

A Transgressive Voice in a Restrictive Media Environment: A Study of Sinar Harian Coverage of the 2013 Malaysian General Election

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian newspapers have a responsibility to be catalysts for national development. For that reason, newspapers in Malaysia are expected to not challenge the state and to partner the state toward nation-building. Although mainstream media in Malaysia are restricted by the state, this does not completely exclude more transgressive modes pushed by challengers. One of the newspapers that could be regarded as breaking the norm in its coverage with other mainstream newspapers in Malaysia is Sinar Harian. This research will study the kinds of transgressive forms of contention that tend to surface through the reporting of the newspaper. The reporting by Sinar Harian during the 2013 Malaysian General Election is subject to qualitative discourse analysis. The result shows that not only did Sinar Harian give space to the opposition group to challenge the authorities, but the newspaper also, at times, challenged the status quo by placing the ruling coalition Barisan National and opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat on an equal footing.

Keywords: Malaysia; mainstream newspapers; journalism; political communication; election; discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian media are expected to be catalysts for national development and to focus on nation-building, social cohesion, and 'responsible' journalism rather than, for instance, critical engagement or freedom of information (Weiss, 2012). For that reason, the media, which are mostly privately-owned, are expected not to challenge the state and to partner with the state toward nation-building (Mustafa, 2005; Weiss, 2012). This has resulted in government intervention and political party ownership of the Malaysian mass media and as a result, mainstream news media are demonstrably limited in what they can and do cover (Mustafa, 2005; Weiss, 2012). Ezhar, Raj and Govindasamy (2012) argue that because of this, important principles of journalism such as the concepts of free and fair coverage by the press are often compromised. They opine that press freedom, independence, autonomy, objectivity and truthfulness have frequently been sacrificed to protect the government, the ruling party, religious groups and the monarchy.

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Concern over racial antagonism within the multiracial societies in Malaysia has always been a major factor for the government in controlling the press (Mohd Azizuddin, 2005; Ezhar et al., 2012). However, Mohd Azizuddin (2005) contends that under the guise of this principle, the media is being used to support and advance the policies of the government. To ensure this, a control system is established and exercised over the media. Control mechanisms include, but are not limited to, a licensing system, government censorship, special taxes and laws in the name of protecting the harmony of the nation from such things as treason and sedition. As a result, the press shies away from any stories that address race relations, religion or problems in foreign countries.

The year 1998 saw a shift in the battleground of opinion shift to cyberspace, triggered by the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. Arguably this was partly driven by the partial coverage of the event by the mainstream media which mostly sides with the ruling coalition government of the Barisan Nasional (Hock, 2006). Less closely regulated internet-based news sites, blogs and discussion forums and social networking tools have come to play an increasingly critical role in expanding and liberalising the news sphere in Malaysia (Weiss, 2012). As a result, the internet and social media have given the opposition parties a medium to engage with their supporters.

Regardless of the above development, old media remain crucially important in Malaysia. Studies show that while internet access is pervasive and growing, most Malaysians still obtain their news through print and broadcast media (Weiss, 2012; George, 2007). An opinion survey shortly after the 2008 elections found that mainstream news was the main source of election-related news and a minority of respondents rated mainstream media even somewhat favourably in terms of truthfulness, fairness, objectivity, breadth of opinions covered or ethics (Weiss 2012). George (2007) contends that although mainstream print and broadcast media are restricted by the state, this does not completely preclude more transgressive modes pushed by challengers.

One of the newspapers that could be pushing towards a transgressive form of reporting is the Malay daily Sinar Harian. The relatively new Sinar Harian, came into existence in 2006 is selected for this study, due to its reputation in giving fair coverage of both the ruling and opposition parties (Wan Rohila, Nurul and Ilyas, 2013). It is published by the Karangraf Group, owned by Dato' Hussamuddin Yaacob who has been part of the publishing business in operation since 1978. It describes itself as Malaysian's first 'state-customized no-frills national newspaper', which caters to the needs of readers according to their individual state (Profile: Sinar Harian, n.d.). It publishes eight editions daily, mainly in peninsular Malaysia. The newspaper prides itself on 'its transparent and neutral reporting style' (Profile: Sinar Harian, n.d.). and it has steadily gained ground from the other daily newspapers which evidently took a pro government stance. According to the data provided by the company, the circulation of Sinar Harian as of January 2012 is 160,000 with readership numbers more than half a million. Looking at the newspaper scenario in

Malaysia, where mainstream newspaper circulation keeps plunging down further, the number is commendable (Audit Bureaus Circulation Malaysia, 2013; Thean, 2013). In comparison to the circulation of seasoned Malay daily newspapers such as Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian with 182,748 and 138,805 readers respectively (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2012), Sinar Harian looks like a winner, though there is scant research to show this. Sinar Harian "unbiased" reporting is belief to be the newspaper recipe for success.

A study by Wan Rohila, Nurul and Ilyas (2013), conducted during a 15-day campaign period of Malaysia's 2013 General Election, through a content analysis method found that Sinar Harian attempts to present balanced reporting, by giving space to both parties contesting, to present their ideas and defend their various stands. This study found 33 per cent of articles favoured the ruling party Barisan Nasional (BN), 36 per cent covered the opposition party Pakatan Rakyat (PR), 24 per cent of articles were considered as neutral reports and 6 per cent of articles reported the activities of independent candidates.

This article will look into a similar case study, the reporting by Sinar Harian during the 13th Malaysian General Election from 1 May until 6 May 2013. The reporting of Sinar Harian will be subjected to discourse analysis through the analysis of lexical features, sentence construction of texts and analysis of direct quotation and indirect quotation. The analysis will be based on the understanding of Fowler's (1991) seminal work *Language in News*, which lays down the initial framework for a 'critical' study of news. He argues that linguistic structure plays an important role in news construction. Fowler regards news not as 'facts about the world', but as a construction of 'ideas', 'beliefs', 'values', 'theories', 'propositions' or 'ideology' (p. 1). Fowler (1991) considers that news is a 'particularly important example of the power of all language in the construction of social reality', articulated from a particular ideological position based on the social, political and economic positions of the news institution (p. 10). This study attempts to investigate how Sinar Harian, in its pledge to be 'neutral' and 'transparent', constructs its linguistic structure in the reporting of the 13th Malaysian general election. It will also look into how language use by the newspaper relates to social, political and cultural formations in Malaysia.

2. MEDIA AND STATE

The ruling government of Barisan Nasional (BN) in Malaysia, which has been in power since independence in 1957, expects media in Malaysia to not play an adversarial role in their interaction with the state due to their socially responsible role of nation-building with the government (Mohd Safar, 1996, pp. 104–14). This symbiotic relationship means that the media is expected to show support for government economic and developmental policies and projects (Mustafa, 2005).

In relation to that, there are a number of laws that are enforced in the name of protecting and promoting law and order and internal security as well as national development. Preserving the multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious nature of Malaysian society provides justification for the state to make use of

these laws. However the laws, the Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act and Defamation Act amongst others, are said to restrict the media from being transparent with news coverage (Yeoh & Ng, 2008).

The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 is a primary piece of legislation that governs and shapes the press industry. PPPA stipulates that all newspapers and regular publications should possess a publishing permit issued by the Home Affairs Ministry. PPPA also empowers the Minister of Internal Security to revoke the permit of a publication should he decide that the publication concerned has acted in a manner prejudicial to the nation's security. In 2012, the PPPA was amended to remove the home minister's 'absolute discretion' over printing press licences. The amendment do away with the need for annual renewal of printing licences, which means once a licence has been granted by the government; a newspaper would not need to renew it until it is revoked by the minister (Printing Presses and Publications (Amendment) Act 2012). It also reinstates judicial oversight over the minister's decisions. However, the PPPA still empowers the minister to have absolute discretion over the approval of publishing permits and to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution or possession of a publication. Traditional media which are subject to the PPPA as well as other legislation have resorted to self-censorship to avoid potential penalties. These have simultaneously limited the free flow of contentious arguments and promoted the circulation of government-supporting messages in Malaysia (Rodan, 2005).

The PPPA is also believed to be responsible for promoting the concentration of press ownership in the hands of a few who are closely aligned with the government. Mustafa (2005) and George (2007) argue that given the immense power that the internal security minister wields, it follows that most publishing permits have been conveniently issued to applicants who are deemed friendly to the powers-that-be. This is especially so when it comes to granting a publishing permit for a daily newspaper (Mustafa, 2005). As a result, political parties' involvement in Malaysian media is commonplace. Most print and broadcast media are closely tied to the BN, with ownership concentrated in party-linked holding companies. Through a complex web of companies and investments, Malaysia's political parties have become the nation's largest shareholders of media. Together, the UMNO-linked conglomerates, Media Prima and Utusan Melayu group, for instance, own nearly all mainstream Malay and English language newspapers, as well as a number of television channels and magazines. Besides this, the Ministry of Information manages the national television and radio networks, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) which consists of TV1 and TV2, and 32 radio channels (Ezhar et al., 2012; George, 2007; Mustafa, 2005; Weiss, 2012; Wong & Lian, 2011).

This involvement in the ownership of the traditional media by the political parties is viewed as a form of bias due to the influence of the politicians on the content of the news (Weiss, 2012). The media have become tools of the political wings to convey information regarding their ideologies and national policies. The control of the mainstream media by the political parties has resulted in news seen as not representing reality to

safeguard the interest of the proprietors (Cohen & Young, 1973).

As a result, the mainstream press in Malaysia are generally considered as being pro ruling coalition Barisan National(BN) (Mustafa, 2005). During general elections in particular, Malaysia's mainstream media were tasked to highlight the BN governments' successes, particularly in the area of socioeconomic development. At the same time, for the other contesting political parties, their voice in the mainstream media is mostly non-existent. If opposition parties appear on the mainstream news, they are often depicted in a negative light (Mustafa, 2005).

Studies of the reporting of the elections by Malaysian media proves this. Since independence in 1957, the mainstream press in Malaysia has been shown to be partisan towards the government and to show a clear pro government, anti-opposition bias. Studies by Mustafa (2005), Ahmad (2008), Abbott (2011) and Mohd Hilmi et al. (2013) show that mainstream newspapers are more likely to be on the side of the government and that English and Malay dailies such as Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian were more supportive of the incumbent BN on the election campaign coverage.

3. CONTENTION AND STRUGGLE

George (2007) argues that although mainstream media, comprising national newspapers and broadcasters, are closely regulated, the contentiousness of Malaysia's competitive elite politics is sometimes mirrored in the mainstream media. He argued that although such conflict tends to be contained within existing political arrangements, reproducing the regime, the mainstream media remain highly contested sites.

Although the potentially transgressive forms of contention tend to surface through alternative media such as independent websites and blogs, George (2007) opines that the mainstream media are not immune to challenge from within by more contentious forces. These forms of inclusion and exclusion relate to the way certain kinds of media practice challenge to the status quo, while others seem to reproduce or completely bypass dominant power arrangements. This inclusion and exclusion of political actors is represented by the concept of 'contentious politics' defined as collective political struggle that is 'episodic rather than continuous, occurs in public, involves interaction between makers of claims and others, is recognized by those others as bearing on their interests, and brings in government as mediator, target, or claimant' (George, 2007, p. 3).

George (2007) puts forward two forms of contention, namely 'contained' and 'transgressive'. Contained contention refers to cases involving actors and means that are previously constituted and well established. In transgressive contention, at least some of the players are newly self-identified political actors and/or use innovative actions; including self-representations or methods that are either unprecedented or formally disallowed by the state (George, 2007). While contained contention tends to reproduce existing regimes, transgressive contention may produce significant short-term political and social change. Based on this argument, George (2007) reveals that mainstream media do in fact serve as a mode for

contained contention. For example, competition between UMNO and its smaller alliance partners is often played out through the mainstream media.

The potentially transgressive contention, he argues, is denied full access to the mainstream media. The coverage of controversial issues such as the controversy of Anwar Ibrahim show opposite reporting by mainstream newspapers, such as New Straits Times (NST) and Utusan Melayu and independent websites such as Malaysiakini. Coverage of political conflict that occurs over and through mainstream media in Malaysia may be occasionally intense, but it is mostly a 'contained' contention: involving established political elites, and tending to reproduce existing regimes, where the boundaries of participation are defined by the ruling government (George, 2007)

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework for this study is based on the discourse analysis approach in news. Discourse analysis is generally concerned with how knowledge, opinions and ideas are created and circulated in society and how they are maintained and held in place over time (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6). This analysis of knowledge, opinions and ideas emphasises 'language in use'; that is, how language relates to social, political and cultural formations, and how language reflects and shapes social order and individuals' interaction with society (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, p. 3).

The analysis of textual features of the Sinar Harian news will be based on the lexical features, sentence construction of texts and analysis of direct quotation and indirect quotation. Lexical analysis explains the usage of words that may 'convey the imprint of society and value judgment' (Richardson, 2007, p. 47). This includes the way that people are named in the news script and the manner in which social actors are referred to. The analysis of sentence construction will be based on the analysis of transitivity. Transitivity explains the relationship between participants in a news report, including the role they play and how actions that appear in a text are represented (Richardson, 2007, p. 54). Analysis of transitivity investigates the process and participants in the sentence, the agency of the sentence, the usage of nominalisations, how sentences are connected, and the usage of active/passive voice and negative/positive sentences (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 101–110). The analysis of direct quotations and indirect quotations in this research will be drawn from Leon Barkho's (2007) conception of four layers of hard news discourse. Barkho (2007) states that the transformation of material by reporters into news discourse is carried out in four major ways: (1) quoting, (2) paraphrasing, (3) background and (4) comment (p. 12). The analyses specifically looks at the level of quoting and paraphrasing.

5. FINDINGS

This article examines Sinar Harian discursive strategies and practices in representing the 13th Malaysian General Election. Sinar Harian news articles were subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) through selected analytical features, namely

the analysis of lexical structures, transitivity and on the layers of quoting and paraphrasing, or direct and indirect quotations. Thirty-five news articles published in the second, third or fourth pages of the newspaper, on the 2013 Malaysian general election, were subjected to analysis. To ensure consistency in selecting news, the front page was not included. This was because, as a regional newspaper, Sinar Harian's front page is customised for each of its eight regional publications. The national news, which appears mainly in the second to fifteenth pages, is mostly the same for each regional publication. The duration covered by the analysis was from the campaigning period, which was from 1 May 2013, until one day after the election on 6 May 2013.

Findings of the discourse analysis show that Sinar Harian coverage delivers glimpses of how the newspaper attempts to provide a balance and objective reporting of the Malaysian political arena within a restrictive media environment and complex dynamics of ethnically and religiously diverse society. These struggles are mirrored in these five themes: more space to the ruling party, positive attitudes towards the opposition party, inconsistencies in the editorials, tit-for-tat between opposition leaders and the government agencies, and striving to be neutral and non-partisan.

5.1. More coverage to the ruling party

Looking at the second, third and fourth pages of Sinar Harian coverage, analysis shows that Sinar Harian tend to give more space to the coverage of the ruling party compared to the coverage of the opposition groups. News items featuring Barisan Nasional (BN) were evidently twice as long as news items on Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

Sinar Harian's main reporting on the 2 May 2013, for example, revolves around the coverage of the campaign by the Prime Minister, Najib Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin and the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. All the news appears on the second page with the article on Najib's campaign speech three times longer than the article on Anwar Ibrahim's campaign speech. Both articles about Najib and Muhyiddin are accompanied by pictures of their campaign trail but there is no picture for the article on Anwar. Sinar Harian's main report on 3 May 2013 also mainly gives a platform to the Malaysian Electoral Commission to address the criticism faced by them on the issues of migrant workers as illegal voters and the introduction of indelible ink for voting.

However the language construction of Sinar Harian reporting on the 2 May 2013, shows clear differences in the reporting on Najib and Anwar stories. The lead on Najib's speech contains a clear attribution and a clear transitivity of the sentence (Sinar Harian, 2 May 2013a). Najib was described as 'admitting that the rural people are the hardcore supporters of the government, hence they are capable of contributing to a big win of BN'. The second paragraph stated that Najib 'also explained two factors why rural communities must continuously place high confidence in BN'. However, the use of the verbs 'admit' and 'explain' portrayed Najib as yielding and submitting to the support of rural people. The word 'continuously' triggered a presupposition that Barisan Nasional could not have

continuous support from rural people. The reporting on Muhyiddin's campaign also shows a clear choice of words and a clear subject and predicate (Sinar Harian, 2 May 2013b). Muhyiddin was said to 'invite the people of Kelantan to join the Jihad to reject PAS because the party has been the cause of decline of the state'. He is also quoted as having said that the current government of Kelantan is 'very weak' and 'not capable of developing the state'.

The reporting on Anwar's campaign speech in Putrajaya shows a divergence in style (Sinar Harian, 2 May 2013c). Unlike the stories on Najib and Muhyiddin that show clear statement and attribution, with little interference from the reporter's point of view, the lead on Anwar contains descriptive adjectives that describe his campaign positively to a point of hinting at the winning of PR in Putrajaya, a hotly contested constituency between BN and PR, and also the administrative city of Malaysia. The lead started with the sentence 'with blazing passion to overthrow the current government', Anwar was said to have 'urged the citizens of Putrajaya to create history by sinking BN' in the 13th general election. In the second paragraph, Anwar was said to have 'urged the voters in Putrajaya to give their support' to the incumbent PR constituency candidate, Husam Musa, to bring about change. In the fifth paragraph, the reporter interpretatively described that 'Anwar is seen fully injecting commitment into the people of Putrajaya to make a difference'.

Sinar Harian's reporting on the result of the 13th General Election on the 6 May 2013 mostly contains direct reporting of the result. The orientation of the second and fourth pages are still the same, news on the winning of Barisan Nasional gets the dominant news space compared to the news on Pakatan Rakyat. 'BN remain in power' is the main title of the first page (Sinar Harian, 6 May 2013a). The word 'remain' indicates the closeness of the election result which saw BN again denied the two-thirds majority by opposition parties. A report by the Electoral Commission shows that with a high turnout of 85 per cent of the country's 13.3 million voters, the Barisan Nasional coalition won with 47 per cent of the popular vote while the opposition group won more than 50 per cent of the popular vote (Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya, 2013). The lead of the news stated that 'BN managed to defend the federal government and will continue to administer Putrajaya after beating rival PR in the 13th General Election'. The words 'defend', 'will continue' and 'rival' are significant, indicating that the government is no longer in a position to secure absolute power. In addition, the word 'rival' put Pakatan Rakyat and BN in an almost equal position of rivalry. Najib Razak was indirectly quoted as saying he was 'hoping that the opposition parties would accept this decision with an open mind and allow the democratic process to run smoothly'. This again indicates that the government is not in a dominant position. In a shorter column, there is also a report on the winning of the Permatang Pau constituency by the PKR de facto leader, Anwar Ibrahim (Sinar Harian, 2 May 2013d), and on the DAP adviser, Lim Kit Siang, who defeated BN heavyweight, Abdul Ghani Othman, at Gelang Path, a constituency which has been under BN incumbent Abdul Ghani for 18 years (Sinar Harian, 6 May 2013b).

5.2. Positive attitudes towards the Pakatan Rakyat

Sinar Harian reporting on 1 May which revolve around the coverage of a dialogue session entitled 'PRU13 Manifesto: Barisan Nasional vs. Pakatan Rakyat'. The session which was held by Sinar Harian involved local political analysts. It discussed on Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) manifestos.

One of the articles in the main page, entitled 'PR Manifesto is closer to young people', clearly reflects a positive tone towards the PR manifesto (Sinar Harian, 1 May 2013a). The lead, 'Manifesto presented by Pakatan Rakyat (PR) is closer to young people and gives hope to the people', immediately shows support for the opposition group political pledges. It is important to note that the sentence was not attributed to any sources, which to an extent suggests the reporter's support of the manifesto of PR. Notice the adjective 'closer', which carries a strong indication of the reporter's attitude towards the PR manifesto in endorsing the statement made by the lead.

The second paragraph, 'Political analysts, Dr. Maszlee Malik opines that the manifesto is realistic in which it gives what the citizen needs and not what they desire', is a paraphrased statement from the political analyst. The statement explicitly described that the opposition manifesto is more 'realistic' for the Malaysian citizen. Through indirect quotations, the article further mentions that the PR manifesto caters for the low income groups. This is supported by a direct quote from the political analyst that the PR manifesto is created by 'young people and more relevant to the younger generation'. Only towards the end of the article does it give credit to the BN manifesto by mentioning that it is 'beneficial to the people too' through a scheme such as 'Bantuan Rakyat Satu Malaysia (BRIM)'. But through a direct quote, the analyst questioned whether the BRIM scheme by the BN coalition which benefited rural citizens more is sustainable and able to overcome the problems they face.

On the same first page, in a smaller size, Sinar Harian highlighted one of PR's manifestos, which is to provide free education (Sinar Harian, 1 May 2013b). The article indirectly shows support towards the manifesto by refuting the arguments that free education would create inactive and unproductive graduates. The article further highlighted opinion from a political analyst that early education needs to become the main focus and feature. It also features an indirect quote from the political analysts on the importance of education in democracy and not solely on the political system, which again reiterated the article support for the manifesto.

5.3. Inconsistencies in the editorial

The biggest news treatment on the second page of the 1 May reports of Sinar Harian is given to the story that the manifestos by BN and PR should be debated openly on television (Sinar Harian, 1 May 2013c). The argument is that it would 'give a fair chance for the people of Malaysia to deliberate on the manifesto and make informed choices'. In the middle of the article, it again shows its propensity to support PR's manifesto by highlighting arguments from a political analyst that the PR manifesto is more convincing in

fulfilling the people's need. BN's manifesto is described as having a top-down approach and very much dependent on government agencies.

This argument is again reiterated in another article entitled 'fulfil the will, the needs of the people' on the next page (Sinar Harian, 1 May 2013d). It is interesting to note that the lead highlights the point that 'the people should realize that both BN and PR are debating the same issues which are about the wants and needs of the people'. However, through direct and indirect quotes of a political analyst, the subsequent paragraphs criticised BN's manifesto as coming 'from the above' and did not fulfil the people's need. The article later, however, incoherently explains that BN's manifesto could win the election because the party is more 'exposed to the world economy'. In another accompanying article from the same page, entitled 'the reason why PR manifesto gets better response', it argued that PR's manifesto is more acceptable than BN's because it successfully 'touches people's heart' especially on the country's resources that are not being fairly distributed (Sinar Harian, 1 May 2013e). The argument which is attributed to the same political analyst however backtracked by saying the manifesto tabled by PR could not solve the country's main problem which is inefficiency in handling its wealth.

Such "backtracking" or inconsistencies in the editorial of Sinar Harian is clearly shown in its reporting on 4 May, which mainly revolves around the controversy of colourful mini-flags placed around the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The main news item on page two titled 'Muhyiddin asks KPN to investigate' reports that the Deputy Prime Minister had asked the Chief of Police to probe allegations that the flags placed around the capital were the focal point for demonstrations by the opposition should they lose (Sinar Harian, 4 May 2013a). He was also quoted as having asked the police to investigate reports published by several blog sites and information disseminated through SMS on the matter. Besides mentioning the word 'opposition' in general, the article did not explicitly mention who was responsible for the flags. However, most of the paragraphs insinuate that the flags are the work of the opposition parties. In paragraph eight, there is a mention that the colours of the flags represent the youth affiliated to the alliance that will embark on the 'Malaysian Spring' on the evening of 5 May if results do not go in their favour.

Sinar Harian also featured a statement by Gagasan Anti Penyelewengan Selangor (GAPS), which is a combination of 50 non-governmental organisations (NGO), and known to be anti-PKR (Sinar Harian, 4 May 2013b). Its president was quoted as asking 'the police to take immediate action against the attempts of certain parties to create chaos that there will be the "Malaysian Spring" after the 13th General Election'. He was also directly quoted as saying 'the action will only scare people towards the democratic process' and the party involved 'is clearly a traitor'. Sinar Harian again, through its paraphrasing, did not make clear who was meant by the 'certain party'.

Page two of Sinar Harian also featured an editorial on the colourful mini-flags controversy (Sinar Harian, 4 May 2013c). The article clearly displays disapproval of the movement to plant thousands of the coloured flags and it

shows in the title 'Attempts to destroy peace'. The Sinar Harian transitivity approach did not include the doers in the title. The 'who does what to whom' was not clearly mentioned in the article and the 'agentless passive' title left the causality and agency unclear. The lead interpretatively questions 'why it needs to be placed, whereas there was no logo for which party it stands for'. The writings cast a tone of bad omen and show concern over the coloured flags which 'show the movement is serious in its plan'. The third paragraph shows the use of unattributed sources. The sources, quoted directly, explained that the 'authorities are monitoring the situation and so far all candidates found to have engaged in a flag campaign are being interrogated.' The article also referred to a Facebook 'Malaysian Spring' created by a 'certain group' claiming that it seems to be directly responsible for the coloured flags. The article hypothetically linked the movement of flag planting to one which 'resembles the rise of the Arab Spring as the flag may be used as checkpoints for a specific movement to stage mass demonstration if the parties involved lost'. The last two paragraphs, referring to SMS-based sources received by the newspaper, incriminated the opposition group. They stated that the SMS sources claim 'that PR supporters will start tomorrow's Malaysian Spring afternoon if results do not go their way'. The small triangular flag colours 'allegedly represent the DAP, PAS and PKR Youth groups'. Notice the words 'claim' and 'allegedly' denote how the writers reluctantly commit to the claim and still try to stand back from the sources although the article interpretively condemns the movement. What is clear is that the tone of the three articles is clearly against the movement although they try hard to hide the subject and the agent responsible for the coloured flag movement.

The article on the next page, however, confusingly featured a spread of pictures of the coloured flags in different locations including the picture of the Deputy President of PKR holding the flags with the caption 'Nurul Izzah launched "Malaysian Spring" campaign as part of the PRU13' (Sinar Harian, 4 May 2013d). The article titled 'Symbolic hope of the citizen: Nurul Izzah' shows the opposite tone to the previous articles and is more positive in its approach. The lead starts with 'It is understood that this movement was initiated by a group of individuals who want to enliven the 13th General Election campaign, voluntarily'. Notice that the lead of the article still vaguely refers to the movement as 'this group' rather than for example, 'supporters of PR'. The words 'It is understood' shows a lack of commitment and again did not fully blame PR. The words 'enliven' and 'voluntarily' cast a positive spell on the article. The article also confirmed that the coloured flags planted around the city are directly correlated with the Facebook page 'Malaysian Spring'. In the following paragraph, Izzah was quoted as saying the flags have nothing to do with the 'Arab Spring Demonstration'. In a direct quote, she said that 'attempts to relate the programme with the "Arab Spring" is the work of those who fear losing power' and 'attempts to scare the people'.

5.4. Arguments and counter-arguments between opposition leaders and the government agencies

One clear feature of Sinar Harian reporting on the election is that its coverage of an issue mainly consists of tit-for-tat between opposition leaders and the government agencies. Although Sinar Harian's report on 3 May 2013, for example, mainly gives a platform to the Malaysian Electoral Commission (EC) to address the criticism faced by them on the issues of migrant workers as illegal voters and the introduction of indelible ink for voting, the overall tone of the article saw EC on the defensive. On the second page, the most dominant news item on the 3rd may (Sinar Harian, 3 May 2013a) featured leads from the paraphrased statement made by the Chairman of EC, Abdul Aziz Mohd Yusof who was quoted as saying that 'a lot of voters coming from Sabah and Sarawak return to Peninsular on the voting day... they are the registered voters that return to fulfil their duty'. The fourth paragraph provided background information on the accusation to which the EC Chairman was responding, which was made by the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar was quoted and paraphrased as claiming that 'the EC and the Prime Minister's Office masterminded a large number of dubious voters to come from Sabah and Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia'. For a daily newspaper like Sinar Harian, the word 'mastermind' or 'mendalangi' in Malay could be seen as a strong word that signifies a very negative and disgraceful act hurled at the Prime Minister's Office and the EC. Besides having to answer opposition claims about the incoming voters from Sabah and Sarawak, paragraph eight saw EC in a direct quote declaring that it is free and 'not on anybody's side, even the government. EC do not cheat and do not have any agenda. The accusation is baseless'.

The next page again saw EC on the defensive regarding the use of indelible ink (Sinar Harian, 3 May 2013b). Similar to the second page, there were two news items, the dominant one from EC and one half the size on the opposition claims of the ineffectiveness of indelible ink. In the main article on page three, the secretary of EC was quoted as saying 'the indelible ink that is applied on the voter's finger will not disappear for five to seven days'. He was said to 'give the assurance based on tests that indelible ink which is shaken for 30 seconds before being applied will remain on for longer'. The smaller item featured a critical statement from Pakatan Rakyat questioning the statement by EC that shaken ink will last longer (Sinar Harian, 3 May 2013c). PR secretary general, Lim Guan Eng, was quoted as saying the 'EC statement does not make sense' and he questioned the brand used where the ink was shaken for a long-lasting effect. The article also featured mostly critical views from Guan Eng towards EC. He was quoted as saying 'This is illogical. Why does the indelible ink need to be shaken before being used? How many times does one need to shake it? Once per hour or once every two hours?' Guan Eng was also paraphrased as saying that he 'denounced the attempts made by EC to play a game which deliberately mocks the democratic process in the country'.

Sinar Harian coverage of the issues surrounding indelible ink on the 2 May 2013, which was used for the first time in the 13th general election, shows a less

favourable tone. Its coverage revolves around the validity issue of the use of the ink that is applied to the forefinger of voters during elections in order to prevent electoral fraud. In one of the news items, titled 'EC admits negligence of its staff' (which was corrected the next day as 'EC admits negligence by some of its staff'), it is reported that the main reason that the ink disappears after being applied is because EC does not comply with use of the ink (Sinar Harian, 2 May 2013e).

Sinar Harian also carried statements by Parti Keadilan Rakyat President, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, that questioned the durability of the ink that is applied to the forefinger (Sinar Harian, 2 May 2013f). She was paraphrased as having said that 'the ink can be easily removed after several washings'. In her direct quote, she urged the voters to 'be ready with smart phones and take pictures of any irregularities regarding the indelible ink'. Sinar Harian also featured an article from a woman who claimed that she was approached by a group of individuals who offered to apply indelible ink to her fingers (Sinar Harian, 3 May 2013d). This reflects the confusion and fear about smudging ballot papers with undried ink and illegal early voting which was discussed across social media at that time.

5.5. Striving to be neutral and non-partisan

Sinar Harian pledges to be neutral and balance is manifested in its coverage on the 5 May 2013. Its coverage on the day of the election emphasised the theme that the election 'is anyone's game to lose'. The editorial by its Chief Editor, Norden Mohamed, anchors the main page of the newspaper on 5 of May 2013 (Sinar Harian, 5 May 2013a). The title declares 'Landmarks of democracy's path'. The writings are very peculiar in the sense that the pronoun 'we' is used throughout the first half of the article, which on the first reading shows solidarity of the newspaper with the reader. The first paragraph urges the reader to choose which party they want to govern over the next year. The readers were asked to 'think for a moment, calmly' when they walk into the voting room. Although the word 'we' may denote solidarity with the readers, it also indicates that Sinar Harian is aware of the media power that it holds thus instructing the reader what needs to be done. The second paragraph recalls the 2008 election where, the writer stated, 'a lot of people quietly changed from the usual choice' and it had "surprised everyone". This mainly refers to the win by Pakatan Rakyat which, for the first time since the 1969 election, denied the majority of the ruling party, BN. The writer described that event as a 'reality check' for both PR and BN and that it showed 'maturity' in the democratic system. In the subsequent paragraph, the editor reminded readers that since the 2013 election 'is the mother of all elections', voters are advised to 'not test the water and so play anymore with the future'. This again, using the persuasive power of the media, indirectly disproved the choices that voters made during 2008, and forebodingly reminded readers they should think before making any change. This shows that the use of the word 'we' is more manipulative than solidarity, where the newspaper tells voters what they have done and what they need to do.

In the sixth paragraph, the editor changes his role. The pronoun 'we' disappears

and now he speaks directly to the political parties as a newspaper editor. He stresses that after the 12th General Election where he argues that both BN and PR have been going through a 'probation period', both parties should be more 'mature'. Both parties were advised that they 'can no longer exhibit childish behavior when receiving the results of the people'. Both parties were also reminded to accept being the winner or the loser and 'honor' choices made by the people. Towards the end of the article the editor declares that whatever the result, Sinar Harian 'will honor the outcome of the elections and support whoever people choose to rule'. The rest of the coverage of Sinar Harian echoes the theme expressed by the editor in which 'both parties should accept the result whatever it is' and the result 'is in the hands of the people'. Most of the sources that expressed these views are experts and prominent religious leaders. The Mufti of Perlis Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, for example, were quoted as saying that the 13th general election is 'a democratic process', and therefore should be respected (Sinar Harian, 5 May 2013a).

6. CONCLUSION

Findings of the discourse analysis show that Sinar Harian is unlike other mainstream newspapers in Malaysia. First, it did not show a clear pro government, anti-opposition bias. The newspaper featured voices not only from the government, but also from the opposition groups that are critical of the government. In fact, analysis shows that the most prominent pages of Sinar Harian mainly feature claims and criticism from the opposition leaders while government agencies such as the Electoral Commission are placed on the defensive. Sinar Harian is also not shy of featuring 'accusations' and 'claims' made by opposition leaders such as Anwar Ibrahim towards the government on campaign issues such as illegal workers and the use of indelible inks. These findings are in line with George's (2007) arguments that within a closely regulated media environment, the mainstream media in Malaysia is a highly contested site. However, George posits that mainstream media serve as a mode only for 'contained' contention, mainly competition between UMNO and its smaller alliance partners. A more transgressive form of contention, such as reporting on controversial issues, especially those touching on political economy or ethnic politics, do not feature in the mainstream media. Analyses of the two most prominent pages of Sinar Harian only partly support this. Although issues on ethnic and racial issues such as the rights of Bumiputera in Malaysia did not feature in Sinar Harian, the contentiousness of Malaysia's competitive politics is mirrored in the newspaper reporting, not only within existing political arrangements, but also outside the realm of the political ruling party in Malaysia.

However, analysis shows that Sinar Harian gives more space to the coverage of the ruling party compared to the coverage of the opposition groups. News items featuring BN were evidently twice as long as news items on Pakatan Rakyat. This also means that news on PR would always be less dominant and would not define the news of the day. Coverage on indelible inks and illegal voters, for example, mainly features the Electoral Commission answering accusations from PR, with the opposition group claim becoming background information or becoming the

party that hurled the claim at the government or government agencies. Yet, looking deeper into the news coverage, the language construction of Sinar Harian shows its positive attitudes towards the opposition group, in its more 'neutral' coverage of the ruling parties and its use of adjectives to show the neutral coverage. This is evident in the coverage of PR manifestos on 1 May as well as the campaign speech of Muhyiddin, Najib and Anwar Ibrahim on 2 May.

An attempt by Sinar Harian to give voice to the opposition group, at the same time ensuring that the ruling party get the dominant news space, also leads to incoherency in their editorial. Many of the articles have an unclear tone of reporting and go back and forth in either 'defending' or 'criticising' the opposition groups. Coverage on the existence of coloured flags around Kuala Lumpur on 4 May is the best example. On the second page, the newspaper clearly insinuates that the opposition group should be held responsible for illegally placing the coloured flags which could lead to an event similar to the 'Arab Spring' demonstration. It includes an editorial style of writing that clearly denounces the act. On the fourth page, Sinar Harian painted a rosy picture of the opposition movement to plant the coloured mini-flags around the capital city. This muddled writing may be explained by the newspaper's attempts to be 'objective, transparent and neutral' while at the same time not upsetting the 'powers that be', and to navigate media laws such as the Sedition Act, Defamation Act and, in particular, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) which empowers the Minister of Internal Security to revoke the permit of a publication. At the same time the newspaper also does not wish to upset a significant number of readers who are understandably supporters of the opposition groups.

The analysis proves that the reporting in Sinar Harian paints different pictures in regards to the climate of mainstream journalism in Malaysia, where previous studies show that the voices of other contesting political parties are restricted or depicted in a negative light. The editorial writing of Sinar Harian on voting day, 5 May 2013, by its editor, Norden Mohamed, shows very little sign that the newspaper is performing self-censorship to ensure that it is on the side of the ruling party. Instead, the editorial clearly denotes that the newspaper is treating both the BN and PR equally. The editorial write-up is significant in many ways. First, it shows the newspaper's awareness of the media power that they have by telling its readers what needs to be done. Second, the editorial is unprecedented in its confidence in telling the ruling parties that the decision is in the hands of the people, and they may be the losers.

Several factors may explain how Sinar Harian manages to break the reporting taboo in Malaysia. First is the 'Hussamuddin' factor. Hussamuddin Yaacob, the 53-year-old Kota Baru born is the group managing director and publisher of Karangraf, a media and publishing company which owns the Sinar Harian newspaper. Although he has found success with the company which among others published more than 25 leading Malay magazines in Malaysia, his move to introduce Sinar Harian in 2006 is regarded as 'the most ambitious venture of his business career' (Raslan, 2008). He is not new to the danger of newspaper

publishing in Malaysia. His newspapers Watan and Eksklusif felt the wrath of Malaysia's restricted media laws when both were forced to close.

Hussamuddin is known to have transformed his company, which started in 1978 in a small shop lot and rose to become one of the biggest media and publishing company with very little government help (Raslan, 2008). And that may explain how Sinar Harian manages to assert a considerable amount of independence in its editorial line due to its minimal linkages with the ruling parties. As the Managing Director of Karangkraf, his philosophy to create a newspaper that is both neutral and independent amidst the curtailed media landscape, runs through the editorial mission of Sinar Harian. His ideology in making sure Sinar Harian is politically neutral is clearly reflected in his official tweets leading up to the 13th General Election and this mirrors the editorial stance of Sinar Harian. In 1 May 2013, his Twitter account stated that as both sides of the party 'are confident to win', they also should 'ready themselves to accept defeat'. On 3 May 2013, his Twitter account explained the need to create a new political culture due to competing claims by the opposing parties that Sinar Harian is the 'stooge' of each other's party. On 3 May 2013, Hussamuddin again reasserted in his Twitter account that 'Sinar Harian is the true voice of the Malaysian Citizen...fair and transparent' and does not 'take sides'.

The second factor is that Sinar Harian was launched in the presence of robust alternative media and social media sites in Malaysia which have changed the dynamic of press control in Malaysia. Although the ruling government may have the ability to skew press coverage, particularly the mainstream media, in its favour, the practice exacts a high political cost. Overtly pro government reporting on political issues has backfired on Malaysia's national newspapers, which have seen dramatic circulation losses. Many readers flocked to alternative news sources such as blogs and Internet news (George, 2007). This is where Sinar Harian fills the void and differentiates itself from the market by making its news less propagandistic in tone.

In a wider context, the emergence of Sinar Harian is in line with the argument of a market driven media which stresses that increased choice for audiences contributes to the diversity of ideas and creates news media pluralism. Hallin and Mancini (2004) explain that in news journalism, competition for readers and advertisers also means disruption of association between media and social groups, and further enhances the power and independence of media organisations. McNair (2006) adds that commercialisation of news further pushes the cultural marketplace of ideas and images that interact with audiences within various socioeconomic backgrounds. He explains that 'critical scrutiny of political elites' and 'visible display of freedom and independence' have become the marketing tools for news media in order to distinguish themselves from one another and to win worldwide audiences (McNair, 2006, pp. 60–61). Sinar Harian is the example of a news organisation that brands itself as a producer of 'quality' news in a marketplace which demonstrates reliability, objectivity, authority, independence and diversity in its coverage.

Many interpretations could be offered as to why the Sinar Harian produce their

news the way they do based on a textual analysis of the 2013 election. Although the analysis only concentrated on a small sample of news of Sinar Harian, it is hoped that the depth in which the samples were analysed gives credence and validity to this study. As Fürsich (2009) points out, "media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding ...and its potential as a site of ideological negotiation and its impact as mediated 'reality' necessities interpretation in its own right" (2009: p. 238). The author is conducting further interview-based research to further support the arguments of these findings. This will hopefully further explain the explanatory factors of Sinar Harian reporting and to what extent individual, institutional, structural and political factors shape, influence and constrain Sinar Harian coverage of the 2013 election.

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