

26/07/1999

Journalists get `taste of own medicine'

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ANSWERING with both panache and a bit of squirming, senior journalists of local and foreign media had a taste of their own medicine during a unique dialogue that was the precursor to the Langkawi International Dialogue today.

They had to answer tough questions on Press responsibility, ethics and professionalism from the people they cover all the time - heads of governments.

The scene could aptly be described as a "reverse" Press conference where heads of governments led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and the likes of Dr Sam Nujomo (Namibian President), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwean President) and Festus Mogae (Botswanian President), asked the questions.

It is believed to be the first time that the reverse occurred in a formal conference - the Press, as the watchdogs, become the "victims" - as Dr Mahathir put it - and the heads of states, the "predators".

Revolving around the theme on how the media could develop smart partnerships with governments, the 11 journalists were grilled on why some stories were given the "sensational" treatment while others did not even merit a mention although important from the point of view of the governments.

The dialogue was moderated by Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali, the Chief secretary to the Government.

On the question of who watches over the watchdog, Zimbabwean journalist Munyaradzi Hwengwere had this humourous analogy: "It is elusive to watch the watchdogs," he admitted. "But using the smart concept, I would describe us as dobermans, easily handled as long as the agenda is clear.

"But we will certainly pounce if we smell something foul..." he said to all-round laughter.

Besides Hwengwere, the foreign panelists were Chris Green (BBC World Service), Qhawe Mamba (Swaziland TV director), Nigel Munyanti (Munyanti Consulting), Itai Masuku (Zimbabwean business reporter), Salamao Moyana (Savan Weekly) and Jerome Dlamini (Swaziland Radio).

The local panelists were New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd Group Editor-in-chief Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, Hardev kaur (NSTP editor-at-large), Sirajuddin Rafia (Utusan Malaysia), H.C. Liew (Sin Chew Jit Poh editor-in-chief) and Wong Sulong (The Star business editor).

Kadir fielded the first question - from Dr Mahathir who asked what the Press thought was good smart partnerships.

"The last few years had led to positive results," Kadir said. "The fact that the heads of governments get together when they normally don't to decide on things they don't normally discuss due to their hectic schedule is useful."

"We want to promote this concept though we don't call it smart partnership. The Malaysian media sees itself as mutual smart partners other than the Government and our society."

Kadir then reminded the government leaders on something which they should do as "reporters". "Aren't you taking down notes?" he said, to the laughter of the leaders.

Green of the BBC went on the defensive when he admitted to being "edgy" when talking about collaboration with governments.

"We have our perspective on spreading information... on what works and

what don't," he said.

On the other hand, Kadir interjected that the Malaysian media always collaborate with the Government, particularly on critical issues that dealt with the nation's development.

"That still does not affect our judgment when we have to be critical of the Government if they do wrong."

Mugabe was especially critical of the IMF for selling their gold stockpile to raise funds but which devastated the prospects of gold-producing states in Africa. "Is it not the role of the Press to defend the countries affected by this sale?" he asked.

In answering Mugabe, Hardev recalled the same effect upon Malaysia when the United States released its tin stockpile, suggesting that the gold producing countries form an association to protect their interests.

Dr Mahathir asked about an issue which bothered the conscience of some of the African journalists. "Are you independent of your owners," the Prime Minister asked.

To which Hwengwere replied: "That would be the ideal situation. Unfortunately, journalists are not good in running themselves... the code of ethics are always broken by publishers."

Building on the emphatic "yes" answer given by Hardev that smart partnerships can work without the media losing their ethics and professionalism, Green agreed that as partners, the media and the Government need each other while respecting their different ethics and responsibility.

When called by the moderator to give his closing remarks, Dr Mahathir, with a grin on his face, said the heads of governments had enjoyed seeing how the journalists felt "uncomfortable and squirmed just like us when we have to answer questions."

He asked the media not to take a "rigid stand" on being watchdogs. "It is very boring," he mused, "just to spot mistakes."

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