The Neutrality of Sinar Harian Newspaper in Malaysian Politics

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Abstract: This article examines the neutrality of Sinar Harian, a Malay daily, which claims to be neutral and without favour, from 20 April 2013 to 5 May 2013, 15-day campaign period of Malaysia’s 2013 General Election. The 13th General Election was the most contentious of election in Malaysian politics. Sinar Harian attempts to present a balanced reporting, by giving spaces to both parties to present their ideas and defend their stand, rooms which are not available in other mainstream newspapers. This study uses content analysis as a method of investigation. It is a technique of gathering and analyzing the content of text. The analyses cover these dimensions; news report and analyses, letters to the Editor, political advertisements and special guest columns. This study found 33% of articles favored BN, 36% covered PR, 24% of articles considered as neutral reports and 6% of articles reported the activities of independent candidates. Using Monti’s classification of biased-unbiased reports, Sinar Harian can be categorized as unbiased newspaper.

Key words: Sinar Harian · Neutrality of media · Mainstream newspaper · General election · Election campaign

INTRODUCTION

Media freedom is important for a number of reasons. It is a vital part of the system of checks and balances in democracy, acting as the watchdog of the people and as the Fourth Estate. A free press plays a key role in sustaining and monitoring a healthy democracy, as well as in contributing to greater accountability, good government and economic development. Most importantly, restrictions on media are often an early indicator that governments intend to assault other democratic institutions [1]. Becker [2] argued that the most essential norm of media freedom is that media should have certain independence, sufficient to protect free and open public expression of ideas and information. The media practitioners have to decide between news values, public’s rights to know, national secrecy and serve the interests of the ruling elites.

It is worrying when the press is not encouraged to entertain criticisms of certain government projects for the supposed fear that they would divert the attention of the people and government away from so-called vital development issues. It is asserted that the media, being responsible and committed to national development, must give their undivided support to the government by publishing positive news about the government and condemn the opposition [3-5]. Analysis of the 1990, 1995 and 1999 elections have shown that the mainstream media is consistent in portraying the ruling coalition positively, who also happen to be the owners of most media and at the same time discrediting the opposition [6-7].

There seemed to be an increased disillusionment with the mainstream media that was perceived as echoing the voice of the government, not giving a balanced coverage of issues and ignoring the Opposition’s point of view. Fed-up with one-sided newspaper, readers started to move to internet, as online media which was accessible to a large segment of the population. It served as a new medium of information. The coverage is more salient, reliable, fast and free. Malaysiakini.com, Malaysia’s first commercial internet newspaper, for example, was placed at number 18 in the Asiaweek’s “Power 50” list of influential communicators across all Asia. The online media became very popular, at times equating the popularity of the mainstream media [8].

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In 2006, Sinar Harian, a Malay daily, was set up in Shah Alam. It belongs to the biggest and most successful bumiputra owned publisher in Malaysia; Kumpulan Media Karangkraf. Karangkraf publishes 25 magazines titles, ranging from entertainment, sports, cooking to fashion, religious and interior design. Sinar Harian is an attempt of Karangkraf to present a balanced reporting, when it gives spaces for both parties to present their ideas and defend their stand, rooms which are not available in other mainstreams newspapers. It attempts to suit the era of media independence when the credibility of news reporting is upheld, without fear or favour. This Malay daily is published based on region. Under the tagline, Telus dan Tulus (Transparent and Sincere), the current regional editions cover Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka, Perlis, Kedah and Penang, Perak, Johor and Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. The editorials are led by five managers, eight editors, eight assistant editors and 200 reporters [9].

The strategy of Sinar Harian to maintain its neutrality receives overwhelming supports from the masses, especially among the Malay readers. Currently, Sinar Harian Online, its internet version, was ranked at number 23 of the most visited sites in Malaysia. In the category of media, Sinar Harian is the second most visited site after Malaysiakini.com. It left all traditional media who also offered online versions (Figure 1). The number of its visitors has increased from time to time. Random observations at the nearest newspaper vendors during the campaign days exposed Sinar Harian was the first newspaper to be sold out.

Recent General Elections in Malaysia: alaysia has consistently conducted general elections since 1955 in order to decide the formation of the government and election is necessary to decide the policy and administration of the country. Since independence, Malaysia has been ruled by the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN), a coalition of 14 political parties mainly UMNO, MCA and MIC, which has produced all the six Prime Ministers of Malaysia. Other parties are allowed to be formed and the biggest rival of BN is the Pakatan Rakyat (PR), a loose coalition of PAS, PKR and DAP.

The 13th General Election on 5 May 2013 was arguably the most closely fought in Malaysia since political independence from British colonialism in 1957. The 2008 General Election witnessed PR’s ability to capture five states (Kelantan, Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor). They also denied BN’s two-third majority in the Parliament. The 13th General Election became the most awaited moment since surveys showed both parties have equal chance to win the election [11]. BN wanted to retain its federal power and wrested the five states they lost in 2008, while PR wished to topple BN and control Putrajaya. The Prime Minister announced the dissolution of the Parliament on 3 April 2013, paving the way for the Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya (EC) to fix the election date. The EC then decided the most awaited date, 5 May 2013 as the polling date, with 20 April 2013 as the official start of political campaigning allowing for 15 days campaign period. There were 222 parliamentary seats and 505 State Legislative Assembly seats to be contested.

As expected, BN retained its power and recaptured Kedah. However, BN still lost the two-third majority power in the Parliament when it only won 133 seats, compared to its 140 seats in 2008. PR was unable to be the next government when it only won 89 seats, better than its 2008 performance (82 seats). For the State Legislative Assembly Seats, BN won 275 seats and PR won 230 seats. The election fever was proven with 84.84% of voter turnout. With all results in, BN polled 5.220 million votes to PR’s 5.489 million, for a deficit of 269,130 votes. This was proportionally down from the 4.082 million votes BN polled in 2008 Election, against the 3.796 million that the PR collected then.

Problem Statement of the Study: The role of the media is most evident in the run-up to any election. Studies on media and elections clarified that the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia are controlled by BN and they remained a critical factor in ensuring BN’s continued success. The Media Prima, a media conglomerate which has a close relationship with UMNO, owned the biggest share of The New Straits Times while The Star and Nan Yan Siang Pau are controlled by MCA, a BN key component party. These are evidences that the ruling elite controlled the editorial boards of these newspapers, forcing them to construct news in a way that favors powerful parties [3, 8, 12-13]. However, opposition parties do have their own newspapers such as Harakah which is published twice a week by PAS, DAP publishes The Rocket and PKR has Suara Keadilan. However, the circulation of these newspapers is very limited. The contents are mainly on party activities and propaganda.

There comes the question on what are the choices left for masses who are looking for unbiased, neutral and reliable election reporting? Literature search found that no studies have been conducted on neutrality of Malaysia’s newspaper. A case study on the neutrality of Sinar Harian in reporting election news is hoped to fill the literature gap.

Analysis/Results: This paper analyzes these four dimensions; news report and analyses, letters to the Editor, advertisements and special guest columns.

News Reports and Analyses: The newspaper is biased when stories about powerful parties received more coverage in the front pages of the papers than stories about opposition parties. The relatively unbiased newspapers on the other hand, should be no appreciable difference in the number of stories powerful or weaker parties [14]. Figure 2 shows the headlines in the front pages of Sinar Harian. The following discussion wraps these headlines into six elements.

Fraction in Pakatan Rakyat: Sinar Harian on 20 April 2013 placed “PAS,PKR in Battle” as its banner headline on its front page. As agreed by Pakatan Rakyat Supreme Council, DUN Kota Putera, Bukit Besi and Seberang Takir would be allocated to PKR. However, a day before the nomination day, PAS decided to place their candidates, which would cause the three-cornered contest in those constituencies. Sinar Harian reported that the PKR State Chairman was dissatisfied with PAS’ decision, as it would fracture their ties. PAS, on the other hand, defended their decision by saying that the candidates from PKR not competence. BN Terengganu said this argument signaled the fraction in PR, which would give advantage to the BN. Fortunately, Sinar Harian dated 23 April 2013 reported that all the three PKR candidates withdrew and declared their supports to PAS candidates.

Independent Candidates: The Nomination Day was given wide coverage by Sinar Harian. Due to strong protests from the grassroots, a few names were withdrawn and replaced by candidates that are more preferable. Both the BN and the PR warned their dropped members to continue supporting the parties as this is the party struggle, not an individual’s. Frustrated members who contest as independent candidates would be automatically dismissed from the party. Photos of dropped party stalwarts like Datuk Kamilia Ibrahim, the UMNO Wanita Chief, Jenice Lee of DAP were emblazoned on its front page. This edition focused on the increasing number of independent
candidates, where three professors from local universities were interviewed. Both saw this increment as healthy to democracy but demerit BN. Another professor read this scenario as a new version of party sabotage, but it would not give any big impacts to BN or PR. Some party leaders accused these independent candidates as they were being sponsored to contest to break the votes. However these allegations were denied by the candidates.

Party Stalwarts: Another interesting report was the neck-to-neck contest between party heavyweights such as in Pekan (Mohd. Najib Tun Razak/ President UMNO and BN), Pagoh (Muhyiddin Mohd. Yassin/ Deputy Prime Ministers), Putrajaya (Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor/ UMNO Secretary General versus Husam Musa/ PAS Vice President), Bukit Katil (Mohd Ali Rustam/ Chief Minister of Malacca versus Shamsul Iskandar Mat Akin/ PKR Youth Chief), Sungai Limau (Azizan Razak/ Chief Minister of Kedah versus Mohd Fadzillah Mohd Ali/cousin), Lembah Pantai (Raja Nong Chik/ Cabinet Minister versus Nurul Izzah Anwar/ the incumbent) and Gelang Patah (Abdul Ghani Othman/ Chief Minister of Johor versus Lim Kit Siang/ DAP Supremo). Sharp predictions on who has bigger chance to win were illustrated with grafts on ethnic composition and previous election results in those constituencies.

Women Candidatures: Women Candidature received a special coverage by Sinar Harian when “Aura Calon Wanita” (The Aura of Women Candidates) became the headline, with the photos of Nurul Izzah Anwar, Nor Azrina Abdullah Surip from PKR and Noraini Ahmad and Jessie Ooi from BN. Sinar Harian reported that there are 168 women candidates in the coming election, proving their capabilities to woo the votes. UMNO Puteri Chief commented that all women candidates have an equal chance to win the election with their male counterpart. She praised BN for fielding a number of women candidates, showing the party recognized the contribution of women in BN. Fuziah Salleh of PKR stated that women candidates have more advantages in canvassing votes during their house-to-house campaign as female voters usually stay at home. The MIC women chief and PAS Muslimat chief were satisfied when the party leaders trusted the ability of women to have bigger roles in politics.

Sinar Harian Forum: The calls for public forum discussing the national issues have been heard after the General Election 2008. Malaysian voters want to see a representative from BN and PR share the same stage debating national issues. Sinar Harian bravely responded to the call by mediating the first country’s debate by inviting party leaders, NGO activists and academicians. The ninth debate entitled “General Election 13: Manifesto BN vs PR” was held on 30 April 2013. This discourse was paneled by three prominent academicians from local universities and it was full house. This shows the efforts of Sinar Harian to mediate a debate received good responses from the masses. The panels operated the manifestoes of both parties and offered their critical evaluations on a few populist policies such as on free education, security, transportation, poverty and price of goods. They agreed to disagree on few issues but they all agreed that more open debates should be held and attended by party leaders. The panels also unanimously agreed that voters should think wisely before casting their votes as they would determine the future of the country.
Religious Background Is Not a Factor: The 2 May 2013 edition focused on the competency of candidates with religious background (ulama’). Realizing the aura and personality of ulama’ can magnetize votes, both parties fielded ulama’ as their candidates. In the context of Malay political culture, ulama’ is respected and trusted, hence, fielding ulama’ increases chances for contesting parties to win. There comes no surprise for PAS to nominate ulama since it is an Islamic party. Recently, BN also placed a few ulama’ in order to fight PAS. Names such as Ustaz Fathul Bari, Jamil Khir Baharom, Abu Ubaidah Redza (BN) and Mohd Firdaus Jaafar, Abdul Hadi Awang and Haron Din (PAS) were given special coverage by editors on their chances to win. Sinar Harian counted that 16 ulama’ from BN and 24 from PAS were nominated and would fight with other professional candidates. Based on interviews with political analysts, Sinar Harian concluded that having strong religious background is not a determinant factor for voters to vote since they also consider other important factors such as manifesto, issues, party performance and party identification.

Letters to the Editor: Conventional media provides a space for readers to express their opinions by sending letters to editors. Letters that were published in this column mainly favor the ruling coalition [16]. In many cases, such letters only reinforced the pro-BN news that appeared on the day concerned. Furthermore, an array of such letters could give the impression that a large majority of Malaysians supported the BN and condemned the opposition [3]. To suit the modern era, Sinar Harian invites its readers to express their opinions by sending short messages system (SMS) to the editors. In contrast with other press, the SMS from its readers varied; there were messages supporting BN and urged the readers think wisely before casting the votes since their votes would determine the future of the country. Below are the samples of messages supporting BN:

“I pray for BN and UMNO will win the coming election. BN has done a lot to the people. Those who reject BN are blind and not thankful”

“We, the FELDA settlers promise to give undivided support to BN under the leadership of DS Najib. It is proven that only BN can bring peace, development and prosperity to our country. The mandate should be given to BN”

The supporters of Pakatan Rakyat sent messages asking the fellow readers to change the government because this is the right time. Below are the samples of messages sent by PR supporters:

“The entrance of DS Muhammad Taib to PAS will strengthen PAS machinery. The experience of Muhamad Taib will help PR and PAS to face attacks from BN. History repeats itself when Umar al-Khattab joins Rasulullah, thus strengthening the Muslim army.”

“Where is a fair election? Media are controlled by BN, PR has not been given access to it. Is it fair for the government of the day to manipulate government machinery for their interests? Is it fair to give election goodies using government money?”

Political Advertisements: Advertisement is the source of income that ensures the survival of a particular newspaper. It is understandable that political advertisement in the mainstream media unabashedly promoted the BN as a stable and united front, a welfare government who works for the sake of people, promotes peace, stability and prosperity. The illustrations were made attractive, with catchy and appalling words, plus colorful photos and captions. There are direct political advertisements that put the emblem of BN such as “Vote BN for Prosperity” and indirect political advertisement like “Saya Anak Malaysia (I am Malaysian)”. M. Kamal [3] found that the opposition was depicted negatively in the mainstream media’s advertisement such as “Anwar: Imam Besar ABIM, Pejuang Islam, Pemimpin Revolusi dan Penghibur (Anwar: The Leader of ABIM, the Champion of Islam, the Revolutionary Leader and the Entertainer)” with his pictures giving sermon, wearing songkok and dancing with unknown woman. These advertisements might have significant effects to the readers.

Sinar Harian begs to differ when it opened its spaces to both parties to advertise their political campaign. PR who had no access to other mainstream media took the opportunities offered by Sinar Harian. Among the eye-catching advertisements were “Kita Dahulukan Rakyat (People First)”, with the picture of smiling PM, Cukai Mereka Kita Turunkan (Their Taxes will be Decreased) with the man standing near a new car. Since BN already had enough spaces in electronic and press media, they had no excitement to advertise their campaign in
Sinar Harian compared to PR, when only five advertisements were found (Figure 3). PR has fully utilized the openness of Sinar Harian to present themselves as capable future government. The forms of advertisement were appeal letters to the voters, photos, manifestoes in a simpler form, answering the allegations made by the other party and achievements of the government.

**Special Guest Columns:** There are columns for guests to write their piece of minds. Sinar Harian invited big names such as Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, the former Member of Parliament, Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, Temerloh Member of Parliament, Karin Raslan, a writer, blogger and lawyer, Fathul Bari, Ulama’ UMNO, Prof. Dr. Sidek Baba, Dr. Redhuan Tee Abdullah, Datuk Rejal Arbaee, former editor of NSTP and Dr. Asyraf Wajdi from ISRA’.

Political veteran Abdullah Ahmad wrote on Wednesday edition, speculated that BN would retain Putrajaya and wrest Kedah back but hard for Penang and Selangor. He also deducted there should be no problems for the party stalwarts such as Mohd. Najib Tun Razak, Muhydinn Yassin, Abdul Ghani Othman, Muhd. Ali Rustam, Nik Abdul Aziz and Lim Guan Eng to win. However, it is unsure for Lim Kit Siang, Hadi Awang, Raja Nong Chik and Saifuddin Abdullah since their opponents are heavyweights too. Dr. Asyraf Wajdi expressed his dissatisfaction on corruptions that happened openly during elections. A blogger Norden Mohamed asked the readers whether their vote goes to party or candidates.

**Fig. 3: Political Advertisements in Sinar Harian (20 April - 5 May 2013)**

DISCUSSION

This paper attempts to gauge the neutrality of Sinar Harian in reporting election issues during the campaign period of 13th General Election. Sinar Harian aims to provide news without fear and favour and gives spaces to all parties and candidates to present their manifestoes, ideas and visions. Their efforts were well received by the readers when Sinar Harian Online became the most visited site, leaving other traditional media that go online.

Out of 288 articles, 96 articles can be classified as pro- BN. The articles covered the activities of BN candidates during the campaign such as ceramah, door-to-door visits, nomination day, interviews with the candidates and interviews with the public on the performance of the candidate. These reports were supported with attractive photos and captures. There are 104 articles which were pro-PR, with similar coverage to its BN counterparts. There were 70 neutral articles which cover interviews with police officers, EC officers, voters’ aspirations and local issues faced by voters. The activities of independent candidates received 18 coverage, mostly on their tactics to fish votes due to their limitations of manpower, machinery, materials and financial. The figures proved that Sinar Harian is unbiased newspaper, as there was no appreciable difference in the number of stories of BN or PR. The headlines of Sinar Harian were neutral, as they would place the valuable and marketable news on their front-page, regardless of parties.

**Conclusions and Recommendations:** The calls for free, unbiased and neutral newspaper become louder in this age of open information. Traditional media are obviously supporting the ruling government since the ruling party holds its share. This has forced the editors to write positive reports about the ruling party and they act just
like a party organ. Online media filled the gap by providing more reliable, accurate and objective coverage. They are also fast and cheaper. Sinar Harian answered the call by publishing a neutral report, under the tagline “Telus dan Tulus”. Following Monti [15] Sinar Harian could be categorized as a neutral newspaper. Fifteen editions of Sinar Harian were taken as a sample. Of 288 articles, 33% covered BN, 36% covered PR, 24% were neutral news and 6% went to independent candidates. It is vitally important that newspaper should be free and less bias. The study on neutrality of Sinar Harian should be extended by comparing its way of reporting with other newspapers. This study took Sinar Harian’s reporting style during election. Future research should focus on its reporting on other issues.

REFERENCES