

Media in Malaysia's 1999 General Election

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Mass Media in Malaysia: An Overview

Regardless of whether they are mass or interpersonal, media in Malaysia generally reflect the various sub-systems of the multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic society that exist and operate in the country.

A characteristic of the Malaysian press is its tendency to concentrate on events important to their respective communities (Syed Arabi, 1989). It is therefore not surprising to note that newspapers like *Utusan Malaysia*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* or *Tamil Nesan* would concentrate on issues pertinent to its own ethnic group. This ethnocentrism in content and organization has its roots in the colonial era. The first newspaper, because it was published by the British colonial administrators, was published in English in 1805 to serve British interests in Malaya. The early English newspapers during this time mainly served the interests of the business community. News of foreign countries, especially Europe, were given prominence as the events affected British business in Malaya.

The Chinese followed suit in 1815 with the publication of the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* which, despite its name, was the first Chinese-language newspaper published in Malaya. This newspaper was used to spread Christianity in China. Subsequent Chinese newspapers published in 1881 and 1932 were extremely partisan and sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution in China in 1911. When the Chinese Revolution ended, these newspapers focused their attention on business. Businessmen in Malaya even started their own newspapers to promote and advertise their products.

The seeds of ethnocentrism were further shown when the Malays published the Malay newspapers in the 1870s and 1900s. These newspapers, the most popular among them being *Utusan Melayu*, were preoccupied with kindling and fostering nationalism and were used as channels to speak up against certain attitudes that hindered the progress of the Malays. To a great extent, the newspapers were also used to agitate against the British. In fact, the

development of the Malay political parties was made possible by the Malay press (Syed Arabi, 1989). Like the rest of its counterparts, the Indian press too highlighted Indian interests. Newspapers like *Tamil Nesan* and *Tamil Murasu* carried the plight of the Indians in the estates and other economic sectors, championed Indian education, helped spread literary works and became the vehicle for political demands (Syed Arabi, 1989).

From the above description of leading newspapers, it can be assumed that ethnic language newspapers are vehicles to voice the aspirations, hopes and fears of the racial groups they represent, while English language newspapers, whose readerships transcends racial groupings, would reflect universally-acceptable news values (Syed Arabi, 1989).

General Elections of Malaya/Malaysia (1955-1990)

There have been 10 general elections held in Malaysia since its formation on 31 August 1963; that is in 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995 and the latest, in 1999. Prior to this, there were two general elections in the Federation of Malaya, i.e. in 1955 and 1959. The following are highlights of the ten general elections:

1. The Alliance won the 1955 general election, with a landslide victory, capturing 51 of the 52 seats contested. Consequently, the Alliance was able to negotiate with the British for early independence of the Federation of Malaya on 31st August 1957.
2. The 1959 election was the first in the newly independent Federation of Malaya. The Alliance proportion of votes decreased – it only won 74 of the 104 seats contested. Nevertheless, the Alliance-led government under Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was able to negotiate with the British government for the formation of Malaysia, by which the original 11 states were expanded to 14, with the inclusion of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore.
3. Conducted against the backdrop of confrontation with Indonesia over the formation of Malaysia, the 1964 election favoured the ruling parties. Apart from the Confrontation, another significant aspect of this election was the unexpected challenge by Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP). This resulted in an intense Alliance-PAP conflict that ended in the separation of Singapore from Malaysia 15 months later.
4. The 1969 election has become very notable in Malaysian history for it ended with the May 13th riots. Prior to that, the election campaign had been conducted in an atmosphere of ethnic distrust and hostility. When the election results were announced, it was clear that the Alliance had won but with a vastly reduced majority. Civil disturbances followed which escalated into riots causing the lives of some 600 people.
5. The 1978 general election was significant because the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition managed to overthrow the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) after 19 years of PAS rule. PAS had left BN a year earlier because of basic disagreements, and its return

to the opposition meant that UMNO again faced the challenge of a Malay and Islamic party in competition with it for Malay votes.

6. The 1986 general election was different from the previous elections for a number of reasons. It had been widely speculated that the supremacy of the BN component parties would be strongly challenged, particularly by the opposition DAP and PAS. BN had been wrecked by internal strife as the then Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Musa Hitam, had resigned from the Cabinet just six months before the election. The economy too was in the throes of a bad recession, with no prospects of immediate recovery. Because of these factors, there was much interest, both within and outside the country, in the outcome of the 1986 general election. Though BN won the majority of the seats, its supremacy in seats was, however, not reflected in the percentage of the votes obtained. In 1982, BN obtained 80.4 percent of the votes cast, whereas its percentage of votes fell to 55.82 in the 1986 election. Further, both the DAP and PAS improved on their share of the votes cast, with the DAP obtaining 20.4 percent as compared to 19.57 percent previously and PAS obtaining 15.1 percent (14.46 percent in 1982). PAS officials minced no words in regarding the mass media as the "devil's mouthpiece" and alleging that the mass media greatly contributed to 'PAS' defeat.
7. Despite having a strong mandate from the voters in the 1986 election, the BN had to cope with a number of political problems, chief among them was the split in UMNO which came out in the open during UMNO's party elections in 1987. There were two camps, one led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Ghafar Baba (known as Camp A) and the other led by former finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former deputy prime minister, Musa Hitam known as Camp B). The victory of Camp A candidates led to a purge of Camp B candidates from ministerial and key party posts and also to subsequent court battles, which in turn led to the deregistration of the old UMNO. This prompted former members of the old UMNO to reorganize themselves into two parties, the "new" UMNO and a party called "Semangat 46" ("Spirit of 46", the founding date of the old UMNO).
8. Led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Musa Hitam switched camps again and joined the "new" UMNO), the Semangat 46 aligned itself with opposition parties, principally the DAP and PAS and made public its intention to contest as many seats in the 1990 election. Hence, the split within the old UMNO, its deregistration and replacement by two parties resulted in a weakening of Malay political unity.
9. Prior to the 1990 elections, it was widely speculated that the BN may not only lose its comfortable two-thirds majority but may also lose control of three or more state governments. The speculation was fuelled by the formation of an opposition coalition known as Gagasan Rakyat (People's Front) comprising PAS, DAP and other minor opposition parties. This was the first time in the country's political history that the opposition parties had formally banded themselves into a coalition. The 1990 election saw a closely contested battle in Penang between DAP and its BN opponents, principally MCA and Gerakan. DAP chief then, Lim Kit Siang, identified this as the

Tanjung Two project. The aim was for DAP to win enough seats so that it could form the next state government. The genesis of the idea was laid in the 1986 elections when Lim spearheaded the Tanjung One project which failed. As it turned out, the Tanjung Two project too failed.

10. Control of the mass media by the government has had both functional and dysfunctional effects upon the electorate, depending upon whether they were urban Malays, urban non-Malays or rural Malays. For example, while the credibility of *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* may not be high among urban non-Malays and some urban Malays, these publications are widely read by the rural Malays, and are regarded as highly credible. However, the publication and distribution of *Harakah*, a PAS publication, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu has helped to strengthen the position of the opposition and contributed to the BN wipeout in Kelantan. The partisan nature of the press seems very clear, e.g. NST and *Utusan Malaysia* groups are in favour of the ruling parties, and *Harakah*, *Rocket*, *Aliran* (all opposition publications) are critical of the government.

The 1999 General Election

Two major developments affected the outcome of the 1999 general election – the changing political fortunes of Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister, and the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998. Anwar, who had enjoyed a meteoric rise in his political career since 1993, was sacked as Deputy Prime Minister, detained under the Internal Security Act and subsequently charged in court with corruption in April 1999. The Asian financial crisis, which generally began with the devaluation of the Thai baht in July 1997, worsened throughout the remaining months of that year and continued for most of 1998.

Thus, the 1999 election was held in the midst of a highly-charged political atmosphere, with many emotional appeals from both the ruling BN coalition parties as well as the opposition parties, which once again banded themselves into a *Barisan Alternatif* (the Alternative Front) and agreed on an electoral pact and a joint manifesto.

Once again, the results of the 1999 election revealed that the electorate is not easily swayed by the rhetoric of the opposition. The BN was returned to power once again with a two-thirds majority. However, PAS made significant gains (retaining control of Kelantan, wresting Terengganu from the BN, and increasing the number of parliamentary seats to a record 27). Other opposition parties, however, fared badly, particularly DAP.

New Media and Political Advertising in The 1999 Election

The Role of the Mainstream and Alternative Media

The role of the media in a given society is most evident in the run-up to an election. Two types of media - the mainstream and the alternative media - play a significant role particularly during the period of political campaigning. In the Malaysian context, mainstream media is informally defined as one endorsed by the ruling elite in terms of ownership and control. The media usually take the developmental journalism approach where they work in tandem with the political and ruling masters and are often labeled as 'agents of the government'.

The alternative media, on the other hand, represent 'the other side of the story' and most often, are skewed toward the opposition. Issues and events that put the ruling elite in a negative light and are not covered by the mainstream media would be carried in the alternative press. Though this divide, where the mainstream media support the status quo and the alternative media the opposition, has become an accepted norm, this complacency was challenged with the sacking and incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim in 1997. This event triggered numerous social and political developments in the country, not the least important being the invigoration of the media.

Before the Anwar saga, the alternative media did not have a strong following. Though political party and socialist group publications like Harakah, Rocket and Aliran are critical of the government, readership has not been widespread. The Anwar ouster, however, catapulted these publications to the forefront, so much so that the mainstream media had to take a backseat. In fact, the circulation of the mainstream newspapers has reportedly dropped by 20 percent since 1997, not just due to the economic downturn that hit Malaysia and other parts of Asia, but also because of the Anwar sentiment.

There seemed to be increased disillusionment with the mainstream media that were perceived as echoing the voice of the government, not giving a balanced coverage of issues, and ignoring the opposition's point of view. This frustration was manifested in a call prior to the election made by the alternative front to boycott the mainstream media. Though the call did not receive widespread support, it was enough to further dent the credibility of the mainstream media.

Apart from Harakah, which increased its circulation from 30,000 (pre-Anwar saga) to more than 300,000 at the height of its popularity (1999), several alternative press also emerged to join the bandwagon. The more popular among these were Tamadun, Detik and Ekklusif. A host of sites on the Internet too sprung up in the wake of the Anwar heat - the more popular being Laman Reformasi Mahazalim, freeMalaysia and Malaysiakini. The Far Eastern Economic Review (16 March 2000) reported that some 25,000 people visited Malaysiakini.com daily and had attracted Microsoft as one of its advertisers. The BN too has

its sites – among the more popular ones being bnlist.tripod.com; umno.forever.tripod.com and kelabmayaumno.tripod.com.

The types of material posted on the sites vary from daily briefings, political reports, literary satires to satirical cartoons, some of which provide sharp insightful analyses while others are manifestations of the disappointment felt by certain quarters of the society over perceived excesses and disdain of the BN government. These sites are often the first to report on the latest developments, for instance, when Anwar was beaten (resulting in the infamous 'black eye') while in police custody, rumours were immediately rife via the sites that the 'top man' in the police force himself did it.

While the mainstream media in general support the ruling government, the private television station, NTV7, was the only mainstream medium that attempted to give access to alternative voice. Through its talk-show *Dateline Malaysia*, which ran for several months before the election, the ruling party, the opposition, the NGOs and other interest groups and individuals were invited in several fora to openly discuss issues previously deemed controversial or sensitive.

Why and how did the alternative media suddenly become popular, at times far surpassing the popularity of the mainstream media?

There was a growing demand by the public for more balanced reporting in the mainstream media where the opposition was hardly covered, and when it did get covered, it would almost always be put in a negative light. The alternative media represent an outlet which the public did not previously have, to obtain information about the alternative side of the story and to air their views more freely. It was through the alternative channels that the public got wind of salient issues that were otherwise not covered by the mainstream media. These issues include a series of police reports by Anwar on alleged corruption by Dr Mahathir's ministers, a former chief minister and close associates, the controversial RM200 million each for the Prime Minister's palace and executive jet (at a time when the country was immersed in economic turmoil), and police brutality.

During the election campaign, charges and counter charges in the mainstream and alternative media were common. There were animated exchanges on issues including democracy, corruption, Islam and alleged government cruelty. A wide range of individuals discussed these issues on the BA side, while the government position usually reflected the views of Dr Mahathir. Both the mainstream and alternative media indulged in fear appeal. For instance, when the mainstream media quoted the BN government that the opposition may cause unrest if they were to lose, the latter countered with the same allegation. BN toyed with public sentiment when it said that Anwar and the BA received financial support from foreign powers, repeating earlier alarm bells of the dangers of foreigners who were out to colonize the country.

The protagonists who took centre stage for criticism in the mainstream media were Anwar, Nik Aziz and other PAS ulamaks, (religious leaders) while in the alternative media Dr Mahathir and his close associates like Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz and Tun Daim Zainuddin received equal bashing.

In fact, these personalities are popularly caricatured in cartoons, which have become a sharp and effective technique to drive home a point. Dr. Mahathir, for instance, is always caricatured in *Harakah*, *Detik* and *Tamadun* with a huge nose, which has now become his 'signature'. To an extent, this gesture of depicting Dr Mahathir with a huge nose demonstrates the disrespect that section of the society feels for him, something unheard of in the Malaysian cultural psyche in yesteryears.

Political Speeches

Though *ceramah politik* (political speeches) had been widely used by the opposition as an alternative means to reach the public, the run up to the elections saw an extensive and intensive campaign of *ceramahs* by opposition parties and NGOs. These *ceramahs* were often fiery and emotional occasions. The campaigns were reproduced into video and audiocassettes that were widely distributed. Notices of impending *ceramahs* were posted on the sites, in *Harakah* and via flyers and posters. Thus, even though it was denied access to the mainstream media, the opposition effectively and largely relied on alternative means to counter the BN onslaught and set its own agenda.

Both the mainstream and the alternative media accused one another of spreading lies and defamation. Thus, when Dr Mahathir prophesised that the 1999 election would go down as the "dirtiest" in the history of the country, both media were quick to point a finger at one another in carrying out dirty tactics. *Harakah*, for instance, accused NTV7 of "leading Mahathir's dirtiest election" (22 November 1999). BN, on the other hand, launched a massive advertising campaign attacking the opposition in the mainstream newspapers and on television.

Never before in the history of press freedom in Malaysia has the press been given as much leeway as the months preceding the election. Under normal circumstances, the media in Malaysia are generally guarded in the freedom of expression through formal and informal controls (Hamdan (1988), quantified some 47 pieces of legislation and ordinances that affect mass media operations).

Political Advertisements of the 1999 General Election Campaign

Most pundits had predicted that the elections would be one of the dirtiest ever in the history of the country. The BN got to use the mainstream media to launch its massive advertising attack on the opposition. The opposition, on the other hand, relied heavily on the Internet and their own party publications to counter these attacks. Advertisements, including political advertisements, are a means of conveying compelling messages through available media to influence voters. However, because the BN controls most of the available mainstream media, the BA had very little access to the media for publicity during the campaign period. In addition, they lacked the resources to launch an advertisement attack similar to that by the BN.

Nevertheless, the popularity of the opposition publications at the time of the campaign provided BA with a readership sufficient to compete with the exposure received by BN advertisements in the mainstream media. Thus, both parties were able to reach their respective supporters as well as the many undecided voters who perused media of both Fronts.

Anti-Alternative Front (BA) or Anti-Opposition Advertisements by BN

On the first day after nominations day (21/11/99), BN publicized in a series of full page advertisements in all the major newspapers, likening the opposition to the cause of anarchy, disorder, violence and mob rule. These advertisements in all the national dailies portrayed violent anti-government demonstrations, depicting scenes of protests in Kuala Lumpur streets that were held several months earlier primarily to protest Anwar's arrest. Their captions read "Don't Let Mob Rule Lead Us" and "No to Violence." The advertisements depicted earlier press pictures of a protestor kicking a car, a trash bin on fire during a street demonstration, protestors throwing stones at the police, and another showing protestors (Reformasi supporters) breaking the windows of a TV3 vehicle. Half page advertisements also ran the following day showing destruction of public and private property by opposition supporters.

There is a belief that these ads had a reverse effect when they angered a section of the voting public against BN and swayed their vote toward the Alternative Front. In fact, the ads persuaded the DAP Secretary-general Lim Kit Siang to lodge a police report against the advertisements in Penang, charging them of being "inflammatory and irresponsible." (The Star, 22/11/1999) However, on others, it had the desired effect of reinforcing the belief of a possible "troubled" and unstable socio-political environment if the BA ruled.

Race and gender factors were also visited in several advertisements, which ran using the thread of fear appeal. There was an ad showing anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia and insinuating that the Alternative Front threatened to stop local cultural activities. One ad in a Malay daily indirectly attacked previous statements and policies that had been made by PAS leaders, which curtailed the women's rights in the workplace, etc. The ad read (translated) "Employment, Ambitions, Future... Why does the woman not have the right to make her choice?" and was superimposed on a picture of a woman in traditional garb.,

Another plug in the ads by BN was to question the placing of trust and confidence in the Opposition. One advertisement showed Wan Azizah, Anwar's wife, as allegedly admitting that she did not trust Anwar (this was through editing an answer she gave at an Australian television interview in December 1998). Several advertisements also showed the Alternative Front, particularly PAS, DAP and Keadilan, to be disunited in their objectives. A full-page advertisement in the New Straits Times questioned the BA with the caption "What Is Their Vision?" It included mugshots of the three leaders of the respective PAS, DAP, and Keadilan parties with the captions below each reading respectively "He has no vision," "He is short sighted," and "He has a headache." These ads too created much furore among the Reformasi and BA supporters.

There was also an advertisement captioned "Can They Ever Agree" implying the BA to be a broken Front. Another advertisement in the Malay newspapers when translated read as "PAS+DAP+Adil+PRM ...No Stand, No Direction, No Experience, No Logo Even." All these advertisements tried to influence the voters by promoting the common message theme of how disunited, unprepared, and untrustworthy the National Front party leaders were.

Pro-National Front (BN) Advertisements by BN

In addition to the negative advertisements on BA, BN also took out positive advertisements in the newspapers illustrating BN achievements, credibility as deliverers of promises, their ability to maintain peace and harmony and to work with all groups in the country. The negative advertisements about the BA counter-balanced by positive ads on BN rule suggested that unity, political stability, and progress in the country could only be achieved through BN.

An advertisement in the Malay newspapers showed a scene of the first Malay leader of the nation (associated with the BN) during the Declaration of Independence with the caption "42 Years Evidence of Excellent Achievement" (Translation) and a subheading "The Foundation of a Bright Future." This ad appeared on nomination day. The same general theme of "42 years of stability, progress and safety" by the BN government was carried consistently in several other advertisements during the election campaign period.

There were also ads that used the emotional appeal attempting to promote patriotism and to caution voters not to gamble with the future. One advertisement using the caption "Do Not Gamble with the Future of the Country" (translation) showed a picture of children of the different races in Malaysia holding hands, with the parliament and the national flag in the background. This theme of "Think about the future of our children; unity and peace of the nation is in our hands" was also used in several other ads. For example, there was an ad showing a child with a pacifier in the mouth and its caption read "Think About His Future" (Translated).

Generally, most of the advertisements in the national dailies the day before the elections emphasised the 42 years of achievements for the progress of the nation by the BN and appealed to the voters not to vote it all away. Even state governments took out advertisements to promote the strength of the BN in the state. An advertisement by the Perak State Secretariat showed the BN leader milling among the crowds, happily accepted by all. There was another ad promising better education for all through an increase in institutes of higher education in Penang. The BN did not end the advertising campaign after the 1999 Elections. The day after winning the elections, BN published a full-page advertisement reinforcing their earlier themes by thanking the voters for "Saving our future and choosing to have a free, united and progressive nation" with a picture of the Malaysian flag flying in the sky.

Advertisements by the Alternative Front

The Barisan Alternatif (or Alternative Front) launched its counter attack in the advertising blitz. Although initially their ads were not accepted by the mainstream dailies, some of the Chinese dailies, namely Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Siang Pau, and China Press, and the English language daily, The Star eventually ran some of their ads. According to the opposition web site, most of these ads had to be edited.

Harakah (22/11/99) also attacked TV3 and NTV7, UMNO-controlled private television stations, of assisting BN in carrying out its "dirty" election campaign and not providing sufficient airtime for BA. Harakah accused the television advertisements of projecting the Prime Minister as a popular leader, and giving negative publicity to the Alternative Front. However, it reported a PAS official, tongue in cheek, as saying the party welcomed the bad publicity, as at least, it meant some publicity for the Alternative Front in the mainstream media.

Nevertheless, the Alternative Front members had publications of their own, especially the popular Harakah, Eksklusif and Detik. But these were small weekly and biweekly publications without the national distribution infrastructure or financial resources enjoyed by the mainstream newspapers. Therefore, the BA also relied heavily on the Internet for publicity during the campaign period. This was the first election they used it to good effect. Both supporters and fence sitters in the country and those who were abroad relied on the Opposition web sites for information about BA's manifesto, grievances, and plans for their role as leaders of the country, if elected.

The common themes in the Harakah advertisements that were anti-BN included: Justice for the people by the people; Punish the violators of justice, namely the BN; Vote to change to curtail BN's exploitation of the nation's wealth; Reject the BN "gangsters" who are not to be trusted; Join us to defend Islam as the BN is unable to do so.

The advertisement that BA ran included a full-page ad showing Anwar in different poses with the black eye he received while he was held at the police headquarters in the early days of his arrest; the caption read in Malay (Translated) "Their Hands did this... Now the Turn is in Your Hands, Punish BN!". The ad illustrated the voting symbol for BA.

Another full-page ad had a caricature of an imbalanced scale with the heavy side filled by the BN controversial national projects and the lighter one with the ordinary citizens. The caption read "Where did they divide the wealth of the nation? Do you want change?" (Translated). There was another ad that had the caption "Reject Gangsters... Reject BN." This ad also condemned the PM for the 1969 riots, 1998 ISA arrests, and of racism. Yet another ad listed all the social problems facing the nation's citizens, and blamed the BN for them. The BA also ended on the cautionary note of "Don't gamble your future" to counter BN calls for the same.

The other common theme in the Harakah advertisements was regarding PAS's greater ability to protect Islamic values and faith compared to UMNO. There was a full-page ad showing mugshots of key UMNO leaders who had defected to PAS and one of the Prime

Minister enjoying a toast with an "enemy" of Islam. The caption read "All of them have joined PAS ...who else is left to defend Islam in UMNO?" (Translated).

The theme suggesting that BN was not to be trusted was captured in an advertisement that showed mugshots of the Prime Minister and his "lying" witnesses in the Anwar trial against those of Anwar's "honest" witnesses with the caption "Who do you believe?" (Translated). Another ad accused certain quarters of spreading "lies and propaganda" through false reports of defection by BA members to BN in their attempts to confuse the voters. It cautioned supporters not to be misled by these reports.

There were also pro-opposition advertisements to show the sincerity in the alliance of Keadilan, PAS, PRM and DAP to achieve justice. This included one that caricatured the cooperation of the BA party members as characters of four cats in dominant sizes, out to capture the small-sized rats, representing the "villains" or BN members. The caption here quoted Confucius: "It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches the rat."

There was a full-page advertisement explaining guarantees in BA's manifesto that would benefit the whole family. The caption was "Malaysia deserves better...Give your family real stability and security". This ad counter-attacked BN ads, which had a similar message guaranteeing that stability and security could only be achieved through BN. The BA did not refrain from using other emotional appeals either. For example, there was an ad depicting a picture of Anwar's young daughter with a mournful face "crying" out to have "Pity for Dad". (Translated)

On the whole, the opposition's advertisements and publicity efforts through their publications, web sites, fliers, political speeches, and word of mouth had almost the same influence as those of the National Front's. This allowed both sides an almost equal platform to present their respective cases to the voters for this election. Though BN still won two-thirds majority, it lost several seats and strongholds. BA made strong inroads in some areas.

Postscript And Conclusion

There have been many commentaries about the 1999 election results and subsequent political developments for both the opposition parties as well as parties in the BN coalition. Among these are allegations that opposition parties were funded by foreign sources and that there is a hate campaign directed at BN leaders, including the Prime Minister.

Another development is the dissension within component parties of the Barisan Alternatif, particularly between DAP and PAS. Added to this is the dissension within the Keadilan party, fuelled by the resignation of Marina Yusof and Chandra Muzaffar. This seems to lend credence to the criticism leveled by BN parties that many of the opposition leaders are not trained in politics and lack contact with the electorate at grassroots level. Matters were made worst when Professor Shahnun Ahmad, who had won a parliamentary seat under the PAS banner in Perlis, resigned from his seat giving ill health as a reason. Observers believe these resignations do not augur well for the future of the party or BA.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the 1999 general election in Malaysia was as interesting as the previous elections. Despite the strong opposition showing in the two states (Kelantan and Terengganu), the Barisan Nasional was returned to power for another five-year term. While the new and alternative media were more influential than in previous elections, BN control of the mainstream media remained a crucial factor in ensuring its continued success.

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