

Hegemonic Discourse in Malaysia: A Study on The News Coverage by Utusan Malaysia on The Issue of Comango

Muhammad Raqib Mohd Sofian¹, Azman Azwan Azmawati²
{raqibsofian@gmail.com¹, azwan@usm.my²}

School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia¹²

Abstract. In recent years, Malaysia has been embroiled with religious conflicts that cause fractions among its citizens and most of the conflicts involved Islam, which is the official religion of the country. Islam has always been a sensitive subject among the citizens as it has been used as a hegemonic tool for maintaining the status quo by the previous ruling government, UMNO. Previously in 2014, Comango, which stands for the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs, participated in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council by sending a report regarding the state of human rights in Malaysia. Comango had allegedly promoted sexual and religious freedom, which is contrary to traditional Islamic teachings. Meanwhile, the mass media, as a medium of power that could influence the society, plays a major role in providing reliable information to the readers through their reporting and their preferential tendency on a particular issue. Thus, this study intends to analyse the messages and discourses being conveyed to the audience by a mainstream Malay newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, especially the Malay community. It will in turn help to shape public opinion and public policy, which could become a national concern. This study found that Utusan Malaysia has been playing the role of a mouthpiece for UMNO, and has constantly played the religious and racial cards in their reporting regarding these issues.

Keywords: Hegemony, media portrayal, Malaysian press

1 Introduction

In recent years, Malaysia has been embroiled in religious conflicts that created fractions among its citizens. Most of the conflicts involved Islam, which is the official religion of the country [1]. Islam has always been a hot topic in Malaysia as it is often used as a political and hegemonic tool by the State to maintain the existing status quo [2]. Overall, 60% of the Malaysian population are Malay Muslims, while the remaining consists of other ethnics, which include Chinese, Indians, and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak [3]. Some privileges have been awarded to the Muslim and Bumiputera Malay communities, as enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution, which include Islam as the official religion, and special privileges for the Malay and Bumiputera communities in several areas, such as education and economics. Nonetheless, the rights of minorities are still guaranteed in the Constitution [4].

Regarding this matter, the minorities tend to think that they were being marginalized by the government policies imposed on them. There were also assumptions that the government, which was controlled by UMNO (the most dominant party that represents the Malay Muslims in Malaysia), is always bias towards Islam and Muslims [5]. The United Malays National Organization is Malaysia's largest political party. It is the founding member of the Barisan Nasional coalition, which have dominated Malaysian politics since its independence. This party aspires to protect the Malay culture, and to uphold and defend Islam across Malaysia. UMNO have previously provoked the Malay Muslims community into fearing for their future by playing racial/religious issues to maintain the status quo and gain the Malay votes in the general election through the media [5].

Previously in 2013, some quarters of the Malay Muslims in Malaysia (especially Malay Muslim NGOs that were close to UMNO) have raised their concerns regarding Islam being challenged and threatened as the official religion in this country. Their fear was brought out by a report sent to the United Nations by Comango regarding the state of human rights in Malaysia [6]. Among the 54 organizations that are part of the coalition are the All-Women's Action Society (AWAM), Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), Voice of the Children (VOC), Yayasan Chow Kit, and Persatuan Guru-Guru Tadika [7]. Comango appeared to be promoting and fighting for sexual and religious freedom in Malaysia, contrary to traditional Islamic teachings. The debates that took place during that period of time were heated, with numerous views published on these issues [8]. The mainstream media was responsible for turning these issues into a political one for the political survival of the previous governing party, UMNO [7].

Among the issues included in the report were the administration of justice, expression and participation, indigenous and migrant's rights, and discrimination involving sexual orientation and race. Due to this report, anti- Comango sentiments were issued by several religious groups, such as Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA), who launched a campaign called 'Sejuta Ummah Tolak Comango'. They claimed that Comango was spreading Western "liberalism" teachings contrary to traditional Islamic teachings. However, Comango has denied that its report to the United Nations Human Rights Council intended to undermine Islam in the country [9].

One thing that needs to be understood is that the press industry in Malaysia is one of the dominant and popular institutions in Malaysia that can indirectly perpetuate and distribute the values and views of certain groups in society. Additionally, prior to the 14th General Election in 2018, the mainstream media in Malaysia is said to have been largely controlled by UMNO and other component parties in the Barisan [10]. The press industry needs to be seen as an institution laden with certain ideologies [11]. In other words, the press industry is not operating in a vacuum. The role of the newspaper industry operating in the world of profit-making and capitalism, as well as the dissemination of certain discourses, must be taken into account in the effort to understand the complexities of press relations and ideology, and the formation of meaning in society.

Thus, this study has analyzed the messages and discourses conveyed to the audience by a previously mainstream Malay newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, which was controlled by UMNO on the issue of Comango's participation in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2014. The role of the media in maintaining hegemony or overcoming conflict must be studied because it can reveal power relations and how they influence cultural practices [12].

2 Research Method

The present study employed quantitative and qualitative content analyses to investigate the nature of news coverage on Comango by a local Malay mainstream newspaper. This study has focused on several items, including the frequency of news, source of news, dominant themes, and the proclivity of the reporters regarding this issue. A total of three-month worth of samples were collected from the month of October, 2013 to March, 2014, which represented the highlights of this issue. This period of time lasted before the previous government issued their final decision to ban Comango since it was not registered under the Registrar of Societies (ROS) in Malaysia.

This study used the census sampling method, which examines all units because previous scholars claimed that census sampling is very useful for studying an event or a series of events [12]. The larger the study samples, the less biased the study results will be. Thus, all types of news articles, including hard news, editorial articles, columns, feature articles, and readers' letters were selected for this study. Utusan Malaysia was selected as the press sample to be studied because it was one of the top Malay newspapers in the country that targets Malay readers. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia and Ac Nielsen in 2015, the average daily circulation of Utusan Malaysia was 503,592 copies, thus making it the highest number of daily Malay newspaper circulated in the country [13].

More importantly, Utusan Malaysia has always been singled out for evoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays, and was heavily linked with UMNO. UMNO also holds controlling shares in the Utusan Group, which owns Utusan, as well as Kosmo! (daily tabloid) and several weeklies [9]. It would be very interesting to investigate how Utusan Malaysia portrayed and covered this issue since it was regarded as a "tool" for the previous regime to propagate their propaganda [13].

Following the 14th Malaysian General Election, Utusan Malaysia ceased its operations on 9 October, 2019 after the company faced a critical cash flow [14]. Many believe that the company did not have enough funds to continue operating after the previous owner, UMNO lost the election to Pakatan Harapan. However, after nine months of shutdown, the newspaper made a comeback under the new ownership of Media Mulia Sdn Bhd, which was reportedly controlled by business tycoon, Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary [9].

3 Results and Discussion

This study managed to collect a total of 129 news articles from the newspaper. The findings showed that Utusan Malaysia had published a high number of news articles on this issue, proving that it had been given a high priority. Since this issue involved the position of Islam in Malaysia, Utusan Malaysia would have given it more attention as they have towards similar issues that discuss about Islam and Malay privileges [9]. The findings of this study also showed that Utusan Malaysia had published the highest number of hard news articles in circulation. This may be because most audiences prefer hard news because it is easy to read and a quick way to get information. Hard news is also widely published by the press because it is a form of reporting outcome from press conferences, statements from the authorities, political elites or just reporting on an issue that occurs without the need for in-depth research.

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of a previous study, whereby newspapers in Malaysia are more likely to report controversial issues involving race and

religion in the form of hard news [13]. Journalists in Malaysia, especially in the mainstream newspapers, are reported to practice self-censorship in their reporting so as to avoid problems with existing media laws in Malaysia [14]. This has resulted in less critical reporting in the form of opinion articles in Malaysia [15].

Utusan Malaysia had also cited most of their news sources among Barisan Nasional leaders, especially Malay Ministers from UMNO and Islamic NGOs. Most UMNO members were angry and objected to the claim by Comango because it threatened the position of Islam in Malaysia. Perkasa, Persatuan Peguam-Peguam Muslim Malaysia (PMM), Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA), Persatuan Pembela Islam (Pembela), Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia (Muafakat), Pengerusi Gabungan Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Islam Bukan Kerajaan (ACCIN), and other NGOs have also objected to the claim by Comango in their effort to maintain the sanctity of Islam. Apart from citing leaders from UMNO, Barisan Nasional, and Islamic NGOs, Utusan Malaysia had also cited a lot of sources from MuslimUPRO representatives. Views and special messages from MuslimUPRO representatives in Geneva, Austria were reported. They pleaded and requested the government and Malaysian Muslims to reject the demands made by Comango. MuslimUPRO act as a coalition for all Muslim NGOs in preparation for the demands that were said to challenge Islam in Malaysia.

Apart from that, Utusan Malaysia had also published opinion articles and columns written by their own editors/authors who objected and criticized the demands made by Comango. The findings also showed that only three news articles had referred to Comango representatives when reporting this issue. Utusan Malaysia had also cited sources among academicians who protested the demands made by Comango. The findings of this study are in line with previous study [16], which stated that mainstream media, especially newspapers that are owned by the government, are often associated with sources that are inclined to maintain the status quo and seldom question Malay and Islamic privileges in Malaysia. This study has also confirmed claims by political economic scholars, who stated that power relations, which form the production, distribution, and use of media, will affect the discourse and representations portrayed in the media [17].

Moreover, Utusan Malaysia had published more articles that do not support the claims made by Comango. In fact, no news in support of Comango was ever published by this newspaper. "Critical" articles means that the published articles do not support the claims made by Comango by using negative words to refer to these claims, while "neutral" articles means that these articles do not show a tendency to either support or reject Comango's claims. From the findings, it was concluded that Utusan Malaysia had published the most articles that disagree and opposed the claims made by Comango. This conclusion is in line with the findings of a previous study [18], whereby Utusan Malaysia had mostly published articles that do not support parties that are viewed as not in favour of Islam and Malays in controversial issues involving race and religion in Malaysia.

In general, several themes were discussed by Utusan Malaysia regarding this issue. Themes that criticized Comango's demands for denouncing Islamic teachings practiced in Malaysia included "disrespect for Islam", "false claims", "challenging the totality of Islam", "Comango patuk (bites) Muslims", "threatening the faith of Muslims", and "illegal support for Comango". Islam was described as being challenged and Comango was described as an association that does not respect Islam in this country. Apart from that, the second most used theme by Utusan Malaysia was to call on the government not to bow to Comango's demands. Among the headlines used by Utusan Malaysia to call on the government were "Government must be firm, do not tolerate the issue of Islamic sanctity", "Government

should not succumb to foreign pressure to recognise Comango's demands", "Take actions against Comango", "Do not accept demands to contradict Islam", and "Do not submit to Comango's pressure".

Utusan Malaysia had also discussed a theme that included criticisms over the weakness of the Pakatan Rakyat government, especially PAS in defending the rights of Muslims as challenged by Comango. By criticising the Malay Islamic parties that exist in Pakatan Rakyat, Utusan Malaysia had discussed another theme that praised UMNO as a party that can really fight for Islam in Malaysia. PAS and PKR Malay Muslim politicians have been described as weak in defending Islam in Malaysia. Titles, such as "Opposition supports Comango?", "As soon as you are afraid to hit Comango: Is Pas afraid of Comango?", "Comango issue: Silence is a sign of Anwar's support?", and "Pas is still in the old status-quo" were used to show that Pakatan Rakyat, which was the opposition party at that time, supported all the demands made by Comango, while PAS was portrayed as failing to fight for Islam in Pakatan Rakyat. Meanwhile, the news headlines used to show UMNO as the only party that fights for Islam in the context of this issue, such as "UMNO as a bulwark of Islam", "UMNO's assertion of efforts to uphold Islam", and "Empowering the UMNO Religious Bureau".

Similarly, a previous study reported that Utusan Malaysia would often play the issue of the need for other races to respect and abide by the social contract, and defend the rights of the Malays, as enshrined in the national constitution [9]. This study agrees with the opinion that Malay-language newspapers in Malaysia will not run away from associating Islam and the Malays as enshrined in the national constitution in their reporting and that Islam is considered as in a "higher" position compared to other religions in Malaysia [19]. This observation showed that the previous government has sought to establish Islamic values and ideas as the dominant ideology because Islam is considered as a catalyst that can strengthened the power of the government over the country. This special hegemony status of Malay Muslims was also created by the previous government to ensure cultural and political supremacy of the Malays on other ethnic groups.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, Utusan Malaysia had only supported the dominant ideology and confirmed the current state of social order. In this context, this ideology that operates at the superstructure level involves using, among other things, media systems and cultural practices that support the elitist values of the government, while maintaining the status quo of this group. Discourses formed by the existing social systems can actually control and restrict the formation of various meanings, which are alternative/critical in nature, instead of promoting the formation of uniformed meanings, or mainstream, as desired by the dominant group. This study has also shown how issues involving Islam has been used as a political tool to maintain the existing power, which can be seen from published articles that referred to sources among UMNO leaders.

Utusan Malaysia had also criticized the opposition party and upheld UMNO in one of its reporting themes, which showed that this issue was used as a political tool for the benefit of the party. This observation shows how hegemony can be subtly formed by painting UMNO as a party that truly protects and preserves Islam in this country.

References

- [1] C. Nge, "Melapor tentang 'Kaum'dan etnisiti: Buku panduan untuk wartawan Malaysia," Selangor Cent. Indep. Journal., 2012.
- [2] W. N. W. M. Ghazali, "Islam as the state ideology: Exploring from Gramsci's notion of power, culture and ideology," *J. Komun. Malaysian J. Commun.*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2019.
- [3] A. A. Bari, "Halangan-halangan pelaksanaan undang-undang jenayah Islam di dalam Perlembagaan Malaysia," *J. Syariah*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 31–42, 2019.
- [4] P. K. Jha, "Religious Assertion in Malaysia: Constrained or Conflagrated?," *Strateg. Anal.*, vol. 33, no. 6, pp. 890–902, 2009.
- [5] J. L.-C. Neo, "Malay nationalism, Islamic supremacy and the constitutional bargain in the multi-ethnic composition of Malaysia," *Int. J. Minor. Gr. Rights*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 95–118, 2006.
- [6] L. F. Yang and M. S. A. Ishak, "Framing interethnic conflict in Malaysia: a comparative analysis of newspapers coverage on the hindu rights action force (HINDRAF)," *Int. J. Commun.*, vol. 6, p. 24, 2012.
- [7] K. Hamayotsu, "Democracy and religious pluralism in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Malaysia compared," *Bost. Univ. Inst. Cult. Relig. World Aff.*, 2015.
- [8] R. Briandana, Caturida, Shahir, and Wan, "Da'wah Communication and Social Media: The Interpretation of Millennials in Southeast Asia," *Int. J. Econ. Bus. Adm.*, vol. VIII, no. Special Issue 1, pp. 216–226, 2020.
- [9] Y. Lai Fong and M. S. A. Ishak, "Framing inter-religious dispute: a comparative analysis of Chinese-, English-, and Malay-language newspapers in Peninsular Malaysia," *Chinese J. Commun.*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 103–123, 2016.
- [10] D. Riffe, S. Lacy, F. Fico, and B. Watson, *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research*. Routledge, 2019.
- [11] J. A. Wahab and M. Ahmad, "Filem Box Office dan Ideologi: Satu Kajian Terhadap Filem-Filem Terpilih di Malaysia.," *Wacana Seni J. Arts Discourse*, vol. 8, 2009.
- [12] A. A. Azmawati, M. Ahmad, M. K. Anuar, and W. L. Kim, *Antologi Esei Komunikasi: Teori, Isu dan Amalan (Penerbit USM)*. Penerbit USM, 2015.
- [13] Y. L. Fong and L. W. Kit, "Framing the Cow-head protest: A comparative analysis of The Star and Malaysiakini," *SEARCH-JOURNAL SOUTHEAST ASIA Res. Cent. Commun. Humanit.*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 71–96, 2017.
- [14] Y. L. Fong and M. S. A. Ishak, "Framing interethnic conflict in Malaysia: A comparative analysis of newspapers coverage on the keris polemics," *Ethnicities*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 252–278, 2014.
- [15] R. Briandana, "Television and National Identity: An Ethnography of Television Audience in the Border of Indonesia-Malaysia," *J. Ilmu Sos. dan Ilmu Polit.*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 72–85, 2019.
- [16] M. R. M. Sofian, "A Quantitative Content Analysis of Utusan Malaysia and The Star's Reporting on A Controversial Thanksgiving Dinner in Damansara Utama Methodist Church," *Malaysian J. Media Stud.*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 45–61, 2017.
- [17] P. Golding and G. Murdock, "Culture, communications and political economy," *Mass media Soc.*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 15–32, 1991.
- [18] M. R. M. Sofian, R. Briandana, and A. A. Azmawati, "Minority Group and the Media: Media Coverage on Shia Muslims in Malaysia," in *E3S Web of Conferences*, 2018, vol. 73, p. 14007.
- [19] A. M. Merican, "Religious ideas: Islam in the Malay press," *Cover. Islam Challenges Oppor. Media Glob. Village*, p. 115, 2005.