

01/07/1999

Remedy for inadequate Press coverage in hands of political parties themselves

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has declared that the general election will be called at any time from now on.

Indeed the country has been gripped with election fever for some weeks now with several political parties proclaiming that they are already in a state of preparedness for the election.

On the eve of a general election, it is not unusual for Opposition political parties to allege that they are not getting adequate coverage in the newspapers for their election campaigns.

In a parliamentary democracy the newspapers play an important role during an election in influencing voters as to which political party they should support.

There are basically three types of voters in an election. Firstly, the party diehards who will vote for the party no matter what. Secondly, there is the floating voter who does not belong to any political party and may vote for different parties at different elections. And thirdly, young people who are voting for the first time.

It is natural for a partisan newspaper to target the second and third groups. Hence the allegation of unfairness by Opposition parties of inadequate reporting of their cause.

The allegation stems from the contention that all newspapers are expected to be neutral and should give equal space and prominence to the views of the government party and the opposition parties. Such a contention ignores reality.

Is there really a neutral newspaper? Or even an independent editor?

Recently, a newspaper tried to be independent in Timor-Timor. For every incident with a political implication, it published the Government version of the incident and also that of the opposition. For good measure, it also published the results of its independent investigation of the incident.

When the editor was away on an overseas trip, his newspaper office and printing equipment were burnt down by protestors for publishing the other's views!

In 1994, I was invited by the Sri Lanka Elections Commissioner as an international observer of the parliamentary elections of that country.

Each day, the Colombo Hilton delivered a newspaper to my room. The newspaper was obviously 100 per cent pro-government. To get a better picture of the political situation and election issues, I bought each day a rival newspaper which was 100 per cent pro-Opposition.

The election was free and fair if only because the incumbent government party lost and the opposition coalition parties won.

The day following the results of the election, the Hilton delivered the same newspaper but its content was 100 per cent pro the new government! Obviously the policy of the newspaper is to be pro government no matter which political party is in power.

In many countries, however, newspapers are aligned to a political party whether the party is in power or not. Thus, in Britain, I had to read both a conservative Party paper and a Labour Party paper to follow current political affairs.

When Sabah first became independent, the late Tun Mustapha Harun had a newspaper to promote his party. His political rival at the time, the late Tun Donald Stephens, also had a newspaper to promote his party.

The truth of the matter is that no newspaper is truly independent or neutral. Editorial policy is dictated by the owners of the newspaper. It may be partisan when reporting on political issues but neutral when reporting on business, foreign affairs or sports.

The bottom line is that newspapers are in the business of making money for the shareholders of the newspaper. It has to maintain a certain level of circulation to keep advertisers happy because it is the advertisements that keep a newspaper in business.

However, the final arbiter is really the reader who decides which newspaper he or she wants to read.

Recent declines in the sales of certain newspapers and increases in others reflect the preference of readers on political issue.

There are of course readers who buy a particular newspaper just because they like the format of the business pages!

A free Press is a misnomer in some respects because it is only free to express the views of its editorial policy and it does not mean that it must freely publish the views of everybody.

In a parliamentary democracy a free Press is vital. It is said that person attains maturity at 40. As a nation we have been free for more than 40 years.

In that sense the people too have matured in their experience with parliamentary democracy and should therefore have access to newspapers of varying political views. The intelligence of the people should be respected.

Following the trend in other democratic countries, it seems that to communicate effectively with the public, a political party should have its own daily newspaper. That is how the system operates in a parliamentary democracy.

The remedy for inadequate Press coverage is within the power of the political parties themselves.

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