MALAYSIA’S HINDU RIGHTS ACTION FORCE (HINDRAF): A PERSPECTIVE FROM A MALAY MAINSTREAM DAILY

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ABSTRACT

The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) came to the forefront when it submitted a memorandum to the British Government asserting its rights¹, and subsequently organized a rally to submit its petition to the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. The demonstration by 20,000² ethnic Indians from all walks of life was the first of its kind to be organized by Malaysian Indians. The rally shook the nation which later led to the electoral defeat of the Malaysian Indian Congress in the 12th General Election of 8 March 2008, and subsequently none the better in the 13th General Election held on May 20 2013. The mainstream Malay news media (Utusan Malaysia) owned by UMNO³, and considered a government propaganda tool had perceived the HINDRAF movement to be a threat to the nation. The objective of this paper is to discuss the stand taken by Utusan Malaysia in its objectivity in reporting Hindraf’s demonstration. This analysis is important as it was later admitted by the Malaysian government that Hindraf’s claims were valid.

Key words: Demonstration, Propaganda, Indians, Media, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

The scope of this paper is limited to a definite time period—from the day it published news about Hindraf, a non-political movement until the day its leaders were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) on 13 December 2007. Hindraf had received wide mass media publicity nationwide during the months of August, November and December in 2007.

Using agenda setting theory as a basis, the views expressed by the paper will be evaluated based on its editorials, news reports and feature articles written by Utusan journalists. Based on the views of these groups, a stand will be taken as to whether Utusan Malaysia was objective in its reporting.

Why Utusan Malaysia?

Among all the major dailies in Malaysia, Utusan Malaysia has the widest circulation among the Malay readers. One needs to consider the newspaper’s historic roots when considering this viewpoint. Utusan Malaysia is an offshoot newspaper of Utusan Melayu which has been published since 29 May 1939 in Singapore in the Jawi language (1). Utusan Melayu had a wide readership in Singapore until it shifted its operations from Cecil Street, Singapore to Kuala Lumpur (at 46 M, Jalan Lima, off Jalan Chan Sow Lin) in February 1958 (2). Thereafter, in Kuala Lumpur it had issued a new weekly edition named Mingguan Malaysia for the first time in 30 August 1964. The first romanised version appeared as Utusan Malaysia on 1 September 1967 (3).

The media agenda objectives of the paper were to serve “race, religion and nation”. It was clear that the paper was founded to defend the rights of the Malays who were at that time under British rule. The founder of the paper was Yusof Ishak⁴ a well-known Malay leader at that time. The paper was formed with a capital of RM12,000 (US$3,726) and became a platform for many prominent writers such as Zaba, Abdul Rahim Kajai, Usman Awang, Abdul Samad Ismail and many others.⁵ It must be noted this was the first paper which urged the Malay rulers not to sign the Malayan Union Treaty and to urge the Malays to unite against the Malayan Union proposals. The paper also urged the Malays to put forth their political views. As a result of these agitations it led to the formation of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946 (2).⁶

¹ Hindraf were formed in 2005 to fight for Hindu rights and it comprised 45 Indian NGOs and its leaders were mainly lawyers.
² There are also reports which claimed that there were 50 or 100 thousand Indians who took part in the demonstration.
³ UMNO owns about 50.5% of the shares in Utusan via RHB Nominees (Tempatan) Sdn.Bhd while the Finance Ministry holds 6.9% and Media Prima Bhd., 43.3% (The Star, 5 December 2006).
⁴ He later became the first President of Singapore (1965-1970).
⁵ Chamil Wariya, “Industri Persuratkhabaran…”, p. 6.
⁶ Ibid.
Presently the Utusan Malaysia is owned by UMNO, Malaysia’s Malay-based political party. An estimated 300,000 copies are sold daily. The majority of the readers are Malays. Utusan Malaysia is the only paper which articulates Malay interest, and is considered to have a strong influence on government policies.

**History of Hindraf**

Hindraf was formed in December 2005 as a reaction to a number of incidents which were considered to have offended the religious sensitivities of the Hindus residing in Malaysia. A good example includes the burial of M. Moorthy, one of the climbers to Mount Everest in 1997. Since he had converted to Islam, he was buried according to Muslim rights. But his family was not aware of his conversion. As a result of this event, 48 Indian NGOs had met and decided to set up a body/organisation primarily to oppose such religious conversions among others, which also included the demolition of Hindu temples and shrines – to champion the rights of marginalised Indians (4). The Malaysian public came to know the existence of Hindraf in August 2007 when it was reported in the press that they had submitted an 18 point memorandum to the Malaysian Government on 12 August 2007. Subsequently on 31 August 2007, P.Waytha Moorthy, a Hindraf lawyer, had filed a symbolic class action suit against the United Kingdom in the courts of Britain for leaving the Indians unprotected in the then Malaya when independence was given to Malaya. The lawsuit claimed 4 trillion British pounds as compensation and called to strike out Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution which provides for Malay rights. It was only then that the public in Malaysia came to be aware of the existence of such an organisation and their objectives.

When the Malaysian Government did not respond positively to its requests, Hindraf had initiated a plan to street march for leaving the Indians unprotected under the majority Malay-Muslim government which Hindraf felt had contravened the human rights of Indians as a minority community in Malaysia. This led to the 25 November 2007 street march. It was reported that 30,000 Indians from all walks of life participated in a major demonstration, who were subsequently arrested by the police (5).

In terms of news reporting of the street march, Utusan Malaysia’s style of reporting differed from that of the other English dailies like the Star, the New Straits Times and the Sun which had critical element in their coverage. Hence it articles were considered critically biased towards government policies. As such, its news reporting had probed as to why Hindraf adopted street demonstrations to vet its frustrations. The following discussion will look into the thoughts reflected by Utusan Malaysia through its editorial column and general news reports.

**Fair Evaluation**

Although one cannot deny that most of the requests made by Hindraf were race based towards one particular community in Malaysia – the Indians, it is nevertheless important to debate this issue within the context of the 18 point Memorandum as to whether the requests were appropriate from a historical point of view and within the context of Malaysian society. Unfortunately Utusan Malaysia took a biased pro-governmental stand and highlighted issues such as an email sent by Hindraf to the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on 15 November 2007 claiming there was “ethnic cleansing” in Malaysia. On the contrary, ethnic cleansing was not listed in Hindraf’s 18 point Memorandum which was not given the fair attention it deserved.

**Utusan’s Perception**

This paper will present the perception of Utusan Malaysia with regard to Hindraf’s street protests from August to December 2007 as justifiable cause that Hindraf leaders should be held under Internal Security Act (ISA) and for being a threat to national unity. The tone was set through its agenda setting reporting.

**Editorial Stand**

The editorials in Utusan Malaysia appear either under the Editorial column or under “Awang Selamat”. Both news pieces are considered important agenda tools for Utusan Malaysia as it ultimately reflect the paper’s stand. It can be claimed that Malay sentiments could be gauged through the editorial columns, especially the column written by Awang Selamat. In fact this column has become a platform to create public opinion or for people in power to gauge Malay sentiments (6).

**Indians Marginalised by the Government**

The editorial about Hindraf was published on 18 August 2007 a few days after Hindraf had submitted its memorandum to the Malaysian Prime Minister. The paper had carried the statement by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) President that MIC had helped Indians and that there is no truth to the claim that Indians had been marginalised by the Government. The paper also highlighted a claim by Hindraf that UMNO is playing the role of “Mandor”, and which perhaps initiated the call for the abolishment of Malay special rights.

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8 Ramachandra Meyappan one of the founder of Hindraf in “Hindraf Seeks a Fresh Start”, Sunday Star, 26 July 2009.
10 Low level official or agent (normally Indians) in charge of indentured labor during the colonial period in Malaya. The laborers were ill-treated by the mandors.
Demolition of Temples

The paper also did not agree with the allegation that many Hindu temples were demolished in Malaysia. In its "Bisik-Bisik Awang Selamat" column it had stated that it was only in Malaysia (apart from India) that there were many Hindu temples, alluding to the notion that Indians were a superior race in Malaysia. It also highlighted that Indians in Malaysia were far better than Indians in other countries, including India. The column also challenged Hindraf members to migrate and settle to other countries if they had felt it was a better choice than living in Malaysia. The remarks by Awang Selamat does indicates the paper did take an emotional stand, instead of looking into the claims made by Hindraf in an objective manner.

On 21 August 2007, the paper further raised the issue of Hindu temples and claimed that most of them had been constructed illegally, and that there were far too many of them, despite Indians being a minority race in Malaysia. It further claimed temples could easily be built implying that there existed no laws in Malaysia. It urged the local government to look into the matter seriously. The paper's comments could be construed such that the government should not be lenient, and perhaps indicate that immediate action was warranted against temples which were illegally built.

Hindraf Rally

When Hindraf took to the streets on 25 November, the editorial comment was that such outwards demonstrations did not bring any benefit to the country. It also deemed that Hindraf's demand of RM29 trillion from the British Government via its petition to the British Government (with regards to bringing of Indians to then Malaya to work as indentured labourers) as unnecessary and a waste of time. It commented that Hindraf's action was only to draw public attention. The editor's opinion could be construed that such demonstrations, including the Bersih Rally also creates problems like traffic woes and downtime in business operations – and could result in a cultural and legitimate norm among Malaysians to vent their grousess.

Kampong Medan Incident

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Feature by Noraini Ab. Razak

The first feature article was written by Noraini Ab. Razak, a Utusan reporter on 8 December 2007. The writer had claimed Hindraf of not being grateful to the country. The writer also opined the government policy had created many rich individuals like Andanda Krishnan and Tony Fernandes. The writer also felt the authorities should investigate the linkage of Hindraf with the terrorists and arrest them immediately. In another featured article dated 9 December 2007 the writer highlighted the deplorable living conditions in India. It had carried a report that two thirds of the 1 billion Indian people were poor in terms of wealth, health, education leading many of them to suicide. This, according to the writer had prompted many Indians to migrate to other parts of the world. The writer was of the opinion that political uprisings should occur anytime there, and she saw no logic for the Indian Prime Minister to be concerned about Indians living in Malaysia. The writer felt that Hindraf should be contented with what the Indians were enjoying here. This can be considered a short sighted view and a poor comparison.

Feature by Ku Seman Ku Hussain

In another feature article written by Ku Seman Ku Hussain on 16 December 2007 it was noted that the Indians living in Malaysia were doing well and were not poor as described by Hindraf. The writer claimed that Indians migration from the outskirts of town and estates to the city center was a positive development towards their 11 Kampong Medan incident was a clash between Malays and Indians at Kampong Medan off Old Klang Road in Kuala Lumpur on 8 March 2001 and according to official figures 6 people died, 42 injured and 220 were detained. The basic cause of the troubles was not just a tiff between two factions – one Indian and other Malay – but a complex of problems rooted in severe poverty and social deprivation.

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wealth creation. However this can be regarded as an over simplistic argument when the facts clearly show that Indians who left the estates for the towns were doing badly.\textsuperscript{12} The writer was of the opinion that if Indians felt they are the oppressed lot in Malaysia, then they should seek refuge in other countries.

\textit{Analysis}

It can be debated that the feature articles in Utusan Malaysia was not well represented and can be considered as not well researched. The writers had in fact had made rhetorical statements that can be toned as racially biased in slant against the Indians. The rationale that Malaysian Indians should settle elsewhere if they are not happy with their lives in Malaysia does not seem valid and reasonable. On the contrary Indians in Malaysia are considered as Malaysian citizens and they have the right to their rights under the Malaysian Constitution. Another major flaw is to equate the achievements of two individuals (Anandakrishnan and Tony Fernandez) with the general living standards of most Indians living in Malaysia. Far from that only a handful of Malaysian Indians are wealthy, but the majority are left far behind economically.\textsuperscript{13} The writers’ view that the Indian migration to urban areas is indication of their success seems in valid. It does not seem logical as gangsterism, dropout rates and many other social problems among Indian youths is on the rise in areas where Indians had to migrated from estates.\textsuperscript{14} Studies have shown that the problems are due to the failure on the part of the government to address the dislocation of Indian estate workers in the 1980s when the estates were taken over by the locals (11).

2. CONCLUSION

From the discussion and analysis it can be concluded that Utusan Malaysia was not objective in its reporting. In fact as suggested by agenda setting theory, Utusan Malaysia had a political agenda of its own which was highlighted in the editorial column and feature articles. Instead the view of this analysis is that since Utusan Malaysia is a national newspaper, there should be a more balanced tone in its reporting, rather than taking a lop-sided approach so as to maintain social balance harmony amongst the multi-racial citizens living in Malaysia.

Another event that puts the paper in bad light is when it only published reports about initiatives taken by the government to address Indian problems only after the Hindraf leaders were arrested. In fact some of the measures to enhance the social standing of the Indians were adopted soon after the 12\textsuperscript{th} General Elections.\textsuperscript{15} One of the immediate measures was the formation of a Cabinet Committee to study social problems faced by Indians, the promise to change the status of 523 partially aided Tamil schools to fully aided schools, the promise to give financial help to the Asian Institute of Medical Studies (AIMS), to increase the intake of Indian students into critical sectors like medicine, engineering, as well as allowing the students from these institutions to apply for Public Services (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam) scholarships, and to upgrade AIMS from college to university status. The government also allocated 120 million ringgit for social development among Indians for four years with an average allocation of RM 30 million in the first year. The government also agreed to increase bus and taxi permits to Indians, job opportunities and easy loans for Indian businessmen and more places for Indians at vocational training centres.\textsuperscript{16}

Therefore this is an definite acknowledgement by the government that the Indian community was indeed lacking in social standing in Malaysia, contrary to the views taken by Utusan Malaysia. Incidentally, the steps taken by the government to address the Indian issues were indeed based on the original 18-point memorandum forwarded by Hindraf to Malaysian Prime Minister. But only 4 of the 18 requests that had been requested by Hindraf were taken into account.\textsuperscript{17}

In conclusion Utusan Malaysia had failed to play an objective the role in its reporting towards the activities of Hindraf.

REFERENCES


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. Refer tables on “A Snapshot of Social Problems and Dysfunctional Behavior among Indians, 2002-2004”; “Annual Admission of Convicted Prisoners among Indians and Numbers and Percentage of Total Prisoners and Youth in Prisons”, pp. 48-49.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} This demands were related to resolution number 4 pertaining to 523 Tamil schools, number 5 regarding scholarships, loans and etc; number 6 plans to uplift Indians in economy and number 10 unlawful demolitions of Hindu temples.


6. N.N. Nik Ahmat. Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri Selangor, 26 October 2006,