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Foreign Press ignored principles

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THE foreign Press which advocates professionalism and impartiality in carrying out its functions, lost on both counts in so far as the Sabah election is concerned.

In fact, the two cardinal requirements in journalism were glaringly missing in their coverage of the election as they kept predicting that the Barisan Nasional would take a severe beating.

Again, they were forced to swallow their words when the BN went on to win 31 seats, just one short of a two-thirds majority.

At 7pm on Saturday, when unofficial results indicated that the BN had a clear lead over its arch-rival Parti Bersatu Sabah, the bureau chief of AFP, Peter Starr reported from Kota Kinabalu that the BN would be defeated.

He based his assessment on a public opinion poll published by the Borneo Post on Saturday.

"Voting in elections in the east Malaysian State of Sabah ended on Saturday with a public opinion poll predicting a loss for Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir Mohamad's ruling coalition," Starr wrote.

Relying on such polls and overzealous members of the Opposition who condemn anything and everything for the sake of opposing, have become the order of the day for news agencies and foreign magazines.

This is mainly because the foreign wires are mostly headed by foreigners or inexperienced local staff who know little about the country's politics, what more the Sabah situation.

As with other foreign bureau chiefs and reporters, Starr is fairly inexperienced and lacks knowledge and sensitivity.

This was quite obvious from his reports.

K. Baranee Krishnaan, who left The Star to join Reuters as a reporter a few years ago, wrote in his report which was transmitted to Malaysian subscribers at 10.55pm on Saturday:

"Early indicators showed the outcome of the polls could be close for the 73-year-old leader, who has held power since 1981, political allies said."

But the fact is, at 10.35pm, the BN had already secured a simple majority and the mandate to form the State Government.

The report clearly showed that Baranee was behind time, unusual for wire agencies. They are supposed to deliver up-to-date reports, speedily and accurately.

It is probably the case of relying on the same source or a deliberate attempt to tell half-truths.

The Associated Press, in its report transmitted at 10.13pm said:

"Despite the early lead, political observers said the outcome was too close for comfort for Mahathir, who hoped for a resounding two-thirds majority in the 48-seat state assembly. His party needed 25 seats to form a Government."

Again, the reporter was behind time. This is the result of relying too much on those opposing the BN, giving the impression that the foreign Press has taken sides.

Any member of the BN would have been able to say at 10pm that the coalition was on its way to a clear victory.

Foreign newspapers and magazines are not left out. They are all in steady competition to bash the Malaysian Government, even to the extent of making sweeping statements.

Thomas Fuller of the International Herald Tribune, in a report on March 11 said:

"As the economy on the peninsula shrank last year by about six per cent, in Sabah it grew by about one per cent, buoyed by the State's plantation sector and timber industry."

Fuller went on to say that the majority of Sabah people were poor, especially those in the hinterland.

The Far Eastern Economic Review's S. Jayasankaran also jumped on the bandwagon, claiming that the 1995 redelimitation exercise was in Umno's favour.

Jayasankaran quoted an Umno leader as saying that the BN had a 50-50 chance of winning the election.

He argued that the Anwar factor would split Muslim voters - about 60 per cent of the electorate - who were traditional Umno supporters.

Leslie Lopez, the staff reporter of the Asian Wall Street Journal wrote:

"Dr Mahathir's coalition Government faces a tough time getting re-elected to another five-year term (in Sabah).

"This is its first political test since the Prime Minister rocked the country by firing his heir apparent, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and banning offshore trading of the Malaysian currency in September."

Wrong again! If at all, the Sabah results only go to show that the reformasi movement, mooted by Anwar and supported by a few, either has died down or had no effect on the election.

The silent majority is all for the Government.

It also appears that the measures taken by the Government to overcome the economic problems had the people's support.

This was made clear by the BN's victory in Elopura, Tanjung Papat, Karamunting and Likas. These are urban constituencies where most businessmen reside.

It seems that these businessmen, though affected by the economic crisis, are satisfied with the Government's actions.

The way things turned out in Sabah, it is obvious that foreign Press reports have little impact on Malaysian voters.

Probably, Malaysians have become mature enough to distinguish truth from falsity.

If the foreign Press shirks professional and journalistic principles, there is a chance that Malaysians may lose faith in them.

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