AN UN-ASIAN APPROACH: CONTESTING VALUES AND RE-CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY—HOW PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS FAIL MALAYSIA.

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Abstract
Much has been said about the indigenisation of media in Asia and the need to understand Asian audiences and media systems from an Asian or native perspective. While globalisation theory has provided several perspectives to this, the old imperialist argument continues to prevail and orthodox developmental theorist in most of Asia seem to stress the need to guard native values against the corrupting influence of 'western' media products. This argument appears to justify all forms of state control over media. Within this context, it is observed that in a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, there appears a national scheme and vision to un-indigenise Malay-Bumiputeras with the help of media while indigenising the media system against the currents of globalisation and Islamic extremism. This paper focuses on the role of media in the development of Malaysia under the Mahathir regime and explores the dilemma with regard to Mahathir's vision to change the Malay-Bumiputera and build a united Malaysian race. Looking at several public campaigns, the paper argues that a huge gap prevails between Mahathir's vision, media and reality. The contradiction between 'modernising' Malay-Bumiputeras and indigenising media, appears to have polarised Malaysia and caused ideological and cultural chaos.

Introduction

It has been with extreme difficulty that developing nations in post-colonial Asia, such as Malaysia, have attempted to construct national identities and preserve indigenous values, particularly after long years of colonisation that have deeply impacted the local cultural scene and that tend to continue to feed national(ist) sentiments and discourses. Thus, while each developing nation in Australia's neighbourhood grapples with the pressures of nation building and attempts to shape its own identity, almost all have invariably exploited media to achieve national dreams and futuristic visions. The mass media road to political success and economic comfort seem constructed by ruling elites for whom there had/s been no easier access to the 'masses' until of course new borderless cyber paths sprang, apparently causing culture jams.

Even then, as in the case of Malaysia, through rigid laws and regulations—such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act which grants the Home Minister power to give or withdraw printing licences, the Official Secrets Act that prevents journalists from

accessing information in any official document labelled as secret and the Internal
Security Act[1] (detention without trial) - and via intimate state-media relationships,
information highways[2] appear to have helped accelerate the pace of 'modernisation'
for Malaysia far beyond what Katz and Lazarsfeld in *The People's Choice* (1948) and
Personal Influence (i955), and Lerner in *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958)
and Rogers and Shoemaker in *Diffusion of Innovation* (1971) prescribed and
envisioned. Even now, orthodox developmental theorists in Malaysia continue to
contend that vertical flow of information intervened by 'opinion leaders' operate as
useful change agents necessary for modernisation--defined largely as western-style
urbanisation (Lent & Sussman 1991) but more precisely, I would say in the context of
Malaysia, Chinese-style industriousness or Singapore-style metro-upwardness.

Asian Values or Human Values?
Generally, 'imperialism' tends to be an argument used by most senior Asian leaders,
such as Mahathir Mohamed, Suharto and Lee Kuan Yew, to support forms of state
control over media. Debates in the 1970s and 1980s on cultural autonomy and the
ensuing proposal for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)
and national communication policies by Herbert Schiller (1976) and Cees Hamelink
(1983), served well to sustain power-hungry elites and to justify national(ist) cultural
policies. The cultural synchronisation thesis (Hamelink1983) in some ways supported
the 'Asian values' argument and fostered the urgency for developing nations to resist
western capitalist (US) cultural products and increase local cultural production. In
turn this led, for example in the case of Malaysia, towards the top-down imposition of
dominant cultural values and practices upon minority and indigenous communities
and in the process the destruction of many traditional and culturally unique and
diverse practices and experiences (see Shriver, 2002)

The grip over media in most of post-colonial Asia seems to be premised on the
oriental argument that 'western' tradition and values tend to hinder the path toward
economic and social development much desired here. Ironically most of these nations
seem to find difficulty defining development in indigenous or non-capitalist terms,
while proclaiming the superiority of 'Asian values'.   Values such as respect for
elders, moral integrity, tolerance towards different racial and religious groups,
importance of family, sanctity of marriage etc are nothing but universal. But what
apparently troubles most of post-colonial Asia is the word 'freedom' and this dirty
word, 'freedom' is perceived as 'western' and 'colonial'. It is argued that it tends to
prevent the rapid transition from agrarian to urban life and it tends to be a stumbling
block to economic and social prosperity where communal, religious, sectarian and
ethnocentric concerns (of the majority population affiliated to political elites) must be
respected. Put differently, institutional control of the media carried out in the name of
Confucian values (Singapore) or 'Islamic values' (Malaysia) is not to nurture among
the majority acceptance or tolerance of ethnic minorities and their diverse cultural

[1] The Internal Security Act sees as offensive speech or publication about traditional Malay
rulers, Islam (the official religion), the Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*) or that which may
incite ethnic conflict.
[2] The excitement over information technology in Malaysia led quickly to a process of
deregulation and liberalisation and the creation of technological concentration in what is
known as Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) fashioned after the Silicon Valley of the US and
akin to Singapore One. It has been reported that in 1999, Malaysia spent RM5 billion (US1.9
billion) on information technology (IT) alone (*The Sun,* March 17, 1999).

values and practices. It is, thus, not about cultural pluralism, it is not about tolerance and mutual respect. Thus, it is neither truly Confucian nor Islamic.

Gunaratne (2000: 2) points out, using the Word Bank indicators, that most of Southeast Asia with the exception of Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia fall in the low-income or lower middle income category. Clearly, economic standing does not correlate with democracy (and media freedom) in this part of the world. On the one hand is Malaysia, which appears economically and politically stable with little regard to human rights and without media freedom, on the other is Indonesia, which appears freer after Suharto but in turmoil. Singapore, however, putting aside economic yardsticks, seems to reflect how high educational level does not correlate with democracy and media freedom. For example, a quantitative study on media and Internet censorship among Singaporeans found support towards such forms of control from the majority (Ang & Nadarajan 1996) and a study on the role of the media as mediator between government and society also found overwhelming agreement towards state control (Tan, Hoe & Chen 1998). Indeed, the comparatively freer and economically poorer countries of Southeast Asia such as the Philippines, Cambodia and Thailand tend to look to Singapore and Malaysia as models for development. Piyanat Watcharaporn, a Thai minister sometime ago had said (http://www.cpj.org/):

"...Thailand's development has lagged far behind that of Singapore and Malaysia because its press has too much freedom..."

The notion among social engineers in Malaysia, for example, tends to be that media freedom prevents the successful implementation of development programmes and hinders the realisation of national state visions. It is thus assumed that the 'blind grass-roots' need guidance and any form of freedom given to the blind will lead to chaos and bizarre-ness. In fact as argued by Reid (1998) the concept of freedom is not entirely western in origin. It had prevailed and had been embodied in the terms *merdeka* (freedom) or *orang merdeka* (freeman) in pre-colonial, feudal Malaya[3]. As will be argued in this paper using Malaysia as a case, the need to uplift the socio-economic status of an ethnic community and the desire to collapse all colonial structures, and the visionary dream to achieve First World status, appear to justify lop-sided ethnic-based development policies and state control over mass media. It seems, afraid of the dark feudal past, when the indigenous animistic Malay was in the bondage of ruling Sultans, and then a servant of the British, the urban Muslim-Malay today tends to see freedom only in terms of cultural indoctrination and domination. Anti-imperialism is thus a theme sung loud with the word *merdeka* (free) in national songs and cultural domination of ethnic minorities evident in the hegemonic use of the Malay language at all levels.

Malay Magic: Culture and Development
Focusing on media's role in the 'modernisation' process of post-colonial Malaysia under the Mahathir regime, this section of the paper presents the socio-cultural aspects of Malaysia as a backdrop to understanding Mahathir's policies and their impact upon Malaysian media and society**.**

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[3] Malaysia was known as Malaya until 1963 when Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and the peninsula merged to form a single nation. Singapore left in 1965.

Malaysia today has a population of 25 million people, with Malay and indigenous communities being the largest (65.1%). The population size has almost doubled since Mahathir assumed office in 1981 when he envisioned a 70 million population in the year 2100[4]. Most of the population is multi-ethnic with the majority being Malay-Muslim and the rest Chinese, Indians and other native ethnic communities such as the Ibans, Dayaks, Dusuns, Kadazans, Bajaus etc in Malaysia's half of Borneo. Islam has been the official state religion since independence from British rule in 1957. Although Malaysia has not been an Islamic state, Islamic law seems enacted by State governments.

Nine states (out of 13) are ruled by Sultans who take turns to assume the title of King. Fundamentally, Islamic legislation is the responsibility of the Sultans in each of the states. *Shariah*-based laws are applied in the sphere of family law. In all other cases civil law has precedence. All states have enactments that imprison those caught proselytising Muslims. In Kelantan and Trengganu[5]—now ruled by Parti SeIslam Malaysia (PAS)—attempts have been made to introduce *hudud* laws (Muslim penal code) one of which mandates a death sentence for apostasy. The federal constitution, however, does not provide the death penalty for apostasy.

In a country where the physical differences between diverse ethnic groups seem blur, a significant identity marker of a Malay-Bumiputera[6] is the practice of Islam and the speaking of the Malay language (Lowe and Khattab, 2003). Thus, if a Chinese, Indian, Kadazan or Iban spoke the Malay language and embraced Islam, he/she automatically is said to have (*Masuk Melayu)* become Malay. However, this has not been a simple process as the Malay-bumiputeras zealously and jealously safeguard their privileged turf. This is not surprising given their worldview and economic backwardness throughout most of the second half of the last century.

In the 1960s for instance there prevailed serious problems in Malay-Chinese relations. Malays, who were a bare majority at that time, were generally in control of the government, while the Chinese, who were about a third of the population, controlled the economy. In the 1969 ethnic riots Malays were believed to have fought the Chinese after a general election, which saw several states on the brink of being taken over by the opposition party. The Alliance had won every single general election until 1969.

Following the 1969 ethnic riots, the Malay government formulated an economic affirmative action program--New Economic Policy--to rectify economic differences

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[4] Although Lent & Sussman (1991) argue that this is to provide a local market large enough to ensure the success of heavy industries, I contend that this is to ensure that the Malay-Bumiputera population grows far bigger than that of the Chinese or Indian in order to continue to safeguard their political rights and privileges as the native majority.

[5] The 1999 general elections in Malaysia that followed the sacking and trial of Mahathir's deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, saw the erosion of the BN coalition's long-held two-third majority seats in parliament and the loss of another state-Trengganu-to opposition stronghold—PAS.

[66] *Bumiputera* means son or prince of the soil. This is a term used to refer to indigenous communities in Malaysia such as the Malay-Muslims and communities in Sabah and Sarawak. It however tends to exclude the Orang Asli—an indigenous community in Peninsula Malaysia who are mostly not Muslims. After the 13 May ethnic riots, policies have been in place for Malay-bumiputeras to enjoy special privileges.

between rural Malays and urban Chinese and to restructure society to promote
economic growth among the Malays. Although expired, the New Economic Policy
(1970-1990) continued to set the guidelines under the Mahathir administration for
Malay development. It has been replaced, since by the New Development Policy and
Vision 2020 to transform Malays even further from urban comfort to global heights.

Clearly, Malaysia's history has been dominated by ethnic issues and ethnic-centred
politics. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition is an ethnic based coalition
government, made up primarily of the United Malays National Organisation (UMN0),
Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The
BN coalition came into being in 1974 as an expansion of the Alliance Party formed
following independence in 1957.

Mahathir's Mantra

Since the ethnic riots of 13 May 1969 culminating in *The Malay Dilemma*[7], and under
the UMNO flagship of the ruling BN coalition led for over two decades (1981 to
2003) by Mahathir Mohamed, the Malay-*Bumiputera,* in multi-ethnic Malaysia, has
been the focus of 'modernisation'.

In this modernisation process (what I refer to here as 'un-indigenisation'), Malay-
*Bumiputera*s--whom Mahathir contends as deserving of 'constructive protection'
(Mahathir, 1970)--have enjoyed a whole host of socio-economic benefits that have in
a brief cultural span shifted the bulk of them from fishing villages to cyber cities. The
slogan *Malaysia Boleh* (Malaysia Can) was coined to inspire the Malay-*Bumiputera*
to move to great heights.

In this process, native values and supposedly 'sick' hereditary characteristics appear
'treated' as the doctor-leader diagnosed and healed these and then challenged the
Malay to move from an old primitive state to that of urban and global loftiness. Thus
values and practices such as fatalism, contentment, laziness and animism were
condemned and replaced with capitalism and Islam. Thus the cliché *Melayu Baru*
(new Malay) is today heard loud. As a result, 'western' capitalist values such as
materialism and individualism were propelled. Imported media influence, other than
that of the English language, over the Malay native was hardly seen as problematic in
the early years of the New Economic Policy (1970-1990). In this period, Malaysia
consumed more than produced media products and despite cries to indigenise media
products, Malaysia seems to continue to consume and imitate more than actually
produce or originate. Echoing Schramm, Lerner and Rogers, local developmental
theorists in various ways contended that these imported programmes created 'rising
expectations' that were necessary attitudinal forces for 'modernisation', overlooking
obvious deforms in processes, structure and policy. Further, Malay-*Bumiputera*s were
advised, in the 1970s, to look within at their ethnic Chinese neighbours and learn to
become as industrious.

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[7] Mahathir Mohamed wrote the *Malay Dilemma* (1970) which served as a blueprint for the
transformation of Malay society. He criticised the Tunku Abdul Rahman government, the
Malay Sultans, the urban aristocrats, the Chinese and the rural Malays for their state of
primitiveness. His book was banned until he became Prime Minister in 1981.

In his engineering of change for Malay(sia), Mahathir seemed to have 'medicalised' the Malay-*Bumiputera* (see Mahathir 1970), justifying emergency aid and substantial subsidies to them and in the process denying 'amenities' let alone rights, to those labelled non-*Bumiputera*, seemingly left without stakes. As pointed out by Nain (2000) the Mahathir administration using the New Economic Policy as a guideline, introduced a variety of policies and strategies, notably the Look East Policy, Malaysia Incorporated and the Privatisation Policy. All of these formed part of Vision 2020 introduced in 1991 following the expiry of the New Economic Policy. As argued by Nain (2000), all these policies focused on attitudinal and behavioural change and psychological liberation for the Malay-*bumiputera*. In pointing out that the first challenge to vision 2020 is ethnic integration, Mahathir is noted to have said,

"By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society (bangsa Malaysia), infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient"
(http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Cove/7284/vision.html)

The imagining of a *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race) in some ways helped to legitimize nation-building agenda but failed to be represented in any form whether through local media images or in real world terms. In other words the slogan *Bangsa Malaysia* was a mere rhetoric of the Mahathir administration. As argued by Silk (2002) based on his analysis of the 1998 Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games, Bangsa Malaysia was an ideological initiative to erase existing ethnic tensions.
He says (2002:791),
"…the political tensions at the conclusion of Kuala Lumpur 98 highlighted the ephemeral and mythical nature of such 'virtual ethnic cleansing"'

Under the ambit of the Ministry of Information, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) was mobilised extensively throughout the 1970s and beyond to recreate a new Malay(sia). Subsequently, the wave of privatisation spearheaded under CEO Mahathir in the 1980s led to further utilisation of diverse media for nation-building agenda. While the currents of globalisation may have brought new media into Malaysia upsetting state policies and (direct and indirect) control of old media, the drive to un-indigenise and reconstitute Malay-*bumiputera* identity continues. In fact public campaigns in the form of jingles have repeatedly attempted to introduce information technology (IT) to the Malay-*Bumiputera*.

Since the turn of the 21st century, however, the development challenge has been to resist 'western' cultural products, emulate Japanese work ethics and re-proselytise the Islamic Malay(sia) into the old cultural form. When former deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and sentenced (1998-1999), village folks spoke of 'how he had challenged his father in an un-indigenous manner and therefore tradition justified his punishment'. Following this, and close to his retirement from office, Mahathir is noted to have diagnosed a new dilemma in the Malay-*Bumiputera*—that of being crippled and needy of crutches. So, the story goes from 'medicalisation' to reconstitution of the majority Malay-*Bumiputera*.

ANZCA04: Making a Difference

State Campaigns

Against this backdrop, the paper empirically examined a range of public campaigns in recent years that have been broadcast over both public and private television stations. Despite the waning popularity of mainstream media, particularly since the Anwar Ibrahim saga, Government agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Unity, Ministry of Women and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Local Government and Housing among others, continue to depend on terrestrial public and private television stations to reach target audiences in the promotion of ideas and in an effort to change attitudes and behaviours. Based on the methodology of discourse analysis, signs, words, themes and actors were analysed and the signifying practices of Malaysian media producers investigated.

Campaigns designed to instil Asian values or Islamic values with regard to 'respect for public property', 'recycling', 'road safety', 'happy family' and 'healthy lifestyle' tend to represent the Malay-*bumiputera* as the primary actor as if no other ethnic community exists in Malaysia. Whensoever an individual from a minority group is depicted, as in the case of the 'respect for public property campaign', or in the 'diabetic campaign', it is usually in bad light. For instance, an Indian-looking male is portrayed as destroying public toilets and again an Indian-looking male is represented as a diabetic patient being advised by a Malay medical doctor. The healthy lifestyle campaign and the happy family campaign portray only urban Malay-Muslim families and impart values relevant only to Malay-Muslims. Reflective of the current lifestyle of the modern urban Malay and designed to instil 'traditional' family values, these 'happy family' and 'healthy lifestyle' campaigns showcase a Malay-Muslim family living a perfectly enviable lifestyle—material wealth, healthy food, spirituality, exercise and respect for the elderly.

While the infrequently aired HIV/AIDS campaigns carry a heavy moralistic discourse, other social problems like alcoholism, gambling, child abuse, illicit drug addiction, poverty and sexual violence have never been on the agenda of public campaigns, despite they being serious problems in the real Malaysian world.

In the television world of campaigns, there seems to prevail only one ethnic group, one set of values, and one clear message for one dominant community. The deliberate un-representation and mis-representation of 'the other' (minorities) in these campaigns and the intentional focus on some problems (not others) reflect the realities of Malaysia's lop-sided policies. The objectives and themes of these campaigns are clearly ethnic-centred and focused exclusively on the social and cultural problems of the Malay-*Bumiputera.* Campaigns clearly depict a polarised Malaysia, a skewed vision and explain how ethnic rights and territories have been neatly staked out. While Mahathir's 2020 vision aspires to create a *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race), this has in no way been reflected in any single campaign. It can be argued that these campaigns have been shaped without any input from minority groups. This makes sense when we come to understand that those who design and implement these campaigns are largely Malay-Muslims themselves who hold key positions in the broadcast industry and the civil service.

The social engineering of a modern Malay(sia) seems to have been conceived by the *Malay Dilemma* which by 2020, no doubt, will witness a Malaysian dilemma. The

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New Economic Policy and subsequent development policies appear to have transformed the Malay-*bumiputera* into developing a materialistic lifestyle while cultural precepts appear to be in abeyance (see *Star Online*, October 31, 2003). Mahathir himself in announcing his resignation in 2002, lamented that he had failed to 'change the Malay'.

In fact, what was conceived and schemed since 1970 appears almost irrelevant today as Malay-Muslims become socially disintegrated and politically divided. There are today the Parti Seislam Malaysia (PAS) Malays, the UMNO Malays and the Keadilan Malays (led by jailed Anwar Ibrahim's wife). The resurgence of Islam and *dakwahism* (missionary movements) as well as militant and deviant forms of Islamic practices appear to have stalled modernisation efforts. In fact, as most Malay-*bumiputera*s became urban and affluent, as a result of Mahathir's policies, they have in various ways known to have made demands for the Islamisation of institutions as though existing policies and institutions seem un-Islamic. These structural demands and human agency measures seem to further isolate ethnic minorities and this tends to be clearly reflected in media institutions and products.

In fact, laws that were put in place in the 1970s, to curb free expression and prevent ethnic minorities from criticising the establishment, have now become handy in curbing Islamic deviance among Malay-Muslims. For example Islamic school teachers have been known to be arrested under the Internal Security Act for alleged involvement in militant activities, most of whom happen to be members of the opposition party PAS (*The New Straits Times*, Dec.8, 2001)

Concluding Remarks
Clearly, in Malaysia, there appear designs to demolish all remaining colonial structures and if this means Islamising institutions and institutionalising discrimination, it is appropriate. 'Modernisation' thus, seems to tread over human rights and take the path of both un-indigenisation and indigenisation depending on what suits and sustains the powers that be. To woo globalisation for its 'modern' virtues, and to shoo indigenisation for its primitive vices seem norms in Malaysia. Then again the pendulum shifts as Malay native cultural values re-emerge as virtues in the wave of Islamic extremism and cyber activism. Within a single developing nation, hence, one sees both resistance towards and acceptance of diverse cultural influences, not necessarily and entirely 'western' or 'colonial'. A Japanese car, an Arabic robe, an American burger and an Indian cinema symbolise the rich cultural identity of the 'modern' Malay-*Bumiputera*, whose values appear capitalist and whose vision of the minority seems severely impaired.

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