MALAYSIA

1. GENERAL INFORMATION ON MEDIA AND MEDIA USE

**Literacy and education**

The literacy figure (definition: age 15 and over and can read and write) for the total population is 88.7 per cent, with male literacy (92 per cent) slightly higher than female literacy (85.4 per cent) (Census 2002, according to Department of Statistics 2008).

In 1993, the World Education Report (UNESCO 1993) stated that Malaysia then had one of the lowest literacy rates (78.4 per cent) compared to her other Southeast Asian neighbours, such as Singapore (100 per cent), Indonesia (81.6 per cent), Thailand (93 per cent), and the Philippines (89.7 per cent) (Zaman 2002). Today, the country’s population is 27.17 million (Department of Statistics 2008) and the Malaysian literacy rate is 85 per cent.

The national language, which is Malay, is used in official functions of the country but English is still an important second language. Generally, the population is bi-literate; that is, they speak and understand their own mother tongue and the national language. Some people are tri-literate; that is, they speak and understand their own mother tongue, the national language, and English (Zaman 2002).

**Media landscape**

There are 35 radio stations (17 of which are state-owned and they comprise both national and community stations, and 18 private stations). As for TV stations, there are three TV organisations, namely the state-owned Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) which has two channels or stations; Media Prima which has four stations; and Astro, the only pay-TV operation, which offers over 100 channels or stations.

Media Prima is the biggest media group in Malaysia, owning all main private television stations and having approximately 54 per cent of Malaysian television viewers, with its closest rival, the pay-television satellite operator, Astro, controlling a market share of roughly 29 per cent. RTM controls 17 per cent of the market.

Media Prima wholly owns TV3, NTV7 and TV9 and holds a 99.5 per cent interest in 8TV. TV3, Media Prima’s flagship television station and the number one free-to-air television station in the country, finished the 2007 season dominating the year’s top 20 programmes (The New Straits Times, 4 January 2008). The station has the number one news segment, Buletin Utama (Main Bulletin), and is the top choice for prime-time viewing (The New Straits Times, 17 January 2008). TV3 recorded a 33 per cent share of viewers in 2007 among over a hundred channels available on satellite and FTA TV (The New Straits Times, 4 January 2008). The group also controls radio stations Fly FM and Hot FM, with a combined listenership of 3.5 million. Media Prima has a 43 per cent stake in the equity of The New Straits Times Press, which has four newspapers in its stable, namely the English dailies The New Straits Times and Malay Mail, and Malay dailies Berita Harian and Harian Metro. Media Prima is Malaysia’s biggest listed media group. This group is said to reach 22 million Malaysians daily: about 11 million television viewers, seven million newspaper readers and four million radio listeners. Malaysia’s population is a little over 25 million. As of 2005, Media Prima is the biggest media group in Malaysia, attracting approximately 48 per cent of Malaysia...
television viewers, with its closest rival the pay-television satellite operator, Astro, which has a market share of roughly 20 to 30 per cent.

Astro All Asia Networks Plc, the group that has the monopoly over Malaysia's subscription television operation, reaches about 10 million viewers in some two million homes representing a penetration rate of approximately 38 per cent of Malaysia's TV households. Astro began operating in 1996 and today offers over 100 channels with a wide mix of foreign and local programmes. It's sister company Airtime Management & Programming runs the eight radio stations in its stable, namely Hitz, Mix, Light & Easy, Era, My, Xfresh, THR, and Sinar. AMP introduced format programming to Malaysia and the company claims that six out of ten radio listeners tune in to any of its eight stations each week.

There are six English dailies, six Chinese language dailies, five Malay dailies, and three Tamil (a South Indian language) dailies in Peninsular Malaysia. According to Nielsen Media Research, in the past five years, overall readership of these newspapers has continued to increase from 51 per cent in 2003 to 55 per cent in 2007 and this was primarily due to the growth of Malay dailies' readership. The top Malay dailies are Berita Harian (holding 9 per cent of the total newspaper readership) and Utusan Malaysia (8 per cent). The top English dailies are The Star (8 per cent) and The New Straits Times (2 per cent), top Chinese language dailies are Sin Chew Daily (8 per cent) and China Press (5 per cent), and the Tamil dailies are Malaysia Nanban (2 per cent) (The New Straits Times, 10 October 2007).

In Sabah, there are 11 regional newspapers, of which five are Chinese language dailies, one Malay daily, one English daily and four tri-lingual dailies (a combination of English, Malay and Kadazan, which is a Sabahan language). In Sarawak, there are nine dailies, out of which five are Chinese, two Malay, and two English.

Harakah is a newspaper founded in 1987 and published by the opposition Muslim fundamentalist party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). Constant intimidation tactics by the government have forced this paper to only publish twice a month, instead of twice a week. The Rocket is the publication of the Chinese-based opposition Democratic Action Party, which has been published since 1966. On the record, the Rocket is sold to party members only but it is not difficult for members of the public to get their copy from some newsstands, just like the Harakah. On 8 November 2006, the government refused to give a printing permit to the official paper of the opposition People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat).

The majority stakeholder for The Star (English daily) is Huaren Holdings, the investment arm of the Chinese-based political party Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) while the New Straits Times Press (under which are two English dailies and two Malay dailies) is under Media Prima, which is owned by UMNO-linked Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad. The main Tamil newspapers, Tamil Nesam and Malaysia Nanban, are owned by the head of the Indian-based political party, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). UMNO is the party that heads the National Front (Barisan Nasional) ruling coalition in Malaysia. MCA and MIC are the main parties in the coalition.

In 2007 four Chinese-language dailies – Sin Chew Daily, Guang Ming Daily, China Press and Nanyang Siang Pau – were consolidated under one company owned by a timber tycoon, Tong Hiew King, known for his close relations with the ruling party (CIJ 2007). As for the two Malaysian states in the island of Borneo, the newspapers there are either owned by the local politicians or tycoons linked to politicians.

In 1996, Malaysia introduced its first satellite television, Astro (All Asia Television and Radio Company). Astro is owned by Binariang, which in turn is owned by one of the most successful businessmen in Malaysia, Ananda Krishnan, a close associate of the previous prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad (Abdul Wahab 2006).
It was not until 1984 that a privately owned television station, TV3, was allowed to operate, which essentially broke more than 20 years of government monopoly over broadcasting. The Privatisation Policy that was introduced in 1984 brought about the establishment of TV3 (Abdul Wahab 2006).

Independent newspapers do exist in Malaysia and the main ones are Malaysiakini, Merdeka Review and Malaysia Today. These newspapers offer news and an avenue for public discourse that do not see print in the mainstream media. These include issues that are deemed seditious (there is more about this in Sections 2.1 to 2.4) and issues the government does not allow the mainstream media to report on. Due to this, the government has resorted to using intimidation and fear to get these internet newspapers to conform to its policies and to keep its monopoly on information, although in 1998, the government introduced the Communications and multimedia act which promised that the internet would be free from control. Then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad had an ambitious plan to transform Malaysia into an information technology centre. This resulted in the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) at a cost of US$20 billion. The motive of Mahathir was primarily to take full advantage of ICT to accelerate economic development. However, to attract and secure foreign investments to make MSC a success, Mahathir was forced to guarantee that there would be no censorship of the internet (Abdul Samad 2001). As a result during the Mahathir administration (1981 to 2003), raids were carried out on the offices of internet newspapers, and website owners were questioned by the police.

The ruling coalition has kept control over the media. Mainstream newspapers as well as television channels are owned or controlled by the governing coalition parties. Given this scenario new political forces released by the internet, which made its debut in Malaysia in 1996, have created a dilemma for the political establishment (Abdul Samad 2001). All disgruntled elements within the political spectrum have been channelled and sent through the internet.

The proliferation of web sites critical of the government has increased. The internet serves as an important alternative media in Malaysia and provides space for the pro-opposition views and news ... Oblivious to the power and speed of the internet, Mahathir underestimated the growth of the opposition to his ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his reformation agenda which started in 1998. Prior to the emergence of the internet, Mahathir could overcome nearly every crisis by controlling the "authentic" news and information reaching the public,' said Abdul Samad in his paper 'The double edged sword: a brief comparison of IT and internet development in Malaysia and a few neighbouring countries in the context of the digital divide'.

In the early days of the internet in Malaysia, Malaysiakini.com, Laman Reformasi, Freeanwar.com, Harakahdaily.com and FreeMalaysia.com are five out of the over 50 websites which give alternative news coverage. 'They were visited by more than 250,000 visitors daily. In addition to such web pages are "e-groups" discussion platforms. Because of the vacuum for a platform for intellectual discussion in Malaysia the internet has become a haven for those Malaysians who longed to voice their long, long repressed opinions and ideas. Sangkancil@malaysia.net is one of the many electronic discussion groups which has earned a great reputation for intellectual discussion ranging from politics, religion, race, culture and nationalism,' said Abdul Samad.

The owner of Malaysia Today, Raja Petra Kamarudin, was probably one of the first to initiate the move to offer alternative news to the public and he did so in the form of the website Freeanwar.com in the mid 1990s. Although the website initially started as a campaign and an online response to the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as the deputy prime minister and subsequently his imprisonment for sodomy, the website grew as people craved to hear about the political backroom dealings, and at the same time financial and sex scandals were unearthed. Some of the information is uploaded without confirmation from credible sources but the website and others like it became a much-awaited alternative to the mainstream news, especially during the dark days when political turbulence in the otherwise quiet and stable Malaysia left many Malaysians wondering what was happening.
The government officials’ response to what was posted on these websites was either to deny the stories or to issue statements condemning the authenticity of the sources and subsequently threatening to bring the portal owners to court. Raja Petra was imprisoned under the Internal Security Act in April, along with nine other ‘reformasi’ (reformation) activists, for allegedly seeking to overthrow the government by ‘militant means’. He was released after 52 days.

In 1996, journalist M.G.G Pillai started a political discussion group called Sang Kancil (Pillai 2001). ‘I am a “banned” writer to government-controlled newspapers in Malaysia, my views heretical to those in power, and my writings appear regularly in usually Malay magazines on the fringes. There is no formal ban, of course, but it has been made clear to me my articles would not be accepted in the mainstream,’ he said in his commentary on the US-based Media Channel website. Shortly after this, he was sued by a Mahathir-linked tycoon in a US$40 million libel suit. Pillai lost the suit, and this case triggered a wave of mega-suits against journalists (more of this later).

The intimidation and harassment continues under the present Badawi administration, although the prime minister promised to be less restrictive with the media. Several incidents have affected the press freedom in the recent past.

According to AC Nielsen (2007), in the past five years, overall readership of any dailies has continued to increase steadily from 51 per cent in 2003 to 55 per cent in 2007. Nielsen Radio Audience Measurement (RAM) shows that total numbers for radio listeners remains high – reaching 92 per cent or 14.4 million individuals aged 10 years and above in Peninsular Malaysia. Malaysia has a relatively low household internet penetration of 12.8 per cent (The Edge 2007) but there are 13,528,200 internet users as of September 2006, which is 47.8 per cent of the population, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission.

The increase in newspaper readership is due to the growth in Bahasa Malaysia dailies’ readership. English, Chinese and Tamil dailies’ readership remains stable. On average, a radio listener tunes in for 23 hours a week. In the last two years, the total TV viewing trend has been stable at 93 per cent. Internet users increased from 15 per cent (July’05–June’06) to 18 per cent this year, with a two percentage point growth in home users. Internet users are still skewed towards PMEBs, other white collar workers and students.

The media have a significant influence on the formation of political opinion in Malaysia. The interesting paradox here is that although most people are aware that the media are controlled, many still form their political opinions based on what is presented in the media. However, there is a rising number of people who are consciously seeking information from outside the mainstream media.

Media as source of information in Malaysia are used often. A sizeable number of people use the media for information, and this information comes in various languages (newspapers, TV and radio broadcasts); for the urbanites and educated Malaysians, there is also the internet.

More and more urbanites are said to be turning to the internet as signs of frustrations with the mainstream and traditional media peaked with the launch of various initiatives to boycott the media, according to the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ). CIJ picked a few online sources to get an idea of the number of visitors to their blogs and sites during two major rallies organised by BERSIH, a non-governmental organisation that is calling for free and clean elections, and HINDRAF, a non-governmental organisation fighting abuse against the Indians, in November 2007.

State-owned media exist. The coverage of their editorial departments is not protected by law from influence by government authorities. The staff members of the state-owned television and radio stations are considered civil servants, and so the appointments of people to key positions have to be vetted and endorsed by the minister of information under which these television and radio stations come. The national news agency, Bernama, used to be under the Ministry of Information but now it has been corporatised. However, appointments to key positions are still determined by the government.
For the private media organisations, there is the hidden hand of the state in appointing people to the top positions in the main media organisations. Media Prima director Kamarulzaman Zainal, who oversees TV3’s news and current affairs section, was the former press secretary of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. NSTP’s editorial advisor is Kalimullah Masheerul Hassan, who was previously the media organisation’s group editor-in-chief and is linked to the prime minister. As for the leading English daily, The Star, which is owned by the Chinese-based MCA political party, the major appointments have to be endorsed by the party.

The state-owned media sometimes sets the agenda for the private media. There have been numerous times when a private media organisation has been faced with a dilemma over whether to publish a particular controversial story or a news item that would reflect negatively on the government and its leaders. On these occasions, the tendency is to always check the state-owned radio and television (the state does not own any newspapers) or the national news agency, which is Bernama, a quasi-government organisation.

Both state-owned and private media organisations can be said to do propaganda for the government. In this regard, there are no differences between press, radio and television coverage.

All journalists have equal access to press conferences held by government officials with the purpose of informing the public of government programmes and policies, and to give the government’s version of an issue or incident and stress that this is the official version, and therefore the truth. However, there have been times when journalists from the independent online newspapers have been asked to leave press conferences by government officials. For example, on occasion either the prime minister or the deputy prime minister has called for a closed-door meeting with editors of media organisations to inform them about how a particular issue should be highlighted or blacked out. However, only the mainstream media editors are invited. At the time of writing this report, a meeting was called by the deputy prime minister to brief editors on what sort of media coverage the government expects for the upcoming general elections. (I am privy to this information because I have been in the media for 14 years, and more importantly my deputy editor husband attended the meeting.) It is mandatory for editors to comply with the instructions of the prime minister and deputy prime minister. Yet, in general, press conferences can be broadcast.

2. LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The laws, regulations and unwritten instructions on the way the media was to operate caused some to say that Malaysia had a constitution ‘guaranteeing freedom of speech, but not freedom after speech’ (Wong 2000). Article 10 (subsection 1) of the federal constitution promises every citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression, to assemble peacefully without arms, and to form associations. Its subsection 2, however, allows Parliament to impose restrictions on the grounds of national security, public order and morality.

The laws and regulations that affect the press deal primarily with secrecy. The government’s obsession with secrecy dates back to colonial times (Padman 2001). For 12 years from 1948, the British (and later Malaysian) government instituted measures against a violent campaign by communist insurgents and in the process, shackles were put on the media.

In 1948, the Printing Presses Ordinance was introduced to control ownership of printing presses and publications. This was repealed and in its place came the Printing Presses and Publications Act in 1984, during the Mahathir (former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad) administration from 1982 to 2003. This ruled that the annual publishing and printing permit could be revoked or not renewed without judicial review. In 1987, during Operation Lalang, the licences of four newspapers were revoked on the grounds that these publications were printing information that was seditious, therefore contravening the Sedition Act 1948.

Section 4 of the Sedition Act specifies that anyone who ‘does or attempts to do, or makes any preparation to do, or conspires with any person to do’ an act with seditious tendency, such as...
uttering seditious words, or printing, publishing or importing seditious literature, is guilty of sedition. It is also a crime to possess a seditious publication without a ‘lawful excuse’. The act defines sedition itself as anything which ‘when applied or used in respect of any act, speech, words, publication or other thing qualifies the act, speech, words, publication or other thing as having a seditious tendency’.

Other offences cited under section 3(1) concern the powers and status of Malaysian rulers, the citizenship rights of non-Malays, Malay special rights and privileges, the status of Islam as the official religion, and the status of Malay as the national language. In addition, an amendment to the Sedition Act has broad and vague definitions of ‘seditious tendencies’ that include a tendency to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite ‘disaffection’ against any ruler, the government or the administration of justice. This coupled with the ISA (Internal Security Act 1960) has nullified the guarantee of freedom of speech and expression in the federal constitution’s Article 10. For decades Malaysians have not been allowed to openly discuss these issues, and those that question the relevance of pursuing policies that uphold communalism and the need for communal politics.

In 1960, the Internal Security Act came into force, allowing preventive detention without trial. In 1972, the Official Secrets Act took effect. There were three cases where OSA was used against the media in 1985 and in all three cases hefty fines were imposed – The New Straits Times' Sabry Sharif’s story on irregularities in military aircraft purchases, two Asian Wall Street Journal foreign reporters' investigative story and a Far Eastern Economic Review foreign correspondent’s story citing an alleged official government document. Amendments were made to the act in 1986, adding provisions for mandatory prison terms. In 1988, the Broadcasting Act brought the electronic media under government control (Padman 2001; Wong 2000; and Syed Arabi 1998). The number of laws adversely affecting press freedom has increased since Mahathir became prime minister. Academic and former Malaysian Human Rights Commissioner Hamdan Adnan says there are presently 47 pieces of such legislation and ordinances (Syed Arabi 1998).

A new law was added with the advent of the internet – the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. The act provides a regulatory framework to make Malaysia a major global hub for communications and multimedia information and content services. Mahathir promised not to censor the internet to ensure the success of the Multimedia Super Corridor, which is a Silicon Valley-type project in Malaysia, and so as not to deter foreign investment. In practice the provisions of the act restricting telecommunications interception appear to be regularly ignored or overridden by other statutes, including the ISA (Privacy and Human Rights 2003). In 1998, police detained four people under the ISA on suspicion of spreading rumours of disturbances in Kuala Lumpur. Inspector General of Police Abdul Rahim Noor told the media then that the suspects were detained after police tracked their activities on the internet with the assistance of internet service provider Mimos Berhad. The provider later claimed that it did not monitor the activities of its subscribers.

Malaysia has always had laws and regulations that have restricted the media. There were no attempts to enact new laws to fight terrorism. However, there are attempts to set up a press council, a move which has been opposed by the journalist union and certain sections of society. One of the non-governmental organisations opposed to this move is the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ). The CIJ feels that without the repeal of licensing provisions in the Printing Presses and Publications Act, a press council would merely form another layer of control. ‘In a situation where there is very restricted space for media freedom, the canons of journalism are paid mere lip-service. The establishment of a media council, or a complaints committee with a similar function (however preliminary, given that a media council is not in place yet) will not address the root of the problem of unethical reporting in Malaysia and/or the impact of political control and manipulation of the media,’ said the organisation on its website.

There is a slight difference in the way the media have been treated during the Mahathir (1981 to 2003) and the Badawi (2003 to present) administrations. Mahathir would periodically call meetings with the editors of the mainstream media organisations and tell them what was to be covered and which stories should be downplayed. When editors were faced with a situation like the Kampong...
Medan racial riots in 2001, they waited for instructions from the prime minister, his department, the Home Ministry, etc before proceeding. This is the standard reaction for editors in that they are required to seek clarification before going ahead with stories – and the instructions are usually very clear and precise. During the present administration, instructions come from the usual sources, and also from the prime minister’s son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, and from a fellow editor, Kalimullah Masheerul Hassan – and almost on a daily basis, according to two senior editors in two English dailies. This is despite assurances from the prime minister when he took up office that the media was to be freer than before. Media freedom, therefore, has gone from bad to worse.

Legal censorship

Legal censorship exists in the form of the Sedition Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Internal Security Act. The issues that are prohibited have been listed above.

Also, editors are periodically given a briefing by the prime minister and the deputy prime minister as to what sort of reporting is expected and what sort of news to black out. Usually, news about the opposition parties is either blacked out or played down, unless the news item reflects negatively on the opposition parties or their leaders. Media organisations are also reprimanded should they report about corruption within the ruling government or personalities linked to the government or about failed or weak policies and projects. The press is expected not to project a bad or weak picture of the government and its leadership unless certain personalities have fallen out of favour with the main leadership and the media chiefs have been given the nod to report on them. Within each media organisation as well, the political masters have their set of orders and their agenda. The task of the media organisation is to ensure their political masters look good and their opponents either within the party or otherwise are made to look bad.

There are times when the state authorities demand that certain news stories or features be faxed, emailed or sent to them for vetting. A journalist who writes commentaries and political analysis for a leading English daily once said (to this writer) that she had to fax over her articles to certain government officials close to the Prime Minister’s Department for their approval. The same English daily had to fax to these same officials a pullout they were doing for the 31 August 2007 National Day celebrations for their approval, an official of the newspaper told the writer.

Media licenses

The press in Malaysia has to appease the Information Ministry and the Internal Security Ministry. The Information Ministry’s task, among others, is to ensure media content is controlled while the Internal Security Ministry controls and issues printing and publication permits under the Printing Presses and Publication Act. Printing and publication permits have to be renewed annually.

About a week before Christmas in 2007, The Herald, the 13-year-old weekly published by the Kuala Lumpur-based Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre for the Catholic community in Malaysia, was having difficulty renewing its printing and publication permit. The Internal Security Ministry had demanded that its Malay section must be scrapped and the use of the word ‘Allah’ when referring to God must be stopped. A public and global outcry forced the government to retract this order on 31 December 2007, and The Herald has been promised a renewal of its publishing permit for 2008, with no conditions attached. This is the latest incident involving printing and publication permits. Prior to this, numerous newspapers have been given warnings over articles they have published, some newspapers have been shut down or their publications suspended. There are numerous cases of editors being removed from their posts. The government officials have also asked media organisations to take action against editors or journalists who have allowed certain articles, which have shown the government is a bad light, to be published.

Journalists’ legal status

Journalists do not need official state permission to practise their profession, but they do need to get themselves registered with the Information Ministry through the media organisation that they work in. Foreign journalists or correspondents also need to register with the Information Ministry for accreditation. Nobody is excluded by law from working as a journalist. Media organisations, however, are usually not keen on employing people closely linked to opposition party leaders and people who are trade unionists.
Journalists have the legal right to participate in all public meetings of the government and Parliament, however, there have been cases when only journalists with the mainstream media have been allowed to participate in public government meetings, and the online newspaper journalists have been asked to leave. The decision over whom is allowed to attend is up to the official handling the meeting. Only the mainstream media journalists are allowed to attend Parliamentary proceedings. However, Hansard is available for public consumption from the Parliamentary website (http://www.parlimen.gov.my/op.php).

Once the doors of public government meetings are opened to journalists, it can be assumed that the meeting can be broadcast. For Parliamentary proceedings, there are no legal restrictions on coverage but because there is surprisingly no immunity for parliamentarians during the proceedings, all that is discussed is subject to the Sedition Act. Discussions on the sovereignty of the king and sultans, the special privileges for the Malays, and similar topics are not allowed. However, Parliamentary proceedings are not telecast live but only certain clips or video grabs, deemed to be non-detrimental to the government and its leaders, can be broadcast or published. Journalists, however, do not have the right to legally challenge state repression.

The formation of monopolies and cartels by private media companies are not prohibited by law. State control over the media has not diminished as restrictive laws and unwritten policies are still in place. The move to further commercialise the media industry in the 1980s with the setting up of the first television station was meant to show that the state was moving towards democratisation when in actual fact it was not. The newspaper organisations then were only involved in the print media. However, over the last 15 years, mergers and acquisitions have taken place, turning the landscape into one where there are fewer but bigger industry players. Newspaper organisations have merged with television and radio stations in a move to bring variety and also to reduce the number of one-product companies. As these companies diversify, the power within the industry has been confined to a handful of companies, and this makes it all the easier for the state to control and manipulate the media to suit its political goals.

3. POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Those who are in opposition parties, the labour movement, left-wing politics, demonstrators or street protestors are given scant publicity. This is because the government does not want dissenting views to be published or aired. However, with the advent of the internet, many are seeking alternative views from blogs and online newspapers and news portals.

Self-censorship exists at all levels – from the reporters to the editors, a habit which started during the Mahathir administration. Reporters have been told to report on matters that neither antagonise the government nor the advertisers. During elections, the self-censorship is even more severe. No Malaysian journalist can claim he or she is freely able to investigate government or corporate scandals (Padman 2001). Partly this is because they have limited access to information and partly because of the controls in place; a journalist has to resort to self-censorship. Self-censorship especially occurs in areas such as politics, corporate scandals, corruption involving high-ranking officials and corporate figures, political instability, religious and racial discontent, failure of government projects, and suchlike.

The government has used force and threats to make the media comply and one such incident was in 1987 during Operation Lalang. In a bid to thwart what would have become a major race riot, probably bigger than the one in 1969, Mahathir declared an operation where over 100 people were arrested under the Internal Security Act, four newspapers were closed down for instigating racial unrest but no journalist was arrested. One of the four newspapers, The Star, was allowed to reopen if it complied with certain conditions, two of which were that the daily had to replace certain senior editors with those from the government-owned Bernama news agency, and the paper had to promise to toe the line in its reporting, according to editors of The Star. Since then, the media organisations have come to understand the vulnerability of their existence and have learned to conduct self-censorship when dealing with controversial stories and to wait for instructions from
the government before running a story. When race riots broke out at a lower-income settlement called Kampung Medan on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur in 2001 between Indians and Malays, the editors of The Star waited for a response from the government before deciding how they should treat the story. They and the editors in other media organisations were told to downplay the racial sentiments.

Ever since the shutdown of four newspapers under the Internal Security Act during Operation Lalang in 1987, there has been a fear in newsrooms of a similar incident happening, although no journalist was arrested. Verbal threats have been issued by government officials, either in public or in private, to media officials and editors since then to keep media practitioners in constant fear. One of the newspapers, the English daily The Star, was allowed to operate again by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad provided certain conditions were met, one of which was the sacking of several editors. The 1987 shutdown of newspapers was the last such act of state repression.

On 9 November 1996, the police arrested 60 organisers and participants at the APCET II conference in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur, following the unlawful disruption of the conference by youth members of the parties in the ruling coalition. Among those arrested were local and foreign journalists. APCET II was a peaceful and legitimate attempt to seek a peaceful resolution to the illegal annexation of East Timor by Indonesia.

Obstacles to internet access
Access to the internet is not hindered by the state, but there are claims of ‘cyber troopers’ being set up by UMNO to get into blogs, websites and news portals to create havoc, disrupt public discourse, make accusations, etc – to sabotage discussions in the internet. News portal owner Raja Petra Kamarudin wrote that when he was called up by the police for questioning over a police report made by an UMNO official that his postings were seditious in July, 2007, he talked to the police about the existence of ‘cyber troopers’.

Changes in the past five years
There have been occasions during the last five years when several people have felt the Badawi administration was going to impose the Internal Security Act and the media was the target. Attempts were made by those in the mainstream media to toe the line.

The internet has opened a floodgate of information for public consumption and government officials are trying hard to counter this. Whether there is any truth to the information posted cannot be ascertained, but the public is bent on believing it after years of being left in the dark. The Badawi administration is dealing with a medium that it is finding hard to control, something which Mahathir himself was unable to get a good grip of. The next best thing to do is probably to intensify fear and hope those behind this will back off.

4. ECONOMIC PRESSURES

State subsidies
The private media are not subsidised by the state. Advertising revenue in the private market is substantial enough for the main media organisations to operate with clear profits.

5. NON-STATE REPRESSION

Repression by non-state groups
The religious departments in the government have on numerous occasions come out with stinging statements about news reports and coverage that can make Muslims react heatedly. In the eastern state of Sabah, the Bugis people occasionally send death threats to the journalists should there be news reports that do not put them in a good light. These threats have remained just that. Non-state repression happens only occasionally. I cannot recall an incident, however, when the Malaysian government has prosecuted these acts.

Changes in the past five years
State authorities can effectively protect journalists because of the amount of control the authorities wield over media organisations, but this has never happened. The state has never functioned as the guardian of the journalists when it comes to issues of rights and protection.
6. CONCLUSIONS

The media in Malaysia reflect the culture of 'soft authoritarianism' (Wong 2000) where the institutions of a democratic state and the division of its powers exist in principle but have been made ineffective or absent in practice. Several practitioners and academics in Malaysia feel that the 1969 race riots gave the government a good excuse to continue with media controls in the name of nation building, economic development and, more crucially, racial harmony. Edmund Terence Gomez and K.S. Jomo in “Malaysia – Political Economy” say that the authoritarian style of Mahathir’s government has on the one hand enhanced economic growth and material well-being while on the other it has led to abuses of power and a shrinking of democratic space (Wong 2000). It has to be stated, then, that there is no freedom of the media. Also, the changes in the past five years have been for the worse.

The major obstacles to free media coverage are limited access to information, repressive media laws, and intimidation and fear tactics by government officials.

Vanitha Nadaraj

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