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The Role Of The Media In Educating The People
On The Constitution And Electoral Processes

By

Zainon Ahmad
The Role of the Media in Educating the People on the Constitution and Electoral Processes

As we know, the role of journalists and the media — by which I mean newspapers, periodicals and radio and television — is to record events and foster that role journalists are said to write the first draft of history.

The media also play a role in interpreting events and in line with this carry or broadcast opinions pieces written by respected writers and interviews of prominent public figures for their opinions and views.

These are, of course, carried in different sections of the newspapers, magazines or various slots of radio and television broadcasts.

Do the Malaysian media play a role to educate the people on the Constitution and the electoral processes? Yes, they do. In fact it was occasionally made incumbent upon them to play that role.

Even so, it was not a formal sort of role with structured presentation.

As far as the Constitution is concerned, the media in Malaysia had to explain the Constitution — though not full constitution per se — but certain sections of it when need arose.

Many constitutional changes took place since the country became independent from Britain in 1957 that left the media little choice but to explain them. There was the end of the Emergency in 1960, the formation of Malaysia in 1963 and the constitutional changes following the May 13 incident in 1969.

Since the beginning of the 1980s significant events have taken place which took up space and time of the media. One, was the so-called constitutional crisis of 1983 when the government under the present prime minister sought to amend certain sections of the constitution.

The traditional rulers influenced the King not to sign the amendments after it went through both houses of Parliament because the changes affected their legislative role.

Undaunted, the political leaders went to the people and in rallies after rallies countrywide tried to win the people to their side. The media reported the speeches made at the rallies and at the same time carried the debates on the role of the monarchy.

The king finally gave his assent to a much-reworded bill. While the so-called crisis achieved little in attempts to curtail further the power of the traditional rulers, it nevertheless brought the role of the monarchy under the scrutiny of the people and at the same time motivated them to look at their constitution.

An article on the role of constitutional rulers by Lord President Raja Azlan Shah, who later became the Sultan of Perak and now the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, was dug up and carried by most of the newspapers.

As a result printers were kept busy meeting the demand for new editions of the constitution.

The other significant event, which not only astounded Malaysians but also the world, was the dismissal of the Lord President. The event shocked the judiciary to its very foundation.

Again the media gave coverage to the event besides also carrying commentaries on the episode.

At the moment, Malaysians are being educated by the media on the functions,
albeit indirectly, of the Elections Commission. The commission has come under public gaze following allegations by the Opposition that it is no longer an independent body but merely doing the biddings of the ruling party.

In itself the allegations did not have a telling effect on the Government, but the setting up of a body called the Election Watch presided over by a much respected Lord President has.

Also significant was the declaration in 1988 by the High Court that Umno, a leading party in the ruling National Front coalition, was an unlawful party. The reason was simple: several of its branches were functioning illegally. The decision triggered off a series of law suits which were played up by the media.

A new party was formed and registered to occupy the place of the deregistered party in the National Front coalition. The Government also initiated several amendments to the law preventing political parties from taking certain disputes to the court.

Besides these indirect role in educating the public in the constitution and the laws of the country, the Malaysian media also play explicatory role with regard to the laws the government amends, revises and premulgates from time to time in Parliament.

Some newspapers carry columns on the law, thus formally informing the public about the constitution and the law of the land. One such column is You and the Law in the New Straits Times.

With regard to electoral processes, the media provide sufficient information during and between elections. During the run-up to elections radio and television carry government documentaries on the right to vote and how to vote. And in between elections, they inform the public on the need to register as voters and for those already registered to inform the registry of their changes of addresses.

The print media report on speeches by government and opposition leaders on the need to register as voters and to vote. At the same time, during elections they create a build up so as to interest more people to vote.

By and large, the Malaysian media have provided sufficient information on the law and constitution and the electoral processes of the country.

(END)