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Paper No. 5
Portraying the Poor:
The Media and Poverty in Malaysia

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Universiti Sains Malaysia
1999

1. The State and Poverty: Malaysia’s Post-Independence Development Policies

The contemporary Malaysian population is multi-ethnic and multi-religious, with three major ethnic groups - Malay, Chinese and Indian - and numerous other ethnic minorities (including Iban, Kadazan, Bajau and Murut), particularly located in East Malaysia. According to 1997 estimates (Bank Negara Malaysia Annual Report, 1996), Malaysia has a total population of 21.7 million. Of these, more than 17 million (78.3 per cent of the total population) are located in Peninsular Malaysia. And the ethnic composition of this 17 million is as follows: 9.8 million (57.7 per cent) are Bumiputera (Malay and certain other indigenous groups), 4.6 million (27.1 per cent) are Chinese, and 1.5 million (8.8 per cent) are Indian.

Given its multi-ethnic nature, not surprisingly, Malaysia’s history1 has been dominated by ethnic-based parties and ethnic politics since it attained independence. The three major political parties that form the basis of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government, for instance, are ethnic-based2. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that ethnic preoccupations continue to dominate Malaysian society, where there is a deep sense of being part of specific ethnic and cultural communities.

The BN coalition, headed by Mahathir Mohamad since 1981, came into being in 1974 as an expansion of the Alliance Party (also a coalition of major ethnic parties). Since Independence in 1957 until it became the BN in 1974, the Alliance had won every single general election held. And the story has remained virtually the same since, with the BN coalition having won more than two-thirds of the seats in the Malaysian Parliament during each of the four general elections (1982, 1987, 1990, 1995) held since Mahathir first became Malaysian Prime Minister. I would argue that in any attempt to understand why the BN government often easily seems to get its way with legislations and policy decisions which to an outsider may appear repressive, this massive majority which the BN enjoys in Parliament needs to be borne in mind.

For more than a decade, until the Asian "meltdown" of 1997, the Malaysian economy had been growing rapidly. The average annual growth rate over this period stood at 6.5 per cent. During the recession period between 1980 and 1985, it slowed down to 5.4 per cent per year, but rose to 9.7 per cent in 1990, 8.7 per cent in 1991 and 8.5 per cent in 1995. Indeed, since 1987, annual growth rates have topped 8 per cent. Real GDP per capita grew from US$1,110 in 1960 to US$5,649 in 1990. (See Kahn, 1996:49-75 and Jomo, 1997:89). By September 1993, when the World Bank published The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth And Public Policy, Malaysia had become one of the eight "high performing" Asian economies which had achieved the highest growth rates in the world between 1965 and 1990. Malaysia’s "miracle" - until the 1997 meltdown, that is - has largely been attributed to the Mahathir administration’s supposedly prudent policies and the accompanying liberalisation of the Malaysian economy.
Before Mahathir became Prime Minister in 1981, Malaysia's development had been guided by the New Economic Policy (NEP). Formulated soon after the ethnic riots of May 1969, the NEP has a two-pronged objective of eradicating poverty and eliminating racial imbalances in the Malaysian economy. The Mahathir administration, in turn, using the NEP as the basic guideline, introduced a variety of policies and strategies, most notable of which being the Look East policy, Malaysia Incorporated, and the Privatisation policy, ostensibly to make the Malaysian economy more competitive in the global marketplace. A decade later, in 1991, Mahathir introduced his vision, "Vision 2020", which, together with the earlier policies, has impacted on the development of the media, and the nation as a whole. Indeed, we can deduce a variety of similarities and continuities from Look East to Vision 2020.

First, we can deduce an emphasis on attitudinal change in these statements and strategies. From the need to adopt a new work ethic, as embodied in the Look East policy, to creating a "psychologically liberated" Malaysian society, as outlined in the nine challenges of the Vision, it is clear that psychological states of mind and changes in individual behaviour are deemed crucial for change to come about, for Malaysian society - assumed here, to all intents and purposes, to be homogeneous - to move forward, to progress to becoming a developed society. Indeed, this change in attitudes, especially among the poor, has been consistently proposed, certainly by Mahathir. In 1984, for example, he asserted (New Straits Times, 2/5/1984):

"There must be a change of attitude among the less well-to-do if poverty eradication is to be realised...The poor must face up to the fact that their fate lies in their own hands."

Three years later, Mahathir again called for a change in the people's attitude, arguing that "without such a change in attitude and philosophy the country would not progress further in trying to wipe out poverty." (New Sunday Times, 13/9/1987). Pointing to the success of the industrialised countries and urging Malaysians to use them as role models, Mahathir, using rhetoric reminiscent of modernists such as McClelland (1961), reiterated the over-simplistic and historically naive view that these countries had prospered "due to the industriousness and willingness of their people to face challenges." (ibid).

The second common theme running through these policies and strategies is, of course, conformity towards - if not celebration of - the market. Until Mahathir's ascendency, Malaysia's open economy - a legacy of British colonialism - had been one dominated by the state. This was made more obvious under the NEP, when the state began to introduce strategies to restructure the economy and played an interventionist role. As a consequence, state-financed bodies, such as state economic development corporations (SEDCs) played a key role in attempting to develop the economy and ostensibly ensuring that the economic cake, as it were, was more equitably distributed. However, as if following global trends and, arguably, aware of the lumbering bureaucracy that had emerged from this interventionist policy, the waste that had accumulated, and the increased costs to the government, the Mahathir administration turned towards the market soon after it came to power. Many previous state monopolies and services were either privatised or monopolised. The practise continues up until today, with education and health being the new targets. As Mahathir (1983:277) himself puts it:
"(T)he government may be able to obtain substantial revenue from telecommunications, ports, radio and television, railways, etc...In view of this possibility, there is a need to transfer several public services and government owned business to the private sector."

Third, what can be gleaned from these strategies is the state's almost unconditional support for the private sector managers, the capitalists. This, when we consider Malaysia's political economy, is to be expected. Indeed, anyone with a basic understanding of the contemporary Malaysian economy would be aware of the heavy corporate involvement of the major parties in the ruling BN coalition. Although allegations of "cronyism" and "nepotism" have only recently surfaced in the mainstream Malaysian media, more academic accounts (see Gomez, 1990, 1991, 1994, Lim, 1981, for example) have been around for awhile, detailing the extensive links between the leading political parties and the Malaysian corporate sector. The Malaysian labour movement, such as it is, thus plays second fiddle, having little say in the overall scheme of things.

Fourth, these strategies also imply an administration that seems hellbent on making Malaysia into a major global player. Whatever his posturings and (continuing) rhetoric against the rich, industrialised nations, or "the West", Mahathir has never been an anti-capitalist. As Khooh(1995:64) aptly puts it in his excellent intellectual biography of Mahathir,

"Mahathir's anti-Westernism did not derive from earlier radical critiques of the capitalist origins, impulses and structures of Western imperialism and the global pattern of dominance and dependence. He was not an anti-capitalist but a capitalist. He was only against 'imperialism' as protectionism but would hardly have conceived of imperialism in the form of 'foreign investments'. He defended transnational corporations against 'vilification' by the 'old protagonists of the superior race [and] also... the working class in the developed countries'...He accepted that the transnationals had to take advantage of cheap labour which he continued to prohibit from unionizing in the Free Trade Zones of Malaysia."

Indeed, despite Mahathir's antipathy to the rich industrialised nations, his - and his administration's - strategy is not to break away from the world economic system, but to compete tooth and nail within the established order. This is clearly reflected in the following passage from his recent publication (Mahathir, 1998:17, emphasis added).

"Vision 2020 has given the focus and direction to Malaysians, especially the private sector, to set bigger goals for greater achievement. Collaboration between the private and public sectors will ensure the sustenance of the nation's comparative advantage and promote its competitive edge in the global market."

It is thus with this wider backdrop of Malaysian development policies very much in mind - a backdrop which, I would insist, is crucial for understanding the manner in which the media portray poverty - that we now turn to the development of the contemporary Malaysian media.
2. **Media Policies and Structures**

i. **Television**

State control over Malaysia's media, particularly television, has been evident right from the beginning. When television was first introduced into the country in 1963, it comprised a single channel national network, under the control of the Department of Broadcasting (RTM) which, in turn, was one of three departments under the control of the Ministry of Information. In October 1969, a second channel was launched, also under the direct control of the Ministry of Information, and guided by the same directives as those which governed the operations of the first channel. (Karthigesu, 1991). These directives - which have remained virtually unchanged and which have informed broadcasting policy, at least for what are now called TV1 and TV2 - are:

a] to explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and the programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public;

b] to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of the government;

c] to assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture;

d] to provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment.

e] to aid national integration efforts in a multi-ethnic society through the use of the national language.

(Ministry of Information, 1983)

Both the RTM channels were established not through an Act of Parliament or by a Royal Charter, but via decisions made by the then Alliance coalition government which, in turn, formulated the policies that would determine the role television will play. The latter practice continues, certainly with the RTM channels, to the present day. After almost two decades of virtual state monopoly of the television airwaves, a commercial television station, TV3, was permitted by the government to begin operating in 1984. And there is indeed no doubt that, in quantitative terms, television in Malaysia has undergone profound changes since, particularly during the latter part of the 1990s. In 1993, for example, there were only 3 television stations, two of which were under direct government control. Five years later, by mid-1998, there were five television stations, three of which were commercial entities, one local cable company, MegaTV, providing five subscription channels, and a local satellite broadcasting company, Astro, providing 15 subscription television channels.

Despite this increase in channel offerings and broadcast hours, however, questions still remain regarding concentration of ownership and the continuing links between media owners and ruling political parties, particularly UMNO. Indeed, ongoing developments illustrate the continuing concentration of media ownership. In early 1994, a local media giant closely aligned to UMNO, the Utusan Group, became part of a consortium of four companies that was awarded a tender by the government to operate Malaysia's second commercial television station, MetroVision (Zaharom, 1994). Yet another company in the consortium is Melewar Corporation,
controlled by Tunku Abdullah of the Negeri Sembilan royal house and a longtime close associate of Prime Minister Mahathir.

Malaysia's first pay-TV or subscription service, *Mega TV*, which began operating in the third quarter of 1995, is also run by a consortium using the company name Cableview Services Sdn. Bhd. The largest shareholder in the consortium, with a 40 per cent stake, is Sistem Television Malaysia Berhad or TV3. The Malaysian Ministry of Finance has a 30 per cent stake, while Sri Utara Sdn. Bhd., a wholly-owned subsidiary of Maika Holdings Bhd. (the investment arm of the Malaysian Indian Congress [MIC], another component of the BN coalition) has a five per cent stake. In the three and a half year period since it began operation, *Mega TV* has been able to extend its reach to virtually all the states in Peninsular Malaysia. (Zaharom and Mustafa, 1998).

As for satellite broadcasting, on 13 January 1996, Malaysia's first communications satellite, the Malaysia East Asia satellite, *Measat-1*, was launched from Kourou, French Guyana. *Measat-1* is owned by Binariang Sdn. Bhd. which, in turn, is owned by trusts associated with three Malaysians, most prominent of whom is manufacturing and horse racing tycoon, T. Ananda Krishnan. Ananda has been politely referred to by one Malaysian daily as "a businessman who enjoys the confidence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad." (Star, 9/1/1996). In other words, he is a Mahathir crony. And the chairman of Binariang's board of directors is a former Inspector-General of the Malaysian police force, Hanif Mohamad Omar. Hence, as far as television - including satellite television - is concerned, what we have in Malaysia is a situation where the selective privatisation exercise by the Malaysian government continues to extend the tentacles of the ruling coalition and its cronies even wider across the Malaysian economy, adding economic and cultural domination to what is already virtual political domination.

**ii. The Press**

Malaysia's press has had a longer and more diverse history than broadcasting. The earliest recorded newspaper, the English language *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* was a commercial newspaper aimed at the colonial administrators and traders. Others that emerged soon after were either missionary newspapers or vernacular ones serving particular ethnic groups. As the nationalist, anti-colonial movement grew, so was the press, especially the Malay press, utilised to galvanise support for the movement. The independent nature of the press was dramatically transformed, however, under the New Economic Policy (NEP), instituted in 1971. Under the NEP, the government designed a five-year development masterplan that emphasised economic growth as well as redistribution of economic opportunities to the Malays. The NEP had a two-pronged strategy: (a) to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty; and (b) to restructure society so that the identification of economic functions with ethnicity could be reduced and eliminated.

This spirit of the NEP, and also the desire to increase Malaysian participation in the national economy, provided dominant political partners in the ruling coalition with the convenient excuses to to invest in the country's major newspapers and other media. The NEP thus helped to justify their corporate manoeuvres, and, at the end of the day, enabled them to exert control and influence over the media they owned. The government-owned trading company, Pernas, for example, acquired 80 per cent control of the *Straits Times* (Means, 1991:136), which was originally held by investors from Singapore. Later a majority of the shares were transferred to Fleet Holdings, an investment arm of the dominant partner in the BN
coalition, UMNO. The transfer of ownership was then followed by a change of name to the New Straits Times Press (NSTP). Fleet Holdings subsequently set up an investment company called Fleet Group that oversaw its subsidiaries such as the NSTP. This corporate move was of great political significance because the take-over involved major mainstream newspapers under the NSTP stable. Effectively, then, UMNO currently has control over NSTP, the largest media conglomerate in Malaysia which, in turn, controls the English language broadsheet, *New Straits Times*, the Malay language daily, *Berita Harian*, TV3 and a variety of other newspapers and magazines.

Further, in this drive to purportedly Malaysianise media ownership, UMNO now has direct ownership of the other big local media conglomerate, the Utusan Melayu newspaper group. The group has an array of major newspapers in its stable, like the *Utusan Malaysia*, the most widely circulated Malay language daily in the country which has a wide appeal among the Malay-speaking readership, in particular UMNO constituencies. Further Malaysian participation in the private sector in this period also witnessed the involvement of another partner in the ruling coalition, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), in the newspaper industry. It now has a major stake in the popular English language tabloid, *Star*, a business rival of the established *New Straits Times*.

iii. Legal Controls

Despite constant assertions about being democratic, the Malaysian government has a slew of laws at its disposal which are anything but democratic. And these are laws which it has not hesitated to enforce. At the top of the pile, most certainly, is the Internal Security Act (ISA), a draconian piece of legislation, introduced during the colonial era to counter communist terrorism in the country during the Emergency period. The ISA allows for indefinite detention without trial and has been used time and again in the 1980s - and even as recently as 1998 - to detain political dissidents, religious cult figures, opposition members of parliament and, most recently, a sacked Deputy Prime Minister.

More specifically for the media, there are the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1987) and what was until recently called the Broadcasting Act (1988). Under the Printing Presses and Publications Act, all mass circulation newspapers in Malaysia need to have a printing permit, granted by the Ministry of Home Affairs, before they can be published. A new permit needs to be applied for every year. Section 13A of the amended Act totally empowers the Home Minister to reject applications for a printing licence (popularly known as the "KDN") and to revoke or suspend a permit. The Minister’s decision is final and cannot be challenged in a court of law. As stated under Section 13, sub-section (1) of the Act (emphasis added):

"Without prejudice to the powers of the Minister to revoke or suspend a licence or permit under any other provisions of this Act, if the Minister is satisfied that any printing press in respect of which the licence has been issued is used for printing of any publication which is prejudicial to public order or national security or that any newspaper in respect of which a permit has been issued contains anything which is prejudicial to public order or national security, he may revoke such licence or permit."

Added to this, Section 7 of the amended Act empowers the Minister to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution or possession of any publication. Thus, we have this situation where the decisions of one Minister are binding and, strictly speaking, the Minister is under no
obligation to explain these decisions. And up until very recently, the Home Minister was none other than the Prime Minister, Mahathir.

The 1988 Broadcasting Act which was superseded by the Multimedia and Telecommunications Act in 1998 provides similar powers to the Minister of Information. Under the Act, any potential broadcaster would need to apply for a licence from the Minister beforehand. Further, Part III, Section 10, Subsection (1) of the Act states:

"It shall be the duty of the licencee to ensure that the broadcasting matter by him complies with the direction given, from time to time, by the Minister."

It is certainly evident then that the trends in the Malaysian media indicate two clear developments. These developments may seem contradictory at first glance but, upon closer scrutiny, are not exactly at odds with each other, given the nature of politics and control in Malaysia. Firstly, there is little doubt that the government's privatisation policy has resulted in greater commercialisation of the media which, in turn, has resulted in more being offered. This has happened not by accident, but as part of the government's strategy. Secondly, this supposed liberalisation has not really resulted in a loosening of government control over the media, contrary to the initial beliefs of many. The reverse in fact has happened. Over the past two decades, the main forms of control over the media - legal, political and economic - have certainly been tightened.

Within this type of environment, it is not surprising that although Malaysians appear to be getting more from the media, what they really are getting is, essentially, more of the same. In this environment, invariably also where the ownership and control of the media are in the hands of a few who are closely aligned to the government and who also wish to profit from the situation, there is increasing emphasis on the production and importation of "safe", often trivial, artefacts. From the endless talk shows on television to the crossword competitions in the press, the emphasis continues to be on material that are non-contentious and easily marketable - those that will not question, examine or challenge the official discourse (Zaharom, 1996).

It is clear, therefore, that media policies and official media strategies have been - and continue to be - informed by specific assumptions about the role the media should play in Malaysia. These assumptions are by no means Malaysian in origin or Malaysian by design. As I have indicated elsewhere (Zaharom, 1996), the origins are essentially Western. Indeed, on the basis of media policy frameworks informed and heavily influenced by a paradigm of development epitomised by the works of, for example, Lerner (1958) and Schramm (1964), the media in Malaysia, particularly television and broadcasting and, more generally, the print media, have been - and continue to be - promoted as valuable, indeed central, agents required for the so-called development of the country. Malaysian policy makers perpetually assert the vital role played by the media in changing Malaysian society. As far back as 1964, when television was first introduced into Northern Malaysia, the then Minister of Information spoke of its so-called revolutionary potential. According to him (Malaysian Times, 2/10/1964);

"television will be an important instrument of our social revolution. It will be a means of informing the people about the progress in various sectors of our national life. It will also enable them to know of the progress outside Malaysia."
Conforming to the orthodoxy that the media are powerful change agents enables the Malaysian government to insist that they are too important for the development of the country and its peoples to be allowed free rein. It helps to legitimise the state's strategy of maintaining strict and tight political control over the media, for the supposed "good" of the nation and in the "national interest", vague and undefined though these terms may be, while at the same time seemingly complying with the needs of a "free" market. As I have indicated in the previous section, it enables the state to embark on a strategy where, predictably, the powers to regulate do not lie in the hands of independent bodies but, as with many other countries in the region, come directly from the government. It allows no less than Mahathir (1981:19) to constantly reiterate warnings such as the following:

"So long as the press is conscious of itself being a potential threat to democracy and conscientiously limits the exercise of its rights, it should be allowed to function without government interference. But when the press obviously abuses its rights by agitating the people, then democratic governments have a right to control it."

Any attempt to critically assess this orthodoxy would also, equally, need to be aware that it continues to be perpetuated, indeed further reinforced, in the majority of the media studies programmes in Malaysia's academic institutions because the country has a profoundly conservative education system which, on the main, preaches conformity and compliance (Zaharom et.al, 1995).

The second factor that needs to be accounted for, if we wish to locate the structures and policies of the Malaysian media within the wider political economy, would be the central role played by state actors - particularly political parties within the ruling coalition - in the Malaysian economy generally and in the media industries specifically.

In Malaysia the role of the state, as I have indicated, is central. Granted, the deliberate and rapid opening of the Malaysian economy to the global market in the 1980s, particularly when Mahathir took over as prime minister, in turn, led to greater commercialisation of the Malaysian media. Nonetheless, increasing commercialisation, far from loosening state control, has, in fact, enabled control to be extended further in the economic sphere, with dominant Malaysian political parties having investment arms which own business concerns and are active players on the corporate scene (Gomez, 1990, 1991, 1994). This, of course, is not common only to Malaysia. However, the nature and extent to which the leading political parties in the ruling BN coalition are involved in business are details which need to be vigorously investigated in order to help us understand why the Malaysian media operate as they do and how their operations may, indeed, not only legitimise or shore up support for a "free market" system but also for particular, dominant groups in Malaysian society and the regime as a whole.

3. Portraying Poverty: The Press, Broadcasting and The Malaysian Poor

It is, of course, one thing to show - as I have tried to - that the mainstream Malaysian media are currently being controlled in an undemocratic manner by both the State and the market. It is quite another to suggest that, as a consequence, certain groups, including the poor, are marginalised or even sidestepped altogether by the media. Indeed, to investigate this possibility, I conducted a preliminary study, largely qualitative in nature at this stage, of samplings of major mainstream English and Malay language daily newspapers and selected local prime-time television dramas.
The newspapers sampled were the English language *New Straits Times* (NST), and the Malay language *Berita Harian* (BH) and *Utusan Malaysia* (UM). The latest (1998) figures indicate that these constitute the 3 top local English and Malay newspapers in Malaysia in terms of circulation and readership (see Table 1).

### Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
<th>Readership</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Utusan Malaysia</em> (UH)</td>
<td>253,680</td>
<td>1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Berita Harian</em> (BH)</td>
<td>272,615</td>
<td>1.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>New Straits Times</em> (NST)</td>
<td>163,287</td>
<td>618,000</td>
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*Source: Media Guide 1998*

### i. Preliminary Findings

On the basis of preliminary analyses conducted thus far, the following general, but nonetheless substantive, observations can be made.

#### The Malay newspapers

The major emphasis of the Malay papers is on rural poverty with the majority of stories being about the poor rural Malays. Invariably, there is an ethnic angle to the reporting. Both the emphasis on rural Malay poverty and ethnicity is not surprising, given that the appeal of the Malay newspapers is towards the Malay readership which, according to 1998 figures, make up 55 per cent of total Malaysian newspaper readers. It is also interesting to note that in the majority of cases, when the poor rural Malays are reported, they are invariably reported as adjuncts of wider reports about, for example, what the government is doing for them.

When specific individuals or groups of the poor are mentioned, more often than not, they are depicted because they represent 'success' stories of the government, beneficiaries of government policies and strategies. The poor - and poverty - are looked at through ethnic lenses; as far as the Malay papers are concerned, it is a racial problem, one that 'we' Malays must overcome to reclaim our rights and our pride, and our proper place in Malaysian society. This touches on one important aspect of 'being Malay', namely Malay sovereignty, an aspect which represents a continuous theme in the style of reporting in both the Malay newspapers. It is an aspect or a theme that continues to this present day.

#### The New Straits Times

The *New Straits Times* - indeed any English newspaper in Malaysia - tends to have a middle-class, English educated readership. The emphasis, particularly from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, has been on what may be termed 'feel good' news, with hardly any effort, leave alone concerted, being taken to reflect on and analyse issues regarding any rural poverty. Hence, when depicted, poverty is seen within a middle-class framework that is essentially urban-based. The emphasis of the disparate reports is not on material poverty but on the deprivation of functions - for eg., the physically and mentally disabled.

Being middle class in its reach, there is less emphasis on race and/or ethnicity and greater emphasis on gender, age and intellectual capability or education. The stress in these reports and
features is more on the successes of individuals and private organisations. As far as the solutions provided by these newspaper accounts are concerned, the emphasis is on self-reliance, self help, without much recourse to the state.

It is not so much that the news items depict the state as having abrogated its role as they depict individuals and civil society as having taken - indeed, must continue to take - up the slack. Hence, the onus is on us to help each other pull through. And, so go many of these news accounts, we pull through, often thanks to the efforts of charitable, caring (rich) individuals and organisations who have hearts of gold, despite being rich. Hence, there is little emphasis in these accounts on the possibility of the rich exploiting the poor, and greater emphasis on scenarios where the rich help the poor, the wretched of the earth.

- **Orang Asli** (aborigines)

These are the truly marginalised groups in Malaysian society despite being the original inhabitants. Many tribes live on the fringes of society, in reservations, in jungle villages. There is no sustained effort by any media, Malay or English, to discuss their plight, to analyse their needs, their cultures. Despite the rhetoric, largely by government departments supposedly created to look into their needs, there has thus far not been any sustained effort to determine whether they wish to join the mainstream of development. The English paper coverage tends to be more sympathetic during the period of analysis, but seldom take on a combative posture in defence of the rights of the *Orang Asli*, in solidarity with their cultures, their needs. At best the *Orang Asli* are seen in the news reports and features as oddities, artefacts in a natural, living museum. At worse, they are assumed - definitely by certain segments of the state - as animists who need to be converted.

- **Immigrant labour**

The boom decade of 1987-1997 resulted in an influx of migrant labour into Malaysia, notably Indonesians and Bangladeshis. Many are still employed in factories and building sites in major Malaysian towns. But there are also those who were - are - employed in plantations (oil palm plantations, for example). The plight of the migrant labour is one that is hardly looked into by the media/press, Malay or English. When they do get in the news, more often than not, they are depicted as a potential threat to Malaysian society. From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, such was the stereotype of Indonesian workers, seen as potential housebreakers and petty thieves, often using 'spiritual charms' to overcome their victims.

- **Television dramas**

Local television dramas, seen in the 1960s and 1970s as extremely pale copies of western genres, received a shot in the arm in the mid-1980s, especially with the advent of commercial television (TV3) in Malaysia. New slots were created on local television to incorporate local productions and within a short space of time, local dramas of varying and inconsistent quality became - and have remained - a permanent fixture.

However, through the mid-1980s up until the present, the plight of the poor in Malaysia, whether rural or urban has seldom, if ever, been adequately dealt with by local television dramas. No attempt has been made by the producers and writers of these dramas so far to systematically, intelligently, and sincerely address the problem of poverty. No questions have been posed about the probable structural causes of persistent poverty. Indeed, whenever the subject of poverty has been incorporated into the local productions available in this sample, as in the drama *Sumi*, it is invariably treated in a cursory and superficial manner - as if it will
magically disappear if only one wishes hard enough. Here again, with local television dramas, the emphasis is on poverty and ethnicity, the focus again being on the rural Malay poor.

Unlike news reports and other forms of 'factual' media artefacts which tend to have narrative structures which are 'closed' and inflexible, television dramas, like many other genres that are 'fictional', tend to be more 'open', where the range of options for resolution are greater. Not surprisingly, therefore, the dramas sampled (10) all tended to conclude with the obligatory happy or hopeful ending. In the case of Sumi, for example, at the end of the hour-long tale, we are left with a message on the screen which preaches, among other things, that poverty has its good points - it teaches us (the poor, that is) to be patient, more mature and more responsible. Through a strengthening of family ties, the sermon continues, and a positive change in attitude, someone like Sumi has as good a chance as any of succeeding (materially) in this world. So, the message is that it all boils down to the individual.

4. The Media and Poverty - Need for Reform?

There are a good many reasons put forward to explain why the poor are - and remain - poverty stricken. Some quarters have asserted insensitively that it is the poor themselves who are to blame and that their condition is due to their own indolence. There are others - even some of the poor themselves who believe that they are fated to remain poor because that is simply the way things are. There are, however, others who argue more convincingly that poverty is largely a consequence of an overall system of exploitation. Indeed, poverty and its causes, its consequences and its possible remedies is a problematic issue which continues to be discussed and debated by academics, policy makers, religious and social institutions, and even the man and woman in the street.

In Malaysia, unfortunately, discussions on poverty by the media has thus far tended to be along extremely narrow lines, where the parameters within which the discussions take place are circumscribed by a variety of factors, both internal and external to the media. These factors include the wider political-economic environment within which the mainstream Malaysian media operate; an environment, I have tried to show in the second part of this paper, this environment deems what is newsworthy, who is worth reporting and in what manner. It is an environment also which socialises journalists into 'taking as read' what/who are news and what/who are not. It is an environment, certainly, that emphasises profit maximisation and minimum costs. It is an environment, therefore, that has very little time and space for the poor, the marginalised, the disenfranchised.

It would, thus, appear that for the poor to have a chance to be heard and duly represented in and by the Malaysian media, reforms need to come about in the wider political economic environment because it is precisely this environment that impinges upon the ways in which the media can - and must - operate. For such reforms to come about, I believe, considerable political will and political action would be necessary, not only on the part of Malaysia's political leaders but, more importantly, on the part of Malaysia's citizens. ☐
Notes

1 When the country attained political independence from the British on 31 August 1957, it was then called "Malaya". In 1963, "Malaysia" was formed, comprising Malaya (now Peninsular Malaysia), Sabah and Sarawak (formerly British Borneo, now East Malaysia) and Singapore. Two years later, Singapore left Malaysia to form an independent state.

2 The largest component party is the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The names of the parties themselves reflect their ethnic bias.

3 The NEP remains the key reference point for Malaysia’s economic development policies. Its objective is summed up in the *Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-1980* (Government of Malaysia, 1976:7):

> "The NEP seeks to eradicate poverty among all Malaysians and to restructure Malaysian society so that the identification of race with economic function and geographical location is reduced and eventually eliminated, both objectives being realised through rapid expansion of the economy over time...the present compartmentalisation of racial groups by economic function, with the Malaysia and other indigenous people concentrated in the traditional sectors of the economy, is the core of the problem."

4 The *Look East* policy was introduced soon after Mahathir became Prime Minister, initially to boost productivity by promoting more effective modes of labour discipline and emphasising hard work, emulating the Japanese and South Korean models. As Mahathir (1983:305) himself puts it, *Look East* "means emulating the rapidly developing countries of the East in the effort to develop Malaysia." New work ethics, labour discipline and productivity are the key terms embodied in the policy. Soon after it was introduced, *Look East* also appeared to mean favouring Japanese and South Korean businessmen in the awarding of contracts, but after some bad business experiences and criticisms from those disfavoured by these arrangements, the earlier definition has been emphasised. (Jomo, 1990:202-205).

5 Adapted from the originally pejorative term, "Japan Incorporated", *Malaysia Incorporated* represents an attempt by the Malaysian government to improve state-business relationships, to ensure that the state and its bureaucracies serve rather than hinder private capitalist interests. As Mahathir (1983:306) puts it, "Malaysia Incorporated can therefore be defined as the concept of cooperation between the government and the private sector for the latter to succeed, thus make greater contributions to national development."

6 Officially, privatisation in Malaysia began in 1983, two years after Mahathir became prime minister. It also occurred at a time when, globally, Thatcherism and Reagonomics were setting the trends while, domestically, the poor performance of the Malaysian public sector, particularly many Malaysian public enterprises was being questioned and addressed. As outlined by the Malaysian government (EPU, 1985):

> "Privatisation has a number of major objectives. First, it is aimed at relieving the financial and administrative burden of the government in undertaking and maintaining a vast and constantly expanding network of services and investments in infrastructure. Second, privatisation is expected to promote competition, improve efficiency and increase the productivity of the services. Third,
privatisation, by stimulating private entrepreneurship and investment, is expected to accelerate the rate of growth of the economy. Fourth, privatisation is expected to assist in reducing the size and presence of the public sector, with its monopolistic tendencies and bureaucratic support, in the economy. Fifth, privatisation is also expected to contribute towards meeting the objectives of the New Economic Policy (NEP), especially since Bumiputera entrepreneurship and presence have improved greatly since the early days of the NEP and they are therefore capable of taking up their share of the privatised services."

Vision 2020, to all intents and purposes, is a master plan for transforming Malaysia into a developed country by the early twenty-first century. As Mahathir (1991:1) himself put it when he unveiled the Vision: "The ultimate objective that we should aim for is a Malaysia that is fully developed by the year 2020". Nine challenges facing the nation in its attempt to attain fully developed status have been outlined by Mahathir and these continue to be the driving force behind the Vision.

These challenges (Mahathir, 1991:2-4) may be summarised as follows:

1. Establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny...at peace with itself...and...made up of one 'Bangsa Malaysia'.
2. Creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society with faith and confidence in itself...psychologically subservient to none and respected by the peoples of other nations.
3. Fostering and developing a mature democratic society, practising a form of mature consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democracy that can be a model for many developing countries.
4. Establishing a fully moral and ethical society...strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest of ethical standards.
5. Establishing a mature, liberal and tolerant Malaysian society.
6. Establishing a scientific and progressive society...innovative and forward-looking.
7. Establishing a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self.
8. Ensuring an economically just society...in which there is fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation.
9. Establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

There is, for example, no competitive, open tender system when bids are made for projects which the government is privatising. The decision to award tenders often lies in the hands of the minister whose ministry is privatising a project.

The newspapers were sampled from three years - 1984, 1989 and 1994 - using an 8-day sampling strategy. These years were selected for a variety of reasons, most important of which being that they were not election years.
References


