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Abstract This paper addresses the subject of media control in Malaysia under the Barisan Nasional (BN--National Front) regime, the coalition of ethnically-based political parties that has ruled the country since independence. As Hughes notes in her introduction to this issue, the dominant liberal discourse on democratization often views the mass media in fairly functionalist terms as an agent of democratization, particularly at times of regime transition or crisis. Existing studies of the media industry in Malaysia, however, have long since concluded that any incipient democratizing tendency within the media has long since been subverted by extensive formal and informal control, thus contributing to the entrenchment of the regime.	

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The rough and rosy road: sites of contestation in Malaysia's shackled media industry.

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A recent article by a regular commentator in Malaysia's Sun newspaper called for the resignation of a minister over a scandal involving government attempts to eradicate the pervasive problem of forged driving licenses. (1) True, the affair he referred to happened more than three years ago and the minister in question had since retired anyway, but the implications of his call and the general thrust of the piece--that ministers should be held accountable for their actions--were, in the context of Malaysia's shackled media industry, bordering on the revolutionary.

This paper addresses the subject of media control in Malaysia under the Barisan Nasional (BN--National Front) regime, the coalition of ethnically-based political parties that has ruled the country since independence. As Hughes notes in her introduction to this issue, the dominant liberal discourse on democratization often views the mass media in fairly functionalist terms as an agent of democratization, particularly at times of regime transition or crisis. Existing studies of the media industry in Malaysia, however, have long since concluded that any incipient democratizing tendency within the media has long since been subverted by extensive formal and informal control, thus contributing to the entrenchment of the regime. (2)

Rather than re-examine the Malaysian media industry from the liberal perspective, this paper instead takes the opposite approach, assuming as its "null hypothesis" the position of the mass media as an agent of the BN's political project, and then looking for sites of weakness and tension that might indicate the limits of this control. Drawing on interviews with media practitioners, as well as extensive textual analysis of print and online media output, this paper thus focusses on countertrends within the media, areas of negotiation and dispute both within and beyond the BN regime. Attention is focussed particularly on the period of political upheaval following the September 1998 dismissal and imprisonment of the popular deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, which launched a popular protest movement calling for reformasi (reform), and galvanized political opposition in the run-up to the 1999 general elections. The picture that emerges from this analysis is less one of a monolithic media industry dedicated to reproducing regime discourse, and more an industry that, although predominantly regime-oriented, has sites of resistance and weakness.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section sets the scene with an overview of the development of regime control of the media in Malaysia, identifying a dual strategy of legislative restrictions and corporate control. Taking these two aspects of media control in turn, the latter two sections examine sites of contestation, focussing, respectively, on the legislative and regulatory challenges presented by the rise of the Internet, and on the internal contradictions between the factional composition of the BN regime and the corporate control it extends over the media industry. It concludes by arguing that whilst neither of these challenges is sufficiently strong to undermine regime domination of the media industry and push significantly for democratization in the country, they are nonetheless important representations of the limits of the state's control.

I. The structure of media control

Measures to control the media industry in Malaysia rank amongst some of the most stringent in the world. In October 2003, Reporters sans Frontieres ranked Malaysia 104th out of 166 countries on its Press Freedom Index; the New York-based Committee for the Protection of Journalists named former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad in its top ten enemies of the press for three years running. Key to this level of control has been a dual strategy of legislative restrictions combined with corporate control by government parties.

As with much of Malaysia's repressive legislative framework, control of the media has its roots in the British colonial administration and, more specifically, in the anti-communist counterinsurgency campaign, which took place after the end of the Second World War, during the period widely known as the Emergency. Before the Japanese wartime occupation, the growth of a vernacular newspaper industry in Malaya and Singapore was at the heart of the emergence of a Malay nationalist movement, which would ultimately agitate for independence. (3) Prominent nationalists such as Zainal Abidin bin Haji Alias and C.H.E. Det--better known now by his real name, Mahathir Mohamad--made their names as journalists, particularly with the Singapore-based Utusan Melayu newspaper. This "Malayan Spring" was, however, brought to an abrupt halt by the postwar British Military Administration.

The mainstay of press control, the Printing Presses Ordinance, was introduced in 1948 and required all newspapers and printing presses to apply for a permit, renewable annually. The left-leaning Chinese press was the first victim of the Emergency regulations, with a number of publications shut down. Malay-medium newspapers were not exempt from the powers of the new regulations, however, and the Singapore-based Melayu Raya newspaper--an independent and vocal

defender of Malay rights--was suspended for ten months and had key personnel removed, after which it promptly collapsed. (4)

Since independence in 1957, the BN and its predecessor the Alliance tightened and extended legislative controls over the media. The Printing Presses Ordinance, later revised as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, has remained central to the BN regime's control of the print media in the postcolonial period. During the 1987 "Operation Lalang" crackdown, which saw the arrest of over a hundred political and social activists, its powers were used to suspend or close down four national newspapers. Following this crackdown, the Act was again revised to give the home minister "absolute discretion" in awarding and revoking permits, and to disallow any judicial review of the process.

In addition to the Printing Presses and Publications Act, a number of other pieces of legislation--also relics of the colonial administration--impinge upon the freedom of the press and other media, including the Official Secrets Act, the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act. The Official Secrets Act was tightened in 1986 to cover all government documents unless specifically "declassified," and made illegal the circulation or publication of such documents, even if they were already in the public domain. The Sedition Act contains an extremely vague definition of sedition, and the Internal Security Act, the bete noir of the human rights movement, allows for effectively limitless detention without trial.

In addition to legislative controls, the independence of the mainstream media has been further curtailed by the corporate involvement of the BN component parties. As early as 1961, individuals associated with the leadership of the UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), the dominant party in the BN, bought a controlling stake in Utusan Melayu, provoking a furious backlash by the paper's journalists and editorial staff, who orchestrated what remains the longest strike in Malaysia's history. (5) Subsequent moves to take control of other newspapers met with less resistance. Other BN parties also joined the takeover frenzy. By the mid-1980s, the UMNO had controlling or substantial interests in major English-, Malay- and Chinese-language newspapers, consolidated in its investment vehicle Fleet Group. (6) The second-largest party in the coalition, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) owned the widely read Star newspaper, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) controlled a number of smaller Tamil-language papers. The East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak have a number of regional papers that are controlled by individuals aligned to various BN parties, including the Daily Express, New Sabah Times (Sabah both) and the Sarawak Tribune.

A similar combination of legislative and corporate controls affects the broadcast media. Television and radio are constrained by the Broadcasting Act, which licenses and controls broadcast activity, and gives the relevant minister powers to direct licensees in broadcast matters. Two of the terrestrial television channels are state-controlled through the RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia), which also runs a number of radio stations. Opposition parties have been completely denied access to the RTM, even for interviews. The regime justifies this on the basis that the RTM is "the official channel of the government of the day [which] conveys official information to the people." (7) The creation of a private terrestrial channel in 1985 did little to expand the political base of the medium, as the licensee, Sistem Televisyen Malaysia, was controlled by the UMNO through Fleet Group.

In the mid-1990s, the advent of cable and satellite television was seen by some as heralding a new "open-sky" policy towards the media. It was hoped that the multiplicity of channels available through satellite broadcasting, and the opportunity to receive broadcasts from outside the country, would force the regime into a more relaxed attitude towards the media. In the event, however, the government legislated to restrict the size of satellite dish permissible, effectively preventing reception from outside the country. The only license for a domestic satellite television provider was given to a conglomerate headed by a UMNO-linked businessman and the former inspector-general of the police force. Similarly, the license for Malaysia's only cable television network was given to a politically-linked company, as were the licenses for two more terrestrial channels. (8)

Stringent as its legislative and corporate controls may be, party-corporate control of newspapers has not guaranteed the political subservience of journalists, many of whom still pursue their profession with relative independence and chafe at limitations placed upon them. As already noted, there was considerable resistance by the newspaper staff to the UMNO takeover of Utusan Melayu; similar protests were made by staff of the Nanyang Siang Pau when it was taken over by the MCA in 2001 (see below). Likewise, the National Union of Journalists has also been vocal in opposing legislation that it thinks will impose on press freedom. In 1986, for instance, the union spearheaded the campaign to oppose the amendments to the Official Secrets Act. The NUJ and other journalist groups have also regularly called for the repeal of the Printing Presses and Publications Act. Some journalists attempt to "slip things by" editorial censorship or push the limits of what is acceptable, such as the call for ministerial accountability cited above.

Perhaps in response to this degree of journalistic independence and echoing similar developments in Singapore, recent years have seen a spate of prosecutions and libel actions against individual journalists and newspaper commentators. In 1999, the Far Eastern Economic Review reporter Murray Hiebert was briefly imprisoned on contempt of court charges, and in 2001 Malaysiakini columnist Hishamuddin Rais was detained without trial for two years. Among other similar cases, the prominent academic and social activist K.S. Jomo is currently facing a RM200 million (US\$52 million) libel action by the prominent tycoon Vincent Tan. As Garry Rodan notes, these and other similar actions have "compounded the climate of intimidation for journalists and media organisations in Malaysia." (9) Indicative of this new climate is that, in stark contrast to the 1986 protests, the NUJ did not condemn the banning of several independent publications after the 1999 general election (see below).

Malaysia does have a small but durable alternative print media. The main opposition parties produce their own newspapers. These include Harakah, produced by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the Rocket, produced by the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP). The prominent social reform group Aliran also produces a monthly magazine, and a fluctuating number of independent Malay magazines such as Detik and al-Wasilah deal primarily with

politics and current affairs, often from a critical perspective. This alternative print media saw its circulation soar during the political crisis after Mahathir sacked his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in September 1998. By December 1998, Harakah's biweekly sales exceeded three hundred thousand. (10) Also linked to the Anwar Ibrahim affair was the rapid expansion of the Internet as a source of alternative media, which will be dealt with further below.

Whilst this alternative media has generally been tolerated, the government has been quick to crack down when it perceives its interests under threat. In 1987, the "Operation Lalang" crackdown on the regime's political opponents saw some major publications banned or suspended. After its victory in the divisive 1999 general election, the BN regime pursued a further crackdown on the alternative print media. In the immediate aftermath of the election, a number of critical periodicals had their licenses withdrawn, including the Malay-language *Detik* and *Eksklusif*. Harakah had its permit altered to restrict it to two publications a month, instead of twice weekly, and its editor and publisher were also prosecuted under the Sedition Act in relation to an article questioning the integrity of the justice system. Circulation of these publications has also fallen off steeply since the reformasi era; *Aliran Monthly* sells barely a few thousand copies per month and is facing major financial problems.

The upshot of this dual strategy of legislative and corporate control is a main stream media that is widely perceived as "muzzled" and sympathetic, if not sycophantic, towards the regime--apologists and eunuchs, in one commentator's memorable phrase. (11) A degree of relative independence has, however, been shown periodically by some individual publications. During the 1980s, for instance, the MCA-controlled *Star* developed a reputation for its more liberal attitude and willingness to give column inches to independent social groups. Despite being regime-controlled, the *Star* was thus one of the papers suspended during "Operation Lalang." Upon its return to circulation, the main editorial staff had been replaced, and the paper never fully regained its more liberal perspective.

In 1994, another notable opening in the mainstream media occurred with the inception of the *Sun* newspaper. Owned by business tycoon Vincent Tan, a close associate of Mahathir and other BN leaders, the paper nonetheless sought to push the boundaries of politically acceptable journalism, giving more coverage to opposition groups and eschewing the otherwise predominant tendency of reporting ministerial comments as fact rather than opinion. (12) The *Sun* quickly established itself as a popular source of news, and its readership grew consistently throughout the decade.

The year 2001, however, saw the setting of the *Sun* as the most independent English daily. In early 2001, the *Sun* was taken over by the publishers of a business weekly, the *Edge*. The new owners pledged to continue an independent editorial policy, and the paper's circulation soared, at which point the government reportedly stepped in and blocked the deal. The paper reverted to its previous ownership. (13) This was not the end of the bad news for the *Sun*, however. On Christmas Day 2001, the paper carried a front-page story about an alleged plot to assassinate Mahathir and his then deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Although initially laughed off by the prime minister, the story was picked up by international newswires and reported around the world, provoking condemnation of the paper from the government. The *Sun* responded by suspending four members of staff involved in the story, and the editor and executive director both resigned. The sackings prompted a storm of protests from the staff, who began picketing the paper in January 2002. By this time, however, it was clear that major changes in the paper were afoot, widely believed to be the result of political pressure from BN leaders. Later in the month, 40 journalists and other employees of the newspaper were abruptly dismissed, beginning a trail of redundancies culminating with the layoff of more than half its four hundred staff in March. The paper stopped circulation for a while, before being relaunched in a considerably reduced version as a free paper.

Whilst the apparent commercial rewards of displaying a degree of press freedom have thus driven individual publications to flirt with a more independent editorial line, this has not resulted in a substantive opening of the public sphere in Malaysia. The BN regime has proved itself more than willing to inhibit such moves towards greater openness either directly, as in the suspension of the *Star* in 1987, or indirectly, as in the *Sun* takeover. Systemic weaknesses in the regime's media control strategy do exist, however, and it is to these weaknesses that we now turn.

II. Legislative control and the rise of the Internet

Regimes like the one found in Malaysia face a new challenge to the legislative restrictions they employ to control mass media: advances in communications technology, such as the advent of satellite broadcasting. Whereas previous advances tended to require little more than legislative tinkering on the part of the regime, however, the rise of the Internet has proved more problematic. (14)

In Malaysia, rather than viewing the Internet with suspicion, the BN regime--and Mahathir in particular--initially embraced it as part of an information technology (ICT) revolution that would provide the driving force for economic growth, and see Malaysia take its place amongst the industrialized nations, a fundamental goal of Mahathir's developmentalist Vision 2020. In 1996, Mahathir thus launched the Multi-Media Super Corridor project (MSC)--a series of business incentives designed to create an Asian "Silicon Valley" in Malaysia. Included in the MSC "Bill of Guarantees" was a pledge not to censor the Internet. The regime was undoubtedly concerned over the potential of the Internet as a subversive medium, but was also keen to gain the economic advantages of an open-door policy to ICT, particularly seeking a competitive advantage over Singapore, which had already implemented stringent Internet controls. Thus, even at the height of the recent political crisis, the regime was careful to maintain its position of non-censorship. In March 2000, for instance, when the deputy home minister announced new curbs on PAS's print newsletter *Harakah* and suggested that similar restrictions would be placed upon the Internet edition, his latter comments were quickly hushed up, and he was forced to issue a statement claiming that he had been misquoted. (15)

The reformasi movement, which exploded onto the political scene in 1998, realized the regime's worst fears about the Internet. In the aftermath of Anwar's sacking, the Internet as a political medium and as the medium of reformasi became

virtually synonymous. During the inchoate period of street protests in October to December 1998, the Internet formed a key medium for communication between Anwar's supporters and the broader public. A myriad of Web sites sprang up supporting Anwar and his newly adopted cause of reformasi. Anonymously operated on free servers, with names such as Mahazalim (the Great Oppressor), Minda Rakyat (the People's Mind) and Konspirasi (Conspiracy), they contained a mixture of news, rumour and slander, as well as meeting points for demonstrations and so forth. Chandra Muzaffar, a prominent social activist and the former deputy president of Keadilan, agrees that the Internet proved to be "vital" for the spread of reformasi. (16) The advantage of the Internet to the opposition movement as a form of communication was twofold. Firstly, it was a medium that the government had not strictly controlled and, indeed, had promised not to censor. Secondly, it provided a political space for the negotiation of reformasi and thus "facilitated greater communication and cooperation between disparate groups in civil society, and importantly in the context of Malaysia politics, across ethnic lines." (17)

Over time, the initial barrage of cyber-reformasi subsided, but it had given birth to a vibrant alternative media on the Internet, including the news portal Malaysiakini. Malaysiakini was set up in 1999 as Malaysia's first commercial Internet newspaper. The site averages 120,000 visitors a day, of which approximately 80 percent are from within Malaysia, which compares respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as the New Straits Times. (18) Ostensibly an independent publication, it is, as the editor admits, "pro-opposition by default." (19) Its limited resources and access to official sources mean that it is often restricted to reporting opposition activities. It is not uncritical in its coverage of the opposition, however, and has garnered the ire of opposition party leaders Lim Kit Siang and Syed Husin Ali. (20)

Until early 2003, the greatest challenge faced by Malaysiakini appeared not to be the threat of government action, but its commercial standing. Initially funded by a number of grants from international organizations, Malaysiakini began running into financial problems towards the end of 2000. The end of these grants coincided with a drastic drop in advertising revenue--the company met barely 20 percent of its advertising revenue target in 2001. The decline in advertising was partly a result of the worldwide slump in Internet advertising, but also apparently due to direct government pressure on those advertising with Malaysiakini. (21) The company has thus sought ways to broaden its income, including a paid analysis service, similar in ambition to Oxford Analytica, and by marketing some of the software solutions produced by their tech department. As these efforts were not enough, the site was finally forced to introduce subscription rates in mid-2002. Malaysiakini thus lacks the infrastructure and the financial resources to provide a comprehensive alternative news source to the mainstream media. Nonetheless, the influence of the Web site is such that, in 2001, Asiaweek magazine placed Malaysiakini and its editor at number 18 in its "Power 50" list of influential "communicators" across all of Asia. (22)

Whilst Malaysiakini is the most prominent of the independent Internet Web sites, there are a number of other important sites. AgendaDaily and RadiqRadio were both set up to offer similar services to Malaysiakini in the Malay language. RadiqRadio is particularly noteworthy in that it sought to overcome the commercial problems faced by Malaysiakini by operating both as an Internet site and as a radio station. Unable to gain a broadcast license in Malaysia, it broadcast from the neighbouring Indonesian island of Sumatra, and was thus only available to a small number of Malaysians in and around Kuala Lumpur. Despite its innovative approach, RadiqRadio appears to have failed to sustain itself and its Web site has gone offline.

Although it has maintained its non-censorship line with regard to the Internet, the regime has taken an array of measures to counteract the medium's political impact. Many of these measures, however, have demonstrated remarkable ignorance of the Internet and how it functions. Attempts to close down or "filter" Web sites met with little success, as the webmasters simply shifted their sites to new locations. Sabotaging attacks on anti-government Web sites also failed; as one minister candidly admitted, "the initial missiles do not seem to follow the enemy but has [sic] ricocheted towards us." (23) In an initial attempt to counter the anti-government rhetoric of Internet forums, the regime set up its own "Love Malaysia" Internet forum, subsequently expressing dismay when anti-government messages were posted on it. (24) BN-controlled newspapers have also played their part in the counterattack, portraying anti-government Web sites as "monsters," which have "spewed ... hatred and despairing tales." (25) A 40-person UMNO "anti-defamation committee," which was charged with countering anti-government Internet activity, did little more than advertise which opposition sites were most active. (26) Threats of legal action against webmasters have also come to naught, probably because the government realizes that even Malaysia's compliant courts would find it hard to convict. (27) The introduction of regulations similar to those in Singapore, which require the registration of all cyber cafe users, are completely ignored.

Despite these initial failures, the regime has been relatively successful in containing if not countering press freedom on the Internet, which now appears to occupy the same ground as the alternative print media--durable but, from a regime perspective, tolerably limited. Where regulation has failed, the regime has fallen back on the more discretionary, repressive legislation at its disposal. The biggest drop in anti-government activity on the Internet came after the March/April 2001 detention without trial of around 15 top reformasi activists under the Internal Security Act. One of those detained, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, was the director of the Free Anwar Campaign, which maintained the widely visited <freeanwar.com> Web site. Shortly before his detention, Petra admitted that the crackdown had forced anti-government webmasters "underground." (28) In December 2002, ten more unidentified people were detained without trial for spreading rumours via e-mail. In January 2003, Malaysiakini itself was a victim of the regime's repressive legislation. After the Web site published a letter heavily critical of UMNO's youth branch, the company was raided by police and had 19 of its computers, including its servers, confiscated, forcing it briefly to go offline; its editor was questioned under the Sedition Act. Whilst most of the computers were later returned and charges not laid, police and ministers continue to warn Malaysiakini that it is being "watched." (29) The raid was thus important not so much in its direct impact, but in the fact that it clearly demonstrated the regime's willingness to deploy the full extent of its repressive machinery should it feel sufficiently threatened. As one Internet journalist noted after the raid, "the government may not be able to close down Web sites, but it can lock up those who run them." (30) Indeed, <freeanwar.com> has relocated its base to Australia largely to avoid such harassment.

We have seen, then, that the rise of the Internet as a form of mass media has tested the limits of the regime's regulatory framework, but that this impact has been limited both by the political economy of the Internet, which limits its viability as a full alternative media, and by the regime's willingness to deploy repressive rather than regulatory legislation against the individuals and organizations involved. Perhaps the most telling evidence of the limitations of the Internet is that Malaysiakini, the godfather of Internet journalism in Malaysia, is currently seeking a permit to publish a traditional newspaper. The rise of the Internet clearly demonstrates the limits of the legislative strategy of media control pursued by the BN regime. Ironically, however, it is in its corporate control over the mainstream media, where its dominance is far greater, that the internal contradictions of this strategy become evident.

III. Corporate control and the politics of the BN

Thus far, this paper has discussed the ways in which the BN regime regulates the media in Malaysia, and its responses to developments in media technology. The BN coalition is itself, however, far from being a homogenous, united whole. Differing interests and political rivalry between component parties, and sometimes within the parties, lend the coalition a highly factional dimension. Control of the media is hence not just a matter of imposing the BN's political discourse on society at large, but is often also the stage for intra-coalition competition and negotiation. Whilst corporate control of traditional media by the BN coalition as a whole helps perpetuate the regime's dominance, it also provides individual parties within the coalition with the means to try to negotiate a better position vis-a-vis one another, thus exposing the weaknesses and fissures within that stance.

The use of the press in intra-BN party disputes has in the past been most conspicuous in the large East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. The politics of the BN in these states has been historically more fragmented than in the Peninsula, and regional newspapers have been a prime weapon in these contests. In Sabah during the latter half of the 1970s, for instance, the two major parties--Parti Berjaya and the United Sabah National Organization (USNO)--were both BN components, but also implacable rivals. This rivalry was fought out in the pages of the Daily Express and the Kinabalu Sabah Times, which were controlled, respectively, by interests close to Berjaya and USNO. With a lack of moderation that would make even the most party-loyal Kuala Lumpur editor blush, each newspaper accused the rival party of vote buying, membership fraud and a host of other sins, particularly in the run-up to the 1976 state elections. The Daily Express even claimed, as its headline news, that Tun Mustapha Harun, the Muslim leader of USNO, was a member of a "worldwide secret Jewish conspiracy"--the Free Masons. (31) Similarly, in the 1987 Sarawak state election, which also saw a split in the BN parties, local papers--Utusan Sarawak and the People's Mirror--sided conspicuously with their political patrons, each paper printing a list of timber concessions given to the friends and relatives of the opposing group. (32)

Even in the Peninsula, where the BN parties have been generally more disciplined in their relations, media ownership has played an important role in internal disputes within the coalition. This role is well illustrated by the recent issue of English-language teaching, a rare instance where policy differences between BN parties have been publicly aired. (33)

In June 2002, the government decided to implement a programme to phase in the English language as the medium of tuition for maths and science in all national schools, a move which was vociferously opposed by the Chinese educationalist lobby, a traditionally powerful and respected force in the community. (34) In the face of such protests, first Gerakan (the second-largest Chinese-based party in the BN) and then the MCA openly declared their opposition to the policy. (35)

In response to this dissent, the UMNO-controlled newspapers launched a blistering crusade against the Chinese parties in the coalition. Utusan Malaysia was the most vehement critic, its regular columnist Awang Sulung accusing the parties of "arrogance" (keangkuhan) and a "superiority complex." (36) Front-page reports claimed that the MCA was demanding new Chinese schools and ministry recognition of their private examinations as a price for supporting the policy, claims that were vigorously denied by MCA boss Ling Leong Sik. (37) More restrained, but nonetheless critical, was the New Straits Times group of newspapers. When the MCA officially announced its opposition to the policy, the New Sunday Times accused the party of "selfishness" and opined that "it is now up to those recalcitrant quarters to show the rest of us how this decision is not a defeat for the country." (38)

In contrast, coverage of the issue in the MCA-controlled Star emphasized the process of reaching a compromise, and the spirit of muafakat (consensus) within the BN. The controversy was downplayed and almost praised as representing the BN's consociationalism at its best. The issue was rarely featured as front-page leads; instead, it was relegated to the inside pages. The Star presented the Chinese parties as taking a moderate and informed stance: "The Chinese parties had since the June announcement, met amongst themselves, consulted education experts and gathered feedback from the community because education has always been a top priority and concern." (39)

Reports highlighted conciliatory comments from UMNO ministers and officials, and the line was promoted that the differences were simply a matter of implementation, rather than policy disagreement. (40) Editorials and commentaries thus described the debate as "vigorous democracy at work" and anticipated a "win-win solution." (41) The paper did, however, take regular sideswipes at the Malay papers for sensationalizing the issue, accusing them (without naming specific papers) of "name-calling" and expressing relief that the education ministry itself had "not been distracted by the intense debate." (42)

In terms of intra-BN relations, then, the UMNO-controlled papers played a vital role for the party in vocalizing what UMNO leaders and ministers could not themselves say. In the Malaysian, and particularly Malay, culture of deference to leadership and avoidance of confrontation, public criticism by BN party leaders of other BN parties is virtually unheard of. In this respect, even the notoriously outspoken Mahathir avoided direct criticism of his Chinese coalition partners, limiting himself to oblique comments to the extent that the policy was for the benefit of all Malaysians. (43) For the MCA, the Star allowed it to present a moderate image and to play down the criticisms of the other papers.

The English-language dispute might be seen as of little broader importance and of interest only in countries with coalition governments, but party-controlled newspapers have also played an important role in factionalism within BN component parties. In the late 1980s, for instance, a split in the MIC reverberated in the pages of two Tamil-language papers, Tamil Nesan and Tamil Osai, which were respectively owned by supporters of the party president, Samy Vellu, and supporters of his challenger, Subramaniam. Similarly, the New Straits Times saw a rapid turnover of editors during the UMNO factional divide of the 1980s, with editors who backed the wrong horse quickly losing their posts. (44) As the divide reached its denouement at the 1987 UMNO general assembly, UMNO-linked papers, including the New Straits Times, Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia, were accused by the challenger faction of "wild and biased" reports. (45) During the subsequent UMNO split, much of the court battle between the opposing camps focussed on gaining control of the UMNO's corporate assets, including its media empire. The decisive turn came when Mahathir's team was able to pass an amendment to the Societies Act, ensuring that it retained control of the party's assets.

Once again, the MCA has provided the best illustration in recent years of the importance of the media in party factionalism. In June 2001, the MCA, through its investment arm Huaren Holdings, bought control of Nanyang Press Sdn. Bhd., which publishes Nanyang Siang Pau and the China Press, two of the four major national Chinese-language newspapers. Nanyang Press was previously linked to the UMNO through its parent company, Hume Industries, though the party lacked outright control. Hume Industries is controlled by a businessman close to Mahathir, and the UMNO's investment arm Renong also had a 20 percent interest in the company, so the newspapers had previously been under at least indirect political influence. (46)

Initially, the MCA president at the time, Ling Leong Sik, claimed that the takeover was purely commercial and that the party was merely acceding to an independent recommendation by the management of Huaren Holdings. (47) The takeover, however, provoked a ferocious backlash from the Chinese community and Chinese organizations, including the normally politically reticent Associated Chinese Chambers of Industry, which viewed the takeover as politically motivated. Ninety columnists and contributors to the Nanyang papers resigned in protest and the leadership of Gerakan also urged Ling to reconsider the takeover. (48) As criticism grew and details of Nanyang Press's poor financial position emerged, Ling was forced to concede that the takeover was not just commercial but a "politically strategic investment." (49) Mahathir, who had initially been noncommittal about the takeover, also justified it on the grounds that "Nanyang has been against us." (50)

The Nanyang takeover, however, was more than just the latest media acquisition by a BN party. It also brought to a head the festering divide in the MCA between two factions, one led by Ling ("Team A") and the other by party deputy president and grassroots favourite Lim Ah Lek ("Team B"). Immediately after the takeover was announced, Team B leaders began questioning the purchase, echoing the claims that it was politically motivated and against the wishes of the Chinese community. (51) Team B leaders went on a road show around the country to drum up opposition to the takeover and to challenge its legitimacy within the party constitution. Forced onto the defensive, Ling eventually called an Emergency General Meeting of the MCA to endorse the takeover, which voted by the closest of margins to approve the deal. (52)

Leaders of the Team B faction claimed their opposition to the deal was based on the wishes of the Chinese community. But they must also have considered the position of their own challenge to the incumbent leadership. The takeover not only brought the Nanyang papers under MCA control, but also, more specifically, under the control of the "Team A" faction and party president Ling. Of course, Ling repeatedly claimed that there would be no editorial interference, but few gave credence to this promise. Even the UMNO-controlled Malay Mail noted ironically that "the road ahead for the MCA will be rough, but at least things will be positive and rosy in the Nanyang Siang Pau." (53) In reality, the MCA-controlled Star already provided very little coverage of the ongoing schism, and when it did it clearly favoured the Ling faction. (54) The Nanyang papers, on the other hand, had given the split some considerable prominence, and it was this source of relatively independent news output that the challenger faction would lose. Team B's fears over the editorial bent of the newly acquired papers were thus realized in April 2002, when Nanyang Siang Pau and the China Press carried the same editorial by the group's editor-in-chief, Hoong Soon Kean, lambasting Team B for "creating chaos and weakening the party." (55)

Factional disputes within BN parties, including the Ling-Lim schism, often take the form of popular grassroots challengers confronting entrenched leadership teams, which have control over the party apparatus by virtue of their position. (56) In such circumstances, party control of media assets clearly favours the incumbent leadership. In as much, it is worth noting that the Ling faction within the party was reportedly one of the prime movers pressurizing the Sun into a more moderate line, as well as apparently intervening to prevent the airing of a news feature on TV2 that focussed on the Nanyang takeover. (57)

In this section, then, we have seen that corporate and editorial control of the media industry by the BN political parties has been a double-edged sword, helping ensure the general quiescence of the industry, whilst simultaneously providing different interests within the coalition--parties and factions within parties--with the means to compete indirectly in the public sphere.

Conclusions

For many academics and activists in Malaysia, one event above all epitomizes the state of the media industry in Malaysia. Just days before the divisive and bitterly fought 1990 general election, the UMNO-controlled Utusan Malaysia carried on its front page a photograph of the opposition leader and former UMNO vice president Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah wearing a native Sabahan headdress that happened to have a cross on it. Together with the provocative headline "Orang ramai marah Razaleigh pakai tengkolok bersalib" ("The general public is furious over Razaleigh wearing a headgear with a cross"), the photograph and the article alongside it implied that Razaleigh, a relative of the Sultan of Kelantan, was not truly committed to Islam or the Malay race. (58) Such distortions and misrepresentations of the regime's critics and opponents

are undoubtedly influential and constitute an important factor in the continuing domination of the Barisan Nasional--as well as the country's continued standing at the very bottom of international press-freedom rankings. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that even in the context of these controls, spaces for negotiation and contestation still exist.

Whilst it has retained its corporate control over the mainstream media, albeit more indirectly than previously, a noticeable shift in the regime's approach to communications regulation has occurred in recent years. Perhaps recognizing the challenges presented by new forms of communication, from satellite television to the Internet and even newer forms such as mobile phone texting, regime control of the media in Malaysia is apparently moving away from legislative regulation and towards the select harassment and repression of individuals and organizations that the regime considers a threat to its monopoly on the public discourse.

If new forms of communication have forced the regime into changing its strategies of media control, however, its use of the media itself is indicative of the limitation of its project. Though a compromise solution was reached in both intra-BN disputes analyzed here, the fact that they were played out, often viciously, in the very public arena of the national newspapers is of great significance. Differences of opinion regularly arise within the BN coalition, from policy disputes to jostling over cabinet appointments and seat allocation at election times. Such disputes, however, are usually conducted behind firmly closed doors, and the compliant mass media generally ignores them. That factions within the BN sometimes turn to their respective media organs to stake their claims is thus not so much indicative of consensus building within the coalition but of the limitations of this consensus. Mobilizing public support through their respective media empires may have been seen by the various groups as the best way to resolve the dispute to their advantage, but it also demonstrated very publicly the lack of consensus within the BN. For a regime that bases its legitimacy largely on its ability to build an interethnic consensus, such public disputes expose the weaknesses and limitations of this discursive stance.

(1) R. Nadeswaran, "Take the rap and resign graciously," *The Sun*, 4 August 2004, available online at <<http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=4314>>, site last accessed 10 March 2005.

(2) Although now somewhat dated, the paradigmatic examination of the politics of the media in Malaysia remains Edmund Terence Gomez, *Political Business, Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties* (Townsville, Australia: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1994). For more recent analyses, see Zaharom Nain, "The structure of the media industry: implications for democracy," in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik, eds., *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2002); and Edmund Terence Gomez, "Politics of the media business: the press under Mahathir," in Bridget Welsh, ed., *Reflections: The Mahathir Years* (Washington, DC: School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2004).

(3) For the classic work on the emergence of Malay nationalism, see William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 2nd edition (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994).

(4) See Timothy N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), especially pp. 282-291.

(5) For a full account of this strike by the then chief editor, see Said Zahari, *Dark Clouds at Dawn: A political memoir* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute For Social Analysis--INSAN, 2001). During the strike, Said was banned from entering Malaya and was subsequently detained without trial for over 17 years in Singapore after the island separated from Malaysia.

(6) Since the early 1990s, the UMNO has apparently divested itself of direct control of these companies and its business interests more generally, preferring to maintain its empire through trusteeships and close links with influential tycoons such as the now out-of-favour Halim Saad and Tajudin Ramli. See Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo K.S., *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, patronage and profits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

(7) "Dewan Rakyat Report," *Daily Express*, 22 July 1999, p. 4.

(8) Zaharom, "The structure of the media industry."

(9) Garry Rodan, "Do markets need transparency? The pivotal cases of Singapore and Malaysia," *New Political Economy*, 7.1 (2002), pp. 23-47.

(10) "Regional briefing," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 December 1998, p. 2.

(11) Zaharom, "Apologists and eunuchs: the state of Malaysian media," *Aliran Monthly*, 10.11 (1990) pp. 12-13. See also Francis Loh Kok Wah and Mustafa K. Anuar, "The press in Malaysia in the early 1990s: Corporatisation, technological innovation and the middle class," in Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby, eds., *Malaysia: Critical perspectives* (Petaling Jaya: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, 1996); and Mustafa K. Anuar, "Defining democratic discourses: The mainstream press," in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik, *Democracy in Malaysia*.

(12) For a detailed content analysis of the Sun, see John Hillely, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* (London: Zed Books, 2001), especially pp. 141-7.

(13) Lorien Holland, "Two Chinese papers fall into government hands," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 June 2001, pp. 26-28. The Edge itself has on occasion been directly and damningly critical of specific government policies or projects, also exuding a more general distaste for the "crony capitalism" of the BN.

- (14) For a recent discussion of these issues, see Garry Rodan, ed., "Electronic media, markets and civil society in East and Southeast Asia," special issue of *Pacific Review*, 16.4 (2003).
- (15) Jason P. Abbott, "Democracy@internet.asia? The challenges to the emancipatory potential of the net: Lessons from China and Malaysia," *Third World Quarterly*, 22.1 (2001), pp. 99-114.
- (16) Susan Loone, "Web vital for aiding reformasi, says Chandra," *Malaysiakini*, 24 March 2001, available online at <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>, site last accessed 10 March 2005.
- (17) Jason Abbott, "The Internet, reformasi and democratisation in Malaysia," in Edmund Terence Gomez, ed., *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); see also Graham Brown, "Between Gramsci and Graffiti: Opposition politics and the impact on the Internet in Malaysia," in Jason Abbott, *The Political Economy of the Internet in the Asia-Pacific* (Greenwood, UK: Praeger, 2003).
- (18) Personal interview, Steven Gan, *Malaysiakini* editor, 10 January 2002, Bangsar, Malaysia. Statistics for visits are not entirely accurate. Multiple visits by the same person would register as two separate visitors. Conversely, more than one person visiting from a local area network (e.g., a university campus) would register as only one visit.
- (19) Interview, Steven Gan.
- (20) "Uphold integrity, DAP tells Malaysiakini," *New Straits Times*, 23 December 2001, p. 2.
- (21) Interview, Steven Gan.
- (22) "Power 50: 2001," *Asiaweek*, 1 June 2001, available online at <<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/features/power50.2001/toc.html>>.
- (23) Tong Yee-Siong, "Gov't to launch upgraded 'missiles' on dangerous websites," *Malaysiakini*, 5 July 2001, available online at <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>, site last accessed 10 March 2005.
- (24) The forum was located on the Department of National Unity homepage, accessible online at <<http://www.kempen.gov.my>>, and has since been discontinued.
- (25) Shamsul Akmar, "Idealistic webmasters should accept the reality of party politics," *New Straits Times*, 27 May 2000, p. 2; "Rumourville on the net," *New Sunday Times*, 9 November 1999, p. 4.
- (26) "Websites used to attack government identified," *New Straits Times*, 9 August 1999, p. 2.
- (27) "UMNO panel considers legal action," *New Straits Times*, 28 May 1999, p. 4.
- (28) Arjuna Ranawana, "A crackdown on dissent: the Malaysian government targets web critics," *Asiaweek*, 15 March 2001, available online at <<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/daily/foc/0,8773,102638,00.html>>, site last accessed 10 March 2005.
- (29) Beh Lih Yi, "'Be careful, we are watching,' Malaysiakini warned," *Malaysiakini*, 16 October 2003.
- (30) Personal interview, Internet journalist (name withheld), 15 April 2003.
- (31) "Tun Mustapha member of Jewish conspiracy," *Daily Express*, 4 March 1977, p. 1.
- (32) Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (St. Leonard's, New South Wales, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 87-88.
- (33) This section relies on an analysis of reportage and commentary in English- and Malay-language newspapers; a similar analysis of the Chinese-language press, whilst obviously desirable, was beyond the linguistic skills of this researcher.
- (34) The government-funded school system currently operates three different types of national schools with tuition in Malay, Chinese and Tamil. Education is an extremely sensitive issue for the Chinese. The political strength of the educationalist movement is well documented by Tan Liok Ee, "Dongzhaojong and the challenge to cultural hegemony, 1951-1987," in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, *Fragmented Vision*. For a more general history of Chinese education in Malaysia, see Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- (35) *Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (*Gerakan--the Malaysian People's Movement Party*) is nominally multiracial, but in reality its support is overwhelmingly Chinese and geographically restricted to the Chinese majority state of Penang.
- (36) Zalina Yahaya, "Politik pendidikan Cina," *Utusan Malaysia*, 29 October 2002, available online at <http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/archive.asp?y=2002&dt=1029&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Rencana&pg=re_01.htm>, site last accessed 10 March 2005; Awang Sulung, "Isu BI semakin rumit," *Mingguan Malaysia*, 27 October 2002, available online at <http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/archive.asp?y=2002&dt=1027&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Rencana&pg=re_01.htm>.

site last accessed 10 March 2005. *Mingguan Malaysia* is the Sunday edition of *Utusan Malaysia*.

- (37) "MCA denies claims," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 30 October 2002, p.1.
- (38) "One step forward ...," *New Sunday Times*, 20 October 2002, p. 8; Shamsul Akmar, "MCA stand reflects selfishness," *New Sunday Times*, 27 October 2002, p. 7.
- (39) Jocelyn Tan, "Chinese parties meet on education," *Sunday Star*, 27 October 2002, p. 4.
- (40) "Minister meets Gerakan," *Star*, 22 October 2002, p. 4; "Finding consensus," *Sunday Star*, 6 October 2002.
- (41) V.K. Chin, "Democracy at Work," *Star*, 24 October 2002.
- (42) "Democracy at Work," *Star*, 24 October 2002; V.K. Chin, "The spirit of muafakat," *Star* 25 October 2002, p. 14.
- (43) Kadir Dikoh, "Penyokong BN diminta jangan emosi," *Berita Harian*, 15 October 2002, p. 8.
- (44) Crouch, *Government and Society*, pp. 86-87.
- (45) "Razalieggh accuses newspapers," *New Straits Times*, 9 May 1987, p. 4.
- (46) Francis Loh, "The Nanyang takeover crisis: representing or opposing community interests?" *Aliran Monthly* 21 (5), May 2001, available online at <<http://www.aliran.com/monthly/2001/5b.html>>, site last accessed 10 March 2005.
- (47) "Ling: MCA supports politically Nanyang takeover by Huaren," *New Straits Times*, 28 May 2001, p. 8.
- (48) "Keng Yaik: Reconsider take over of Nanyang," *New Straits Times*, 6 June 2001, p. 1.
- (49) "Purchase of Nanyang a politically strategic investment, says Ling," *Business Times*, 18 June 2001, p. 1.
- (50) Tong Yee Siong, "Nanyang was against us: Dr M," *Malaysiakini*, 22 June 2001, available online at <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>, site last accessed 10 March 2005.
- (51) "Chua, 9 others question Nanyang deal," *Business Times*, 30 May 2001, p. 1.
- (52) As party president, Ling had a great deal of control over the representatives sent to the EGM, and the narrowness of his victory was thus probably indicative of an even greater level of discontent within the party.
- (53) V. Vasudevan, "Battle lines being drawn," *Malay Mail*, 1 June 2001, p. 4.
- (54) Over the past few years a number of letters have appeared on the *Malaysiakini* Web site, allegedly from *Star* journalists and editors, detailing how they operate under orders to give preferential treatment and coverage to Ling and his faction. The actual provenance of these letters is impossible to ascertain.
- (55) Y.S. Tong, "Two MCA-owned dailies attack Team B in same editorial," *Malaysiakini*, 8 April 2002.
- (56) Ironically, Ling himself had been swept into the party presidency in 1986 on the back of a grassroots revolt by supporters of tycoon Tan Koon Swan against the incumbent leader Neo Yee Pan. Tan had held the presidency for the briefest of periods, passing it on to his close factional comrade Ling after he (Tan) was indicted in Singapore on criminal breach of trust charges. See Heng Pek Koon, "The New Economic Policy and the Chinese community in Peninsular Malaysia," *The Developing Economies*, 35.3 (1997), pp. 262-292.
- (57) Susan Loone, "MCA's Team A exerted pressure on the Sun: Party source," *Malaysiakini*, 8 January 2002; Y.S. Tong, "TV2 drops Nanyang feature after phone call from MCA top leader," *Malaysiakini*, 10 June 2002.
- (58) Mustafa, "Defining democratic discourses," p. 154.

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