

Turning A Blind Eye To Corruption: Malaysia's Messy Media

*By Jean Paul Leon**

1. Nadeswaran is arguably Malaysia's most famous investigative journalist. Popularly known as Citizen Nades, he is sometimes described as the scariest man in Malaysia.

Nadeswaran, who works for The Sun (one of Malaysia's top English language newspapers) has, together with his long-time partner Terence Fernandez, broken story after story on corruption and government misuse of public funds.

Arguably the most prominent story is their exposé of the Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) scandal, a 2 billion ringgit (US\$648 million) industrial park project that went over budget due to dubious financial dealings, including the purchase of land at a price far in excess of its value.

Once asked if he thought the Malaysian media were doing a good job in exposing corruption, Nadeswaran's reply was cutting: "You must be joking. Do you know how corrupted some of our journalists are?" he said. He added that corruption exists in many forms, including the giving of Datuk-ships, a Malaysian title akin to "sir".

He highlighted the case of now-deceased assemblyman Zakaria Deros, who made headlines in 2008 for building a massive mansion in the town of Klang, in the state of Selangor.

Zakaria had not submitted building plans for his mansion. It was later discovered that he had not paid taxes on another property for 12 years. In addition, his family was caught operating an illegal satay restaurant on government reserve land.

"Every reporter worth his salt in Klang knew about his palace. Ask the (current) Selangor Speaker Teng Chang Kim, who took a group of reporters to the palace in March 2007. No one wrote about it," Nadeswaran said, adding that nothing was done until he and Fernandez broke the story in October 2008.

"Ask some of the Klang reporters how Zakaria treated them. Ask how many of them had hand phones donated by Zakaria," he said.

A former Klang news bureau chief, who declined to be named, said bribes from politicians were "normal".

"(Journalists) find many ways to do it. They disguise it, for example, as pocket money for petrol or festival treats," he said.

Sometimes, attempts to bribe the media backfire. Such an incident was registered in January 2009 when, during a by-election in the northern state of Terengganu, white envelopes, each containing 300 ringgit (US\$97), were distributed to journalists at the State Information Department Centre.

The reporters did not take the bribe and logged police reports.

Unfortunately, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), under whose purview the matter fell, did nothing, claiming the reporters could not identify the person giving the bribe.

However, two journalists from online news portal Merdeka Review did, in fact, name the person who offered the bribe. Rumors abounded that no action was taken because the bribe had been given by members of the ruling political party.

Politics is, and always has been, the main reason why Malaysia has not had a free, fair and — some would say — clean media.

Mainstream Media's Big Role

Most mainstream media publications are owned by the political parties that form the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. Malaysia's largest selling English daily, The Star, is owned by the uni-racial political party Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) through its investment arm Huaren Holdings.

New Straits Times Press Berhad (NSTP), which publishes the English language New Straits Times (NST), Malay Berita Harian and Harian Metro papers, is owned and controlled by Malaysia's largest political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), through its corporation Gabungan Kesturi Sendirian Berhad.

This corporation owns 90 percent of the shares through its 13 percent equity interest in NSTP's parent company Media Prima Berhad. UMNO also controls Utusan Malaysia, another major Malay language newspaper.

As a result, both the news coverage and the opinion pieces often heavily favor BN and frequently demonize opposition parties. One such piece was a front-page article in the New Straits Times on March 7, 2008.

Titled "Dancing with Wolves," it was written on the eve of the country's general elections. The writer attributed qualities like peace, love, humility, kindness, empathy, and compassion to the BN party and used terms like "lack of grace" and "arrogance" to describe opposition parties.

Editors: Loyal to Owners or the Truth?

Top editors are often political appointees who owe their allegiance to the political masters of the day.

The president of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), Hatta Wahari, who works for Utusan, said his paper has a lot of “must cover” articles on UMNO division chiefs. These “must cover” stories are essentially written to further the interests or political careers of the division chiefs, regardless of whether the stories have news value or not.

“The division chiefs call editors, who immediately issue these ‘must cover’ assignments,” he said, adding that assignment chits have a ‘WC’ tag on them. WC stands for Wajib (the Malay word for compulsory) Cover.

Hatta said the situation today is even more restrictive than it used to be during the tenures of former Prime Ministers Tun Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009).

“Back then, media used to be monitored and controlled in terms of content, but now even pictures and headlines are controlled,” he said.

Hatta’s claims that editors act more as gatekeepers for politicians than sentinels of the Fourth Estate are shared by Helen Ang, who runs the media watchdog blog Hartal MSM.

Ang, a former journalist at The Star, said there have been several times when journalists have obtained scoops on corruption scandals, only to be thwarted by editors bent on protecting the vested interests of political owners.

“I think the editors are the first line of defense. In the course of clearing a copy, self-censorship comes in and stories are even watered down,” she said.

Nadeswaran agrees that self-censorship is rife: “It is inbred. As a reporter, I was always told by my bosses, ‘you cannot write this or that’. I always made the stand that I would report, but I would not edit or censor what was said by others. I always threw the ball at the feet of the bosses,” he said. “Sorry to say, but most [editors] are political appointees. The problem is that political parties own newspapers, and they appoint their own people, however unprofessional or incompetent they are.”

Former NST associate editor Rehman Rashid, however, feels there is no high-level conspiracy at work, merely simple incompetence.

Taking the generally lukewarm coverage of the PKFZ scandal as an example, Rehman said the main problem was that media got lost in the minutiae of what was going on at the moment. “Why not just do better reporting?” he asked.

Rehman also pointed to a massive street protest organized in 2007 by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih, i.e. “clean” in Malay language), and how most mainstream media vastly underplayed the fact that tens of thousands of people attended the rally.

“The police stated a number and they just took that, despite the fact that there were at least seven times as many people there,” Rehman said, attributing it to incompetent reporting.

A Different Outlook on the Fourth Estate

Media Prima is Malaysia’s largest media group, owning TV and radio stations as well as the NSTP newspapers. Its chairman, Datuk Johan Jaafar, feels the mainstream media are unfairly targeted.

“What have we not done?,” Jaafar said, pointing out that The Bukit Cerakah (a land development scandal) and Rahim Thambychik (an UMNO politician) sex scandal were both broken by Utusan. “And that was when Rahim was one of the most powerful men in the country. (And) who broke the Muhammad Muhammad Taib [a former Selangor chief minister] corruption story? Mainstream media. Who broke the story of Khir Toyo’s [another former Selangor chief minister] mansion? It was The Star. People allege that UMNO owns Media Prima. But nobody owns us,” Jaafar insisted.

Politicians weigh in as well. Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, Malaysia’s de-facto justice minister, recently took Utusan to task for “forgetting its own masters” and publishing views contrary to those of the BN leadership.

In his view, UMNO-owned newspapers should support Najib by promoting his Malaysia ideology. “If you look at Harakah, they promote [opposition party] programs, Suara Keadilan promotes PKR [opposition party], The Star promotes MCA [BN component party]; but UMNO’s newspaper Utusan does not even support their own bosses,” he said.

Rehman Rashid, the former NST associate editor, better describes the odd role the media play in Malaysia. “It is not so much the Fourth Estate, but part of the political process by which the country runs itself.

While that formula may have worked in the past, it rarely does now.

Media Credibility Diminishing in Public's Eyes

A 2009 poll of 1,241 citizens randomly selected by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research and the Centre for Independent Journalism shows the mainstream media have an unenviable reputation.

Fewer than one in three Malaysians think the media are fair and unbiased, almost three quarters of the people feel that the media favor BN, and more than half are not satisfied with the level of reporting of corruption cases.

Aside from media ownership, other factors substantially hamstringing the media. The lack of sunshine laws and the existence of laws such as the Internal Security Act and the Sedition Act allow detention without trial. Additionally, the Official Secrets Act allows the government to classify documents as it pleases, while the Printing Presses and Publications Act requires media to obtain yearly licenses.

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, almost every Malay and English newspaper, with the exception of tabloids like Kosmo! and Harian Metro, and free dailies like The Sun and The Malay Mail, have suffered drops in circulation in the last decade. Nadeswaran, for one, believes this is due to the kind of stories they now publish.

"You cannot continue to sell propaganda to readers. They won't buy it anymore," he said.

The general flaccidity of the Malaysian media has led many subscribers to prefer to get their news from online sources, such as Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insider, or from bloggers such as the abrasive Raja Petra Kamaruddin, editor of the news website Malaysia Today.

These outlets are not politically owned and, by being online, don't have to deal with laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act. They also get to exploit a government promise to never censor the Internet, giving them greater leeway to expose government wrongdoing and criticize the government when it is necessary.

Still, they too are paying a hefty price. Raja Petra was arrested in 2008 after an order by the Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (a judge later determined the arrest was illegal and freed the blogger), and Malaysiakini's offices have often been raided by the

police, most recently when a political cartoonist was detained for sedition.

While online reporting may be the hope for the future, the Malaysian media landscape can be divided into two groups: those who turn a blind eye to corruption and, in turn, help graft continue, and those that face retribution for exposing the country's dirty truth.

Malaysian readers will decide who wins.

**Jean-Paul Leon has worked in the Malaysian media for almost a decade. He has covered crime, politics and human rights, among other issues, and has seen first-hand the way the media is often used as tools for political purposes.*