



Writing Women

The Women's Pages of the
Malay-Language Press
(1987–1998)

Sonia Randhawa



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ISBN 978-981-19-1106-4 ISBN 978-981-19-1107-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1107-1>

The print edition is not for sale in Malaysia and Singapore. Customers from Malaysia and Singapore please order the print book from: GB Gerakbudaya Enterprise Sdn Bhd. [978-967-2464-51-8]

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This book is dedicated to those Malaysian journalists who have tried to expand the number of stories that can be told. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book, based on my PhD thesis, has been both challenging and exhilarating, intellectually, personally and physically. Throughout all, my supervisors Kate McGregor and Amanda Whiting have provided guidance, inspiration and extraordinary support. I cannot thank them enough for their help.

I gratefully acknowledge the funding support from the Australian Government Research Training Programme Scholarship and the input of Dr. Wulan Digantoro and Associate Professor Barbara Keys.

The thesis would not have been possible without the collaboration of my 21 respondents. I would like to particularly thank Maizura Mohd Ederis from *Berita Harian* and Norila Daud from *Utusan Malaysia* for introducing me to their broad circle of colleagues and friends. Professor Kiranjit Kaur at Universiti Teknologi Mara was my external supervisor in Malaysia, and provided me with contacts and assistance, for which I am also grateful.

In terms of the content analysis, accessing materials proved difficult. Without the help of Professor Azmi Sharom and library staff at the Universiti Malaya, and Professor Wang Lay Kim and my research assistant Yong Chee Yan at Universiti Sains Malaysia, this thesis would have been much poorer. My particular thanks to Chee Yan. This thesis is also richer for my Malaysian friends, peers and colleagues, Gayathry Venkiteswaran, Jac sm Kee, Juana Jaafar, Chuah Siew Eng, and countless others. Without

your example, your intelligence and your courage, this thesis, and my life, would be unimaginably more dull.

Within my cohort at the University of Melbourne, Jennie Jeppeson provided an unstoppable example of balancing motherhood and research. Sharing a room with Shane Smits and Susan Reidy in my first year helped maintain that balance of hard work and manic release that I found necessary at the start of my candidature. And thanks to Jason Ng Sze Chieh for sharing election night 2013. To Susie Latham, thank you for your feedback and support.

On a more personal note, this could not have been done without my parenting support networks. From Elaine, Jo, Erin, Amanda, Juliet and Genie who helped care for my kids; to the PhD Parenting Facebook group who helped me maintain a sense of humour throughout the process, thank you. My kids and I have kept sanity and balance in large part through your efforts.

Penultimately, thanks to my family. Dorian, Zai and Kavi, you've made this thesis so much more difficult than it would have been otherwise, but made my life so much richer than I could have imagined. I love you beyond measure.

But lastly, my mother, Ruth. When I fell and, quite literally, broke, you came to pick up the pieces. Without your care and love during those months, none of the rest would have been possible.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Women in the Newsrooms: Their Perceptions and Stories	35
3	Evolving Constructions of the Malay-Muslim Woman in <i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	83
4	The Different Voices of Women in <i>Berita Harian</i>	135
5	Umno, Editors and the Women's Page Journalists	185
	Conclusion	211
	Appendix: Brief Biographies of Oral History Respondents (in Alphabetical Order)	219
	Glossary	223
	Bibliography	227
	Index	283

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sonia Randhawa first worked as a journalist in 1993, working for a Malaysian English-language newspaper. Since then, she has worked as a journalist in print, online and radio media; but most of her working life has been with the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) in Malaysia. Her main passion at CIJ has been community media, particularly radio, though she has had more success advocating for the right to information.

ABBREVIATIONS¹

<i>Abim</i>	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i> , Malaysian Islamic Youth Organisation, a leading <i>dakwah</i> organisation, led by Anwar Ibrahim until 1982
<i>BN</i>	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> or National Front, a coalition of primarily race-based parties that formed government throughout this period, and who have been in power since Independence. Formerly the Alliance
DAP	Democratic Action Party, a Chinese-based opposition party, officially advocating socialism, though increasingly seen as pro-business. Originally an offshoot of Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party in Singapore
<i>DCCK</i>	<i>Di celah-celah kehidupan</i> , Life's nooks and crannies. A weekly column published in <i>Utusan Malaysia</i> throughout the period, written by veteran journalist Maimunah Yusof
DVA	Domestic Violence Act (1994)
ISA	Internal Security Act (1960)
MCA	A Chinese-based party, the Malaysian Chinese Association and a major partner in the ruling coalition
MIC	The Malaysian Indian Congress, an Indian-based component party of the <i>Barisan Nasional</i>

¹ I have remained true to my journalistic roots, capitalising those whose acronym is pronounced as letters, such as DAP, and capitalising just the first letter of those pronounced as words, such as Umno. In either case, the first use of the word provides the full designation.

NEP	The New Economic Policy, measures introduced following the race-based violence of 1969, primarily consisting of affirmative action for those identified as <i>bumiputera</i>
NUJ	The National Union of Journalists (Malaysia)
<i>Pas</i>	An Islamist opposition party, the acronym comes from the Arabic for <i>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</i> , the Malaysian Islamic Party
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984)
<i>SJA</i>	<i>Soal Jawab Agama</i> . An advice column of the same name was published in both papers. Although it appeared under various names in <i>Berita Harian</i> , I have used the same acronym throughout as the writer and the format remained unchanged
Umno	The United Malays National Organisation and the 'New' Umno, the keystone Malay-based political party for the ruling <i>Barisan Nasional</i> coalition
Umno Baru	The party became Umno Baru in 1988 following a court ruling that disbanded the original party
WAO	Women's Aid Organisation, a women's rights and welfare organisation

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 3.1	A fatwa (inset) had been issued saying women must wear traditional dresses to play netball. In the image, the girls use the voluminous skirts to hide the ball from the opposing team	99
Fig. 3.2	Cartoon showing Syariah official helping a wife, the mouse in the corner representing Maimunah Yusof	119
Fig. 4.1	Ragam (cartoon) Chinese-looking man selling “Aladdin’s lamp” to a Malay grandmother	143
Fig. 4.2	Front page of Berita Wanita, headlined “School Menu”	149
Fig. 4.3	The first man praises the women for talking in the national language; the second is dismissive saying they are just talking about a handsome sportsman	152
Fig. 4.4	Fashion article on trends in wedding dresses	161
Fig. 4.5	Editorial team under Delilah Hussein in January 1996	170
Fig. 4.6	Editorial team in March 1998. In 1996 (Fig. 4.6), there were 7 reporters, four sub-editors and 7 sales and marketing staff; in 1998 there were 4 reporters, 8 sub-editors and 14 sales and marketing staff	179
Fig. 5.1	Stark increase in the number of articles written by women’s page journalists once Delaila Hussain became editor	193

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Articles analysed by article type	86
Table 3.2	Breakdown of Wanita articles for October 1987	121
Table 4.1	Articles analysed by article type, excluding front page articles and wire pieces	138
Table 4.2	Data from a report by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Analysis of Adex Size and Trend in Malaysia (2006)	162



Introduction

I applied to the New Straits Times, they were looking for economic writers, so my intention was to work on the Economy desk. I had to write an essay of 300 words... There were 100 candidates and only 25 were chosen... the allowance was only RM600. I could get RM1,800 (in a different industry) – but I came here for RM600, I struggled for six months just to get the (training) certificate. If we didn't get the certificate, we had to get another job, because that was just pre-entry.

—Maizura Mohd Ederis (Berita Harian, 1993–1996)¹

Journalism is a vocation as much as a profession, involving long hours, bad pay and, as I show later in this book, an often toxic masculine culture—yet, as Maizura notes above, despite these constraints, in the early 1990s when she began her career, there was plenty of competition for entry-level jobs in the Malaysian newsrooms. Maizura was a high-achieving student. She had good grades, but she was a village girl, a “kampung girl from Penang... on the border with Perak”. With that disadvantage, the only university place she was offered was in “management technology”.

¹ All interviews took place between January and May 2014, in and around Kuala Lumpur. For more context, see Appendix A.

So not much opportunity, so when I got good grades, the only offer was UTM (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, based in Skudai, Johor), so if I want to be a journalist at that time, I have to take Form 6 because only UiTM (Universiti Teknologi Mara) and USM (Universiti Sains Malaysia) offered journalism at that time, so I didn't want to risk, people said Form 6 is very difficult, people were very negative at the time, they said if you take Form 6 you will fail, better to just get married!

So Maizura studied a university course that she wasn't interested in, but by the final year, she was committed to pursuing her dream.

So the final year, I started writing essays, and I applied for journalism, but again there was a negative response, people said journalism is not an easy thing. People referred to *Mat Som* (a movie about a freelance journalist), by Lat, and would say, 'oh, you know Mat Som? It isn't an easy thing to be a journalist!'.

Yet, Maizura persisted and started work in *Berita Harian*, a national Malay-language daily, in 1993. She spent just three years as a newspaper journalist, then left the paper and went to work in a magazine. At the time of the interview, she was writing soap operas for television.

This book is about those women journalists, like Maizura, in the Malay-language press who overcame the barriers of male discrimination, low pay and family constraints to carve out a space for women both in the newsrooms and on the pages of the newspapers. It examines how the newspapers portrayed women, and how far they could stray from the Umno vision of what a woman should be, examining the gender order at the heart of the Malay ruling party, during a time when that gender order was being rewritten. Further, this book argues that we can learn about how the media functions by looking at the parts of the media that are on the margins of the system. Women, as I argue throughout this book, were crucial to the maintenance of Umno hegemony from Independence until the elections of 2018. Yet, the way that women have been addressed and constructed in the Malay-language press has been neglected. By looking at these pages, I also found that at the margins of the newspapers, women were, at times, able to move outside the official Umno visions of what a woman should be, and that they often strayed from the script of the Umno woman present on the "malestream" leader and religion pages.

While this book tells a story over three decades old, Malaysian politics today has been shaped and dominated by the two characters who dominated politics during this time: Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim. Looking at how the Malay-language newspapers evolved during their initial periods of dominance can help us understand more about the political situation today, and how these key actors have affected the media in the past. While the focus is on the women's pages and women writers, it also tracks changes in the leader and religion ("malestream") pages.

THE CONTEXT

The story starts in the late 1980s, when Malaysia suffered an economic crisis. Graduate unemployment, inconceivable a decade earlier, was considered a problem. Corruption scandals plagued the administration, and there was unrest in the ranks of the Umno. Outside the party, the appointment of non-Mandarin speaking heads in Chinese-language schools and the proposed "development" of the heritage *Bukit Cina* (Chinese Hill) site combined to make the Chinese-identifying population in Malaysia feel sidelined. Logging in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, in particular, was fuelling an environmentalist movement, along with more localised concerns such as the siting of a rare earth dump.

The period I examine in this book begins on 1 October 1987: On 27 October, English-language newspaper *The Star* ran 19 mugshots on its front page, people who had been detained without trial under the notorious Internal Security Act. *Operasi Lallang*, then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's (1981–2003) response to the tensions above, had begun. Those arrested included opposition and government politicians; environmental, religious and educational activists; and academics. The following day *The Star* was closed down, along with Chinese-language paper *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and the Malay-language weekly *Watan*. *Operasi Lallang* was devastating for the press in Malaysia, not only for these journalists directly affected, but for those who watched their colleagues struggle, financially and morally, with the consequences of the closures.²

² This is primarily from personal observation, working sporadically in newsrooms and as a journalist from 1992 until 2007.

Journalists not directly affected were colleagues and friends of those who turned to taxi-driving, hawker-stalls and cleaning to make ends meet.³

Operasi Lallang thus impacted beyond those organisations or movements whose members were detained. Further, by weakening other non-party political organisations, it strengthened the *dakwah* (Islamisation) movements: The state intervened in the affairs of Muslim groups tentatively, unless they were perceived as an imminent threat to stability. In the past, particularly the 1985 raid in Memali (a raid on a Pas-linked Islamic sect which left 18 people dead), intervention had had politically ambivalent results. As historian Farish A. Noor has argued, the Memali incident helped strengthen bonds within the Islamist party Pas (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, known by its Jawi acronym), allowing them to tap into the global discourse of the martyred Muslim fighting against their own postcolonial government.⁴ Thus, the government's main strategy was incorporation. Simultaneously, the government was continuing to act against left-wing and other NGO movements. Thus, the safest means of debating state actions, including on poverty and foreign policy, was through religiously based organisations. *Operasi Lallang*, therefore, marks the start of this research because it represents a pivotal moment in shaping the Malaysian media, NGOs and the *dakwah* movement.

Nonetheless, at the 1990 General Election, Umno and its partners in the *BN* coalition managed to hold on to their two-thirds majority. While electoral shifts took place, particularly at the state level, the parties in opposition failed to persuade voters, particularly Malay voters, to move away from the trusted *BN* model: The opposition's attempt to replicate this model failed.⁵

In 1998, once again, Malaysia was in the midst of an economic crisis, brought on by the regional Asian financial crisis. Unemployment among all classes was rising. Rather than the metaphoric pall of 1987, a literal

³ From anecdotes shared by Star reporters on the blog of a former journalist, <https://uppercaise.wordpress.com/?s=lalang>; accessed 9 December 2012.

⁴ Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party Pas, 1951–2003* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 2004), 396–406, 35–36.

⁵ Some commentators even saw little difference between the two parties, seeing the split as primarily a personality clash, e.g. Harold Crouch, "Authoritarian Trends, the Umno Split and the Limits to State Power," in *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Joel S. Kahn and Francis Kok Wah Loh (Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen & Unwin, 1992), 30.

pall hung over the country, pollution from forest fires in neighbouring Indonesia choked swathes of the country, a condition exacerbated by an ongoing water supply crisis which left approximately half the capital without running water, dependent on water supply trucks for months.⁶

This is the endpoint of this book, the resulting political crisis of 1998, marked by the sacking of deputy prime minister and heir-apparent Anwar Ibrahim on 2 September 1998. This ignominious dismissal was an indicator of the splintering of the vision for Malaysia's future. The Islamist opposition no longer comprised the narrow-minded clerics criticised by Mahathir in 1987⁷; rather, it now provided an alternative to the developmental vision of Umno. While the opposition still failed to break the two-thirds threshold, there was a swing of Malay votes away from BN and the Umno. The shifts in the 1999 electoral contest mirrored an upheaval in the media of a very different nature, with the onslaught of more credible online news sources. Rights-based NGOs underwent a revitalisation, and the split between the *dakwah* movements and the Umno bureaucracy (which was present even at the height of the government's efforts at Islamisation) became more open, effectively symbolised by the incarceration and humiliation of Umno's top *dakwah* proponent, Anwar.

Further, by 1998, women were key to the struggle between Umno and Pas. As Helen Ting has noted, this contest, particularly in the 2004 elections, included Umno's attempt to woo women voters through greater attention to women's rights.⁸ The Umno framed their vision of women as modern and in keeping with development norms, and this vision is a key reference point in this book. In contrast, Pas women, and *dakwah* women more broadly (see below), were arguing that women should prioritise their role within the family. In an interview with Rebecca Foley, then-head of the *Dewan Muslimat Pas*, the Pas' women's wing, Jamilah Ibrahim said, "Men are the leaders of women inside and outside the

⁶ In 1997–1998, I was living in Kuala Lumpur, reliant on these trucks. For how the haze was framed by the press locally, see Brian L. Massey, "How Three Southeast Asian Newspapers Framed 'The Haze' of 1997–98," *Asian Journal of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2000), 72–94.

⁷ e.g. Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister's Office, "Official Opening of the Seminar on Islamic Management with the Islamic Development Bank and the Ministry of Education", 6 April 1987.

⁸ Helen Ting, "Gender Discourse in Malay Politics: Old Wine in New Bottle?," ed. Edmund Terence Gomez, *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 75.

home”, continuing to say that women could only work outside the home if veiled and with permission of their husbands.⁹ Anthropologist Maila Stivens has extensively demonstrated how the Malay-Muslim woman has been a key support for the *BN*-dominated state.¹⁰ These observations highlight the two domestic policies that were at the heart of political policies affecting women: neoliberalism and Islamisation. While neoliberalism affected women economically, the bureaucratisation of Islam meant that women were increasingly framed as wives and mothers.

HEGEMONY, ITS LIMITS AND THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA

Hegemony as a concept is rarely used to examine authoritarian systems, the underlying assumption being that the threat of violence is omnipresent, and that there is no consensus upon which the state rests. These assumptions have been challenged by, in particular, in an edited collection by Sumit K Mandal and Ariel Heryanto, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*. The diverse essays in this collection argue that different segments of the population have different relationships with authoritarianism, that it does not affect all parts of society in the same ways, and, significantly, that important sectors of society, such as the media and the middle classes in Malaysia and Indonesia, during this period, accepted and supported authoritarianism.

There were various mechanisms used by the Malaysian government to maintain hegemony, and in this section, I give an overview of three main ideas that animated Malaysia’s political hegemony—neoliberalism, race and Islam—and ensured during this period that no alternative to the *BN* model was conceivable. First, however, I examine the legislative environment, that defined the parameters of the ideological apparatus.

⁹ Rebecca C. Foley, *The Challenge of Contemporary Muslim Women Activists in Malaysia* (Monash University, 2001), 145.

¹⁰ Maila Stivens, “Religion, Nation and Mother-Love: The Malay Peninsula Past and Present,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33, no. 4 (2010), 390–401.

CONSTRAINTS ON THE NEWSPAPERS AND THEIR JOURNALISTS

The Malaysian Constitution of 1957 guarantees freedom of expression in Article 10, but, as with the other rights-based provisions, subject to other pieces of legislation as “deemed necessary or expedient”:

in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or of any Legislative Assembly or to provide against contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to any offence¹¹;

In practice, during the period discussed, opposition and activist attempts to interpret Constitutional provisions through a broad human-rights framework were largely unsuccessful. For example, in 1990, the Supreme Court overturned a High Court decision that would have granted civil society organisation Aliran permission to publish their newsletter in Malay, as the law allowed the Home Ministry “absolute discretion” in deciding whether to grant a publishing permit.¹²

Legislation governing the print media was established by the British and from its inception, the framework governing the media in Malaysia was about containment rather than about facilitating debate or dialogue. This interpretation, and fear, of the role of the media continues up to and beyond the research period. The cornerstone piece of legislation was the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA). The PPPA was revised twice in 1987 by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, just prior and just after *Operasi Lalang*, as well as in 1988. The 1987 amendments to the PPPA removed the right to judicial review of Ministerial decisions, and concentration of power in the Executive. The PPPA required printers and publishers to obtain a licence from the relevant Minister (often the Home Minister) to print any periodical. The Minister could, and often did, include conditions to the printing permit, including frequency of publication, languages in which the publication could be published and geographic limits to circulation. Licences were awarded on an annual

¹¹ *Federal Constitution* (Malaysia), article 10.2a.

¹² *Minister of Home Affairs v Persatuan Aliran Kesedaran Negara* (1990) 1 MLJ 351 (Supreme Court).

basis, from the start of the calendar year, and there was no presumption of renewal. Further, as mentioned, the Minister's decision on the award, amendment or revocation of a licence was final, and not subject to judicial review. Other pertinent provisions in the PPPA criminalised defamation and allowed for the seizure of publications.

Another piece of legislation that influenced journalists, despite being rarely used against the media or media practitioners during this period, was the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960, which allowed for detention without trial, potentially indefinitely.¹³ In amendments to the Act in 1988 and 1989, Mahathir strengthened the Minister's powers under the Act, attempting to curb judicial review and the writ of habeas corpus; removing the power of an Advisory Board to release detainees during six-month reviews; and increasing Ministerial powers to appoint and dismiss the Advisory Board. The Act also contained provisions on the control of "subversive" publications.¹⁴ The ISA defined the parameters of government power, and the potential use of the legislation served as a constraint.¹⁵ Further, senior journalists, such as A. Samad Ismail who worked in *BH* at this time, had been detained (1976–1981 in this instance).

Other notable pieces of legislation include the broadly defined Sedition Act 1948, the Official Secrets Act 1972 and various provisions in the Penal Code. Together, these functioned as a formidable arsenal against freedom of expression and freedom of information. The legislative arsenal was rarely used by the State against the mainstream media, particularly against *Utusan Malaysia* (*Utusan*) or *BH*, which are the focus of this book. Both were, however, subject to numerous private defamation suits.¹⁶

¹³ For a personal account, see Rehman Rashid, *A Malaysian Journey* (Petaling Jaya: Rehman Rashid, 1993), 229–39.

¹⁴ *Internal Security Act*, (Malaysia), s22–31.

¹⁵ For an exposition of the use of the ISA, see Koh Swe Yong, *Malaysia 45 Years Under the ISA*, trans. Agnes Khoo (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2004).

¹⁶ While journalists were aware of defamation laws, they did not appear to have a chilling effect on the government-aligned media, cf Garry Rodan, "Embracing Electronic Media but Suppressing Civil Society: Authoritarian Consolidation in Singapore," *The Pacific Review* 16, no. 4 (2003), 503–24.

Despite recognition by some journalists that censorship occurred, a number either did not recognise its presence or spoke in detail about the freedom they enjoyed as journalists.¹⁷ Yet, the impact of this arsenal of laws has been discussed by Mustafa K. Anuar in relation to the 2004 elections, and by Wong Kokkeong, using the lens of development journalism, in relation to the 1999 elections.¹⁸ Both find that the environment was highly regulated, but both studies look at the newspapers during elections. This focus is useful to demonstrate the extent of government control, but these periods appear to be chosen precisely because enhanced political vulnerability translated into greater regulation of content. What is missing is an understanding of how censorship operated outside times of political vulnerability.

The legislative framework alone is insufficient, though necessary, to describe the circulation of power in the Malay-language newsrooms. Chang Teck Peng's insightful PhD thesis examines how hegemony operated in the newsroom by analysing the coverage of the Asian financial crisis (July-December 1997).¹⁹ It shows that the coverage in two newspapers directly owned by Umno (*New Straits Times* and *BH*) more closely mirrored the government position than a paper owned by government allies (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*). His findings show how the newspapers strengthened elite hegemony at a time of crisis and the close links between legislation and media ownership. As all owners needed to be licensed by the relevant Minister, and few newspaper licences were awarded, the print media in Malaysia consisted of a politically-connected oligopoly. Editors, particularly in the Malay-language newspapers, were political appointments. An extreme example is Johan Jaafar, editor-in-chief at *Utusan* from 1992 to 1998. He had no prior "hard" news experience before

¹⁷ See Chapter 2, and Adibah binti Ismail and Syd. Abdul Rahman Hj. Syd. Zin, "Evaluating the State of Investigative Journalism in Malaysia from Practitioners' Perspectives," in *International Conference on Corporate Law* (Surabaya, 2009), 12.

¹⁸ Mustafa K. Anuar, "Politics and the Media in Malaysia," in *2004 Philippine Political Science Association (PPSA) Regional Conference* (Manila 2005), 25–47; Wong Kokkeong, "Asian-Based Development Journalism and Political Elections," *Gazette* 66, no. 1 (2004), 25–40.

¹⁹ Chang Teck Peng, *Media Massa Dan Hegemoni Barisan Nasional: Satu Kajian Kes Ke Atas Peranan Media Dalam Pengurusan Krisis Kewangan 1997 Di Malaysia* [Mass Media and Barisan Nasional Hegemony: A Case Study on the Role of the Media in Managing the 1997 Financial Crisis in Malaysia] (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002), 195.

his appointment, which the journalists I interviewed related as resulting from his close ties with then-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (see Chapter 2).

Aside from legislation, the government also used informal channels to influence the media. Said Zahari relates, in 1959, being summoned by the Deputy Prime Minister who “rose from his chair and lashed out against *Utusan Melayu*”.²⁰ This episode indicates that politicians assumed the power to summon and berate newspaper editors soon after Independence. Thus, whether it is the official “show-cause” letter, where newspapers have to defend themselves against vaguely worded charges or risk losing their licence, or the more informal, but often intimidating, calls from ministerial offices, there has traditionally been regular communication between government and the editorial floor.

Whether the media operates as a site for maintaining hegemony or for challenging and deconstructing power remains an active debate, particularly in the context of Western nations. The perception of journalists is often the latter, even in an authoritarian context. Thus, many journalists join the profession to make a difference. In her survey of 65 journalists working in *Orde Baru* Indonesia, Angela Romano found that even journalists who felt that the main function of the press was as a watchdog rejected the idea that this was incompatible with “the aspirations, ideals and operations of development or *Pancasila* journalists”.²¹ Thus, in this authoritarian setting, journalists perceived themselves as working for the benefit of the people, rather than elites, though working in conjunction with the elites.

The view of journalists as watchdogs has come under sustained attack, particularly by the Left and by feminist media theorists. This attack comprises several fronts. Below, I first examine the issue of corporate ownership of the media; how professionalisation can embed a conservative bias in the assessment of what constitutes news; and the evolving critiques by feminist media theorists, as part of the field of cultural studies. At each stage, I explore how far these critiques apply to the Malaysian context and the newspapers under review.

²⁰ This related to the coverage of a debate between the Prime Minister and the Agricultural Minister: Said Zahari, *Dark Clouds at Dawn* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN), 65; Said Zahari, “Remembering Operation Cold Store,” Pusat Sejarah Rakyat.

²¹ Angela Romano, *Politics and the Press in Indonesia* (London; New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2003), 57.

Both corporate ownership and reliance on advertising can jeopardise media independence. The nexus between the US media and big business has been, for example, explored by Ben Bagdikian in *The Media Monopoly*.²² He argues that in a Western context, the ability of the media to hold corporations to account is compromised by the extensive interests of the corporations that own major media conglomerates, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Perhaps the clearest indication of the power of media ownership to trump press freedom recently has been the attempts by the media owned by Rupert Murdoch to silence academics, regulators and other outlets.²³

In a Malaysian context, there has been a clear nexus between the newspapers and the political elite. While licences for magazines flourished in Malaysia in the early 1990s, the ownership of newspapers remained strictly controlled, licences only given to those closely allied to the *BN*, and even to factions within the ruling coalition. The 1987 suspension of the licences of both *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* as part of *Operasi Lalang* illustrates this nexus: Both newspapers resumed printing after ownership was restructured. *The Star* was taken over by the MCA, while *Sin Chew* came under the ownership of a timber tycoon with close ties to the Sarawakian Chief Minister. A major difference in ownership between *BH* and *Utusan* is that the former has been owned indirectly, while *Utusan* has been owned directly by the Umno, thus it is only degrees of distance from political ownership that is pertinent in this context. Considering that all printing and publishing licences had to be approved by the Home Minister, this nexus of political power and media ownership is unsurprising.

All the journalists interviewed recognised a close alliance between the licensed media in Malaysia and the ruling coalition. When asked about censorship, respondents talked about the “angle” that the newspaper takes on all issues, similar to the angle Western newspapers take on a story (a comparison used by some respondents).²⁴ Marhaini Kamaruddin said, “*Utusan*, we’re more on the government’s voice”, and, further, “We put our stand on it, and **as long as the government of the day is *BN*** and

²² Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 138–51.

²³ The campaigns against critics in Australia are explored in Mitchell Hobbs and Stephen Owen, “Stifling Dissent: The Murdoch Press and Its Campaigns against Its ‘Critics’,” *Communication Research and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2016), 137–58.

²⁴ Interviews with Marhaini Kamaruddin, Jamhariah Jaafar and ‘Damia’.

the Constitution is still there, we have to protect [them]”.²⁵ This quote shows pride in the close relationship between *Utusan* and the government and was, paradoxically, given as an indicator of more professionalism in *Utusan* than in other papers. The second quote indicated that the journalist felt allegiance not to the government as such, but to the political parties of *BN*. This party-based allegiance was not seen by respondents as problematic, equivalent to Western newspapers which are right- or left-leaning, a difference in degree rather than kind. In this context, they speak of freedom as journalists, recognising that only those who unconditionally supported the idea that *BN* had a *right* to govern would either work for, or advance in, the Malay-language press.

THE MULTI-LINGUAL PRINT LANDSCAPE: SHAPING MALAY IDENTITIES

Race was one of the key supports for the hegemonic constructs that supported the ruling coalition. From Independence until May 2018, the ruling coalition (initially the Alliance, the *Barisan Nasional (BN)* following violence in 1969) was dominated by three race-based parties, the Umno; the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA); and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The coalition was thus premised on the idea that the interests of Malaysians were primarily formed through race, rather than class or geography. I am not here asserting that race or ethnicity are a priori categories, but that race has been a key identifier for Malaysians, and that it has been significant since before Independence in 1957.

From their beginnings, both the newspapers examined here and the Umno constructed the Malaysian citizen as being Malay-Muslim (and generally male).²⁶ Particularly after the racialised violence of 1969, the myth that dominated political and public discourse was that if the Malays were given a larger slice of the economic pie, the greater stability and peace that would result would serve the interests of all.²⁷ Umno also

²⁵ Marhaini, interview. Emphasis inserted.

²⁶ Within this context, the use of language such as “special rights”, an oxymoron within a human-rights framework that stipulates that all rights are universal, makes sense—Malays are the natural citizens of Malaysia and thus are entitled to associated rights denied those identified as Other.

²⁷ The official rhetoric was that job function and race were to be disassociated, “Second Malaysia Plan,” ed. Economic Planning Unit (Kuala Lumpur, 1971), 1.

argued that economic development would detract from the Islamisation agenda of Pas, again to the benefit of all. Umno maintained the latter contention was a key difference between Islamisation under themselves and under Pas: Umno's Islamic agenda was pro-development, and benefited the entire nation, while Pas' Islamisation was medieval and would drag Malaysia economically and culturally backward. Further, as I show in Chapters 4 and 5, the interests of the Malays were drawn against the interests of other ethnic groups—Umno's political power rested on the continuing trope of the marginalised Malay whose interests could only be served by a race-based political party and/or system.

Malaysia's print landscape has been demarcated by language. In the interviews I conducted, respondent journalists identify a "Malay" audience, acknowledging that some non-Malays read the papers, though they were seen as exceptions rather than the rule.²⁸ There are numerous implications, economic, social and political, that result. The major newspapers in peninsular Malaysia during the period of study were the English-language *New Straits Times*, sister paper to *BH*, and *The Star*; the Chinese-language *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*; the Tamil-language *Tamil Nesan*; and the two Malay-language papers. The Jawi-script, Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu* was ideologically significant, despite marginal circulation. Across this period, the Malay-language newspapers had the largest circulation. Together, between 1991 and 1998, the two broadsheets reached at least 20% of the population, with their Chinese counterparts reaching around 18% of the population; the English-language dailies reaching not more than 15% of the population; and the Tamil-language dailies reaching only around two per cent of the population.²⁹ These figures do not tell the whole story. Looking at advertising rates, the English-language and Chinese-language newspapers were and were perceived as being, comparatively well-resourced. Thus, the Malay-language newspapers emphasised their role in defending "the Malays" against a variety of perceived threats, from neo-colonialism to economic competition with other races, examined in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁸ E.g. interviews with Rosnah Majid, Maizura Mohd Ederis and Mona Ahmad.

²⁹ Statistics from James Selva, *Media Guide 2001* (Kuala Lumpur: WhiteKnight Communications, 2001), 60–68.

The racialised demarcation had further implications. Race, as noted earlier, is not an essential category, and there is an extensive literature contesting the monolithic and static concept of “the Malay”.³⁰ Nonetheless, in contemporary newspapers, the demarcation by language implied a demarcation by race. The Malay-language newspapers served a Malay-identifying market, the Chinese-language a Chinese-identifying market, and the English-language newspapers a more cosmopolitan, and more affluent, market. Further, the Malay-language newspapers presumed a Malay-identifying audience in their exploration of Islam, language, music and even travel. In contrast, the Chinese-language newspapers contained coverage of political events in mainland China and Taiwan, and their entertainment pages featured Hong Kong pop stars and musicians. This demarcation served a marketing purpose, but also perpetuated cleavages which reinforced the political status quo, which in turn served the ultimate owners of the newspapers, the race-based political parties. The print media thus illustrate how the different communities talked to themselves and/or about “others” in ways that segregated them: There was not one nation imagined, but a variety of nations. In *Utusan*, for example, there were two weekly columns, *Desas Desus Masyarakat Cina* (Chinese Whispers) and *Pandangan Akhbar Cina* (View from the Chinese papers) which underscored the difference between “the Malay” point of view and “the Chinese” on domestic matters. This demarcation has more recently been replicated in the online environment, where social media further this ghettoisation of communities who rarely glimpse what is happening in other communities even when they occupy the same geographical space. Thus, it is key to an understanding of the audience of the Malay-language newspapers that the act of reading the daily newspaper was not so much an act of citizenship, but an act of Malay nationalism. Identifying both positively as a Malay, and identifying broadly as “not-non-Malay” and more narrowly as “not-Chinese” contributed to privileging the “Malay” identity above the “Malaysian” identity.

³⁰ For example, Joel S. Kahn, “The Making and Unmaking(?) of a Malay Race,” 2005; Reid, “Understanding *Melayu* (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities”; Amri Baharrudin Shamsul, “Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: “Malayness” in Postwar Malaysia,” in *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States*, ed. D.C. Gladney (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 135–50.

The apparent primacy of the Malay identity begs the question of the positioning of the “Muslim” identity. As I demonstrate throughout this book, the newspaper and the reporters attempted to make an equivalence between these identities. The *dakwah* movement, however, was opening up possibilities for seeing the “Muslim” identity usurp the primacy of the “Malay” identity. This book illustrates both the tension and the balance between these two aspects of the “Malay-Muslim” identity. I examine how far the newspapers, by attempting to strengthen Malay identity, premised on being Muslim, allowed “Muslim” to supplant the primacy of the identification as Malay and how this shift affected the women’s pages.

Utusan is the older of the two papers studied, the Romanised version of a Jawi-script publication, *Utusan Melayu*, registered on 15 June 1938. It was the first newspaper financed by Malay capital, and at its beginnings had a strict policy of discrimination against those not identified as pure Malays (i.e. against those descended from Arabic or Indian ancestors).³¹ The role of *Utusan* in defining and drawing boundaries around “the Malay” is shown in Henk Maier’s article on founder Abdul Rahim Kajai. Maier notes that “They were very Malay-centred, set in a tone of being wronged, be it selectively so: whereas they did find fault with Chinese or Kelings [sic]..., the authority of either the British masters or their Malay aristocratic accomplices was never seriously challenged or questioned”.³² As Chapter 4 shows, there are continuities between this Malay-centric vision in the first half of the twentieth century and the way Malays were depicted during the period studied here.

Following the Second World War, the paper’s editors Keris Mas, A. Samad Ismail and Said Zahari (1951–1961) were active in the independence movement, but also often espoused left-wing politics that transcended race. Prior to Independence in 1957, the main goal of these writers and the goals of the Umno coincided. Once the Umno were in power, the journalists’ focus on social justice brought them into conflict with the party. In 1961, following protracted tensions, Umno assumed control of the majority of the shares in the newspaper, resulting

³¹ Gender discrimination was also prevalent. A Malay woman who married a non-Malay could no longer work at the paper.

³² Hendrik M. J. Maier, “The Writings of Abdul Rahim Kajai: Malay Nostalgia in a Crystal,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no. 01 (2010): 78.

in a three-month strike, led by the unions.³³ The strike was, ultimately, unsuccessful. Zainuddin Maidin, in his history of the newspaper, says that prior to this, the paper's editors had been “*antikaum modal dan antipasaran bebas*” (anti-capitalist and anti-free market).³⁴ Zainuddin was influential in shaping the myth of the newspaper. According to him, the paper's leftist leanings “angered the majority of the Malays who supported UMNO and were the major share-holders of the newspaper. They boycotted *Utusan Melayu*, causing its shares to plummet... UMNO had to save the newspaper”.³⁵ The quote illustrates that *Utusan* editors positioned the paper as the voice of the Malay people. Its Malay nationalist roots were important to the identification of the journalists working in the paper—that it belongs(ed) to “the” Malays, rather than to any elite interest. Moreover, his analysis assumed an identity between the paper, the Malays and Umno. Following the collapse of the strike, the priorities of the newspaper more closely aligned with the ruling coalition, but the women interviewed, particularly those who joined prior to 1980, often referenced the individual editors who were active during this time as being influential in shaping them as journalists.

In contrast, *BH* started in 1957, just prior to Malaya's independence, as a translation of the pro-British *Straits Times*. It began publishing its own stories in 1958 under the editorship of A. Samad Ismail, whose departure from *Utusan* was seen by his former colleagues as a betrayal of his nationalist roots. The Umno took over the peninsula-based paper following amendments to the PPPA to prevent foreign ownership of the press in 1974. The newspapers' different starting points continued to influence the newsrooms. *Utusan* portrayed itself during the period studied as the voice of the “regular” Malay, and often addressed a rural, working-class audience. *BH*, in contrast, was aimed at Malay business-people and the upper-middle classes. How the newspapers constructed these audiences is explored further in Chapters 4 and 5. The newspapers

³³ The best account of the strike, which has been dealt with fleetingly in most histories of the Malaysian press, is Zahari, *Dark Clouds at Dawn*.

³⁴ Zainuddin Maidin, *Di Depan Api, Di Belakang Duri: Kisah Sejarah Utusan Melayu* [In Front Fire, Behind Thorns: The History of Utusan Melayu] (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn Bhd, 2013), 132.

³⁵ *The Unsung Heroes*, (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors, 2004): 37.