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The Dynamic Media Landscape in Malaysia's 15th General Election

YONG XIN YI*
MONIZA WAHEED
THAM JEN SERN
JULIA WIRZA MOHD ZAWAWI
Universiti Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Media outlets play a vital role before, during, and after general elections by disseminating political information to the general population. Framing contributes significantly to how the media promotes certain issues, solutions, or interpretations. The 15th General Election marked a significant moment in Malaysia's political landscape which characterised a dynamic interplay between mainstream and alternative media. The Malaysian mainstream media with its established credibility and extensive reach provided comprehensive coverage of the general election. However, its affiliation with political parties and perceived bias often led to questions about impartiality. In contrast, alternative media leveraging social media and digital platforms emerged as an important source of alternative viewpoints. The alternative media offered diverse perspectives and highlighted issues underrepresented in mainstream media, especially during the general elections. This study explores media challenges such as media law and government censorship, as well as differences in reporting the general election between the two media types. The discussion reveals that mainstream media has a significant influence due to its resources and infrastructure. The alternative media on the other hand plays a crucial role in democratising information and fostering more inclusive reporting. Additionally, this study explains the significant correlation between media and political parties, which influences media bias in news coverage. The contrasting role of mainstream and alternative media during the 15th General Election discussed in this study demonstrated their distinct framing impacts in the Malaysian political landscape. The discussion also highlights the necessity for balanced media coverage that supports pluralism and a democratic context in the Malaysian political landscape.

Keywords: *Mainstream media, alternative media, 15th General Election, media framing, media ownerships.*

INTRODUCTION

Media framing is a subject of extensive research in the fields of political communication. Entman (1993) argued that the framing paradigm was fractured, and debates about the value of framing as a theoretical concept are still ongoing. In reporting political issues, framing provides a powerful tool to examine the content of news coverage on a wider range of issues. In the analysis of news coverage, scholars are primarily interested in variations of framing across media and over time that may lead to different interpretations of an issue (Duan & Takahashi, 2017). Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) defined frames as the persistent patterns of recognition, presentation, interpretation of selection, exclusion and emphasis by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse in verbal or visual form. The selection of frames in news provides selective views and alternative ways of interpreting issues that may influence readers' perceptions (Waheed & Hellmueller, 2021; Yong et al., 2024).

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Framing contributes significantly to how the media promotes certain issues, solutions, or interpretations. The way media present political issues generally influence people's beliefs, feelings, and thoughts. This phenomenon has become the focal point of most research on framing (Baharin et al., 2017; Yong et al., 2024). The results of Malaysia's 15th General Election have further highlighted issues related to improved political governance, as echoed in the Malaysian media landscape. Therefore, it is important for the present study to examine the role of mainstream and alternative media in reporting the general election to determine the influence of media framing during the 15th General Election.

Malaysia is a multicultural country in Southeast Asia that practises British colonialism. The Malays, Chinese and Indians were segregated economically before gaining independence (Chin, 2023). The colonial state reinforced this racial economic structure that led to the formation of an enduring ethno-religious political culture and the formation of political parties.

The British administration collaborated and supported the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malayan (later known as Malaysian) Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malayan (later known as Malaysian) Indian Congress (MIC) in equipping for self-governance (Chin, 2023). Later, these parties formed the Alliance coalition which won the general elections in 1955. The Alliance then led Malaya to independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, which included Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak. However, Singapore later separated from Malaysia in 1965 due to the refusal to comply with the unequal racial rights.

In 1973, the Alliance coalition later rebranded itself to become the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. According to Nadzri (2019), UMNO appeared as the dominant force within the BN and Alliance, with its members holding key cabinet positions and its president typically serving as prime minister. Over time, UMNO's dominance grew and power sharing occurred more on its own party rather than through equitable negotiation between MCA and MIC (Weiss, 2020). The control became so entrenched that it appeared synonymous with the government itself such as repressive legislation, media control and influence over the judiciary and religious institutions to solidify its position and power (Nadzri, 2019).

Over the past few years, Malaysia has undergone rapid political and social change. BN maintained a two-third majority in the Parliament until the 2008 General Election. The loss of BN stemmed from the rise of the Internet, the Reformasi (Reformation) activism, and the grassroots activism. The participatory democracy with citizens becoming more engaged in politics alternatively. The opposition such as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS) leveraged the Internet to voice citizens' dissatisfactions and criticism of BN. As a result, BN lost the federal government to Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition in the 14th General Election in 2018 which led to the end of BN's 60 year ruling record in Malaysia.

The 15th General Election held on 19 November 2022 resulted in an unexpected setback for the BN and PH for the rise of Perikatan Nasional (PN). Media coverage of the 15th General Election was comprehensive from both the mainstream and alternative media. In the last two decades, the Malaysian political landscape in 2024 remains unchanged. Issues of race and religion continue to dominate the news landscape in both mainstream and alternative media. This persistent focus significantly affects Malaysia which is characterised by its diverse racial composition. The media is a central focus during general elections as it conveys adequate political information to the voters through election coverage. Therefore, media coverage is important for political parties to convey political statements and viewpoints to

the electorate. Hence, positive visibility in the media dedicated to electoral success drives political parties to consume media during election campaigns (Park & Suiter, 2021).

The primary function of the media is to convey ample information to the citizens, especially in a democratic country. Ideally, political parties persistently utilise the media platform to engage with the public to keep them informed and conscious of their role as citizens. The emergence of the Internet has changed the media landscape. Publics are no longer restricted to obtain information from the mainstream media as alternative media offers diverse perspectives and highlights issues underrepresented in mainstream media, which plays a distinct role in the democratic framework.

Reflecting these narratives from Malaysia, the present study seeks to discuss the significant role of mainstream and alternative media in the Malaysian political landscape. By analysing the media ownerships and censorships that limit the media freedom in Malaysia, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of media role in shaping public opinion especially during general elections. Against the backdrop of the media ownership, Malaysian citizens are often exposed to mainstream and alternative media for political issues (Nain, 2018). The political landscape and media in Malaysia therefore enable this study to explore the significance role of mainstream and alternative media in the Malaysian 15th General Election in 2022.

THE 15TH GENERAL ELECTION IN MALAYSIA

The 15th General Election held on 19 November 2022 indicated a critical moment in Malaysia's political evolution amidst the first general election held during the COVID-19 pandemic and one-third of 21 million eligible voters were first time voters (Chin, 2023). The voting age was changed from 18 to 21 in 2019 and automatic registration for eligible voters was done. This was also the first general election where Malaysians were seeking political stability after the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government in 2020. There were three major coalitions contesting in the 15th General Election - Pakatan Harapan (PH) led by Anwar Ibrahim, Perikatan Nasional (PN) led by Muhyiddin Yassin and Barisan Nasional (BN) led by Zahid Hamidi.

The Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) were the two main parties in PH, and DAP is known to win Chinese votes in the 14th General Election in 2018, recording the best electoral outcomes in urban areas. Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin led the PN coalition which consists of two main parties, Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM). PPBM largely comprises of UMNO members who had withdrawn their support to Malaysian former Prime Minister Najib Razak and Zahid Hamidi due to their corruption trials. PAS on the other hand, has a strong grassroot presence in the rural Malay heartland. The BN coalition is dominated by UMNO where its core members consist of Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC). The Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GPS) used to be under the BN but rebranded itself as a new coalition in 2018 when BN lost power.

BN was the leading coalition heading into the polls in all prior elections in Malaysia. However, there was no dominant coalition during the 15th General Election after the first regime change in the 14th General Election when Malaysia underwent political instability due to the fall of the PH government in 2020. As a result, none of the three major contesting coalitions were able to reach a minimum of 112 seats in the 222-seat Parliament to form a new government in the general election. Based on the electoral outcomes, PH won 82 seats,

BN won 30 seats, PN won 74 seats, GPS won 6 seats and the remaining 7 seats were won by others. The unprecedented seats won by PN was the biggest challenge to PH, as both coalitions were able to form a new government by bringing the number of seats above 112. In the end, PH was able to form a new government with BN supporting the PH coalition leader, Anwar Ibrahim to become the 10th Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Various factors facilitate the electoral results. Welsh (2018) distinguishes frameworks that rationalise the elections into five interconnected areas such as broader socio-political features, campaign mobilisation, agency, voting behaviour, and electoral system. The media landscape is seen as a primary stage for political parties to engage with the voters during the election season. Mainstream media often have affiliation with political parties to promote political agendas in their respective media (Rosli & Sani, 2021). In evidence, mainstream media news coverage in the prior general elections attempted to tarnish critics about the government and favoured the ruling government (Manaf & Sedu, 2015). For instance, Utusan Malaysia had the highest negative coverage for the then opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat, with no negative columns on BN during the 13th General Election (Rosli & Sani, 2021). It is undeniable that the Internet sabotaged the monopoly of the mainstream media which provided the public with an alternative platform to compare information and obtain underrepresented information from alternative media especially during the elections (Yong et al., 2024; Manaf & Sedu, 2015). Hence, the alternative media coverage of political information varies remarkably from the mainstream media which was controlled by the development journalism practise in Malaysia.

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM IN MALAYSIA

The role of development journalism is widely practise in developing countries such as Malaysia, China and India to assist the government in disseminating national policies (Baharin, Waheed & Hellmueller, 2017). The history of development journalism in Malaysia dates to the 1920s and 1930s. Journalists were nation builders who assisted the government in developing the country in rural area, environment, and health.

Development journalism was aimed at maintaining the nation's harmony and economic development. Although Malaysia is a multi-religion and multi-ethnic society, freedom of speech and expression is allowed in Malaysia's constitution with limitations (Mia et al., 2021; Alam, 2015). For instance, the Malaysian government can remove any views that allegedly harm the harmony of national stability. Media in this respect is responsible to enhance the relationship between multi-racial and construct a positive political culture.

According to Hanitzsch and Vos (2016) development journalism in Malaysia was reinforced in the early 1970s when the government realised the importance of modernization and social change. To secure Malaysia's economic development, Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad championed the practice of development journalism to maintain national unity (Waheed & Hellmueller, 2021). The government dominates the media through media ownership and legislation such as the Official Secret Act (OSA), the Sedition Act of 1948, and the Printing Press and Publications Act (PPPA) (Mia et al. 2021).

MEDIA OWNERSHIPS AND CENSORSHIP

The Malaysian mainstream media has been in existence since the British colonial administration. For instance, major newspapers include two Malay language dailies, three English language dailies, two Tamil language dailies and five Chinese language dailies (Yong et al., 2024). Although there are numerous media outlets in Malaysia, the controlling interest

revealed that media ownership is highly concentrated with the government as a major stakeholder. Manaf and Sedu (2015) contended, the communal nature of media has not changed much from the colonial administration. This is partly due to the religious-based readership, such as the Malay newspapers cater to the Malay readers, the Chinese newspapers are widely read by Chinese readers, and Tamil newspapers target Indians.

The role of media in politics is to serve the citizens with information and government actions, to assist them make thoughtful decisions. Political parties have developed intricate strategies by using the media for their own benefit to engage with the public during general elections. According to Yong et al. (2024) and Ahmad et al. (2021), the media has been an instrument to filter information for BN to retain hegemony for more than half a century. Newspapers and television stations are wholly owned by UMNO or dominated by companies closely linked to it which resulted in more than half of Malaysian media controlled by UMNO media conglomerate Media Prima (Nain, 2018). For instance, Media Prima owns New Straits Times, and Berita Harian. In addition, The Star is associated with MCA (Abott & Given, 2015) while The Sun is a free tabloid owned by a businessman which has close links to UMNO leaders (Waheed & Hellmueller, 2021). The Sin Chew daily on the other hand dominates the Chinese language press is owned by a Sarawak timber tycoon and the MCA (Manaf & Sedu, 2015).

A range of legislations have restrained media in Malaysia through licensing and censorship such as the Printing Press and Publications Acts 1984 the Official Secret Act 1972, Broadcasting Act 1988 and the Sedition Act 1948 (Mia et al., 2021). The enforced legislations serve as a guideline for journalists to be attentive in news reporting. The PPPA stipulates strong penalties for journalist's breach which includes jail sentences. The Sedition Act forbids any publication, speech or act that have seditious tendencies whereas OSA allows the prosecution of anyone who publishes official information without authorization (Abbott & Givens, 2015).

The employment of such restrictions has hindered press freedom in Malaysia which resulted in a negative press freedom score (Baharin et al., 2017). Despite development journalism claimed to have been unbiased and balanced press coverage, the practice of development journalism in Malaysia has built a modern version of a traditional authoritarian approach (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). In evident, BN received abundant media coverage on mainstream media during the election period which not only created media bias but hinted that BN continued to remain as the ruling government (Yong et al., 2024).

Numerous studies have discussed the different ways that the Malaysian government controls mainstream media through legislation and ownership ties to BN. These studies have revealed that mainstream media was found to report pro-government news during general elections (Yong et al., 2024). In fact, the mainstream media coverage during general elections is considered to be heavily favoured towards BN (Mohd Sani, 2023) despite the mainstream media responsibility to serve the citizens with information. Political parties consistently control the mainstream media especially during general elections for their own benefit. For instance, Utusan Malaysia (UM) has been found to be the official channel for the government to propagate Malay consciousness in politics, social being and economy in Malaysia.

The trend continued with the 15th General Election. The mainstream media focus primarily on positive coverage for the benefit of the political elite due to the affiliation between political parties and vigilant apparatus of the government (Mohd Sani, 2023; Yong et al., 2024). The fettered democracy and limited press freedom in Malaysia has significantly

influenced the mainstream media coverage of government policies to be uncritical while opposition parties usually face limited reporting (Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020).

Despite the strong limitations on mainstream media in Malaysia, the expansion in civil society organizations particularly since the 1980s demonstrate a changing attitude in Malaysian society in response to their socio-political needs and responsibilities that relies more on collective actions and ideas (Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020). The mainstream media confronted a possible change as the civil society organisations increasingly utilise the internet to obtain information.

THE ROLE OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN THE 15TH GENERAL ELECTION

The mainstream media served a crucial role in influencing voters' behaviours during the 15th General Election. Media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television served as the main sources of information about electoral developments, political campaigns, party platforms, and political candidates.

Mainstream media coverage during the 15th General Election was marked by varying degrees of bias, often reflecting the political affiliations of their ownership. Media organizations linked to the BN coalition, such as TV3 and UM, were observed to provide favourable coverage to BN candidates while being critical of the opposition. This bias was evident in the amount of airtime and space allocated to different political parties, the tone of the coverage, and the framing of political issues (Abbott & Givens, 2015).

A notable instance of mainstream media influence was TV3's coverage of the election campaign. TV3 is owned by Media Prima Berhad, has historically close ties with UMNO, a key party within the BN coalition. During the election period, TV3 extensively covered BN's campaign activities, highlighting their proposed policies and portraying their candidates in a positive light. For example, Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's economic plans and promises of stability were frequently featured, while opposition figures were often scrutinized for their past controversies and leadership disputes (Welsh, 2018).

UM another media outlet with historical affiliation to UMNO, also played a similar role in shaping public opinion. UM frequently emphasised the risks of electing the opposition parties and highlighted the achievements of the BN government to their readers. Since the Malay demographic is an important voter base for BN, UM often published news coverage of the BN government's initiatives to protect Malay rights and boost Islamic values which strengthen BN's reputation as the defender of Malay-Muslim interests (Baharin et al., 2017).

The Star on the other hand, linked to MCA which is part of the BN coalition, provided extensive coverage of issues relevant to the Chinese community in Malaysia. Although The Star was generally more balanced in its reporting compared to TV3 and UM, The Star still exhibited a pro-BN slant. It focused on MCA's efforts within the BN framework to address concerns such as education, business opportunities, and community welfare. During the election campaign, The Star published numerous articles highlighting the government's support for Chinese schools and small businesses, portraying BN as the best choice for the Chinese electorate (Chin, 2023).

The mainstream media's portrayal of political parties and candidates significantly influenced public opinion. Positive coverage of BN's achievements and promises aimed to reassure voters of the coalition's ability to govern effectively. Simultaneously, highlighting the alleged weaknesses and scandals of opposition candidates sought to undermine their credibility and sway undecided voters (Yong et al., 2024). For instance, TV3 and UM regularly featured stories on internal conflicts within PH and PN, framing these parties as unstable and

incapable of providing effective leadership. Although the partisanship in the mainstream media towards BN was obvious, Baharin et al. (2017) argued the framing strategies in mainstream media had changed in efforts to gain voters' trust and to challenge the alternative media after the 12th General Election in 2008.

Despite its influential role, mainstream media faced challenges in maintaining credibility and audience trust. The perceived bias and lack of balanced reporting led to scepticism among segments of the population, particularly the younger, urban voters who are more inclined to seek alternative sources of information online. In response to the political monopoly of mainstream media, alternative media managed by alternative businesses, individual actors or civil society organizations has a growing presence in Malaysia in the digital world. Online news portals, blogs and social media offered the public diverse perspectives where government control and censorship are more difficult compared to mainstream media (Abbott & Givens, 2015). Even though the mainstream media tends to mirror its ownership structure, the alternative media operates as government watchdogs to provide a channel for dissenting views and airing critical discussion (Yong et al., 2024; Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020).

THE RISE OF INTERNET IN MALAYSIA

Internet access was first introduced in 1996 in Malaysia. The internet has changed the Malaysian media and political landscape by unleashing political discourse and diminished the power of mainstream media (Baharin et al., 2017; Yong et al., 2024). The online news portals do not require a license to operate like mainstream media. The internet has provided a platform for opposition parties to deliver political information to the citizens for their own advantage. To advance Malaysia into a high technology industrial nation, Malaysian fourth Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad pledged in 1996 to protect freedom of speech on the internet to lure global investors to its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). The 1998 Communication and Multimedia Act forbade internet censorship and exempted the internet media from the legislations such as PPPA. The hands-off internet policy during the Reformasi movement in the late 1998s unfolded a flood challenge to Malaysian mainstream media and political hegemony. The growing number of the alternative media on the internet has emerged drastically for opposition parties to openly spread propaganda, information, and criticise the ruling government (Manaf & Sedu, 2015). This is due to the limited flexibility within the role of mainstream media in Malaysia.

The introduction and development of the Reformasi Movement in September 1998 became crucially attached to the internet. The internet freed publics to express their opinions publicly against the ruling party (Yong et al., 2024; Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020). Websites, online forums and email facilitated huge protests towards the government. The simmering Reformasi movement exploded when Anwar Ibrahim was accused of sodomy and corruption with multiple websites sprung to stand with him and criticized the government. Compared to mainstream media, blogs have gained popularity in the early 2000s as the alternative online platforms for the opposition parties to broadcast videos of parliamentary debates on online platforms. The blogging phenomenon expanded tremendously among opposition parties during that time until social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok emerged.

THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Over time, the rise of alternative media provided news from a different perspective to the public. Malaysiakini emerged in 1999 and serves as an alternative media in Malaysia. When

Malaysian began comparing the information obtained from mainstream media with the alternative media, they began to realise the biased and misleading information reported in mainstream media.

Malaysiakini is widely regarded as Malaysia's most important alternative media (Baharin et al., 2017). Alternative media has disclosed irregularities in mainstream media reporting which has played as a significant role in balancing media dynamics in Malaysia. The number of alternative news portals has increased in Malaysian with The Malaysian Insider, Free Malaysia Today, and The Rakyat Post.

In 2020, Malaysiakini faced legal action for user comments on its website that were deemed contemptuous by the authorities. This legal pressure was indicative of the broader challenges faced by alternative media in Malaysia, as they navigated a landscape of restrictive laws and governmental scrutiny. Despite these challenges, Malaysiakini continued to report critically and uphold journalistic standards.

The government views the media as a crucial instrument for promoting and disseminating its policies. However, there is a fundamental mismatch between how political authorities perceive the role of the press and how the public envisions it. Media organizations are often seen as engaging in severe self-censorship, exacerbating the censorship already imposed by the government. Press freedom is significantly curtailed by a series of laws, notably the recently enacted anti-fake news law. Additionally, racial and religious issues must be handled with extreme caution to avoid violating sedition laws. Malaysia was ranked 107th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index in 2024, which fell 34 spots as compared to the World Press Freedom Index in 2023. This situation has led to an increasingly low level of trust among Malaysians in their news outlets.

The role of media is crucial in the run-up to any election in Malaysia. The 15th General Election proved to be a watershed in the development of media in Malaysia. This was widely due to the role demonstrated by the alternative media which gained popularity by reporting the issues not provided by the mainstream media. While the role of mainstream media has been evident in every election, the role of alternative media proved to be a turning point by providing political news coverage that seems taboo by the mainstream media.

THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN THE 15TH GENERAL ELECTION

Alternative media played a crucial role in the Malaysian 15th General Election which provided alternative viewpoints and acted as a counterbalance to the mainstream media, which was often perceived as biased towards the BN coalition. This alternative media offered diverse perspectives, investigative journalism, and a platform for opposition voices, significantly influencing public opinion and voter behaviour. Alternative media outlets such as Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider, and Free Malaysia Today, provided comprehensive coverage of the election which focused on issues that were often underreported or misrepresented by mainstream media. These platforms were crucial in highlighting instances of corruption, governance failures, and social injustices, offering a more critical view of the BN government (Chin, 2023).

Malaysiakini was prominent alternative media in exposing the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal which involved Najib Razak as the main perpetrator. It became a significant issue during the general election in 2022. Differing from the news coverage angle from mainstream media, Malaysiakini provided in-depth investigative reports that kept the public informed about the intricacies of the 1MDB scandal such as the alleged involvement of high-ranking government officials. Malaysiakini's crucial role in shaping public

perception of BN in the 1MDB news coverage, which contributed to growing demands for accountability and dissatisfaction towards BN.

Alternative media also provided a platform for opposition parties and civil society groups, ensuring their messages reached the electorate. Unlike mainstream media, which often favoured BN, alternative media offered balanced coverage which allowed opposition leaders to present their policies and criticize the government's shortcomings. Hence, alternative media had an impact on the younger and urban voters who are more tech-savvy and rely heavily on digital platforms for news. Social media channels, blogs, and online news portals became critical in engaging this demographic, which is less influenced by mainstream media.

Alternative media effectively took advantage of the internet to distribute news content and engage with the public. Channels like Instagram, Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) were utilized to share news articles, infographics and videos that highlighted candidate profiles, key election issues and voter education content. This approach was especially effective in mobilizing voters who were instrumental in swinging the vote towards the opposition.

LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Despite their crucial role in the political landscape, alternative media faced significant challenges. The government executed legislations such as the Sedition Act 1948, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and the Anti-Fake News Act 2018 (Baharin et al., 2017). The Sedition Act 1948 prevents any seditious tendencies towards sensitive constitutional issues while the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 prevents a person from making any suggestion, request or comment that is false, offensive, obscene or indecent with intent to harass, annoy, threaten or abuse another person. A person who commits an offence will be liable to fine or imprisonment or both under this law, making it difficult for alternative media journalists to operate freely.

The introduction of Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) by the government was to converge the communications and multimedia industry. Any online platforms including alternative media news portals will receive warning from MCMC if found to overstep the commonly understood boundaries, including legal consequences (Mia et al., 2023). The surveillance of the alternative media through the abovementioned acts limits the media to share information with the public and leads to serious punishment. The suspension operation of the Malaysian Insider is the significant consequence of alternative media in reporting the 1MDB scandal. The Rakyat Post, The Edge and Malaysiakini also experienced the same consequences after their persistent coverage on the 1MDB issue. Although the government limits the alternative media freedom of speech with these laws to protect the harmony of Malaysia’s multi racial and multi religious society, these laws have instead been used to silence the critical sentiments toward the government (Yong et al., 2024; Baharin et al., 2017).

Mainstream media played a crucial role in shaping voter perceptions and influencing electoral outcomes. While their coverage helped to reinforce the narratives of established political parties, particularly those within the BN coalition, it also faced significant challenges from alternative media sources. The evolving media landscape underscores the need for traditional media to uphold journalistic integrity and adapt to changing audience behaviours to maintain relevance and trust in future elections. The interplay between mainstream and

alternative media highlighted the complex dynamics of information dissemination and its impact on democratic processes in Malaysia.

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia's media landscape has traditionally been characterised by significant government control and political influence. The political changes especially the unpredicted electoral outcomes in the 15th General Election and the subsequent growth of the internet poised for a latent shift towards greater media freedom and unbiased reporting in Malaysian political landscape (Baharin et al., 2017). The role of the internet has jeopardised the monopoly of mainstream media over freedom of expression. In fact, internet usage for information purposes has shown a steady increase in the late 1990s among younger audiences (Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020), which in return the alternative media influence will also continue to grow.

The alternative media has an impact on the political process in Malaysia by unleashing the government control of mainstream media in proving alternative viewpoints and truth to the public. Consequently, the Malaysian government has started to pay extra attention to govern the internet especially the criticism reported by alternative media towards them. Although there exists law enforcement for alternative media, it is still worrying that the government will introduce special legislation to control and censor the online media (Yong et al., 2024).

Although the Malaysian government has enforced legislations towards the mainstream and alternative media, it is interesting to observe how journalists make use of the available freedom in news coverage when the government and media undergo severe transformation in the upcoming years. This study has deliberated on a few aspects of the dynamics of media landscape as it continues to change over time. The impacts on political processes and democratic participation will remain an important area of research and public interest.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia preserves a great interest as a country that is characterised by its multi racial and multi religious composition. Development journalism was introduced by the government to stabilise the nation's harmony and economy (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). With this practice, the present study highlights that the government as the ruling party took advantage of multiple legislations such as the Sedition Act 1948, the Official Secret Act and the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 to monopolise the mainstream media for their own benefit until the emergence of the internet.

The introduction of the internet provided a shelter and uncensored platform for objective journalism and unbiased news coverage. The internet has been credited as an important role in bringing remarkable changes to the political landscape in Malaysia. For instance, alternative media acts as a channel for opposition parties to engage with their audiences (Manaf & Sedu, 2015). The discussion in this study also reveals that the internet also enables the public to obtain more political information from different perspectives, not only from mainstream media.

The study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge for media framing by comparing the role of mainstream and alternative media in reporting the 15th General Election in Malaysia. The analysis of both media enables a thorough understanding of media framing used by media outlets, especially in the Malaysian context. This enhances the

understanding of media organisation agenda, their limitation and their strength in fulfilling the role in upholding democracy in Malaysia. The 15th General Election marked a significant role of mainstream media in assisting the government while the alternative media served its role as a watchdog to uncover issues which have been underrepresented by the mainstream. The contrasting role of mainstream and alternative media during the general election discussed in this study demonstrated their distinct framing impacts in the Malaysian political landscape.

The mainstream media in Malaysia is profoundly entrenched in the political fabric which historically favoured the Barisan Nasional coalition. This was evident in the news coverage which significantly influenced public opinion in the rural area. In contrast, the alternative media provided a counter balance to the mainstream media narrative during the general election. The extensive coverage of 1MDB by the alternative media sabotaged the positive perceptions of BN portrayed by the mainstream media. Building on this, the present study did not support Ahmad et al. (2021) argument that the framing strategies in mainstream media had changed in efforts to challenge the alternative media, rather, the study shows that mainstream media was heavily used to attack opposition parties while the alternative media serve as a platform for opposite views.

The interplay between mainstream and alternative media highlighted the complex trend of information dissemination during 15th General Election in Malaysia. The mainstream media is often characterised by tremendous intervention of limited reporting and selected political coverage. It is notable that, the media affiliation with political parties is significantly linked to the news coverage during general elections. This study furthers the understanding of the correlation between media outlets and news coverage in political communication. Despite all this, the mainstream media continues to reinforce development journalism practice in assisting the government to maintain the nation's harmony and deliver information to the citizens especially in the rural area. The results of the study also show the existence of alternative media's potential to promote democratic engagement with the citizens.

BIODATA

Yong Xin Yi is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), 43400 Serdang, Malaysia. She received her MComm (in Media Studies) from Monash University. Her research interests include political communication and media studies. Email: yongxinyii@gmail.com

Moniza Waheed, PhD, is an associate professor at the Institute for Social Science Study, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia. She specialized in journalism, political communication, and intercultural communication. Email: moniza@upm.edu.my

Tham Jen Sern, PhD, is a senior lecturer at the Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia. He specialises in health and risk communication. Email: jstham@upm.edu.my

Julia Wirza Mohd Zawawi, PhD, is a senior lecturer at the Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, UPM, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia. She specialises in news framing, media studies, and frameset. Email: wirza@upm.edu.my

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