
INFLUENCES OF MAHATHIRISM IN *UTUSAN MALAYSIA* EDITORIALS DURING MAHATHIR'S PREMIERSHIP FROM 1981- 2003

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ABSTRACT

This study examined editorials in *Utusan Malaysia*, from 1981 to 1987, in order to examine the influence of Mahathirism on *Utusan Malaysia's* editorials on government policies. The theoretical framework of Reese's hierarchy of influences served as the foundation for this study. This qualitative study utilised retrospective in-depth interviews with key personnel of *Utusan Malaysia* as its methodology to answer the research questions. This study found no compelling evidence of the direct or overt influence of Mahathirism on the editorials. However, the study discovered that the *Utusan's* chief editor, Zainuddin Maidin's enthusiasm for Mahathir's thinking. The editorials demonstrate that he shared Mahathir's concerns about how Malaysia should be developed and how the Malay agenda and increased economic representation for the Malay community should be accomplished. The editorials revealed, not verbatim echoes of Mahathir's thoughts and ideas, but ZAM's original thinking about Malaysian nationalism, the Malay agenda and the assertion of Malaysian sovereignty in the face of Western dominance. Many of these ideas are reflected in what is conveniently called Mahathirism.

Keywords: *Mahathirism, Buy British Last Policy, Look East Policy, Utusan Malaysia, UMNO, Hierarchy of Influences*

INTRODUCTION

Editorials have for decades been a feature of newspapers. Newspaper editorials are a powerful means of communicating specific viewpoints, not only to policymakers but also as a means of communication of specific viewpoints from policymakers to the general public (Naveed, 2016). Although news stories in the various sections of a newspaper are designed to communicate what happened and influence the reader to draw their own conclusions from the information given, editorials argue for particular positions and express opinions. While a newspaper will

provide articles on different topics on any given day, editorials will focus on only one, or at most a few issues a day, drawing additional attention to the topics on which it chooses to comment. An editorial is defined as the expression of an informed opinion with the avowed intention of persuading the readers to accept that opinion, including political influence. In *Utusan Malaysia*, specifically, what the researcher is interested is the editorial desk or the editorial page. This is the part which this research focuses on. An editorial page is an article written by the editor or the editorial staff of a publication that shares the publication's views or opinions on a topic.

The editorial department at *Utusan Malaysia* was led by an Editor-in-Chief, Zainuddin Maidin (ZAM), who also led a team of three editors and four senior journalists in writing the editorials page. Before the article can be published, it must be approved by the editor-in-chief or deputy editor-in-chief. In this study, it is important to understand the influences on the content of editorials. The present study on *Utusan* editorials is based on the Shoemaker and Reese (1996) "hierarchy-of-influences" model. Their model has been employed in various studies about influences on journalistic news decisions (e.g., Concepcion, 2011; Ibrahim, 2003; Suryanarayan, 2008; Varouhakis, 2009). The five forces postulated by Shoemaker and Reese operate, both individually or through interaction with each other, to shape media content. These forces range from micro factors (individual level) to macro factors (e.g., extra-media). The model suggests that the researcher's task is to determine under which conditions certain factors are most determinative and how they interact with each other (Reese, 2001).

At the core of the model (Level 1) are the influences associated with an "individual journalist" as a communicator. In this is included the editors and the chief editor. This level of influence represents journalists' characteristics and personal backgrounds and experiences such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientations, political orientations, education, training, attitudes, personal biases, personal values and beliefs, religious upbringing, and professional orientations. This level wields the least influence on media content, according to Shoemaker and Reese (1996). This communicator-centered approach suggests that media content is influenced by media workers' socialization and attitudes. Reese (2007) points out that this level of influence emphasizes the psychological factors that impinge on a journalist's work: professional, personal, and political (e.g., Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980). The media content in *Utusan Malaysia* was influenced by the socialisation and attitude of media workers. *UM* is owned by UMNO, the country's ruling party. The *Utusan Malaysia* culture is one of support for the UMNO and the government. ZAM is an outspoken supporter of UMNO and Mahathir. Journalists will also back him up in order to gain ZAM's favour. This attitude will have an impact on their professional, personal, and political lives. As Ramli (2019) states:

The culture and practices of Malaysia's journalism were shaped by the resilient parochial politics of the Umno-dominated BN government over the last six decades until its downfall in the fourteenth general election. Using it as a propaganda tool, the government restricted and at times, controlled publications as well as intimidated political dissidents. In so doing, the ruling coalition controlled various public-listed media companies by having huge shares of ownership.

The second level in Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) model represents "media routines", which are the patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their work. The media routines level of influence on content is a "profound one" (Martin

& Hansen, 1998), because they affect the social reality portrayed by the media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Martin and Hansen (1998) say that routines help journalists manage huge flow of information, which they must deal with, and select materials to be presented to the audience. Commenting on media routines, Lau (2004) observed that news reflects the routine practices because the news production process is constructed partly based on media routines.

The third level represents “organizational forces.” Sources of influences, among others, at this level include editorial department staff, newsroom editorial policies, newsroom supervisors, media managers, media owners, advertising considerations, technological imperatives, and organizational policies. At this level, the ultimate power lies with the owners, who set policy and enforce it. The editorial organization constitutes the sphere of influence that is most immediate to the journalists’ experience (Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

The fourth level represents “extra-media forces.” It suggests that factors external to the communicator and the organization determine content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Such external factors include information sources, revenue sources, social institutions, economic environment, technology, social-political interest groups, market competition, and public relations. Other factors include audiences, politicians, advertisers, media laws, government regulations, religious pressure, friends, and family. Lau (2004) refers to the external forces as “extraneous factors” that act as constraints on journalists’ work.

The fifth layer of influence on journalists’ work represents “ideological forces.” It is the most powerful layer, and recognizes the fact that the media content is influenced by the ideology of those in power (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In carrying ideologies consistent with those who hold economic power, news media act as enforcers of ideologies. In other words, the media are part of the economic system controlled by those exercising economic power (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

This study used a retrospective approach and Stephen Reese’s Hierarchy of Influences’ theoretical framework to investigate and provide a retrospective account of what happened in *Utusan Malaysia* during the period 1981 to 1987, in order to understand the influences on *Utusan Malaysia*’s editorial formulation with respect to the Buy British Last Policy (BBLP) and Look East (LEP), two very important government policies introduced by Mahathir Mohamad during his period as Prime Minister of Malaysia, and investigate whether the Prime Minister, or Mahathirism, which is a conceptual shorthand for Mahathir’s political philosophy, influenced the writing of the editorials. The key research goals of this study were to examine the impact of writing editorial columns in *Utusan Malaysia* on editors-in-chief or editors, and what evidence exist to suggest that Mahathirism influenced BBLP and LEP editorials in *Utusan Malaysia*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mahathir’s Leadership Style and Nation-Building Strategies

Mahathir was born in 1925 in Alor Setar, Kedah, Malaysia. He was a doctor before becoming a politician with the UMNO, and ascended quickly from being a member of parliament to prime minister. During his 22 years in office, he created a strong government, developed the economy and was also a spokesman and activist for third-world developing nations. Mahathir was the fourth prime minister of Malaysia, holding office from 16 July 1981 to 31 October 2003 and later became the 7th Prime Minister in May 2018 and held office till Mac

2020. Mahathir became active in UMNO, Malaysia's largest political party, and was elected to its policy-making group, the Supreme Council.

Mahathir's leadership style and influence had a significant impact on the economy, culture and the administration of Malaysia. Under Mahathir, Malaysia experienced rapid economic growth. He began privatizing government enterprises, including airlines, utilities and telecommunications, which raised money for the government, improved infrastructure and the working conditions for both white and blue-collar workers in the country.

The Historical Background of BBLP and LEP Policies

The BBLP was announced by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir in 1981. The policy was a retaliation to a number of British aggravations. There are four controversial issues which soured Malaysia's relations with Britain. These issues, which some researchers might call "scandals", helped to sour relations between Britain and Malaysia (Karminder, 2009).

Under the BBLP, restrictions were placed on British imports and contracts. All contracts and imports from Britain must first be approved by the Prime Minister's Office through a request. But upon sending for a request, a list of possible substitutes from non-British companies or products must also be sent as well. Eventually, the bureaucratic red tape imposed by this policy hampered trade between Great Britain and Malaysia. Whatever was written in the *Utusan Malaysia* editorials regarding the BBLP reflected the voice and the policies of the government in dealing with matters that arose between the two countries during the period 1981-1987. The Malay readers were angry with the British for treating the Bumiputra community badly, for example, by increasing the fees for Malaysian students, most of whom were Malays.

The LEP was announced by Mahathir on 8th January 1982 during the 5th Joint Annual Conference of MAJECA/JAMECA in Hilton Hotel, Kuala Lumpur. The policy was aimed to direct the government towards studying and researching and subsequently, choosing policies and implementation examples from Japan and Korea with the intention of localizing such initiatives to suit the situation in Malaysia. The "Look East Policy" was conceived as a political strategy directed primarily at the Malay community to motivate the Malays to change their attitude and mind set (Hajrudin, 2003). The LEP also did not mean following all Eastern habits blindly or trading solely with these countries. What it meant was that Malaysians acquire the good values of the East, particularly in terms of work ethics and their technological skills. The Mahathir leadership caught both Malaysians and Japanese by surprise when it announced the LEP in 1982. His decision to adopt the LEP was regarded as a major turning point in the country's bilateral relations with Japan. Whatever is written in the editorials regarding LEP reflected the voice and the policies of the government in dealing with matters that arose between Malaysia and Japan during the period 1981-1987. The Malay readers were happy with the Japanese for helping them in many development projects such as in the car manufacturing industry. They were sent to Japan to obtain technical skills and training in various fields. It is clear that the BBLP and LEP were of paramount importance to the government, especially Mahathir, its key advocate. The need to advance the cause of these policies would devolve on *Utusan Malaysia* editorials acting as the official media conduit of the Malaysian government.

Mahathir's Control of the Press

The development of the newspaper industry has a close relationship with the government policy towards newspapers, economic policy, increase in the per capita income of the people, rate of literacy, urbanization, industrial and transport system. It was during Mahathir's era that witnessed the rapid growth in the newspaper industry in the aspect of circulation, rate of reading, advertisements, or printing technology. The press has played an important role in socio-economic development and the national agenda after independence. During the administration of Mahathir, the role of the press was more aggressive and effective to inspire the spirit of the people to support government policies, especially industrial and development policies, as well as to change the people's attitudes in line with the times.

Mahathir felt that the press and other media should be permitted to express their views freely even if their views were wrong provided that this was guided by the twin principles of responsibility and impartiality. He pointed out, "The press has no right to destroy the society. An irresponsible media is a threat to the rights of a society in a democracy. If it fails to understand this, then it is the government's duty to protect the larger section of society against an irresponsible press" (Aziz Zariza, 1997).

Most of the media supported Mahathir's policies, including the BBLP and LEP. The journalists were influenced by Mahathir's policies as they were impressed by Mahathir capabilities in his action. When Mahathir announced on BBLP and LEP, they supported him because they were excited to see his accomplishments. When Mahathir took office as Prime Minister in 1981, there was a rapid growth in the newspaper industry. He was initially very lenient with the media but later became extremely strict. During his first two weeks in office, he released 21 ISA detainees and granted more licenses to media outlets. There were 68 newspapers and 27 journals in 1982, including three daily newspapers and four weekly newspapers in Malay, eight weekly newspapers and eight journals in Chinese, and three weekly newspapers and one journal in Tamil (Ahmad Sebi, 1991). When people protested against the government, Mahathir took stern action by implementing ISA. On October 27, 1987, the "Operasi Lalang" action was carried out. The government arrested 106 people under the ISA and revoked the licences of two dailies, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, as well as two weeklies, *The Sunday Star* and *Watan* (Jeniri, 2007).

Mahathir has been labeled a "dictator", "recalcitrant", "authoritarian" and "a leader usurping despotic power" by many of his opponents including former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating. Yet, he held strongly to his position and power. Somehow Mahathir's leadership goes into new episodes each year and it has even leaped into the new millennium. As far as press freedom is concerned, in the case of Malaysia, social responsibility is considered an appropriate label of its press system (Mahathir, 1985). Here partnership between the government and the press is being encouraged. The partnership means the press shares in the national aspirations of a democratically elected government. However, many researchers misunderstood Mahathir's thinking about the unity and actions of the press which did not comply with the above idea of partnership.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a historical approach when collecting and analyzing data (Sloan, 2009). The primary sources are editorials written in *Utusan Malaysia* on BBLP and LEP during Mahathir's Premiership from 1981–1987. Secondary sources, on the other hand, are articles written after

the event, and in the case of this study, are interviews conducted with editors and journalists after the period from 1981 to 1987. There are many methods to study and evaluate editorials; however, a retrospective research approach is appropriate to this study which used interviews of senior *Utusan Malaysia* journalists who were involved in the formulation of editorials about BBLP and LEP nearly 40 years ago, to participate in interviews. The major data source of this study were collected through the collection of editorials.

In the case of this study, the researcher interviewed senior editors and journalists who served during Mahathir’s era in *Utusan Malaysia* from 1981 to 1987. Thus, during the interviews, the participants were asked questions about their experiences during that time, their opinions about why certain events occurred, how they felt about the event, and what they felt was the outcome of that particular event as they looked back. Overall, this research is based on qualitative method through collected data involving content analysis of editorial columns and in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior editors and key journalists in *Utusan Malaysia*. The reason for using this approach is to collect data that can shed light on the degree of alignment of the Editorial Board with BBLP and LEP policies.

The use of the purposive sampling technique for the research is due to the fact that the period from 1981 to 1987 consists of 2,192 days, totalling 43 articles. These frequencies are divided into six tables, namely, period of study, slant, sources of information, the target audience of information, title, and issue. Samples are abstracted from editorials.

Table 1: Four categories of the research

Category	Frequency	Percent
Buy British Last Policy	15	22.0
Look East Policy	27	39.7
Mahathirism	15	22.1
Press Control	11	16.2
Total	68	100.0

As shown in Table 1, the frequency of the four topics was the focus of the *Utusan Malaysia* editorials during the period from 1981-1987. The most frequent topic that was discussed in the *UM* editorials was LEP with 27 editorials (39.7%), followed by both BBLP with 15 editorials (22%) and Mahathirism with 15 editorials (22.1%), and finally, PC which was discussed in 11 editorials (16.2%) in the *Utusan Malaysia*. The most frequent discussion of LEP in the editorials could be due to the many projects on LEP carried out such as *Proton Saga*, *Malaysian Incorporated*, and privatisation projects, while PC was discussed the least number of times because Mahathir concentrated more on the development and gave less focus on press freedom.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the editor-in-chief, editors, and senior journalists of *Utusan Malaysia* who served during Mahathir’s era (1981-1987). Among the key editorial personnel who were interviewed were *Utusan Malaysia* Editor-in-Chief, Tan Sri Zainuddin Maidin (abbrev. ZAM), four editors, Datuk Abdul Aziz Ishak, Datuk Chamil Wariya, Rashid Ahmad and Ahmad Abdul Hamid, and two senior journalists, Abdul Razak

Ghouse and Norela Daud. All of them are familiar with “the behind the scenes” untold stories about Mahathir, especially his relationship with the press and how he exercised control over it.

This paper presents findings on the research question, namely, what evidence is there to show that Mahathir, as Prime Minister of Malaysia or his unique way of thinking called Mahathrisim, influenced *Utusan Malaysia* editorials on BBLP and LEP?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The concept Mahathirism

This study is retrospective in nature and focuses primarily on the period between 1981 to 1987, but looking at Mahathir’s political career as well as the key policies he has initiated will help us to understand the man and his thinking and his actions as embedded in the concept of ‘Mahathirism’ that we have sought to define beyond Khoo Boo Teik (1995), Karminder (2009) and Hilley (2001). It will also help us to identify if there are recurrent themes of the unique expression of ‘Mahathirism’ including any paradoxes that appear, which was largely discussed by Khoo Boo Teik (1995). This greater perspective will facilitate a better and more accurate analysis of Mahathir’s press control policies between the years 1981-1987. Also looking at his key policies will provide more data in order to understand his conception of the role of the press in terms of nation-building and the realization of a modern Malaysia. There are many generalizations that Mahathir had used his autocratic tendency to impose his will over *Utusan Malaysia*; this is a favorite posture of his detractors. This study also intends through retrospective interviews with key editorial personnel to verify if this Mahathir’s “arm-twisting” is true according to his critics.

Khoo (1995) is of the view that Mahathir’s ideas constitute a relatively coherent political ideology which he terms ‘Mahathirism’. He distinguishes five core components within Mahathirism: nationalism, capitalism, Islam, populism, and authoritarianism. These Mahathir’s major ideas on politics, economics, religion, power, and leadership are expounded by Mahathir in his three books, numerous essays, many more interviews, and countless speeches. They include ideas that can be discerned from his political praxis through the policies he had supported at earlier stages of his career or those he has enacted since he became Prime Minister. Here Mahathir’s ideas and ideology may be regarded as the practical realization of his ideas and ideology. Khoo (1995) explores the meanings, quality, and implications of Mahathir’s nationalism, capitalism, Islam, populism, and authoritarianism. The author argues that there is a sufficiently high degree of consistency in Mahathir’s main ideas, held over his long political career to make such an exploration meaningful.

However, he says that there is a contrary motive that is no less important. There are tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes within Mahathirism, and between this ideology and Mahathir’s politics. The core components of Mahathirism reveal not an uninterrupted consistency, but significant changes and modifications at different points in Mahathir’s career. The tensions between Mahathirist ideology and politics may be seen primarily as the dialectical interplay between a politician’s ideas and the milieu within which they find their expressions.

One of Mahathir’s definitive characteristics, according to Khoo (1995), is his constant concern to keep ahead of a rapidly changing world. Mahathir considers it the duty of a leader to forearm his people and his nation continuously. Some of Mahathir’s characteristics

include his diagnosing of environmental shifts (whether local or global), identifying emerging obstacles, pin-pointing opportunities, and taking steps to deal with them. It is not without reason that words such as ‘dilemmas’, ‘obstacles’, and ‘challenges’ are considered as some of the key words in the Mahathirist lexicon. Khoo (1995) also suggests that Mahathirism is not just ideas. According to him, “it incorporates Mahathir’s deepest impulses, shades of his personality, and the imprint of his style. These are intangible, but personally and politically significant aspects of Mahathir.” (p.8)

Khoo (1995) also points out that there is a need to reconcile not merely the political and the personal in Mahathir, but also Mahathir with his society if ‘Mahathirism’ has any significance. Although Mahathir’s ideas are, without doubt, individual to the extent that he articulates them and has the political power and authority to implement them in his own way, those ideas cannot be isolated from Mahathir’s lifelong attempt to grapple with socio-political developments in Malaysia. To that extent, Mahathirism goes beyond Mahathir, and his worldview captures the ethos of particular social groups in Malaysia. In short, Mahathir has his unique political ideology and his own worldview.

As far as the ‘paradoxes’ within Mahathirism go, it is important to note that Khoo (1995), sets out to examine what he considers a series of ‘paradoxes’, which are considered to represent the mystique of Mahathir. These may be considered as summing up different facets of Mahathir or Mahathirism. Among the paradoxes are the following:

Being anxious to secure the survival of the Malays, Mahathir is also prepared to see the end of ‘Malayness’ or aspects of a mindset that is detrimental to entrepreneurship or modernization. Temperamentally undiplomatic, he fashioned a diplomacy to suit his temperament (Khoo, 1995, p. 8-9).

He would ‘Look East’ to catch up with the West. His frankness in his people’s catharsis: the quality of his populism. It was not quite clear where is populism declined and his authoritarianism congealed. Mahathirism framed a worldview that was greater than Mahathir’s alone and was shared by the social classes and groups closely aligned with his aspirations for Malaysia. This notion that ‘Mahathirism’ also echoed a greater philosophy held by many leading Malays is important. This departs from the notion that Mahathir was purely autocratic and that Mahathir felt that it was his mission to improve a lot of the Malay community. *Utusan Malaysia’s* alignment with this philosophy, if validated by this study, is a key factor in unveiling the real influences underlying editorial orientation. Khoo (1995) departs from this more moderate view by seeing ‘Mahathirism’ as an ideology bent upon imposing the nationalist-capitalist project of which Mahathir was chief formulator and implementer. At its apogee in the first half of the 1990s, the project bore a hegemonic appeal in the form of Mahathir’s popular Vision 2020.

It supports the argument that Mahathirism is in fact a type of cultural relativism, as opposed to universalism or Western liberalism, specifically in the Malaysian context. The main idea of Mahathirism comes from Mahathir’s concept of ‘Asian values’. His argument about Asian values can be split into the philosophies on anti-Western imperialism, strong government, communitarianism, and social and economic rights. Mahathir rejects universalism or the Western liberal notion of human rights, which, he believes, can corrupt Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. According to Milne and Mauzy, (1999, p. 168),

Mahathirism is not a guide to Mahathir's thoughts or actions. Rather, Mahathir's thoughts and actions are a guide to constructing Mahathirism. Mahathirism is an exercise in allocating his thoughts into logical categories with the aim of achieving intellectual satisfaction and understanding.

Jeniri (2006) conducted a study on freedom and control of the press during the era of Mahathir. According to him, under Mahathir's leadership, it is imperative, that press was used as the ideological and political apparatus to fulfil the government's agenda. His research applied to all the newspapers including social media, online and alternative newspapers such as *Malaysiakini*, *Harakah*, *Rocket* and *Aliran*. However, Jeniri (2006) failed to discuss in depth the editorial columns of a single mainstream newspaper such as the *Utusan Malaysia*, and, for example, how "Mahathirism" influenced the editorial policy of *Utusan Malaysia*. Mahathir (1999, p. 71) expresses the same view with strong criticism of the foreign imperialist agendas:

Make no mistake. The people who control the media control our minds, and probably control the world.... not the national Governments of tiny developing nations...or the Government of powerful nations. A few people in the West control all the international media.

Mahathir said that for these reasons, the Malaysian government uses its power to strengthen the media laws and control almost all local media companies either directly or indirectly. Yet, it looks like the government is seeking to control people's minds, not just the Western media. By controlling the media, the ruling party could also contain political opposition. To say that Mahathirist ideology is relatively coherent and its core themes can be expressed in new variations is not to suggest that Mahathirism is free of contradictions. It has been demonstrated that the reverse is true: Mahathir has been full of paradoxes and Mahathirism abounds in contradictions and tensions. Through his books, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), *The Challenge* (1976), *The Way Forward* (1998), *A New Deal for Asia* (1999), *A Doctor in The House: The Memoirs of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad* (2011) and *The Straits Times*, Mahathir pointed out various issues concerning the Malays. Mahathir is so familiar with the Malay community and he is very knowledgeable about Malays due to his background as a businessman, government servant and politician since the period of British and Japanese colonials. The main idea of Mahathirism comes from Mahathir's concept of 'Asian values'.

As reviewed in the literature, Khoo (1995) introduced the term 'Mahathirism' to describe what he saw as the basis of Mahathir's idiosyncratic and style of "non-consultative" decision making. While Khoo (1995) provides interesting insights about Mahathir, his views may be colored and not as an objective in understanding enigmatic aspects of Mahathir's thinking and leadership. It also fails to explain Mahathir's impact and charismatic influence over his subordinates. This is especially important in understanding Mahathir's relationship and charismatic influence over personalities like ZAM. Hilley (2001), another prominent researcher, spoke about Mahathir's "self-initiated assaults on civil, administrative and elite institutions" implying that Mahathir with his "Thatcher-type" tendencies exerted his autocratic style over the institutions he presided over. The researchers of this study contend that an autocratic style or idiosyncratic style, as perceived by many researchers about Mahathir, maybe a facile way to generalize his actions, but there may be other influences, which are not so easily discerned, and identifying such factors as his infectious zeal to create

a modern Malaysia, and his visionary appeal to advance the Malay Agenda and promote Islam both locally and internationally is highly appealing to modern Malay intellectuals.

Mahathir was, above all, a pragmatic leader who can change his style based on arising exigencies. To stereotype him as an autocrat and power hungry tyrant would be to create a blind spot that will prevent this study from identifying influences that may not be due to Mahathir's overt actions, but would be due to his visionary appeal and the confidence he evokes in people like ZAM. This influence on ZAM can be seen as a tipping point of this research.

Khoo (1995) depicts the premier's worldview as consisting of complex and alternating patterns of consistencies and contradictions. Mahathirism held the ruling ideas for the nationalist-capitalist project of which Mahathir was chief formulator and implementer. At its apogee in the first half of the 1990s, the project bore a hegemonic appeal in the form of Mahathir's popular Vision 2020.

Mahathir claims that Western pressure on developing countries, including Malaysia, over human rights and democratization is intended to cause instability, economic decline and poverty. With such a situation, the West can threaten and control Malaysia. However, critics dispute Mahathir's purported intention in restricting human rights, arguing that his real intention was to exploit these issues as a justification for curtailing opposition and reinforcing his position in power, as well as to hide human rights violations in Malaysia.

Since taking office, Mahathir has attempted to change the country through a series of new ideas, policies, and slogans that have garnered the support of the majority of Malaysians. Some of the policies and decisions were met with opposition and criticism from a variety of sources. They did not, however, dampen the leadership's determination to forge a greater Malaysia. As a result, while there had been severe tests over the years, the events must be viewed as pieces being formed and reformed to lay the foundation for the future nation, as seen by his leadership. Several major policies were implemented in order to build a strong and respected nation. "Malaysia Incorporated," "Privatisation," "Leadership by Example," "Multimedia Super Corridor," and "Vision 2020" were among them (Hasan, 2004).

According to Mahathir's views, the press has a responsibility to society while also being aware of its function as a disseminator of knowledge. As a responsible press that serves society's interests rather than its own, the press had a responsibility to strike a balance between the government's desires and the needs of society on the one hand, and the purposes and ethics of journalism on the other. Some people in this country have long considered the press to be the prime protectors of freedom of expression. As a result, they were dissatisfied with press freedom during Mahathir's final years in office. These individuals, mostly academics and opposition politicians, communicated their grievances through books and public speeches, as well as their concerns for the future of press freedom in the country (Aziz Zariza, 1997).

Mahathirism and Government Policies

If we look at the Reese model at the ideological level, we will find Mahathirism, that is, Mahathir's unique thinking and actions influenced *Utusan* editorials on government policies such as BBLP and LEP. The fifth layer of influence on journalists' work represents "ideological forces." It is the most powerful layer and recognizes the fact that the media content is influenced by the ideology of those in power (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Ideology is a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs, of a kind that

can be abstracted as “worldview” or “class outlook” (Williams, 1977). In carrying ideologies consistent with those who hold economic power, news media act as enforcers of ideologies. In other words, the media are part of the economic system controlled by those exercising economic power (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Mahathirism is an ideology that is intimately connected to upholding Malaysia’s role as a sovereign nation having gained independence. Mahathir was determined to see that Malaysia is not bullied or intimidated by the great superpowers of the West. This BBLP policy, for example, was initiated by Mahathir with little consultation with Wisma Putra, the foreign ministry. Mahathir’s reading of Britain’s highhanded action like the raising of university fees for students intending to study in the United Kingdom compelled him to resort to a tough retaliation strategy which indicated that Malaysia cannot be bullied into conformity. There was a strong streak of nationalism in Mahathir’s seemingly abrupt action. What is embedded in the concept of Mahathirism is that Malaysia is not a third world country that is a pushover or a plaything of the superpowers. A specific instance of this is found in the following editorial:

Buy British Last Policy was launched represents Mahathir retaliation to Britain. (To support government on BBLP) (22 July 1987) (Editorial).

According to the evidence derived from the interview of the *Utusan Malaysia*’s Editor-in-Chief, ZAM, the BBLP and LEP policies became part of a planned strategy. This meant that the LEP was a logical outcome of the BBLP. When British policy marginalised Malaysia Mahathir automatically thought of de-emphasising the role of Britain in Malaysia’s development by looking at non-Western models that were successful i.e. the LEP. The label ‘ma’ is not an ideology or philosophy that is cast in stone; it can reflect a pragmatic response to economic, political and social exigencies. Mahathir was a solution-oriented statesman who quickly dealt with issues that could compromise Malaysia’s development and her sovereignty. This can be perceived as evidence of Mahathirism, Mahathir and his influence over editorial policies and this begs the question, Is the influence on editorials direct or indirect. ZAM, in his interview, said that Mahathir did not issue any explicit directive about conforming to government policies. However, Mahathir’s concept of responsible journalism in a new democracy invariably meant that newspapers should not go against the principles of a guided democracy of a newly independent nation.

Retaliation against the British was an unprecedented move by Mahathir as it went against the traditional close ties between Malaysia and Britain. In fact, this move was a complete surprise even to officials in Wisma Putra. The *Utusan* editorials supported this sudden shift in Malaysian foreign policy in spite of silent protests from top government officials who were used to cordial relations with their British counterparts. The fact that *Utusan* editorials supported Mahathir’s BBLP and LEP policies from their very inception suggest that there was strong evidence of influence.

How did *Utusan* editorials reflect or highlight issues like the Malay agenda which embraces Islam, populism, authoritarianism, nationalism and capitalism as mentioned by Khoo Boo Teik (1995)? In order to answer this question about the key elements of Mahathirism found in *Utusan* editorials, we have to discover where the influence actually comes from. Agenda setting and framing is the work of the newspaper and is also a by-product of the ingenuity of its Editor-in- Chief, ZAM, in using his own expertise in formulating editorials

to influence the public, and in this case, to influence the predominantly Malay readers. It could be said that Mahathirism provided the inspiration and the visionary appeal and the impetus for ZAM to make his own contribution through editorials to raise the awareness of the Malay community. There is evidence from the interviews in the form of ZAM's direct testimony that Agenda Setting was deliberately used. This indicates an indirect influence on editorial formulation from a source that did not originate directly from Mahathir.

Among the extracts from the *Utusan* editorials that show that Mahathirism influenced *Utusan Malaysia* editorials on BBLP and LEP are the following:

The foreign policy of Malaysia that is the "Look East Policy", can be clearly seen in two different events but which happened on the same day two days ago. Two events are Malaysia-Japan Economic Conference and the three-day visit by British Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington. (Extract from *Utusan Malaysia* published on 10 February 1982)

It is strange that these two events took place at the same time. Mahathir is well-known for his twists and this character, according to the study, is an integral aspect of Mahathirism. He deliberately set the date for the two events on the same day to show Britain and Japan that he is indeed important. He wanted to show Britain that if it did not want to trade with Malaysia, it can choose Japan. The same thing goes to Japan. If it does not want to trade with Malaysia, it can make Britain as an alternative trade partner. Mahathir wants to tell the world not to take Malaysia lightly. This editorial clearly supports Mahathir's twists and turns. Another editorial mentions that he is always bold in taking actions and he will definitely face various challenges, not only from within the government but from his own party. This editorial is also evidence of support for Mahathir:

As a person who is always bold in taking actions, Datuk Sri Dr. Mahathir will definitely face various challenges, not only from within the government but also from the party in which he is the chairman and president. (Extract from *Utusan Malaysia* published on 16 July 1982)

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question, how did Mahathir or Mahathirism influenced *Utusan* Editorials about BBLP and LEP is to be found, in ZAM's zeal for Mahathir's thinking and his faith that this Prime Minister had the courage to deliver on what he preached for the achievement of a modernized and prosperous Malaysia and a better stake in the economy for Malays. The editorials showed that ZAM, as a thinking journalist and editor-in-chief, directed members of his editorial team to reflect the case for Malaysian nationalism and the crucial need to redress the socio-economic imbalance between the different races. It is clear from ZAM's editorials that he shared Mahathir's concerns about how Malaysia is to be developed and how the Malay agenda and greater economic representation by the Malay community was to be achieved. We find in the editorials, not verbatim echoes of Mahathir's thoughts and ideas, but ZAM's original thinking about Malaysian nationalism, the Malay agenda and the assertion of Malaysian sovereignty in the face of Western dominance. Many of these ideas are reflected in what is conveniently called Mahathirism.

Khoo (1995) in his zeal to label Mahathir as an autocrat with a non-consensual style of leadership, overlooked people such as ZAM who were zealous upholders of Malay nationalism

and who felt passionately that Mahathir or his Mahathirism provided a viable solution for Malaysia to move forward. Mahathir had no time for endless debates and discussions and could not allow Western ideas of free expression to hinder Malaysia's development. ZAM, by personal choice, became the official spokesman of UMNO and the journalist, who through his own thinking and original perspectives about government policies, highlighted Mahathir's political and economic objectives for Malaysia and Mahathir's emphasis on the Malay agenda as the intellectual basis for his formulation of pro-Mahathir editorials. The primary influence on *Utusan* editorials was due to ZAM's thinking and his subscription to Mahathirism or aspects of it. The PM's office had little reason to exercise overt press control over *Utusan's* editorials as ZAM was the guarantee of ideological correspondence, and so there was no need for ideological compliance in editorial perspectives. The Reese model indicates that the personalities of key players, and in this case, the editor-in-chief, can exert a huge influence on editorial content and direction.

The Shoemaker/Reese Model, as it stands, contradicts the analysis of the authors of this study and interpretation. The model/framework had to be reversed to stand on its head and emphasise that level one is the most important level and it is about the Editor-in-Chief, ZAM, who is the pivotal agent of this study. He is the one who ensured that all reporters and senior writers conform unquestioningly to *Utusan Malaysia*, UMNO and pro-Mahathir policies. It is through ZAM that all levels from two to five are realized.

However useful it is, the acceptance of the Reese/Shoemaker framework as it stands, becomes a constraint. One of the difficulties the researcher faced was the problem of getting key personnel, such as the editors-in-chief, editors and senior journalists, to express their views honestly without "fear or favour" via interview sessions conducted with them. The interview questions had to be formulated in such a way that honest information was obtained without making them feel threatened or intimidated by their disclosure of the press control policies adopted by the Mahathir government. Another factor was that the interviewees might have forgotten some information, as the BBLP and LEP were implemented more than 30 year ago. This is one of the difficulties of a retrospective study since time itself may dilute accurate recall of what actually happened. There might be missing elements or even the reluctance to comment about controversial issues.

This study has little precedent in academic research terms, because it focused on a single newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia*, not a variety of newspapers or the entire mass media. ZAM himself did everything to ensure all his subordinates conformed to *Utusan* and Mahathir's policies, especially in terms of BBLP and LEP. Furthermore, since this study is from 1981 to 1987, a period of time between 31 and 36 years, it might not be reasonable to extend the same conclusions to the present time. The research also revealed that the media's capacity to bring BBLP and LEP news to mainstream coverage in the form of editorials transcended individual interests and attitudes.

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