



The Malaysian power shift: The mainstream perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian power shift that happened in February 2020 shook the nation and the democracy system in the country to the core. Several political parties had secret meetings which culminated in rumours of the formation of a new alliance to helm the government. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad resigned as the 7th Prime Minister (PM), submitting his resignation letter to the King on Monday, 24 February followed by his resignation as Chairman of *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Bersatu), half an hour later. Bersatu President Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin then announced that his party was quitting *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), causing the government led by the multi-ethnic PH to collapse and further throwing the country into political turmoil. The objective of this study is to find the differences of news coverage concerning the power shift struggle combined with the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia, between two mainstream media, *The Star* and *The New Straits Times*. The criteria that were studied were headlines, sources, visual images, story angle and perspective as well as historical references. These criteria would aid in identifying how the newspapers' background influenced the way news stories were reported or presented. From the analyses carried out, the mainstream media have done their duties as the fourth estate to circulate news from the new government of Malaysia to the people. The new PM has also demonstrated a clear direction of duty and responsibility towards the country in this time of crisis to ensure Malaysians continue to live in peace and harmony and above all, safe.

Keywords: ***Malaysia, power shift, Covid-19, government, opposition***

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian government

Malaysia is a country that practices parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy system. The Paramount Ruler, generally referred to as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (His Majesty, the King), is the head of state elected from nine of the hereditary rulers (the Sultans) of Peninsular Malaysia. The ruling is subjected to change every five years. The King gives directives under the advice of the Prime Minister (PM), the head of government. The Parliament is the most important institution in a country which practices the principles of democracy. This parliament consists of two houses which are the senate (*Dewan Negara*) and the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*), the latter of which the PM presides over.

In Malaysia, there are several political parties and the PM, who governs the country, is elected from one of these parties. According to the Parliamentary democracy system in Malaysia, Malaysian citizens have the right to vote for their preferred candidate through the general elections once they reach 21 years old. The victor of this election will become the representative of the electorate (people who voted). Malaysians can “vote in” two representatives, one of which is the state representative and the other, a parliamentarian. However, in certain situations such as national emergencies, the King can also appoint a PM according to the present degree of confidence among the Members of Parliament, bypassing the need for a general election.

The power shift drama started off on 23 February 2020 with speculations rife about a potential political crisis. Several political parties had meetings on that Sunday which culminated in rumours of the formation of a new alliance to helm the government (Harun, 2020). Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad resigned as PM, submitting his resignation letter to the King on Monday, 24 February (Ho, 2020) followed by his resignation as Chairman of *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, abbreviated Bersatu or PPBM, half an hour later. An hour lapsed and Bersatu party President Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin announced that his party was quitting *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), causing the government led by the multi-ethnic PH to collapse.

In response to the sudden resignation, Tun Dr Mahathir was appointed as interim PM by the King until a new PM was chosen. But the political turmoil that plagued the country beginning that Sunday, was just the beginning. The Conference of Rulers convened on 28 February at a special meeting at Istana Negara before Friday prayers, to discuss the matter.

In the meantime, the press continued to cover the unfolding political drama, as it happened. Tun Dr Mahathir’s candid account of the chronology of events also gave Malaysians and the world, some insights into the crisis that brought down his administration. He had resigned as PM two days after the aforementioned PH meeting, prompting suspicions that he was making a power grab to prevent Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim’s ascension as his stated successor. The suspicion intensified when Tun Dr Mahathir began testing the waters for a non-partisan government that would have encompassed parties from the entire political spectrum (Loheswar, 2020), which if successful, would have made him very powerful.

On 28 February 2020, Bersatu posted a statement and announced their support for the party’s president, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as the 8th PM. The next day, the royal palace released a statement saying that Muhyiddin, in the King’s judgment, is likely to command the confidence of the majority of the Member of Parliament (MPs) and is to be appointed as the 8th PM of Malaysia. Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in on the morning of 1 March at Istana Negara, after a week of political intrigue.

The King, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah said that the 8th PM was appointed after political parties were given sufficient time to work out their conundrum in a democratic manner and name their respective candidates. There were 11 members of *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) who “frog-leaped” and joined *Perikatan Nasional* (Koya, 2020). The 11 former PKR members were Azmin Ali (Gombak), Zuraida Kamaruddin (Ampang), Saifuddin Abdullah (Indera Mahkota), Baru Bian (Selangau), Kamaruddin Jaffar (Bandar Tun Razak), Mansor Othman (Nibong Tebal), Rashid Hasnon (Batu Pahat), Edmund Santhara Kumar (Segamat), Ali Biju (Saratok), Willie Mongin (Puncak Borneo) and Jonathan Yasin (Ranau). These former members and legislators switched their support for the various opponents in a series of political turns and twists. Hence, they have been branded as “traitors” but they claim that their actions were justified to save the country (Yusof, 2020).

As the new PM, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin faced multiple challenges. The political, religious and racial fault lines were strained, specifically in the sabotaging effect of the country’s governing coalition since 2018. This complicated efforts to improve the aggravating economy and the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19). He had no choice but to act quickly on pushing forth bold measures to boost public and investor confidence in the short term, by ensuring the sustainability of economic growth, raising people’s income while reducing the cost of living (“Act quickly to boost”, 2020) – a tall order indeed.

The objective of this study is to find the differences in the news coverage concerning the power shift struggle in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, between two mainstream media. The analysis looks at how headlines were worded, sources used, visual images and story angles or perspectives conveyed and if any historical references were highlighted. *The Star* and *The New Straits Times* (NST) were chosen to represent the mainstream news portals. Both media have different values of coverage with regard to issues. Notwithstanding, the media usually tell the readers what they want to hear, rather than providing them with what they need to know.

Mainstream media – The Star vs New Straits Times (NST)

The Star is an English-language, tabloid-format newspaper, known for decades as the leading English newspaper in Malaysia’s news industry (Star Media Group Berhad, 2020). According to Audit Bureau of Circulations, *The Star* has a daily circulation of about 250,000 as of January 2017, proving that it has the largest circulation among newspapers in Malaysia. *The Star* is a party-owned paper with its majority stakes owned and controlled by Malaysia Chinese Association (MCA), which is a part of *Barisan Nasional* (BN). MCA is the majority shareholder owning 42.46% of the company’s shares (Deng, 2019). *The Star* started out in Penang as a regional newspaper in 1971, and then advanced to a “national daily” starting 3 January 1976. In the same year, its head office was relocated to Kuala Lumpur, renting a premise in Jalan Travers, Brickfields. To accommodate increased staff and technological advancements, they again moved their head office from Kuala Lumpur to Petaling Jaya in 1981. On 23 June 1995, *The Star* launched its own online platform, *The Star Online*, becoming Malaysia’s first online news portal (Star Media Group Berhad, 2020).

NST is considered one of the oldest English-language newspapers published in Malaysia. It was founded as *The Straits Times* in 1845 during the British colonial rule and the first issue was published on 15 July 1845. *The Straits Times* re-established itself as *New Straits Times* in 1974. In the mid-19th century, the development of *NST* provided unanticipated strong support to help the nationalistic movement that culminated in

Malaysia's independence in 1957 (The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd, 2020). According to Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the last reported circulation for *NST* was approximately 30,929 for its print newspaper and 85,469 for its online newspaper, for the period July to December 2018. Currently, Media Prima Group is the owner of *NST*. In 2011, *NST* reinvented itself with a new look of its masthead, typography, content and logo in order to meet market needs and changing aspirations of readers. Before this, it served as Malaysia's only broadsheet format English-language newspaper. *NST* is also known as the first Malaysian newspaper that produced a "talking" newspaper in 2012, where a QR code was placed which enabled readers to listen to recordings of articles and even advertisements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there have been tremendous changes in the Malaysian government over recent years, there have been limited studies that examined these developments. For instance, Nadzri (2018) used content analysis and ethnography to analyse the success of PH in unseating the BN government in the 14th General Election (GE14). Data were gathered through a mixed method of archival research, media studies, and direct observations as an official observer appointed by the Election Commission of Malaysia (EC). GE14 was also linked to past general elections, GE12 in 2008 and GE13 in 2013, which formed part of the struggle to unseat the current government at that time. This is supported by Lee (2019) and Ting (2020), as the change in the ruling government is a first-time, unique event in the history of Malaysia after six decades of ruling by the same coalition. Fortunately, the government transition was a peaceful and relatively smooth process without any violence.

However, Malaysia's political crisis saw a new party coalition, known as National Alliance (*Perikatan Nasional*, abbreviated PN) being formed in mid-February 2020. The coalition is made up of *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO), *Malaysian Islamic Party* (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS), as well as disgruntled ex-members of Tun Dr Mahathir's and Anwar's parties, and regional party members from Sabah and Sarawak. The new PM, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, was a former UMNO politician who served as deputy prime minister under Najib Razak. He joined Tun Dr Mahathir's Bersatu, as party president after he ended his membership in UMNO and served as Minister of Home Affairs in Tun Dr Mahathir's Cabinet. On 29 February, Tan Sri Muhyiddin secured the support of Malaysia's King to form a new coalition government, and he took the oath of office as PM the next day (Malaysia's political crisis, 2020).

In 2020, Malaysia not only faced political instability but also a serious economic crisis. The newly appointed Finance Minister, Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz claimed that it was the worst economic recession in the history due to ongoing Movement Control Order (MCO) that was necessitated by the need to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Shah et al. (2020), there were a number of actions taken by the Malaysian government to overcome this economic crisis during the pandemic. In February 2020, the government introduced a RM20 billion economic stimulus package to spur *rakyat*-centric economic growth. The PM also announced the RM250 billion PRIHATIN package on 27 March 2020 to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which were struggling to retain their employees. Further to that, the PM also allocated an extra RM1 billion for equipment and manpower to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic on the same day. The PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Package (ESP) was also introduced to help students, families, and business owners who were struggling with the financial crisis (Cheng, 2020; Shah et al., 2020).

Unlike the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the global financial crisis in 2008, this time around, the Malaysian government focused on the public health crisis first, and the economic crisis second. Therefore, economists agreed that the economic policy should focus mainly on strengthening public health efforts in handling the pandemic whilst ensuring the welfare of the *rakyat* and businesses. However, the stimulus packages presented during the global financial crisis in 2008-2009 amounted to RM67 billion, which is three times larger than the current RM20 billion economic package stimulus. As a result, many analysts contended that there is an urgent need for a second add-on package to strengthen and broaden many of the initiatives of the February stimulus package, especially after predicting that the MCO would be extended (Cheng, 2020).

Malaysia aspires to be a successful developed country with its own model of growth. To achieve greater success, the government must practise effective management to overcome its weaknesses and shortcomings. A study by Lee (2019) evaluated the economic reforms Malaysia undertook in the aftermath of GE14. The research explained the 10 actions that were carried out by the new government within the first 100 days of its administration. The first was the abolishment of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and settling unnecessary debts that have been imposed on the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers. The new government also tried to stabilise the price of petrol by introducing targeted petrol subsidies and introduced Employees Provident Fund (EPF) contributions for housewives. The minimum wage was equalised nationally, beginning the process to increase minimum wage in the country. Further, the repayment of National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loan was deferred to all graduates who earned less than RM4,000 per month and the blacklisting policy was also abolished (Lee, 2019).

According to Shah et al. (2020), the Malaysian government also implemented many measures to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. The enforcement of the MCO to control the spread of the virus was necessary although it inflicted damaging results on the overall economy. So far, Malaysia has gone through five phases of the MCO. Phase 1 was implemented 18-31 March. Phase 2 in 1-14 April, where the military assisted the police in enforcing the MCO. Phase 3 was executed and ended on 28 April while Phase 4 stretched till May 12. On 5 May, a week before the MCO was lifted, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob announced that Malaysia will move into Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) for a month till 9 June 2020. On 7 June, the PM announced that the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) would end on 9 June, with the country entering the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) phase between 10 June and 31 August. This however has been extended till the end of this year. Throughout this period, the country has been strained with weeks of bad news (and sometimes good) of the number of patients which keeps fluctuating. Naturally, this is expected as the country continues to battle this pandemic until a vaccine is found.

In addition, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has and continues to play a very important role in ensuring maximum readiness to contain the spread of the virus. The ministry augmented its healthcare services and set up provisional hospitals to fight the pandemic. Cheng (2020) voiced similar concerns regarding actions undertaken by the Malaysian government and MoH in order to overcome COVID-19 and the economic crisis as well as to maintain the livelihoods of the citizens (Cheng, 2020; Shah et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed content analysis to identify how newspapers' background influence the way that news stories are reported and presented. This method was chosen to ensure

better reliable results and to obtain an in-depth analysis for the myriad of media content. Content analysis is a readily understood and inexpensive research method which gives the researcher a clearer insight of the slant and language used in newspapers.

The sample for this study was selected from the English-language newspaper with the highest circulation—*The Star* and the oldest – *NST*. Samples were drawn from 23 February 2020, which was the day when the secret meeting took place at the Sheraton Hotel, to 14 May 2020, the day of the no-confidence vote against Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in Parliament. As each media has a different reporting style, this investigation was carried out to ascertain any differences between *The Star* and *NST* in their portrayal of the Malaysian government power shift.

The sample comprised 93 articles, of which 42 was collected from *The Star* while another 51 from *NST*. The articles were collected from their official online portals. The units of analysis were the articles, which included the headlines, sources, visual images, story angles and perspectives as well as historical references.

The agenda-setting theory is a mass media theory that describes the way media attempts to influence viewers and establish a hierarchy of news prevalence (Dearing & Rogers, 1988). Mass media such as newspapers tend to draw attention to certain issues by prominently featuring selective aspects, essentially influencing the audience’s behaviour, perception, and policies (Colistra, 2012). The theory was used to ascertain if and how the newspapers utilised this theory to their benefit.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A number of criteria were compared between *The Star* and *NST* such as headlines, sources, visual images, story angles and perspectives as well as historical references. These criteria aided in identifying how the newspapers’ background influence the way news stories are reported or presented.

Headlines

A headline is often the primary way of attracting potential readers to be interested in an article. Based on the news articles collected by the researcher, the headlines of *The Star* were often short and concise. The words ranged from four to eight per title. In contrast, the *NST* articles carried longer headlines which ranged from 6 to 12 words per title. It was also interesting to see how the newspapers framed their headlines of the same issue either on the same date or the following day.

Table 1. Comparison of headlines as the political turmoil unfolded

Date	<i>NST</i>	<i>The Star</i>	Source
23 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political party meetings fuelling talks of something big today Bersatu meeting ends, speculation rife of a “big announcement” GPS MPs meet in federal capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible scenarios how power has shifted in Parliament Malaysia’s party meetings fuel talk of change in government 	A party insider, GPS’ parliamentary chief whip Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof
24 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are not traitors; this is to save Malaysia - former PKR members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Azmin, 10 PKR MPs aligned to him leave PKR, to form independent bloc 	Joint statement

Table 1. (con't)

Date	<i>NST</i>	<i>The Star</i>	Source
27 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UMNO to wait for King's decree • PH holds emergency meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special meeting called for all UMNO division chiefs 	Annuar Musa
28 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BN, PAS throw backing behind Muhyiddin as PM • News of Muhyiddin as likely Malaysian PM met with elation and dismay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bersatu nominates Muhyiddin as 8th PM • BN, PAS back Muhyiddin as 8th PM • Big comeback for Muhyiddin • Bersatu Youth supports party council's decision to back Muhyiddin as next PM, says exco member • MCA to support Muhyiddin as eighth PM • Dr M: Muhyiddin can become candidate for PM • Dr M didn't object to Muhyiddin's PM candidacy, says Mohd Redzuan • Bersatu nominates Muhyiddin as 8th PM • Politicians gather at Muhyiddin's home, Zuraida gives thumbs-up 	Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, Bersatu Youth, MCA, Mohd Redzuan, Zuraida Kamaruddin (Ampang)
29 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anwar: Support for Dr M to end political crisis • 'Everyone is confused over this situation' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malaysia King names Muhyiddin as Premier to succeed Tun Dr Mahathir • Tun M says 114 MPs are behind him, will prepare letter for King 	Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri
1 March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8th PM to be sworn in at 10.30 am today • Azmin: We are thankful our struggle to form new govt successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muhyiddin heads to Istana to be sworn in as PM • Muhyiddin is eighth PM, says King • Dr M: Muhyiddin has no majority support • PDRM congratulates Muhyiddin on appointment as PM • Dr M blames on Muhyiddin and Anwar for <i>Pakatan's</i> downfall 	

Table 1 presents the cited articles starting from 23 February, the start of the Sheraton move till 1 March when the new PM was sworn in. This constitutes 33 articles from a total of 93 articles for the period mentioned, which indicates that roughly one third

of the news coverage discussed the political turmoil as it unfolded. It should be noted also that both news portals ran the same story but with different headlines. For example, on 23 February, *NST* ran with “*Political party meetings fuelling talks of something big today*” and “*Bersatu meeting ends, speculation rife of ‘big announcement’*” while *The Star* used “*Possible scenarios how power has shifted in Parliament*” and “*Malaysia’s party meetings fuel talk of change in government*”. The headlines for the first day of the political saga was enough to intrigue readers to stay tuned to the political happenings in the country.

Over the next few days, the headlines carried by *NST* used strong words like “traitors”, “emergency meeting”, “dismay” and “confused”. *The Star*, in contrast, went with “aligned”, “special meeting”, “big comeback for Muhyiddin” and “Malaysia King names Muhyiddin as Premier”. While *NST*’s headlines gave the impression of the severity of the situation, there was also an indication of a slant in terms of reporting. As for *The Star*, the headlines were straightforward, and readers could predict the gist the story just by glancing at the titles. Both media carried more news on 28 February, giving more space to both sides of the political divide to pledge support for their coalition.

On 6 April 2020, *The Star* headlines read “*Muhyiddin unveils RM10 bil stimulus package for SMEs*” and “*PM to announce extra incentives for SMEs on Monday*”. “*Stimulus package a welcomed relief*” was the headline carried by *The Star* the next day, 7 April 2020 as a follow-up. The headline was concise, consisting of abbreviations but clear. Similarly, *NST* reported, “*Additional RM10 bil for SMEs under PRIHATIN economic stimulus package*” and “*PM’s speech for the stimulus package*” on the same day, 6 April, 2020. *NST* however, did not have any follow-up news. The headline also composed of several abbreviations. Despite that, the headline for *NST* is visibly longer than *The Star*. While there are no apparent redundant words present in the headlines of both newspapers, longer headlines are usually perceived as more confusing or less informative. The wording of the headline plays a crucial role to get readers’ attention, as most readers prefer headlines that are interesting and easy to understand. Nevertheless, the headlines used by both newspapers are always clearly relevant to the story they were reporting, reflecting the essence of the story fairly without conveying any biased stereotypes.

Sources

As the new government continues to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, they have shown their capabilities through concise actions that have garnered positive results, such as the decreasing number of infected cases and the provision of aid to financially struggling citizens. In this study, the key source is Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, current PM of Malaysia, as he is the primary spokesperson for action-based announcements regarding the pandemic as well as the economic crisis, making the news credible. The other main source for announcements and updates on the Covid-19 pandemic is the Health Director General, Tan Sri Noor Hisham Abdullah.

Both *The Star* and *NST* were able to present their news in a fair manner, providing credible information from relevant sources. One of the observations drawn from studying the language used in *The Star* and *NST* is that both newspapers convey their message to readers in different styles. *The Star* posted a news article titled, “*Calculate if you’re eligible for Bantuan Prihatin Nasional, plus FAQs*” with regard to the *Bantuan Prihatin Nasional* (BPN) application and credited the source to the Finance Ministry (31 March 2020). Meanwhile, *NST* only reported about this announcement in the PM’s speech (6 April, 2020).

In most cases, *NST* and *The Star* would state clearly the person who was interviewed. However, there were a few articles that did not specifically introduce the interviewee and the information was presented in a way that raised questions about their credibility. For example, the article by *NST* “*Political party meetings fueling talks of something big today*” (23 February 2020) quoted an unnamed “party insider” as the source of news of the alleged formation of a unity government. On the same day, *The Star* reported on Malaysia’s political party meetings and the change in government. In the article titled, “*Malaysia’s party meetings fuel talk of change in government*”, the newspaper only credited the person they interviewed as a “a lawmaker aligned to PKR president Datuk Anwar Ibrahim” without providing the person’s name or referral. Such quotes, usually from non-authoritative figures, are usually added to reinforce a certain biased perspective to the current system— thus, these sources are questionable at best. Nevertheless, there were also other credible sources that were quoted as the political turmoil unfolded as shown in Table 1.

Visual images

Based on the news articles that were selected for this study, it can be concluded that the visual imagery used by both newspapers illustrated the content of the story effectively. *NST* demonstrated a generally higher relevance of visual images with regard to their published articles. Most of their stories included images, which portrayed the stories illustriously, and aided in garnering a higher reading interest. In contrast, *The Star* demonstrated a low relevance of visual images with their published stories. Some published articles did not include a single image to depict the stories, which may decrease readers’ interest in the article. Images are important in conveying the overall message of the article in the quickest way, as images are usually the first thing that readers see. The overall content can be predicted with just a glance if the correct image accompanies the story. Conversely, if the wrong or irrelevant image is used, the story will be a huge waste, no matter how well it is written. Visual images often reinforce a particular message and perspective as well as summarise the whole story, in most articles.

To illustrate, *NST*’s article “*Political party meetings fueling talks of something big today*”, (23 February, 2020) carried a picture of a signage at the Sheraton Hotel (Figure 1). This clearly suggests to the reader the location where several PKR leaders held their secret meeting even before the readers read the article. In contrast, *The Star*’s “*Malaysia’s party meetings fuel talk of change in government*” (23 February, 2020) reporting a similar article used a picture of Tun Dr Mahathir waving to journalists after Bersatu’s meeting at its headquarters in Petaling Jaya (Figure 2), without showing the location of the meeting to the readers. As another example, *NST*’s news article “*Cabinet ministers to give two month’s salary to Covid-19 fund*” (26 March, 2020) featured a picture of all the newly appointed Cabinet members taken during the Cabinet meeting that decided on cabinet salary deduction for the Covid-19 fund (Figure 3). The picture shows that the meeting did indeed really take place and creates the impression that the cabinet salary deduction for Covid-19 funding is a genuine effort to help the *rakyat*. The same story was reported by Zakiah Koya in “*PM, Ministers and Deputy Ministers*” to give two month’s salary to Covid-19 fund” (26 March, 2020) from *The Star*. However, the image of the Prime Minister’s Office in Putrajaya was used (Figure 4) as a visual image instead of the meeting. Although the article is clearly about the meeting, the image used does not support the article.



Figure 1. Signage at the Sheraton Hotel



Figure 2. Tun Dr Mahathir waving to journalists after Bersatu's meeting at its headquarters in Petaling Jaya



Figure 3. Cabinet members during the Cabinet meeting on salary deduction for the Covid-19 fund



Figure 4. The Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya

Story angle and perspective

The Star and *NST* use language differently. *The Star* mainly uses simple English bordering on Manglish in their stories, which is an informal form of Malaysian English used by Malaysians. However, *NST* primarily uses formal English, which depicts more professionalism. Despite the differences, the language used does not convey any biases or stereotypes in their published articles. The strict tone of every article is scripted to remain neutral and unbiased.

As *the Star* and *NST* are both mainstream newspapers, the news articles that are published are more than just a form of alternative reading. News is generated for the public to read and keep abreast of happenings around the world; therefore, journalists only report newsworthy content to let readers develop their own perceptions and opinions regarding the reported topic.

According to the news article by Harun (2020) from *NST*, probable facts are used to refer to statements or messages given by individuals who are deemed trustworthy, or who has no reason to provide anything but factual information. In many cases, a parallelism can be seen in the news articles published by the two newspapers, which depicts accuracy as both sources provide congruent information without statistical conflicts that insinuate otherwise. As an example, *The Star* reported on the launch of the RM250 billion Economic Stimulus Package on 29 March with the headline “*Stimulus package: Eligible Malaysians told to register with IRB*”. This is reflected as factual and is supported in a very similar news article in *NST*, on the same date.

Certified and mainstream news tend to focus on factual, professional opinions in comparison to the questionable opinions of the masses. This is true for *The Star* and *NST*, as they tend to focus on authority figures with minimal focus on the society’s viewpoints. Both newspapers quoted heavily former PM, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammed, the current PM, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, as well as former PM, Tun Najib Razak. The COVID-19 crisis also brought the Director-General of Health, Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah to the forefront as an authoritative source who is heavily quoted for accurate news. He appears on television every day with the much-awaited COVID-19 updates and related news. Sometimes he slips into medical terminology, which can leave the audience rather perplexed, but usually, his explanations are clear. A few headlines from *NST* related to him are “*Malaysia shows progress in Covid-19 testing capabilities*” (25 April, 2020), “*Chinese experts impressed by Malaysia’s handling of Covid-19*” (1 May, 2020), “*Malaysia’s testing method to deal with Covid-19 successful*” and “*CMCO extension will help contain spread of Covid-19*” (10 May, 2020). Similarly, news headlines from *The Star* are, “*Health DG: Undocumented immigrants will be screened for Covid-19*” (1 May, 2020), “*Health DG: Socio-economic needs of the rakyat must not be forgotten*” (1 May, 2020).

Likewise, the Minister of Defence, Dato’ Sri Ismail Sabri Yaakob also conducts his daily press statements regarding MCO, RMCO and CMCO and related information such as SOPs. *The Star* also highlighted Wan Saiful (Chairman of the National Higher Education Fund Corporation) in “*Pandemic, democracy and power shifts*” (16 April, 2020) while *NST* focused on the Finance Minister, Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz with “*Malaysia facing worst economic recession in its history*” (2 May, 2020) and “*Additional RM10bil for SMEs under Prihatin economic stimulus package*” (6 April, 2020).

There was minimal space allocated for the voices of the common man, mainly to bring attention to the perspective of the masses. However, while these voices were given a platform to be heard, many of the quoted information tended to be biased or carried harsh criticism regarding the current situation, such as offhanded Facebook comments. This creates a generally untrustworthy or callous impression on those quotes or opinions,

while some can be construed as being overemotional or immature. There is a minority segment of the society that is genuine and moderate such as freelance copywriters and well-known lawyers, but they are rarely given any spotlight.

The politicians also tend to exchange harsh commentaries about each other, be it from the ruling party or the opposition. Although the tone remains neutral as a reflection of the professionalism of journalists, the quotes are usually framed to create a satirical impression regarding one's capability or incompetence in addressing the issue at hand. A lot of sensational news tend to be present in both newspapers for attention-grabbing headlines, such as instances of authoritative public figures speaking controversially or making highly offensive remarks. Take for example, the headline from *NST* that reads, "*We are not traitors, this is to save Malaysia - former PKR members*" (24 February, 2020). The news article talked about the 11 former PKR members, branded as traitors, who described the attempt to force Dr Mahathir to set a date for the transition of power as malicious and trying to depict Dr Mahathir as a "lame duck PM". In another news article from *NST*, "*Umno to wait for King's decree*" (27 February, 2020), the UMNO secretary-general, Tan Sri Annuar Musa remarked "We understand the situation that Dr Mahathir is facing. However, Dr Mahathir was also responsible for some matters related to the current turmoil." This can only serve to reinforce the biased or one-sided view of the situation, but such instances are minimal and inconspicuous in comparison to the more neutral news.

All things considered, both news media have maintained their objectivity and a neutral standpoint without being biased to any party or politician. This is reflected in a news article by *NST* headlined "*Muhyiddin rises to the occasion*" (28 March, 2020). The article was written by Tan Sri Dr Munir Majid, a former *NST* group editor, who writes on local and international political affairs. In highlighting several pertinent points, he stated that "*He (Muhyiddin) was always the dark horse, as Pakatan Harapan (PH) played out the interminable game of staying and succeeding as prime minister*", an obsession he contended, that would come to harm the PH government in the end. Secondly, "*going by the stimulus package he introduced he has shown a calmness and depth of understanding of the people's needs — with no extravagant rhetoric in an engaging and not hectoring style. It may be just as well he is prime minister at this unprecedented time in the life of the nation.*" Thirdly, "*his experience and knowledge of society and government is reflected in the various agencies and people of different walks of life, that he reached out to, through financial assistance and benefits.*" To use his words, "*no one is left behind.*" Fourthly, "*there must be communication of the strategy to combat the disease after the MCO, to give people hope which money alone cannot buy. Therefore, the plans for mass testing, contact tracing and social distancing have to be revealed.*" Fifth, "*he made reference to the liquidity in the domestic financial markets, which Bank Negara Malaysia has so creatively made possible. It would be good to know how much the government might have to borrow and where. There is the matter of getting the money to the people double quick.*" At the end of his presentation, the PM spoke in English, of the confluence of challenges he faces — political, health and economic as he made his plea that the nation must support him in facing these challenges together.

In *The Star's* column "It's Just Politics", its reporter, Philip Golingai presented an overview of the perspectives of some public figures regarding the PM in "*Hoping for a Malaysian-first PM*" (8 March, 2020). One of those interviewed was Tan Sri Chua Soi Lek, who had worked with the PM since 1986 where he served as a two-term state exco when Muhyiddin was Johor's Menteri Besar and again, as Cabinet colleagues when they were both promoted as Federal Ministers. "*If you ask me, Muhyiddin's biggest setback is he doesn't have a friendly look. By nature, he is not a friendly person. Outwardly, he looks very stiff and not very friendly. But if you know him, actually he is a kind-hearted person, and he*

is very hardworking” he remarked. Another interviewee was Bridget Welsh, an honorary research fellow at the University of Nottingham Malaysia’s Asia Research Institute. According to Welsh, a plus point for Bersatu’s president is that the public will have low expectations of him as Prime Minister. “So if he can stabilize the situation and have some concrete deliverables or positives, this will increase his ratings very quickly. The second crucial thing, as he is a person who is experienced, so he knows the different aspects of government and he has allies in the system.”

Prof Dr Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, a political lecturer from Universiti Utara Malaysia, was of the opinion that politically, the Prime Minister will struggle, as he does not have a solid majority. But the plus point for him is that he is a seasoned leader. Based on the examples discussed, it can be concluded that both media have maintained an objective standpoint in their coverage of the political drama that unfolded without any biased viewpoints from their personal political leanings or beliefs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has outlined how the mainstream newspapers in the country covered the power shift of the Malaysia government with objectivity and professionalism. Both newspapers handled their role in setting the agenda for the society prominently, as other news media in the world were largely overshadowed by the sheer intensity of sensational news regarding this topic. *The Star* and *NST* used the agenda-setting theory to present prominently political news in their newspapers, which suggests an ongoing political crisis for the readership. With generous proportions of opinions of the public as well as official quotes, both news media created a sense of representation in the general view of the masses. This then sets up a negative, positive or neutral perception amongst their readers regarding the power shift in the long term.

Despite the abrupt change of government in February 2020, the 8th PM, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin, has demonstrated good leadership in handling the COVID-19 pandemic with ongoing consistent efforts in aiding citizens who are facing financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic. In a two-pronged approach, apart from providing allowances to affected individuals and families, the Malaysian government also strived to increase employment opportunities as well as boost the employability of those who lost their jobs. The launch of the PRIHATIN Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package (BPN) in March and the “*Pelan Jana Semula Ekonomi Negara*” or “PENJANA” on 5 June 2020 to assist the *rakyat* was certainly a much welcome reprieve. Moreover, The Ministry of Health also continues to strategise and implement ongoing efforts to control the number of infected cases in order to safeguard public health.

Based on the findings, we conclude that the mainstream media have and continue to execute their duties as the fourth estate in bringing credible and important news, from the new government to the people. The 8th PM has also demonstrated a clear direction of duty and responsibility towards the country in this time of crisis to ensure Malaysians continue to live in peace and harmony and above all, safe.

Acknowledgement: The authors would like to thank Jesslyn Ong, Gan Si Pei, Teh Mei Xian and Tang Qiu Shuang for their assistance in the data collection for this study.

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