extending their control over their societies.

2.3 Analysis

The textual analysis looks at selected pre- and post-election (the General Election was held on 8 March 2008) headline news stories published in the English mainstream daily *New Straits Times* and the Malay mainstream daily *Utusan Malaysia* as case studies to explore how through ideology, the rhetoric of ethnicity is an active undercurrent in any reading of the Malaysian mainstream media. The analysis covers the pre-election dates from 1 to 8 March 2008 and post-election dates from 9 to 15 March 2008. This analysis will also be coupled with literature that has emerged post-election and also pre-election predictions.

Mustafa's (2003) study on reporting in the mainstream press during the 1999 general election revealed that the portrayal of the BN angled on how 'caring' its politicians and the party was and such portrayal was the concerted effort on the part of the BN and the mainstream press to stem the suggestion of an ideological and political gap existing between the BN and the people and to present a picture of harmony of interests between the people and the BN (Mustafa 2003). It is from this point of reference that the analysis begins, to identify the BN-heavy rhetoric present in the mainstream press as the motivating force behind the need for the new media as an alternative outlet. It should also be noted that in the same study by Mustafa (2003: 56-57), the *Barisan Alternatif* (the Alternative Front, as the Opposition was known in 1999) was depicted in very negative terms by portraying it as a coalition riddled with differences and one which had close ties with Western powers and could not be relied upon to guarantee Malaysia's independence.

Central to the analysis however, is to identify the rhetoric of ethnicity present in the textual system that exists within the practice of journalism, in this case, to the backdrop of a general election. Journalism may be taken as the textual system of modernity and of

modernism, and the most important of these are: the people (society), science (knowledge), progress (politics) and comfort (capitalist culture) (Hartley 1996).

In the context of the Malaysian mainstream media, ownership (either directly or by proxy) and control (through draconian laws and Acts) figure prominently in the news selection and angle. The public's perception and understanding about the attributes and roles of the mainstream press and the nature or characteristics of its form of writing (compared with other forms of writing), whether they consciously realise it or not, needs to be addressed. As the mainstream press is ideologically aligned with the state, readily embracing their nation-building role, and recognising the government of the day as the legitimate interpreter and trustee of national interest (George 2006: 49), the identification of the rhetoric present in the headlines could potentially help to illuminate the growing trend of the new media as an alternative source of news.

This is important because the advent of the new media (online news portals and blogs in this case) as a viable alternative and independent source of news allows for the Malaysian public to be wary or skeptical of not only the rhetoric found in the mainstream press, but also savvy towards a reading of the ideology that permeates the news. Chin (2003: 139) observed that the trend kick-started by online news portal *Malaysiakini* in the late 1990s could in many ways enlighten many, bringing the said skepticism to prominence despite the fact that Malaysian readers knew that *Malaysiakini* would give greater and fairer coverage to the Opposition rather than the pro-government mainstream media. The growing skepticism is not a matter of taking sides but rather the public's growing awareness of being duped by the mainstream media, as journalist Surin (2008: 122) notes (in reference to a demonstration protesting the 30% fuel hike in 2006):

The government may be able to block out or diminish news of this particular protest now, but such measure are foolhardy in an era where Malaysians have access to other sources of news, including foreign broadcasts, the Internet and SMS. When Malaysiakini, for example, reports that 2,000 people protested against the fuel hike in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and other local media leave out or downplay the news, the government and the media gain nothing. Instead, both lose credibility, and in the long term, both lose the ability to convince the rakyat (citizens) to embrace unpopular decisions because people will question the legitimacy of government information and action that is disseminated through the media.

Various forms of cultural production (including the media) that we are surrounded by are themselves highly rhetorical (which exploit rhetorical figures to tempt us to see things their way) and if we have the available means to unpick these strategies, we can begin to take a more critical stance towards them (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1994). While a more thorough analysis into the news reports that accompany the headlines would allow greater breadth of scope and inquiry into the rhetoric present, the analysis of the headlines alone and tracking its progression through the critical general election period serves as a precursor to such inquiry by noting the choices of words and angles used in the headlines.

2.3.1 Pre-election

1 March 2008 (Saturday):

- *Utusan Malaysia* main headline: “*Pilih calon Cina BN – untuk pastikan kaum itu terus punyai kuasa politik, suara dalam kerajaan*” (“Choose Chinese BN candidate – to make sure that race continues to have political power, voice in government”). Second headline: “*BN akan lakukan terbaik untuk Kelantan*” (“BN will do its best for Kelantan”).
- *New Straits Times* main headline: “Trench Lines – with exactly a week to polling day, Kelantan, Terengganu and Penang are living up to their billing as the main battlegrounds.”

In *Utusan Malaysia*'s 1 March main headline, a week before the general election, ethnicity is used as a rallying call (very blatantly as the word ‘race’ is prominent) to vote for the ruling coalition to ensure the continual representation and political voice and power of the Chinese community in government. The political party of choice referred to by the BN coalition could be from the MCA or Gerakan (the coalition party that runs the island state of Penang). The hegemonic alignment of domination and subordination is clearly present in the sentiments expressed in the headline, noting that this is coming from *Utusan Malaysia*, the suggestion of the loss of the Chinese community's representation in the government if the BN endorsed party is not voted fails to highlight key issues, focusing instead on the alignment of ‘race’ with a specific political party.

The subordination of the Chinese community in the context of the contemporary Malaysia is an example of the rhetoric of ethnicity being exercised to justify BN's significance (although one could argue that the BN does not necessarily represent the Chinese community as a whole but the elite few) in Malaysian politics. This sentiment is echoed in the second front page story about the state of Kelantan, a stronghold of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) with the suggestion that the Kelantanese population are in dire need of a change in the state government and that they are perceived as economically backward. This can be interpreted in line with BN's economic ideology where the rhetoric of ‘development’ is often displayed as a desired feature of modernity and in the headline alone suggests that the BN is the torchbearer for economic development.

In contrast, the *New Straits Times*' headline, however, hinted at the nature of the election and identified the key states that would be close ‘battlegrounds’ in the election, a common knowledge amongst the public. Kelantan, Terengganu and Penang are identified as crucial states, ‘trench lines’, bypassed any references to ethnicity and instead focused on the subtext of BN's uncertainty of claiming victory in those three key states (with Kelantan being the biggest uphill task for the BN).

2 March 2008 (Sunday):

- *Mingguan Malaysia* main headline: “*Hak Melayu terjamin – jangan berasa kurang selamat – PM*” (“Malay rights guaranteed – do not feel unsafe – PM”). Second

headline: “*BN lancar manifesto khusus ‘rawat’ Kelantan*” (‘BN launches manifesto catered to ‘treat’ Kelantan”).

- *New Sunday Times*’ main headline: “Dark Horse in the Running? – Will Teng Chang Yeow be the next chief minister of Penang?” Two other headlines: “Abdullah: Unity and co-operation in BN help us solve difficult issues’ and ‘Battle for Chinese votes hotting up.”

Ethnicity is used again in the 2 March *Mingguan Malaysia* main headline, this time focusing on the Malay majority, quoting the Prime Minister’s assurance to the Malay electorate of the upholding of their special rights as *bumiputras*. The Malay rights issue has been a major focus of UMNO and reinforced the party’s fancy as the defender of the Malay community. The second headline focuses on the state of Kelantan and reiterates the party’s continuing quest of ‘reclaiming’ it. The metaphor of ‘treating’ the state, as if it needed to be ‘cured’ of its current status of being an Opposition-ruled state, hints further at the BN’s rhetoric of economic development as a solution to the state’s supposed condition of being an economic quagmire, an impression that BN often paints of Kelantan.

New Sunday Times’ main headline focuses on who will be the next chief Minister of the state of Penang and highlights Gerakan party’s Teng Chang Yeow as the possible ‘dark horse’ in the race for the position since the party President and outgoing Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon’s announcement to not contest and retain his position. There seems to be little concern over efforts to strengthen the party’s consensus among the Penang electorate (as Gerakan would eventually lose the state to the Democratic Action Party in the election) and focus on the various grassroots issues that had mired the state government, focusing instead on the ruling party’s leadership changes. The second headline quotes the Prime Minister’s reiteration that BN’s component parties need to stay ‘united’ and ‘co-operate’ with each other to ‘solve difficult issues’, something similar to the main headline’s focus on BN’s internal issues rather than national issues. Ethnicity again is the focus in the third headline, echoing *Utusan Malaysia*’s angle of the importance of winning the Chinese community’s votes, emphasised by the metaphor of ‘hotting up’ in the race to woo voters.

3 March 2008 (Monday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*’s main headline: “*PAS kepanasan – angin perubahan politik mula dirasai di Kelantan – Najib*” (“PAS restless – political winds of change felt in Kelantan – Najib”). Two other headlines: “*BN tak persia kepercayaan rakyat*” (‘BN does not take citizen’s trust for granted’) and “*PAS bukan lagi parti perjuangkan Islam*” (“PAS is not a party that fights for Islam anymore”).
- *New Straits Times*’ main headline: “Hot, Hot, in Penang – Waves of expectations running high.”

Utusan Malaysia’s 3 March main headline quotes the Deputy Prime Minister’s remarks about his believed perception that PAS is beginning to reel from BN’s campaign to win over Kelantan (which consists of a majority Malay electorate), that political change is in the

cards for the state. The second headline reinforces this perception by reiterating BN's continued service towards 'citizen's trust' and that it had not taken it for granted, a possible response to the Opposition's own attack on the ruling coalition during the general election campaign (not reported in the newspaper). The third headline uses the rhetoric of religion, in this case Islam (which inadvertently is a direct reference to ethnicity – Malays being Muslims), as an attempt to out-Islamise PAS by quoting the BN's assertion that PAS is a party that 'does not fight for Islam anymore'. This contest based on the rhetoric of religion is omnipresent within the discourse of the Malay community and is commonly highlighted in the Malay language media.

The *New Straits Times*' headline focuses on the continuing battle in Penang, acknowledging BN's fragile consensus in the state.

4 March 2008 (Tuesday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "*Sokongan BN meningkat – Impian pembangkang tawan lebih banyak kerusi sukar*" ("Support for BN increases – Opposition's hopes to conquer more seats difficult"). Another headline: "*Proses undi pos bermula*" ("Postal voting process begins").
- *New Straits Times*' main headline "Blue tide rising – BN leaders sense victory in Kelantan – but PAS remains confident". Second headline: "Former Keadilan Deputy President claims Anwar 'deceiving Malaysians'...."

Utusan Malaysia's 4 March headline displays similar BN chest-thumping found in the previous headlines, this time announcing BN's increased support without statistics or numbers. The Opposition is painted in an unfavorable light, with the reiteration of the 'Opposition's hopes to conquer more seats difficult', again, without the numbers or unbiased sources in the news story to back the assertion. The second headline is a straightforward report on the beginning of the postal voting process.

The focus of the *New Straits Times* back on Kelantan, this time reiterating the same BN chest-thumping but with reference to PAS' own sense of 'confidence'. Given equal attention is the second headline's statement by former Keadilan Deputy President's revelation that de-facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim is 'deceiving Malaysians'. The second headline's angle does favour the BN by questioning Anwar Ibrahim's credibility, this time from a former insider and aide who had left the Opposition and joined BN.

5 March 2008 (Wednesday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "*Guna dakwat dibatal – ada pihak beli dari luar negara rancang calit kuku pengundi – SPR*" ("Use of ink cancelled – there are parties who bought ink from abroad who plan to mark it on voters' nails – SPR [Election Commission]"). Two other headlines: "*Abdullah: Anwar gemar bordolak-dalik, tidak kotakan janji*" ("Abdullah: Anwar does not keep promises") and "*PM ulas tindakan SPR*" ("PM explains SPR [Election Commission]'s actions").

- *New Straits Times*' main headline: "Plot foils ink plan – Indelible ink won't be used as planned because of a security breach and legal considerations." A liftout quote by MCA's Datuk Wong Mook Leong next to main headline: "Chinese voters have a simple choice: a bigger say in parliament and government, or a louder voice in Parliament without any real influence...."

Both newspapers' main headlines focus on the announcement of the cancellation of the use of indelible ink for the election by the Election Commission, something that is peppered with suggestions of a 'plot' which led to a 'security breach' and a decision based on 'legal considerations'. *Utusan Malaysia*'s second headline continues the attack on Anwar Ibrahim's credibility with a quote by the Prime Minister who suggests that Anwar 'does not keep promises'. The third headline again quotes the Prime Minister, this time explaining the Election Commission's decision.

Ethnicity is present again in the *New Straits Times*' second headline (a liftout quote by MCA's Wong Mook Leong) exhorting Chinese voters to vote for BN coalition parties to ensure their continued representation in Parliament and government.

6 March 2008 (Thursday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "Anwar terdesak – Penasihat PKR sanggup cemar imej Negara sendiri di Singapura" ("Anwar desperate – the PKR advisor willing to pollute own nation's image in Singapore"). Other headlines: "Batal guna dakwat tepat – Najib" ("Cancellation of ink use accurate – Najib") and "Pulau Pinang semakin panas – Tsu Koon" ("Penang island getting hot – Tsu Koon").
- *New Straits Times*' main headline: "Flap over ink stain – political parties join PM in taking the Election Commission to task over fiasco."

Utusan Malaysia's main headline focuses on Anwar Ibrahim's speech in Singapore that apparently painted Malaysia's image negatively and suggested that it was done in desperation in light of the upcoming election. The fact that Anwar warranted a headline could possibly point to the Opposition's increasing chances but also as a counter attack by BN towards the Opposition. The other two headlines revisit the indelible ink issue, with a quote by the Deputy Prime Minister echoing agreement over the decision while the other headline further emphasises the growing competition for Penang as observed by the outgoing Chief Minister.

New Straits Times' headline focuses on the indelible ink issue alone, without any other stories on the front page.

7 March 2008 (Friday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "Rekod BN terbukti – beri semula mandat demi masa depan keluarga – Abdullah" ("BN's record proven – give back mandate

for the sake of family's future – Abdullah"). Another headline "*Persiapan mengundi lancar*" ("Election preparations smooth").

- *New Straits Times*' main headline: "Don't silence yourself – No representation, no voice – that's the price of wiping out the component parties in BN, warns PM."

Utusan Malaysia's headline again displays BN's self-endorsement by quoting the Prime Minister's assertion of BN's proven record, this time using the rhetoric of family and the future as a rallying call to regain consensus. The second headline is a straightforward news story on the election preparations.

The *New Straits Times*' main headline also quotes the Prime Minister's 'warning' on the significance of BN's place in governance, warning readers of the consequences if the BN component parties are not favoured and re-elected.

8 March 2008 (Saturday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "*Kuasa di tangan rakyat*" ("Power in people's hands"). Another headline: "*61 kawasan Parlimen sengit*" ("Close battle in 61 Parliament areas").
- *New Straits Times*' main headline: "Wither Malaysia? It's your call", with a liftout quote from PM, "you have to vote for our future...our children. What will happen if there is chaos and instability?"

On election day, both newspapers chose to turn the focus to the readers/voters with assertions of the "power in people's hands" and "it's your call." *Utusan Malaysia*'s second headline focuses on the 61 Parliament 'battleground' areas.

The *New Straits Times*' headline includes a liftout quote from the Prime Minister who suggests and reinforces the previous day's headline regarding the significance of BN winning, this time aligning the key words 'children', 'chaos' and 'instability' in the same sentence.

2.3.2 Post-election

9 March 2008 (Sunday):

- *Mingguan Malaysia*'s main headline: "*3 negeri di rampas – pembangkang tawan P. Pinang, Selangor, Kedah. Perak kritikal*" ("3 states taken – Opposition takes over Penang, Selangor, Kedah. Perak critical"). Another headline: "*Barisan Nasional hilang majoriti dua per tiga*" ("National Front loses two-thirds majority").
- *New Straits Times*' main headline: "BN rocked – big swing to Opposition..." (plus election results graphics) with a liftout quote from PM "Congratulations to the winners. BN accepts the results as this is the way democracy works. I urge all parties to accept the results and refrain from having street demonstrations..."

In the first post-election main headline, *Mingguan Malaysia* suggests that the loss of the states of Penang, Selangor, Kedah and Perak as having being ‘taken’ from the BN, with emphasis on Perak being a state in a ‘critical’ condition. The second headline notes BN’s two-thirds majority loss. Both headlines suggest an ‘ownership’ over the states (‘3 states taken’) and the majority (‘loses two-thirds majority’) from BN’s point of view rather than an objective manner of representation.

The *New Straits Times*’ main headline takes a more objective approach by reasserting BN’s loss but focusing on the ‘swing to Opposition’ angle rather than the party’s own predicament. An accompanying liftout quote from the Prime Minister congratulating the winners emphasises this angle.

10 March 2008 (Monday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*’s main headline: “*PM tak letak jawatan – Angkat sumpah pukul 11 pagi ini*” (“PM not resigning - Swearing in at 11am today”). Another headline: “*Tsu Koon sedia berundur*” (“Tsu Koon ready to step down.”)
- *New Straits Times*’ main headline: “BN leaders urge Abdullah to battle on” (plus final election results graphics).

Utusan Malaysia’s main headline refers to the calls for the Prime Minister to resign as a measure of accountability for BN’s loss of the two-thirds majority. The headline reasserts that the Prime Minister will not resign and will be sworn-in in the morning. The second headline parallels the main headline regarding Penang’s Chief Ministers’ readiness to resign as result of Gerakan’s loss in the island state.

New Straits Times also focuses on the calls for the Prime Minister to resign but taking the angle that BN leaders are urging him to continue and that he has their support. This story is accompanied by graphics which display the final election results.

11 March 2008 (Tuesday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*’s main headline: “*Kerajaan masih kuat – Keputusan Pilihan Raya Umum Ke-12 baik – PM*” (“Government still strong – Results of the 12th General Election is good – PM”). Other headlines “*Tiada usaha tukar pepimpinan parti – Najib*” (“no effort to change party leadership – Najib”) and “*Dilema bentuk kerajaan di Selangor, Perak*” (“Dilemma in forming government in Selangor, Perak”).
- *New Straits Times*’ main headline: “PM sworn in – UMNO and BN pledge full support for Abdullah.”

Utusan Malaysia’s main headline reverses the negativity present in the previous two days with the Prime Minister’s quote stating that the coalition government is ‘still strong’ and that the result of the general election was ‘good’. The second headline also supports this assertion with a quote from the Deputy Prime Minister stating that there will be no

change in the party's leadership. These two headlines contrast with the third headline which scrutinises the Opposition's 'dilemma' in forming governments in the states of Selangor and Perak.

The *New Straits Times*' main headline focuses on the Prime Minister's swearing-in and the emphasis on his strong support from UMNO and the BN to continue in the post.

12 March 2008 (Wednesday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "*Tiada lagi DEB – Antara langkah awal kerajaan DAP, PKR Pulau Pinang*" ("No more NEP [National Economic Policy] – Amongst first steps of DAP, PKR Penang"). Other headlines: "*Pengundi Melayu juga sokong DAP*" ("Malay voters also support DAP") and "*30 NGO India mahu Samy dilantik Senator*" ("30 Indian NGOs want Samy elected as Senator").
- *New Straits Times*' main headlines: "Lim takes charge – New Penang chief minister rings in the changes". Another headline: "Subramaniam calls on all to Indians to help revive MIC" with a liftout quote "We should bring back all those who left the party so that the party can recapture lost ground. As a former MIC deputy president, I would like to offer my services...."

The main headlines of both newspapers on 12 March display the rhetoric of ethnicity. *Utusan Malaysia* focuses on the New Economic Policy (a contentious policy which favours the *bumiputra* Malays) and the DAP and PKR's proposal to abolish it in Penang. The second headline also establishes the rhetoric of ethnicity by asserting the fact that 'Malay voters' had also elected DAP candidates (the DAP has not been noted amongst the Malay community previously) and the third headline refers to the call by 30 Indian non-government organisations to elect MIC President Samy Vellu as a Senator (Samy Vellu had lost his constituency to the Opposition).

New Straits Times' main headline focuses on Penang's new Chief Minister, DAP's Lim Guan Eng, and the changes he will bring to the governance of the state, without mentioning the New Economic Policy. The second headline quotes former MIC Deputy President S. Subramaniam's call to revive the MIC (which lost most of its seats and constituency, hence, a loss of parliamentary representation for the Indian community) and him offering his 'services'.

13 March 2008 (Thursday):

- *Utusan Malaysia*'s main headline: "*Amaran kepada Guan Eng – Jangan buat kenyataan semarakkan ketegangan kaum – PM*" ("Warning to Guan Eng – don't make statements that flare racial tension – PM").
- *New Straits Times*' main headline: "Coalition in Crisis – DAP objects to choice of PAS candidate for Perak MB – Palace says state DAP agreed to appointment"

The rhetoric of ethnicity is present in *Utusan Malaysia's* main headline, quoting the Prime Minister's 'warning' to the new Penang Chief Minister to not 'make statements that flare racial tension' in reference to the state's ruling opposition party to abolish the NEP.

The *New Straits Times's* main headline focuses on the growing 'crisis' in the appointment of the new Perak Chief Minister, relating to the conflicting reports that the DAP objected to PAS' candidate while the Palace stated that DAP had agreed to the appointment.

14 March 2008 (Friday):

- *Utusan Malaysia's* main headlines: "*DAP biadap – Arahan pulau majlis pelantikan MB Perak dianggap hina raja Melayu*" ("DAP disrespectful – Order to boycott appointment of Perak Chief Minister seen as an insult to Malay royal sovereignty"). Another headline: "*Raja Nazrin beri syarat bentuk Kerajaan Perak*" ("Raja Nazrin gives conditions to forming Perak government").
- *New Straits Times's* main headlines: "Perak fiasco – Catfight as DAP takes lion's share – Kit Siang apologises but swearing-in of Perak MB postponed."

Both newspapers' headlines focus on hitches in the formation of the new state government in the state of Perak. *Utusan Malaysia's* main headline again displays the rhetoric of ethnicity by contextualising DAP's order to boycott the appointment of the new Perak Chief Minister as 'disrespectful' and 'an insult to the Malay royal sovereignty' (DAP's leadership comprises Chinese and Indian politicians). The second headline refers to Raja Nazrin giving conditions to the formation of the Perak government.

The *New Straits Times's* focuses on the DAP's overwhelming win in the state and the apology by DAP's Lim Kit Siang (who had called for the boycott) and the postponement of swearing-in ceremony of the Chief Minister .

15 March 2008 (Saturday):

- *Utusan Malaysia's* main headline: "*Jaminan PM – Perkemas pemerintahan bagi atasi perasaan tidak puas hati rakyat*" ("PM's guarantee – tidying up governance to prevent dissatisfaction amongst the people"). Other headlines: "*Kontroversi perlantikan MB Perlis*" ("controversy regarding appointment of Perlis MB") and "*3,000 bantah hapus DEB di P. Pinang*" ("3,000 protest abolition of NEP in Penang").
- *New Straits Times's* main headline graphics "Beware the Ides of March – Palace interference throws Perlis into turmoil, Ruler appoints his own man, Dr Mohd Isa Sabu, as menteri besar (chief minister)..., Incumbent Shahidan says he has PM's endorsement..., Mukhriz Mahathir does to Abdullah what his father did to Tunku in 1969...".

Utusan Malaysia's main headline which quotes the Prime Minister's 'guarantee' to tidy up governance, is contrasted with the controversy surrounding the appointment of the

Chief Minister of the state of Perlis (a state that BN retained in which the Prime Minister's choice for Chief Minister differed from the Sultan's choice) and the protest against the abolition of the NEP in Penang.

The *New Straits Times*' main headline focuses on the same Perlis 'turmoil', with a parallel drawn between UMNO's Mukhriz Mahathir's (former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed's son) calling for Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's resignation (a similar call made by Mahathir Mohamed towards Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman).

3. FINDINGS

The emerging pattern of reporting in the period analysed mirrors the findings that Mustafa (2003) observed, notably in its depiction of the BN and its coalition parties in a positive light while maintaining the negativity associated with the Opposition parties. Although both papers published stories with unwarranted predictions in the headlines on 4 March, *Utusan Malaysia* generally declared that the support for the BN had 'increased' and that the Opposition's 'dream' had become more 'difficult'; *New Straits Times*' headlines took a more cautious approach by focusing on one key state, Kelantan, and merely 'sensed' victory in the state. *Utusan Malaysia*'s declaration could be seen to further bolster its previous day's headline on 3 March which declared that PAS had become 'restless' via a quote from the Deputy Prime Minister. The rhetoric of ethnicity via religion is present in the second headline on 3 March with the headline that read "PAS is not a party that fights for Islam anymore". This can be read as a suggestion that PAS no longer 'fights' for the Malay community as Islam is a hotly contested issue.

The state of Kelantan was a strong player in the headlines in the first three days from 1 March to 3 March, notably in *Utusan Melayu* ("BN will do its best for Kelantan", "BN launches manifesto catered to 'treat' Kelantan", and "PAS restless – political wind of change felt in Kelantan – Najib"). The sweeping statements in those headlines contrasted with the *New Straits Times*' headlines concerning Kelantan by giving more attention to Penang as an equally important state ("Trench Lines – with exactly a week to polling day, Kelantan, Terengganu and Penang are living up to their billing as the main battlegrounds.", "Dark Horse in the Running? – Will Teng Chang Yeow be the next chief minister of Penang?") and "Hot, Hot, in Penang – Waves of expectations running high."). Kelantan, a key Malay state, which possibly warrants daily coverage in *Utusan Malaysia*, the ruling PAS state government would eventually retain its power there and it is worth noting that PAS itself had surprisingly played down its role as a 'fighter' for Islam by replacing its Islamic state (another contentious topic) slogan with one of a welfare state (Tan, 2008). This trend is probably something the BN had not accounted for in its campaign, hence, its rhetoric of ethnicity via religion in this case failed. Comparatively, the state of Penang's constituency is ethnically mixed and this can best be seen in the *New Straits Times*' headlines of the same period, which bypassed the sole focus on Kelantan. In this instance, the language of the publication possibly played a part in the choice of coverage by considering its target market and the larger scope of an ethnically mixed readership, and it being an English language daily.

The rhetoric of ethnicity can be found more consistently in most of *Utusan Malaysia*'s headlines: "Choose Chinese BN candidate" (1 March); "Malay rights guaranteed" (2 March); "Malay voters also support DAP" (12 March); "Warning to Guan Eng – don't make statements that flare racial tension – PM" (13 March); "DAP disrespectful – Order to boycott appointment of Perak Chief Minister seen as an insult to Malay royal sovereignty" (14 March). Comparatively, the rhetoric of ethnicity is only presented once in the *New Straits Times* headlines analysed: "Chinese voters have a simple choice: a bigger say in parliament and government, or a louder voice in parliament without any real influence" (5 March).

However, the Opposition is still painted in an unfavourable light in both newspapers. *Utusan Malaysia*: "PAS restless – political wind of change felt in Kelantan – Najib", "PAS is not a party that fights for Islam anymore" (3 March); "Support for BN increases – Opposition's dream to conquer more seats difficult" (4 March); "Abdullah: Anwar does not keep promises" (5 March); "Anwar desperate – the PKR advisor willing to pollute own nation's image in Singapore" (6 March); "3 states taken – opposition takes over Penang, Selangor, Kedah. Perak critical" (9 March); "Dilemma in forming government in Selangor, Perak" (11 March); "Warning to Guan Eng – don't make statements that flare racial tension – PM" (13 March); and "DAP disrespectful – Order to boycott appointment of Perak Chief Minister seen as an insult to Malay royal sovereignty" (14 March).

Negative portrayals of the Opposition occurred less in the *New Straits Times*: "Blue tide rising – BN leaders sense victory in Kelantan – but PAS remains confident"; and "Former Keadilan Deputy President claims Anwar 'deceiving Malaysians'" (4 March); "Don't silence yourself – No representation, no voice – that's the price of wiping out the component parties in BN, warns PM." (7 March); "Coalition in Crisis – DAP objects to choice of PAS candidate for Perak MB – Palace says state DAP agreed to appointment" (13 March); and "Perak fiasco – Catfight as DAP takes lion's share – Kit Siang apologises but swearing-in of Perak MB postponed" (14 March).

4.0 CONCLUSION

What the findings show is that there is very little display of objectivity in the headlines from both mainstream dailies. The rhetoric of ethnicity is more prevalent in *Utusan Malaysia* and supports the hypothesis that a local language daily has more potential of being entrenched in ethnic-based discourses as compared to English dailies which have the potential of readership from non-Malays and non-Malaysians. The negative portrayal of the Opposition is not unexpected as the mainstream press' ownership and control is testament to the news angles selected. Although not the focus of this paper, the emergence of new media as an alternative source of news as a possible reflection of the public's skepticism towards the mainstream media is an area worth exploring further. The intrinsic link between the economics of the media as business and political control by the ruling government through the Acts that veered news angles in favour of the hegemony was even more apparent during the general election when the battle for winning the public's consensus was paramount. However, in its desperate act to win consensus by sideswiping news objectivity and simplifying issues by playing on the ethnicity card, the mainstream press quite possibly lost its credibility as a news source.

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