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## General Election and the Enigma of Free Press in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Political Transformation Programme (PTP) announced by the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2012 is forecast to have changed the political and the local media landscape. This is because, traditionally, political news coverage in the Malaysia mainstream media is often seen as unbalanced and too favourable to the ruling party. To what extent this reform has been translated into meaningful practices is an interesting and very significance to understand? Generally this paper aims to assess to what extent the PTP has impact Malaysia newspapers press freedom with reference to Malaysia 2013 General Election (GE13) case. Through content analysis of three highly circulated newspapers, this paper discussed the press freedom scenario in contemporary Malaysia.

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*Keywords:* Political communication; press freedom; Malaysia

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### 1. Introduction

The role of the media is important in understanding the political scenario of the country. In the Malaysian context, the mainstream media often deemed to primarily focus on positive stories for the benefit of the political elite (Anuar, 2000). As the tool sharpening and prudent government, it is claimed that the Malaysian mainstream media tend to the ruling party. This claim appears the relationship with the newsroom culture in Malaysia, where the close relationship between political leaders, editor and publisher of a newspaper critical complicate the mainstream political leaders and their parties (Anuar, 2005). For few researchers, such as Bari (2003), Doronila (2000) and Muzaffar (1986), freedom of the press has been observed as a precondition for true democratic system. Therefore,

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analysing the coverage of the mainstream media in the general election will always contribute to the academic and practical ideas of the linkages between media and politics.

## **2. Political transformation and free press**

Prime Minister Najib Razak may be deemed as the father of Malaysia's transformation. Almost of the policies introduced by him has laid the transformation agenda as the basis of the policy. PTP is considered as a set of programme to provide more vibrant and conducive political environment. So far it includes revamp and revises of acts and laws that jeopardise democracy system. In regards to media, the government's political transformation initiatives have included reviewed the laws that guiding the media in this country. One of the significance moments of this PTP agenda took place in April 2012 when the government passed a new Security Offences (Special Measures) (2012) to replace the Internal Security Act (ISA) (1960). As claimed by many scholars (Jeffery, 2013), ISA has been accused as suppressing freedom of speech in Malaysia.

Another step that also should change the media and politics landscape is the reviewed of the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) (1984). Major amendments to this act include abolishing the need for annual licence renewal. This changes has resulted the 'absolute discretion' power of Home Minister over printing press licences been removed. Those actions have been considered as better room for free press on political reporting. In the past, PPPA has been blamed for restricting political discourse from being reported in Malaysia newspapers. These policies changes and transformation is expected to set down new era of free press in Malaysia (Anand, 2012). It is expected that this new policy environment would lead up Malaysia press to practice a mature and respected democracy as claimed by the Prime Minister.

In the context of political-media theory, scholars are interested among others in media-state relationship, freedom of the press and agenda setting. In addition, there has been a significant amount of literature on the effects of power and politics on the media (Splichal, 2004; Nyamnjoh, 2004; Wang Lay Kim & Zaharom, 2004, Zaharom, 2000). As emphasis by Professor Andrew Harding, the restrictions are considerable enough to make any politician, journalist, academic, publisher, or indeed any citizen, to think twice before placing any controversial views in the public domain.

In Malaysia's restricted democracy (Netto, 2002), mainstream media coverage of government policies is usually uncritical, while political opponents face limited reporting. The public sphere is partisan and characterised by heavy ruling party intervention. Due to component parties of ruling parties have ownership and control of all major TV and newspaper institutions, the press freedom has been characterised as "partly free" by Freedom House. The 2008 General Election has resulted a more cohesive opposition than it was at the beginning sometimes in 2001. The political tsunami of 2008 has become one of the forced factors for government to perform political transformation agenda. Immediately after took charged as Malaysia's 6th Prime Minister, Najib Razak has took proactive ties by allowing the media to be more critical towards government for the sake of public as he said, "We believe the days when 'a government knows everything' are over" (The Malay Mail, 17 April 2012:p. 3).

Due to many changes in political behaviour of public especially in 2008 GE, many parties has call for reform agenda, particularly over calls for political reform. While it is evident that there are strong limitations on media in Malaysia, it is also important to recognise that dynamic but contested elements have emerged more recently. While the mainstream media's role has been evident in every election (Brown, 2005; Houghton, 2013) how political parties has been portrayed in the Malaysia GE13 shortly after the PTP has been introduced? Furthermore, with the PTP has become significant commitment for healthier press freedom, has it impact the mainstream newspapers coverage on the political parties of both sides (BN-the ruling party alliances and PR- the opposition coalition)? With the PTP, it is expected that those constraints will be alleviate and my put in healthier exercise of press freedom especially during the general elections.

## **3. Methods**

This study engaged content analysis technique. As Malaysia newspapers remain to be influential for politics, data were gathering from three most circulated newspapers. The newspaper selection is based on its stand of circulation on the highest number reported by the Audit Bureau of Circulation. For that, two Malay and one English language

newspapers were chosen. Based on the report, a total of 15 *Harian Metro* (including *Metro Ahad*), 15 *Sinar Harian* and 15 the *Star* (including *Sunday Star*) published from 21 April 2013 to 5 May 2013 were selected as sample for the study. However, data were only gathering from the first five pages of each volume. Qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10 was used to store, code, content analyse and manage the data. Data from 45 volumes of the newspapers were coded based on these three categories: political party, type of portrayal and issue covered. Data were analysed by engaging thematic analysis technique. Analysis of matrix coding was performed to identify trends or patterns of this research focus. Through this analysis, certain patterns of political parties reporting were discovered. In addition, inter-coder coding technique is implemented to ensure the reliability of the data. Coding comparison query using NVivo point out the Kappa coefficient (K) value is 0.80. This indicates the data signify substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

#### 4. Findings

The content analysis identified a total of 1496 items related to parties contesting in Malaysia GE13 were published in all three newspapers. During the campaign period of 14 days, in average there were 107 GE items were portrayed in the five first pages of the newspapers. Data also shown 41.5% of the total items were from *Sinar Harian*. This statistic put *Sinar* as the newspaper that give most coverage on GE13 compare to the *Star* and *Harian Metro*. The percentage of total item for the *Star* is 38.6 and the least percentage coverage is *Harian Metro* with only 19.8%.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of items published according to political parties

Party	The Star		Metro		Sinar		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
BN	189	32.8	204	68.9	188	30.2	581	38.9
UMNO	10	1.7	12	4.1	25	4.0	47	3.1
MCA	96	16.6	0	0.0	4	0.6	100	6.7
MIC	2	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.1
Gerakan	4	0.7	0	0.0	4	0.6	8	0.5
PR	52	9.0	22	7.4	142	22.8	216	14.4
PAS	34	5.9	12	4.1	69	11.1	115	7.7
DAP	44	7.6	4	1.4	12	1.9	60	4.0
PKR	10	1.7	6	2.0	22	3.5	38	2.5
Independent	20	3.5	6	2.0	34	5.5	60	4.0
General	116	20.1	30	10.1	123	19.7	269	18.0
	577		269		621		1496	

Based on Table 1, a clearer statistic on the coverage given to respective political parties can be identified. The *Star* and *Harian Metro* found to have majority of their items representing BN component parties. *Harian Metro* coverage on BN is in the highest percentage (73%), follow by the *Star* (52.1%) and *Sinar Harian* (35.4%). The coverage given for PR component parties has shown reverse trend with *Sinar Harian* (39.3%), the *Star* (24.2%) and *Harian Metro* (14.9%).

In this study, the types of items are classified into three categories: news, advertisement and political visual. News refers to any kind of reports, including article pertaining to contesting parties, individual candidate or the GE13 in general. Promotion of a political party, their manifesto, candidate introducing, agenda or the promotion of political ideas is items refer as advertisement. While political visual define as displaying of any visual material that categorised candidates, events or the party without any form of detail reports (Table 2).

All three newspapers were found to have same trends in types of item portrayed. News reporting emerged as the main type of item displayed, follow by the election advertisements and political visual materials. As indicate in Table 2, 65.1% of items in the *Star* are the news, 30% of them are advertisement and only 4.9% are political visual

items. For Harian Metro, the news coverage is 65.6%, the advertisement is 24.6% and the political visual is 9.8%. The same trend designate in Sinar Harian with 61.3% is news coverage, 32.7% is political advertisement and 5.7% is political visual materials. Comparison of news coverage based on BN and PR shown that the Star and Harian Metro are maintaining their status quo that tends to provide extensive coverage on BN. Unlike the Star and Harian Metro, Sinar Harian found to display much balance of news coverage for both alliances. It also found, Sinar Harian has published more political advertisement that representing the PR. In addition, the political visual items of Sinar Harian also representing PR more compare to BN.

Table 2. Type of newspapers coverage according to party

Party	<i>The Star</i>						<i>Metro</i>						<i>Sinar</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>News</i>		<i>Adv.</i>		<i>Visual</i>		<i>News</i>		<i>Adv.</i>		<i>Visual</i>		<i>News</i>		<i>Adv.</i>		<i>Visual</i>		
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	
BN	104	18.0	81	14.0	6	1.0	124	41.9	68	23.0	10	3.4	109	17.5	79	12.7	2	0.3	583
UMNO	10	1.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	4.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	25	4.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	47
MCA	26	4.5	70	12.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	100
MIC	2	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2
Gerakan	0	0.0	4	0.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	8
PR	40	6.9	8	1.4	4	0.7	16	5.4	0	0.0	6	2.0	42	6.7	94	15.1	4	0.6	214
PAS	30	5.2	0	0.0	4	0.7	10	3.4	0	0.0	2	0.7	40	6.4	19	3.0	10	1.6	115
DAP	42	7.3	0	0.0	2	0.3	4	1.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	10	1.6	2	0.3	0	0.0	60
Keadilan	10	1.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	20	3.2	2	0.3	0	0.0	38
Independen	14	2.4	6	1.0	0	0.0	6	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	28	4.5	2	0.3	4	0.6	60
t																			
General	100	17.1	4	0.7	12	2.1	16	5.4	3	1.6	11	3.7	101	16.2	6	1.0	16	2.6	269
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>65.1</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>65.6</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>61.3</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>1496</b>

Table 3 displays the outcome of analysis on issues portray by all newspapers studied. Overall, politics issue appear as main issue covered (57.6%). The second rank of issues covered is security that represents 17% of total coverage. Social (9.6%) and economy (8.9%) issues are rank as third and fourth. Religion issues are rank at fifth with 5.7% and the least issue coverage is education with only 1.2%. Generally, analysis of issue portrayed found to favour to BN except on religion issues as illustrate in Table 3. However, if the data is compare between the three newspapers, Sinar Harian found to have different trend in portraying the GE13 issues according to political parties. While PR only gain higher coverage on religion issues in the Star, Sinar Harian has provide PR with much balance issues coverage on economy, social, security and education. In fact PR gained better issues coverage on politics and religion from Sinar Harian.

Table 3. Frequency of issues portray according to political parties

	Politics			Economy			Social			Security			Religion			Education		
	861			134			143			255			85			18		
	TS	HM	SH	TS	HM	SH	TS	HM	SH	TS	HM	SH	TS	HM	SH	TS	HM	SH
BN	87	90	90	27	30	35	49	18	20	24	54	37	2	2	6	0	10	2
UMNO	10	12	21	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
MCA	68	0	4	14	0	0	4	0	0	2	0	0	6	0	0	2	0	0
MIC	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gerakan	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PR	38	16	94	0	0	22	6	2	8	6	2	8	2	0	8	0	2	0
PAS	16	10	47	0	0	4	4	0	4	0	0	0	14	2	14	0	0	0
PKR	8	6	8	0	0	0	0	0	10	2	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
DAP	22	4	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	2	16	0	2	0	0	0
General	62	16	54	0	0	0	8	0	10	44	14	48	2	0	9	0	0	2
Independent	20	6	34	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	337	160	364	41	30	63	71	20	52	84	70	101	42	4	39	2	12	4

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In general this study recognises that the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia had maintained its status quo as the ruling party friendly media. BN component parties have remain getting wider coverage compare to PR alliance in all three aspects analysed in this study (political party, type of portrayal and issues covered). While the Star and Harian Metro for the most part covers BN campaigns, Sinar Harian was found to be far fairer in their coverage of both sides of components alliances. More interestingly, Sinar Harian was seen very courageous because the percentage PR news portrayed by them is slightly higher than BN. As expected, the Star and Harian Metro found to portray BN parties through various types of portrayal such as news report, political advertisement and political visual. Even important issues during the campaign found to be much favour to BN.

However when the three newspaper data are compare, it is quite clear that Sinar Harian has champion to become quite unbiased newspaper agency in portrayal political issues and parties in Malaysia GE. While Harian Metro totally doesn't welcome any PR advertisement, the Star does provide some space to the PR. Nevertheless, Sinar Harian was found to be more courageous by providing extreme space for PR to advertise their political vision and manifesto in their newspaper. Nevertheless, the Star found to exercise better coverage of the all parties contrast to Metro. The outcome of the analysis does signify that the Star has done better coverage on PR alliance compare to Metro in most categories of this study. But one must admit that both newspapers are associated with political parties in BN coalition.

While Political Transformational Plan was claim as the authority's commitment to provide better and healthier political landscape, more concrete actions and supports by media institutions are crucial in fulfilling this agenda. The findings of this study on newspaper coverage of GE13 have assumed there are some positive impacts of PTP on free press in Malaysia. Generally this study findings found to be fairly similar with recent study such as by Houghton (2013) and a study of GE12 by Rajaratnam (2009) except Sinar Harian was not include as their data. This study possible conclusion argued that freedom of the press in the context of political democracy is no longer an enigma for Malaysia in this 21st century.

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