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The duty to be fair and factual

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad speaks for every Malaysian when he asks the international media to be fair, balanced and factual. Malaysians have despaired over the slanted and distorted reports that freely flowed from several international news agencies. As reflected in readers' letters to this newspaper, they are deeply insulted when disinformation is used to blight the country.

Comment is free but facts are sacred. But some agencies have traversed from this principle to facts being free, where indulgence in creative tinkering is required, and comment uninhibited without any regard to truth. They go by the basis that where there is conflict, there is news. This has resulted in manipulative attempts to give an impression of perpetual turmoil as seen in CNN's relentless airing of a scene from its newsreel about the riot at Dataran Merdeka. Their editorial responsibility is in question and loss of journalistic accountability is apparent from the fact that they put the onus of proving a report's accuracy on the news source rather than on the journalist. In doing so, they are doing a disservice to their clients who may make wrong decisions in their investments.

As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, we are not asking the international media to report only good things but in reporting on those agitating against Governments of developing countries, they should give the Government side a fair exposure too. Slanted, fabricated and damning reports will, in one swift stroke, plunge a country into the abby of darkness.

Distortion of facts is particularly evident in their analyses of Southeast Asia's currency crisis. They persistently attribute its root cause to crony capitalism and corruption. But they omit to mention that what they perceive to be crony capitalism has existed a decade ago when Asia's economies thrived - a time when the World Bank and International Monetary Fund had nothing but praises for these economies and international rating agencies gave high ratings to companies they now call crony companies. In lending legitimacy to buzzwords like crony capitalism and deviating attention from the actual cause - a growth model that dictated deregulation to the demands of globalisation and led to a dependence on short-term foreign capital - they deny the much-needed and swift solutions to these languishing economies.

Nor is their condemnation of the local media as an appendage for politicians in grabbing power and pelf fair. The local media's restraints and refusal to play up events that may touch the raw nerves of any section of society has led men of esteemed intellectuals such as Dr Chandra Mudzaffar to refer to media personalities as having servile, supine and subservient attitude towards the powers-that-are. Its restraints in reporting on the Hindu temple-mosque clash in Penang's Kampung Rawa, for example, had meant that the clash was localised and did not spark off similar clashes elsewhere.

Such show of restraint does not mean that consciousness of Press freedom is not uppermost in the minds of the doyens of the local media. But in Malaysia, Press freedom is a consequence of the earnestness and sincerity with which the local media meets its obligations to the people as readers and to the cause of national interest or common good. It does not answer to monopolist capitalist or proprietors of industrial interests. The local media's consciousness of its editorial responsibility and role in national

development should not be misconstrued as lack of freedom.
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