Media as a Mechanism in Strengthening Mahathir’s Political Hegemony

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Abstract- Apparently, the role of media in politics including the political partying is unquestionable. To date, an effectively use of media for the purpose of political hegemony by the ruling elite party is accepted as a phenomenon or common practice. Since taking over the leadership as the President of United Malaya National Organization (UMNO) and Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has shown his strength and capability in controlling and manipulating media particularly in managing crises throughout his era of administration. This study which embraces a library research method – books, websites, and journals, discovered that there are two approaches of control over the media available in Malaysia - laws and ownership is believed to be beneficial and helpful for Mahathir’s administrative style and Malaysian politics at large. Consequently, the study (which is interdisciplinary between political science and communication) had also analyzed the strategies taken by the prime minister as a tool in strengthening the 22 years of his political career and his hegemony as the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Keywords- Mahathir and Political Hegemony, Media

I. INTRODUCTION

Utilizing the media as a tool in shaping and strengthening political hegemony has long been accepted by many countries throughout the world. In discussing the theory of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci assessed on how the persuasion process been performed by the ruling party (the representative) through media over the people (the represented) as a strategic step taken to acquire their approval and ultimately to continue to lead the country. The willingness of public to elect a party during election and support them to remain in power (besides the acceptance of the government’s policies and regulations) are the examples of such agreement. The situation is believed has provided a 'comfort' movement for the government not only at the formation stage, but also in strengthening and maintaining of their political hegemony. Thus, it is not a surprise when such agreement persists, the government will continue to reign for a longer time, i.e. 22 years, as in the case of Tun Mahathir as the Malaysia's Fourth Prime Minister (1981 - 2003). The four phase of his administrative era has witnessed his strength and success in ensuring the country’s media provides ‘persuasion’ or acquires 'approval' of the citizen. Considering the legal and the non-legal dimensions of controlling the media system in Malaysia, this paper intends to briefly investigate on the approach, step or strategies taken by Tun Mahathir to 'lead' the media industry as well as how the media has
been operated in such a way to consolidate his political hegemony.

II. POLITICAL HEGEMONY IN MALAYSIA

Historically, the political power in Malaysia since independence (1957) were in the hands of Barisan Nasional (formerly known as the Alliance): a combination of UMNO (represented the Malays), MCA (represented the Chinese), MIC (represented the Indians), and other parties representing other tribes. Over 54 years, not even once has this party been overthrown and leave the office to be governed by the opposition. Despite the crises that the government had experienced - judiciary, financial and political, they were still remained in power, favorable and accepted by the people. Regardless of the grievances expressed by the opposition, BN was still mandated to govern as the trust and support of the people towards their administrative approach continued. This 'positive' perception was translated into the 13 times of elections that were held through the ballot box and had without failed offered a great victory to the government. In the eyes of the opposition's supporters, their party has been seen as had succeeded in raising public interest issues such as poverty, unsustainable development, corruption and abuse of power, yet, BN was still in power. Apparently, one of the successful keys of BN’s political hegemony was associated with the 'power within the media'. Hence, the ownership and operation of the media had been given major attention by the government. The media was ascertained to submit to the 'political master of the day' and this had turned to be a common practice within the media organizations.

III. MEDIA SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA

The media in Malaysia is in between of two approaches: authoritarian and democratic. While encouraging the pro-government media, the ‘other’ media (which is neutral or sympathetic towards the opposition) was also given the opportunity to operate, especially if it is not considered excessive in its coverage of events in and outside the country. 'Media extremist' is a widely used term to refer to the media that was too bold in its publication with regard to the national matters. There were no policies as such called ‘biasness’ and banning of the opposition’s media, yet the history had proven that the alternative media was frequently intended to cause chaotic among the nation by arising the sense of dissatisfaction towards the government. Thus, the withdrawal and cancellation of their operating permit, besides seizing printing equipments as had experienced by an online newspaper, Malaysiakini few years ago could be perceived as an authoritarian approach (control) by the government over the media industry. Taking control over the media systems in Malaysia is possible in two forms: by legal (acts and ordinands) and non-legal (ownership). Followings are among the four most prominent laws enacted and had been effectively exercised by the government as a way to strengthen and ultimately maintain their political hegemony:

1) Internal Security Act 1960 - Allocations made by the Minister of Home Affairs in order to prevent any form of printings, publications, sales, distributions and possessions of any document that are classified as a subversive threat to national security, public order, violence, rebellion against the law or encourage racial hostility. The enforcement of this law is not in accordance with the normal legal process of litigation and trial in an open court. The Minister of State is with the power to detain any person who is considered as dangerous to the country’s national security for 60 days without charge.

2) Official Secrets Act 1972 - This act was designed to prevent the occurrence of subversion, theft of information, gather, collect, record, publish or provide any official and confidential information,
articles, documents intended for the use or which may be used by the enemy in threatening the country’s national security.

3) **Printing and Publications Act 1948**—These laws regulate the ownership and usage of printing machineries in producing the internal (within the country) printed materials. This act has empowered the Minister of Home Affairs in controlling the possession and use of printing press as well as the approval or denial of publication permit. The Minister is also with authority in revoking any granted license; either by withdrawal or cancellation of the permit.

4) **Sedition Act 1948 (amended in 1971)**—These laws prohibit any form of speeches or publications which could insult or cause hatred or promote dissatisfaction towards any King or against the Government of Malaysia or any State Government as well as induce humiliation or hatred or encourage disaffection against the administration of justice, cause dissatisfaction among the people of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong or King of the people of any state in Malaysia or to promote hatred and hostility between races.

Apart from the legal aspect, taking control over the media through acquisition and ownership by the government had also seen as another strategy. Individual or group of individuals who pleaded for media operations and its permit were as a rule consists of those with close connection or compassionate to the government. It is also a common understanding that those who ever have had a record of showing favoritism towards the opposition shall be denied their rights from operating the media – with common reason as to preserve the security and harmonious of the country. Nonetheless, even if the permits were granted, their operations would definitely being watched closely by the government as a precaution step as to prevent any form of provocative publications. Considering the power that the government holds in the media industry - regardless of which approach (democratic or authoritarian) and strategies (legal or non-legal) taken, it is agreeable that the mainstream media in most of the countries are with the tendency of showing their interests and kind favor towards the government. Besides, an appointment of chief editors and chief executive officer who are in favor of the government is another criterion in ensuring sound news coverage and reporting of the government.

**IV. MAHATHIR ‘S PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA FREEDOM**

While the systems and practices of media in Malaysia since its independence (1957) had definitely benefited the government, yet Mahathir had taken a stand to initiate and promote an idea of democratic media or freedom of press as a way to bring changes into media industry. To many political analysts, the idea may be based on his bitter experience of being a government ‘critic’ during the reign of the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra as he was expelled from the party due to continuous criticism towards the policies designed by Tunku. Tun Mahathir was with a strong believes that his expression of ideas was the matters concerned to the public’s interests but unfortunately Tunku did not seize them seriously. Nevertheless, the idea of implementing a liberal media policy or a democratic approach has had faded away along with an increased of crises throughout his reign. Conversely, he was no longer believed in freedom of media as before as what was expressed through his speech at the World Press Convention in Singapore in 1985:

> “Just as they are right in saying that a government has no monopoly on constructiveness and wisdom, the media must recognise that they too have no monopoly on constructiveness and wisdom. Just as the public servant must be prepared to accept criticism, so too must the media be prepared to accept criticism. Just as government is not
above the law, the media too are not above the law. It simply will not do if a public is subject to the laws on state secrets but in the name of freedom others are not. Just as the government cannot be allowed to have the freedom to do exactly as it pleases in society, so too the media cannot be allowed to do exactly as they please in society. So long as the press is conscious of itself being a potential threat to democracy and conscientiously limits the exercise of its rights, it should be allowed to function without government interference. But when the press obviously abuses its rights, then democratic governments have a duty to put it right.”( Asia Pacific Media Educator, Issue No.16, Dec. 2005)

V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of strengthening and maintaining the 22 years of reign, the Malaysian media have contributed towards the formation of political hegemony of the government in general and Tun Mahathir in particular. Despite the various crises occurred during the era of his reign, Tun Mahathir managed not only to defeat but also strengthen his hegemony and his regime’s political position in Malaysia. He had continuously 'govern the country' with 'support' and 'consent' from the majority of the people to the last day of his position (2003). The symbiotic relationship of the media and government specifically Mahathir was something that is interesting and became the attention of researchers since the end of his administration era. Even with the existence of alternative media which supported the opposition, he was able to withstand and remains as Prime Minister until he himself decided to refer his position to his successor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

REFERENCES