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“Ink Me”: A Representation of Transparency in Election Administration

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Abstract. The Malaysian Election Commission has to present itself as fair, transparent and competent in its preparations for elections. Malaysia recently went through its twelfth general election, and while the Election Commission was busy with its preparations, it also had to be seen to be neutral in its treatment to all Malaysians, including the contesting parties. This paper shows how the Election Commission was represented by the media in the days following the announcement of the general election. Besides that, the analysis is also focussed on the strategies used by the Election Commission to present themselves more credibly and transparent to all the relevant parties and voters concerned. The study uses the technique of critical discourse analysis to analyse a corpus of articles taken from The Star from 13 February to 7 March 2008.

Keywords: General Election, Election Commission, transparency, credibility.

1. Introduction

Malaysia recently went through its twelfth general election, and a number of concerns were raised with regard to the equal treatment of all contesting parties. The Election Commission, thus, faced the task of showing itself to be fair, transparent and competent in its activities. It was kept busy preparing for the election while at the same time having to be seen as neutral with respect to all the contesting parties and indeed to all Malaysians. The days leading up to the election were fraught with tension and fears of all kinds, ranging from accusations and floods to the use of ink on voters. In the end, the results of the General Election showed that the initial fears had been unfounded, since the opposition party succeeded in a big way when they took control of five states (now at the time of writing down to four). According to Kee (2008), the twelfth general election was going to “go down in history as a turning point in Malaysian politics”[1] when the political tsunami came crashing down into the ruling party’s backyard. During the previous election in 2004, the ruling coalition known as Barisan Nasional, ‘national front’ won with a two thirds majority of the parliamentary seats and 89.7% control of the state legislative seats.[2] However, they had failed to retain a two thirds majority in the recent election. “It was an unexpected turn of event that many thought of as a dream or nightmare, depending on who was having the dream.”[3]

This paper aims to show how a local daily newspaper portrayed the Election Commission during the

campaign period, and the objectives are to:

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- discover how the Election Commission was represented by the media for public consumption; and
- identify the strategies used by the Election Commission to show transparency and fairness in its treatment to everyone, including the voters.

2. A Brief History of the Political Scene in Malaysia

Malaysia was effectively set up in 1957 as an independent nation with a system of parliamentary

democracy and a framework of constitutional monarchy. It is a plural society as a result of British colonial

policy, and is made up of a number of ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, and Indians, in addition to

indigenous peoples. Barisan Nasional (BN), the ruling coalition which has been in power since independence

in 1957, [4] is not based on ideology, but developed out of the Alliance (PERIKATAN), a political party in

the former Confederated Malay States, set up to gain independence from British colonial rule. Later renamed

Barisan Nasional, the coalition brings together fourteen component parties including the United Malay

National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysia Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysia Indians

Congress (MIC). The component parties are linked to ethnic communities in that UMNO represents the

Malays, MCA represents the Chinese, and MIC represents the Indians, while other regional parties represent

the minority ethnic groups. The political philosophy of Barisan Nasional is based on the sharing of power in

a multi-ethnic society, and it has generally won spectacular victories in general elections, except in 1963,

when there were racial riots on the following day.[5]

The opposition, known as Pakatan Rakyat ('people's alliance'), is an alliance consisting of the People's

Justice Party (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). While the

alliance is pledged to uphold the rights and interests of all Malaysians, each component party has its own

ideology. PKR promotes social justice and anti-corruption, PAS aspires to establish Malaysia as a country

based on Islamic legal theory, and DAP advocates a free, democratic country, based on the principles of

human rights, equality, social and economic justice.

3. Methodology

This study takes a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, which is based on the view that there are hidden social practices and processes in most discourses.[6][7] The social practice in focus here is concerned with the way in which the Election Commission seeks to achieve a certain level of credibility among the contesting parties and voters in the General Election, and the social processes that the Election Commission undergoes in order to achieve this goal. All of these involve media discourse. The corpus used for the study is taken for the period between 13 February and 7 March 2008 from the local daily newspaper *The Star* which was chosen because it is the current leading English newspaper in Malaysia. In 2008, *The Star* daily had a daily readership of 1.082 million[8] and a circulation of 304,904.[9] The companion *Sunday Star* had a readership of 1.022 million[8] and a circulation of 313,609.[9]

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Representation

Analysis of the way the activities of the Election Commission are reported in *The Star* show that the newspaper has chosen to portray the Election Commission positively through various social identities: fair arbiter, strict teacher, and law enforcer.

Fair arbiter. This social identity is clearly illustrated in reports of cases of dispute or vagueness. For example, PKR's Zulkifli Nordin was embroiled in a controversy in which his candidacy was questioned following a police report made against him. The Election Commission was constructed as a fair arbiter when it "ruled that the candidacy of Zulkifli...is not in question at this point of time." In another case, a case of ambiguity illustrated the Election Commission as a fair arbiter when questions arose concerning the presence of agents for candidates in polling stations to verify the casting of postal ballots. The Election Commission announced that "This is a new decision we have reached. We have yet to officially notify the political parties and will do so within the next few days." The new decision portrays the Election Commission as transparent in the process of validating postal ballots. Subsequently, this report consolidates the social identity of the Election Commission as a fair arbiter as the use of realistic statements or statement of fact show that the Election Commission has the authority to make decisions regarding the election. More importantly, the decisions made are taken objectively on the basis of law and discussion.

Strict teacher. The role of strict teacher is portrayed when the Election Commission is represented in the

media as the imparter of knowledge about the election. A case in point is the headline “Some do’s and don’ts on polling day”, which informs voters, campaigners and candidates on what they should or should not do.

For example, “No one is allowed to wear, hold or carry any form of clothing, head covering, ornament, rosette, water bottle or umbrella showing the symbol of any political party within 50m of the polling station.”

Other headlines featuring information on the election include, “Don’t scribble insults on ballots,” “EC tells parties to play nice,” “Don’t obstruct opponent’s posters.” All these headlines serve to depict the Election

Commission as a strict teacher who is teaching her students about elections. Since educators have the authority to give instructions to students, the use of imperatives is here an effective means of constructing the

Election Commission as a teacher.

Law enforcer. Apart from arbiter and teacher, the newspaper also constructed the Election Commission

as a law enforcer. Having educated the public and resolved various issues, the Election Commission must

ensure that the rules and regulations are followed. For example, the Election Commission “has deployed 200

teams to ensure political parties play by the rules in their campaigning.” These teams are known as “Election

Campaign Enforcement Teams (which) comprise an EC official, a policeman of Inspector rank or above, and

representatives from the local authority and the party or independent candidate contesting.” This is to ensure

the “peaceful conduct of election campaigns and...the safety of the public who attend the rallies.”

4.2. Strategies

Analysis of the data also reveals that the Election Commission used a number of strategies to promote

transparency and fairness in its handling of the election. Although the newspaper is responsible for the

portrayal of the Election Commission, the Election Commission also ensured that newspaper reports

projected the image and values it wanted the public to see, namely credibility and transparency in handling

the election. The strategies used included highlighting its efficiency, bravery, and diligence.

Efficiency. It is important for the Commission in projecting an image of credibility to be perceived as

efficient by the public. The Commission accordingly ensured that the newspaper was aware of its efficiency

in running the election by means of reports of preparations for any eventualities, including floods (“I have

asked the returning officer to monitor the flood situation and report back...he would brief the EC headquarters about the latest flood situation, and await its decision”). The present perfect tense

have (in

“have asked”) shows that the action has in fact been taken and *would* in the “would brief ...” is a form of a promise on the part of the officer which further call our attention to this image of efficiency. In addition, the Commission announced that they had upgraded their system in order to get the results out earlier and make an earlier announcement (“the returning officer faxes the results to the state office which then enters the result directly into the main data input, after which we allow the returning officer to announce it at the official tallying centre,” “The EC, he said, would be making announcements for each state when a simple majority is obtained,” “EC would be meeting the Yang di-Pertuan Agong at 9am Sunday”). All these examples serve to highlight the efficiency of the Election Commission in handling matters relating to the election. The role of the Election Commission is also portrayed as active when it is depicted as the doer in carrying out the actions or tasks mentioned above.

Bravery. Another strategy used by the Election Commission to gain the public’s trust is a show of bravery, in revealing that its chairman had been threatened in certain ways in the course of his duty. For example, “Vandals hurled red paint on the front gate of Election Commission (EC) chairman Tan Sri Rashid Abdul Rahman’s Lembah Pantai house.” The victim is the top person in the Election Commission, and red paint is a form of threat to frighten its victim. In this incident, Rashid claims that “he believed the incident had something to do with the last-minute move by the commission to scrap the use of indelible ink announced on Tuesday.” However, Rashid advised the perpetrators to “Go to the polls if you want change but stop throwing paint at people’s house.” He continues by saying “Don’t think I will be frightened by these kinds of scare tactics. I will continue to do my job and lead the EC.” This act of bravado emphasises that the Election Commission will not be cowed by any threats while performing its duty, even at the expense of its own safety. Rashid showed a high level of commitment to truth when he used the modal *will* twice to make his stand in his brief statement. This bravery is also accentuated when Rashid used the imperative when advising those who are for any reason unhappy with the Election Commission.

Diligence. The third strategy used by the Election Commission to show their credibility and transparency is diligence. The headline, “EC staff working hard to ensure smooth polling,” proudly proclaims how the Election Commission members are working hard to ensure that everything goes according to plan on the day. Similar praise in other headlines includes “Among the most hard-working civil servants now must be the

Election Commission (EC) staff,” and their “Working hours was stretched from 8am to midnight.” In addition, it is reported that the Pahang EC director, Ismail Mohd Yusoff, was “without a deputy for a while, (but) he did not allow this to be a problem.” This admirable trait is noted through the use of adverbs and adjectives in the report on the Election Commission staff in general. In a specific case study, the report focuses on the staff in Pahang where they are short of the deputy, surely a key member of staff. This is constructed as a challenge to the Election Commission staff there. Photographs of staff members working hard are also placed beside other reports on the election. For example, there is a photograph (22cm by 14.5cm) showing the staff busy getting the ballot boxes ready before sending them out to the polling stations under the caption “Election Commission staff members in Kelantan sorting out ballot boxes and paraphernalia at the Dewan Jubli Perak in Kota Baru yesterday. A total of 252 ballot boxes will be sent out to voting centres in the state today.” In some cases, visual images make a stronger impact on the reader than words alone, and this particular photograph is put right on the front page.

5. Conclusion

Language is a potent force that can bring about a change in the mind of the listener or reader. Bourdieu stressed that language is much more than just a tool of communication, adding that it is a dominant medium of power.^[10] The power wielded by the media over their readers must not therefore be overlooked. The media are an instrument of change, and language and the media working together make formidable partners in bringing about change. This study has shown how seemingly innocent newspaper reports can actually play an important role in constructing the public image of the Election Commission, and in shaping the minds of its readers into viewing the Commission in a favourable light, i.e. as fair, transparent and credible. To make the readers view the Commission positively, there needs to be a symbiotic relationship among several parties: media and subject, reader and media, and subject and reader. Thus, a positive outcome from the equation would be a balance force of power among the three entities. It is clear from this study that the newspaper has supported the Election Commission by projecting a positive image in its news reports: fair arbiter, strict teacher, and law enforcer. The Election Commission has also played its part by showcasing its own positive values and traits as efficiency, bravery and diligence. However, the question that remains beyond the scope of this paper is whether the partnership of newspaper

and commission brings about a positive response from the readers of the newspaper.

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