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The world watches

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IT'S being billed "The Greatest Show in Kuala Lumpur". The trial of ousted Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has a formidable cast, a tangled plot of sex and politics and an audience of millions. The whole world, it seems, has tuned in.

Hundreds of foreign journalists have descended on the capital, churning out reams of copy on events which surely mark a seismic shift in Malaysia's socio-political landscape.

With the local media accused of parroting the Government's version of events, many eyes have turned to international reports in the belief that they may offer a more truthful tale.

Coverage of the trial itself has generally followed the court happenings, with reports from some 20 newspapers from the United States, Britain, Hong Kong, Thailand, Australia, the Philippines and Singapore almost identical in their accounts of each day in court.

But there have been exceptions. On Nov 6, The British newspaper The Independent ran a story that took subtle liberties with outgoing Special Branch chief Datuk Mohamed Said Awang's testimony during a cross-examination by defence counsel Christopher Fernando the day before.

The article recounted that Mohamed Said was asked if a police report sent to the Prime Minister in August last year contained a statement that the allegations against Anwar had been politically motivated.

The story concluded: "He replied 'I don't deny it,' and also conceded that (Special Functions Minister Tun) Daim Zainuddin, a rival of Mr Anwar and a close aide to Mr Mahathir, may have been involved in cooking up the sodomy allegations."

That one line suggests that the allegations were indeed false, and that Daim had been involved in "cooking" them up, arguments which have yet to be proven in court.

It could perhaps be a minor point, one that could be explained more as differences in journalistic approach, rather than the existence of any hidden agenda.

Headlines for trial-related stories have also been pointedly different from the ones favoured by local newspapers.

A sampling includes: "Push and shove politics on trial," and, "I'd lie if ordered: Anwar witness". Others are more misleading, such as this heading that ran over a Financial Times story on Oct 28: "Malaysia police target children in protests".

The international outrage that this case has provoked is more clearly voiced in a number of commentaries and editorials that have been published overseas.

In an editorial entitled "A Whiff Of Stalinism - Anwar's trial may be little more than a judicial farce" published in The Times on Nov 3, the writer speaks disparagingly of judge Augustine Paul's refusal to grant observer status to a number of human rights and legal groups that showed up outside the court's doors on the trial's first day.

"Mahathir Mohamad is determined, it seems, to have a show trial and will allow no check on a manipulation of justice that has more than a whiff of Stalinism about it," the editorial said.

It went on to dismiss the trial as a judicial farce orchestrated by a Prime Minister who had "begun to see himself as indispensable," and who had "looked for a scapegoat when things went wrong".

A recent New York Times editorial headlined "Malaysia on Trial" ran along the same lines, and called the charges facing Anwar "questionable."

"The more likely reason for his arrest is that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, worried by the fall of President Suharto in Indonesia, felt threatened by Anwar's popularity and reform agenda," it said.

The volley of criticism isn't coming just from the Western media. A similarly stinging indictment of Malaysia's state of affairs came from a commentary carried by Philippines' Manila Times on Nov 6.

"The sodomy charges against Anwar are obviously designed first and foremost to destroy Anwar's moral credentials to lead the Reformasi - the reform movement against corruption, cronyism and oppression in Malaysia.

"To Mahathir, the overriding goal is to destroy Anwar morally. That is why the charges against Anwar have nothing to do with graft in government transactions, but with sexual misconduct that is expressedly condemned in the Koran," it ran.

Because of its political ramifications, Anwar's trial has undeniably raised long-simmering questions about the credibility of the country's fundamental institutions: the political leadership, the judiciary, the police; indeed, Malaysia's very claim of democratic being.

It is also true that the way events have played out - Anwar's dramatic arrest, the street demonstrations and the now infamous black eye, to name a few - has cast the Government in a harsh light.

"(Anwar's) fall was as swift as it was brutal: a gang of masked anti-terrorist police smashing their way into his suburban home last night while thousands of supporters gathered in a futile show of support," ran a story published in Australia's The Age on Sept 22.

The temptation to distill all these tumultuous events into a tale of David versus Goliath, new versus old, good versus evil, may be difficult to resist.

But the tone of the editorials and commentaries, though they raise some valid issues and concerns, suggests that the international media have come here with their minds already made up.

These preconceptions may be making that inexorable journey to becoming truth not through investigation, but through the process of re-telling.

Local reporters meanwhile, who have found their credibility questioned, have their own tales to tell. Some have been snubbed by their foreign counterparts. One had her casual encounter with a BBC journalist turned into a story she says never happened.

"A BBC film crew talking to Anwar sympathisers outside the High Court shared the comments with a friendly reporter from the New Straits Times," a recent BBC report ran.

"Yet when her report appeared in the newspaper, the comments had been amended to suggest that a man with fiercely anti-government views was some sort of racist."

The reporter recalls the incident very differently: "They did not share the comments with me, I only double-checked the name of the person we spoke to," she says. "And I paraphrased the man's comments, but did not twist what he said, as they have suggested."

Other local journalists have been staggered to find themselves talking to "parachute reporters" who arrived here with little or no knowledge of this trial's background or context.

One even confused the jailing of Lim Guan Eng for publishing false news with Lim Kit Siang.

"A number of foreign journalists covering the trial are actually freelancers who may, to stay employed, be compelled to spice up their reports," a senior Malaysian editor noted.

"Other have never been to Malaysia before. Some decided to come early

for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit so that they can file a few stories on the trial," he said.

The foreign media coverage of the trial, however, is not all blatantly anti-Government, although, the editor added, some reports "seem more devoted to describing the trial than reporting it".

Such descriptive prose appears more frequently within many editorials and commentaries, whose tone indicates that most sympathise with the beleaguered ex-DPM.

Still, other perceptive voices are calling our attention to issues that loom just as large as Anwar and the political aftershocks of his dismissal and trial.

Referring to the Anwar's alleged beating while in custody, a Bangkok Post commentary published on Oct 5 noted that: "Instances of police brutality exist in almost every country of Southeast Asia. Human rights groups and other organisations have been calling for action against this practice for years.

"The only difference is that the man suffering from this barbaric behaviour this time is Anwar Ibrahim - a man recognised in international circles as representing the emerging, younger generation Southeast Asian leader...Mr Anwar is a somebody."

An analysis in the same newspaper nine days later picked up the same thread of concern over national security laws in the region:

"...international disapproval over Mr Anwar's predicament, although commendable and well-intentioned, is ultimately misplaced.

"While Mr Anwar is an important catalyst to events in Malaysia, there are dozens of others being treated similarly...President Habibie of Indonesia, President Estrada of the Philippines and the deputy foreign minister of Thailand who have all made public statements of disapproval also have their own versions of national security laws," it said.

Where does this media frenzy leave the readers, who every day scour the newspapers and the Internet for new nuggets of information?

Preconceptions may ultimately guide judgement in the court of public opinion. Others, faced with tonal differences in news reports, may choose to believe that the truth lies somewhere in between.

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