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The good, bad and ugly among journalists

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IN the past few months, it has become fashionable for many in the international Press and some investment houses to indulge in Malaysia-bashing. But in this rat pack mode, many things have been forgotten, such as the fact that since 1981 Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and fellow Malaysians have built up a nation which stands tall.

I write, however, not about Malaysia's achievements. This letter is about perceptions built up by some in the international Press and like-minded analysts who, during the recession years of the early and mid-1980s, never gave countries like Malaysia a chance but who quickly changed their tune when the economy recovered and, for a decade afterwards, could not stop talking about the "Asian miracle."

Now, the herd instinct is back and no one wants to express views to the contrary. For to do so would seem to be going against conventional wisdom. And going against conventional wisdom would mean standing out and appearing to be siding with Dr Mahathir, the man declared by George Soros as "a menace to his own country". That cannot do because it is generally not in the nature of those without a stake in this country to go against conventional wisdom.

For close to eight years, I was a foreign correspondent. I worked with the best amongst them and unfortunately met the worst amongst them as well.

The foreign Press in Malaysia is made up of many Malaysians but in recent years, a larger number of foreign nationals, their organisations attracted by the "Asian miracle", has been posted here. Some of them have had wide experience working elsewhere, some have barely cut their teeth.

But experience, from my own encounters, does not necessarily a good journalist make. Some of the experienced ones are even less ethical than those young, clean-cut foreigners who come across as brash and arrogant and who seemingly still believe white and might is right.

In close to 17 years as a journalist, I know that some of the Malaysians working for the foreign Press came to senior positions by virtue of their experience, maturity and vast knowledge of the country.

They were those who wrote with a great sense of responsibility because they knew their writings could have far-reaching effects. Among them I would certainly count Mervin Nambiar of Agence France Presse and Wong Puan Wah who for many years worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Then, there were those Malaysians who felt the need to be critical because they needed to prove to their editors in Hong Kong or Singapore or the United States that they could be totally impartial in reporting about their own country.

These were the most unpredictable because more often than not, they erred against the side of caution merely to prove to their foreign peers and editors that they were "good, objective impartial journalists not driven by nationalism nor patriotism." The problem was that nobody ever said by being fair and objective, they were any less patriotic or any less Malaysian.

To me, then and now, this group is doing the greatest disfavours to the profession and to the country. For while basking in the praise of their editors and the diplomatic cocktail circuit, they did and are doing great harm to the country because of their insecurities and desire to be accepted by their foreign employers and colleagues.

Among the foreign nationals, many just want to make a name for themselves. Accuracy is a moot point. The more sensational a story, the better. One good example is a weekly Hong Kong-based regional magazine's senior correspondent who has had so many of his stories denied. Even in my days as a foreign correspondent, for the many regular lunches and dinners we had with ministers and newsmakers, they made it a point to make sure he was not invited.

However, the denials never stopped this journalist from making misleading reports because his editors believed that leaders of a "third world" country like Malaysia cannot be telling the truth, even if they said the journalist never spoke to them for the article but quoted them from an interview 24 months earlier.

When I joined Reuters in 1987, a new chief correspondent was posted to Kuala Lumpur, fresh from six years of reporting in Brussels and the Ivory Coast, and three days of briefing in Hong Kong about Malaysia.

On the day he arrived, I was doing a story on the MV Douulous, a ship stocked with books on Christianity which was docking at Port Klang. Some Muslim youth groups had protested against the ship coming to Malaysia. The correspondent, a British national who had backpacked through Malaysia a decade earlier, told me to weave in the fact that there had been racial riots in Malaysia in 1969.

When I objected that the riots had nothing to do with the protests against the ship's arrival, he insisted that I had to be fair and objective in reporting the story. I mockingly called him Bwana because he still seemed to be living in the days of the British Raj, thinking that the natives did not know what was good for them.

I left Reuters soon after but this correspondent went on to become a senior sub-editor in Hong Kong presumably still believing that after his three-day briefing and his short stint in Kuala Lumpur, he knew more about Malaysia than any Malaysian.

But these examples do not mean that all foreign nationals are bad journalists, just as not all who work for the local Press are ethical and good journalists. There are many good journalists from the foreign Press who have worked in Malaysia and the region and who are a credit to their organisations wherever they are.

People like Agence France Presse's Michelle Cooper and Nambiar, Reuters' Jose Katigbak, Far Eastern Economic Review's Rodney Tasker and Michael Vatikiotis and Asiaweek's Assif Shameen and Binu Thomas come to mind.

But unfortunately, we and the rest of the world have of late been exposed not only to the worst of those in the foreign Press, but also to the bad ones who fly in for a day or two, talk to one or two people, and form opinions which are related to the rest of the world hungry to know about the "vanishing Asian miracle".

If one were to surf the Internet and read news reports from around the world on Malaysia and on Dr Mahathir, one would get the distinct impression that:

- * Malaysia is a pariah, standing alone against the rest of the world;
- * Malaysia's economy is on the verge of collapse;
- * Malaysia is a country in political turmoil and its population will soon take to the streets, either in racial strife or in a show of people power demanding that its leader step down; and
- * Dr Mahathir, who was losing his political grip, was bent on destroying whatever Malaysia had achieved but he would soon be forced out of office.

These news reports also implied, some openly declaring, that the Asian tigers were in effect paper tigers and the boom of the last decade was a "flash in the pan" and that this "disaster" facing these countries had been just waiting to happen.

Never mind that many of these prophets of doom are the same ones who barely months ago were singing praises of the well-managed economies of these Asian tigers. Like Morgan Stanley. Or like the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy which in its report on Malaysia in June said it would be a relief when Dr Mahathir returned from his two-month leave, as his presence would encourage stability and direction for the country.

But after the currency crisis began, Morgan Stanley took a totally antagonistic stand against Malaysia and its leaders, totally out of sync with the role of an investment house. Bruce Gale of PERC was reported by Reuters to have cast doubts on the immediate future of Malaysia despite his glowing report of a few months ago.

It must be remembered that during the debate on curbing the powers of the rulers several years ago, it was PERC which published a report saying there had been violent clashes in some rural villages between "royalist" and "anti-royalist" forces and it was Reuters which sent this report around the world quoting PERC. Of course, the fact that there never were any such clashes did not matter.

Reuters has established a reputation as the world's foremost news agency. This is largely through its unbeatable worldwide network and reputation for accuracy.

While not intending to cast doubts on Reuters' overall reputation, the news agency must acknowledge that there are and will continue to be journalists in its fold who are less than professional and biased in their reporting because of:

- * either their need to get the "impacts" or "hits" to further their professional career;

- * or because of their lack of contacts thereby forcing them to resort to calling up "dial-a-quote" analysts who themselves lack definitive knowledge; or

- * because of their lack of experience and inherent personal bias.

Towards the end of September and early last month when the US dollar was rising fast against the ringgit, one Reuters journalist in particular, who is based in its Kuala Lumpur bureau, was prolific in writing two, three, four breaking stories a day to meet the different time zones.

Journalists can be fast but when reporting such important matters, especially for Reuters which can move and shake markets, a good journalist takes extra precautions to safeguard accuracy.

Do we not remember the glitch by Reuters mistakenly quoting two exchange rates for Asian currencies which led to a rush of buying in the ringgit earlier this month?

Quoting unnamed analysts, basing stories on unverified local newspaper reports and passing judgment and personal opinions are certainly not what Reuters is renowned for. But if one were to read the Reuters reports during this period, that is what one would see - one journalist's prejudices for the whole world's markets to react to.

One must also remember Reuters reporting on the period of "unrest" in Sabah in 1986 when fish bombs were exploding in several parts of the State. The agency likened the situation to Lebanon in almost every despatch it sent out from Kota Kinabalu.

The death toll in Sabah at the end of that period of unrest was five. A tragic event certainly, but definitely not Lebanon. Anyone who has been to Beirut can imagine what the turmoil in Lebanon had been like during the massacres of Shatila and Sabra in 1992.

Then there is the Washington Post journalist who flew into Kuala Lumpur for a day and ended up writing a story on the haze, on the so-called differences between Dr Mahathir and his deputy, and a commentary on the Southeast Asian tigers.

From this journalist's stories, it was obvious he spoke to at least two Malaysians, one of whom is from a think-tank, and another an environmentalist. Of course, there are the usual quotes from "people afraid to say negative things about Dr Mahathir" and the usual political scientist in a little-known university in Hong Kong and the usual unnamed analysts with vast financial knowledge.

The bottomline is that the reporter spent slightly more than one day to get information on what must be the biggest environmental and financial crisis to hit the region in years.

The Washington Post journalist is an "old Asia hand" and in general, we must agree his perspectives are sounder than those shown by many of the other foreign journalists who "parachuted" into Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Manila, to write about the "boom that went bust".

Still, the Washington Post is syndicated and its articles read by decision makers throughout the world. Did these people know that what they were reading was the result of a journalist's 24-hour foray into a Malaysia which had taken 40 years to build up?

Then, there is the Southeast Asia correspondent of the Sydney Morning Herald who is based in Bangkok and has written several articles on the "crisis" facing Malaysia. He was, I must stress, writing from Bangkok because the articles were datelined Bangkok. That journalist wrote that Dr Mahathir "may step down" and his conclusion was based on "comments made by Dr Mahathir himself." Unless all the Malaysian newspapers and agencies missed that story, I cannot remember Dr Mahathir having said anything even close to that. In fact, if anything, the Prime Minister said he would not step down in the face of the crisis because it was not his nature to run away when there was a problem.

I wonder if Australia would take kindly to a New Zealand newspaper reporting on Canberra from Papua New Guinea. I can imagine the headlines over the recent case of paedophiles:

Australian Child Sex Scandals - Politicians and Judges Implicated
Many committing suicide to avoid stigma

Or maybe another such headline to reflect the recent cases of violence against Asians in Queensland:

Asianocide in Queensland

White supremacist Hanson makes political headway

Of course, we in Malaysia know that such stories, if they did appear, could not be true because we have known Australians for many, many years because of their presence in Butterworth. They love their beer, they love fun and, by and large, they are not normally racist and neither are they paedophiles. They are ordinary human beings just like us.

But news reports could make them out to be otherwise, like many reports which have originated from Australia in recent years about how the original Aborigine population were and are being treated.

The Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian and The Age are respectable newspapers and have a well-earned reputation for good journalism.

Yet, sometimes, when reporting on other people's backyards, some of facts for the sake of colour.

Some days ago, Thailand's The Nation newspaper in an editorial said it was time for Dr Mahathir to go as he had outlived his usefulness. This is not the first time it or its rival, the Bangkok Post, has made such comments about Malaysia and its leaders.

To blame Dr Mahathir for Thailand's financial crisis is incredible, to say the least, because everyone knows it was Thailand's economic crisis which sparked the region's financial woes.

Still, in the exercise of journalistic licence, The Nation and the Post had for years carried articles by a Malaysian journalist whose credibility

in the region's journalistic fraternity was and is, to say the least, questionable.

That this journalist for years contributed to other publications, including Time and Newsweek, and was never arrested under the "draconian" Internal Security Act must speak poorly for the ability of the "much dreaded Malaysian security forces" to weed out malcontents and those with an alternative view.

But despite such reports, one thing is for certain - fighting the world's Press is a battle no one can win because there are so many factors involved - individual biases, institutional biases, colonial hang-ups, racial hang-ups, superiority complexes, inferiority complexes, religious biases, regional biases - and no one can expect to cope with and defeat all that.

Our only hope is that journalists hold true to the ethics their profession is supposed to cherish - fairness and objectivity. Unless, of course, they are content with being at the opposite end of the moral spectrum as Earl Charles Spencer said.

Until there is strict adherence to the spirit of fair play and justice, we will have to brace ourselves to face the pack mentality of journalists whenever there is an issue in our country or region.

At the same time, our newsmakers, including the think-tanks and non-governmental organisations, should learn to differentiate between the good and the bad. So long as they entertain the habitual offenders, it is like telling a criminal that it is okay to commit a crime.

Malaysia needs to get its message across to the world and, to do this, it needs to speak to the international Press and analysts. There are enough good journalists in both the local and foreign media to do this. As for those who fly in, it may be best if their credentials are checked before interviews are granted.

If we ourselves do not take the necessary precautions, then we should take a share of the blame for the bad Press we get.

Subang Jaya

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