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Honeymoon for journalists never lasts long

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IN the early days of independence the party in power and the Press enjoyed a honeymoon. It was the culmination of their struggle for Merdeka and each expected much of each other. Editors themselves fervently nationalists were in the forefront with political leaders in endeavours to fulfil the objectives set for the nation.

As time went by the honeymoon ended. The relationship with its ups and downs reflected the changing values. A remark by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his address at the end of the recent Umno General Assembly provides a reminder of other things also. Quote: "The political scenario has turned hostile, including among government officers, religious officials, students, youth groups and newspapers."

Yet another honeymoon was one between the new Labour Party in Britain and British newspapers after the party's landslide victory in the 1997 general election.

Among newspapers which supported Prime Minister Tony Blair's party was The Sun, the highest selling daily hitherto consistently pro-Conservative.

It is now said that the cozy relationship has almost ended following the election of Ken Livingstone as Mayor of London and the Labour Party's loss of over 600 seats in local elections.

Labour's candidate for mayor, Frank Donson lost miserably despite strong support from the party organisation whereas Livingstone was on his own. As one newspaper described it later, he broke "the once-iron law that party labels and organisation are decisive."

A joke which went round about Labour's candidate explains things:

A one-legged man goes to see a wizard and asks to be given two legs again.

"I can make many dreams come true but that's too difficult," says the wizard, "so wish for something easier."

"I've got this friend, Frank Dobson," the man replies, "can you make him mayor of London?"

"Let's have another look at that leg...."

In the end Livingstone also defeated the Conservative and Liberal-Democrat candidates.

Surprising too in the midst of the honeymoon was the support given by The Mirror, traditionally Labour, to the Conservative candidate. The paper's editor was said to be peeved because Blair had written a long letter for publication in the rival Sun.

Revealing was the way the candidates and newspapers wooed each other during the elections. An example was the Guardian when each candidate for the post of London Mayor went to the paper's offices for discussions. They had lunch too. In the end though the newspaper did not state its preference.

As was later described The Guardian "was not the only newspaper with a crisis of conscience." The Express, usually pro-Conservative, but siding with Labour in 1997 went back to its old roots. The Independent did not support any candidate.

The headlines in the various newspapers summarised their stance." A bloody nose for Blair," The Express trumpeted, followed by "Got the message?", the next day.

Meanwhile The Sun's "Mayday, Mayday" before polling was followed by "Rattled" on another day.

And so it's said that the honeymoon has ended, but both parties have not gone to the divorce courts.

No less cozy was the earlier relationship between the Indonesian Press and the country's leader, President Abdurrahman Wahid. Back in circulation was Tempo, the country's biggest-selling weekly magazine, after being banned during the latter part of President Suharto's administration.

It has since been seen to be critical. The heading on the cover of its latest issue reads: "President Wahid: How low can you go?" That it's heading was in English has now escaped the attention of language purists.

For journalists everywhere the honeymoon never lasts long.

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