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Western media freedom is a farce

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IN the western world, its media both reflects and shapes the political mood of its rulers. I myself have always deprecated the notion that western media is free. It's balderdash.

The passionate hostility of the foreign media against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a well-known fact. The foreign media has been conducting its open warfare for a long time and it has become more vitriolic with the advent of the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim saga.

I know what happens in real life is harder to believe than what the foreign media and Pas say. However, I am very glad that facts do not lie. There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so. It entirely depends on one's point of view.

This inherent bias, I feel, is all about new journalism. Peter Arnett, CNN's star reporter during Desert Storm, recalled what a senior executive of CNN once told him: "I'll make you famous on the air. Just remember, if it bleeds it leads".

Another philosophy of CNN is that the news must be, at any cost, first on the air before anyone else, whether it is about politics or kidnappings or even food poisoning. You would have noticed that nowhere does it emphasise on facts and fairness in reporting which was what I was taught by the old school of journalism.

A former Anwar spin-doctor is now, I was told, heading the CNN news coverage team for the Asia Pacific region. Well, now you know what to expect from CNN, as though you don't already know.

You will prosper and flourish if you know how to spin the owners' and their political masters' agenda and other vested interests.

The same, I suppose, could be said about us but then we don't have a worldwide agenda which we are propagating whilst at the same time denying the fact. There lies the difference. We mind our own business whilst they don't.

However, as S.H. Chong wrote in the New Straits Times on Sept 14, what is very real, though, is the world's criticism of Dr Mahathir. There is no misconstruing that (but) does he really care? Not at all. Dr Mahathir could have greatly diminished the criticisms of the foreign media by doing some things and abandoning others.

He would have been given incentives, like less harassment, by doing so. But such a course of action would have been dishonourable and against the national interest.

I expect Dr Mahathir to continue to play the card, which to others may not be an ace, and achieve the objective that he has set out for the nation. His primary concern is to protect Malaysia, not himself.

However, western media is waging a personal vendetta against Dr Mahathir.

What media freedom do you talk about when stories are distorted and slanted, only anti-government views expressed, facts massaged and some reports have no resemblance to facts on the ground?

New journalism has blurred the distinction between fair reporting on hard news and writing opinions, often over playing one story over another with a vengeance. They write with little regard to objectivity. Of course, no involvement at all, depicting the stereotyped image of western hacks being briefed by their resident diplomats and WOGs (western oriented gentlemen), as is possible.

Have you ever visited a newspaper office, by this I mean the newsroom? The reporters will be assigned to cover stories (few have the initiative to look for stories on his/her own) by the news editor.

The stories are written, re-written and edited. The editors will decide where they go to, whether it's the front page, inside pages or buried in some insignificant corner of the paper.

The sub-editors will give the headings, panels and choose the quotes to be highlighted. Sometimes they even spike the stories, allegedly because of the lack of space.

The stories, before they appear in print, would have passed through so many hands unless you are one of the editors who edits his own pieces. Imagine the slant, distortion and misconstruing of facts/issues, either intentionally (most of the time) or unintentionally, that could have taken place along the route.

The result is that the next morning or the next week, you read the story either with approval or with acute dissatisfaction.

Like other professions, journalism is not without its scoundrels. We too have rogue editors and reporters, and the young writers are very mobile. They either move to do other things or join other newspapers; rarely signing themselves on for a life-long tenure to a particular group.

This is very true with foreign media organisations. They cast their nets over a wide area. That notwithstanding, deviancy is not tolerated but spinning for the owners or their national interest is tacitly encouraged, and this breeds allegiance to the editors and owners and to the style of journalism they want their correspondents to practice.

The Western media culture is dominated by liberals and they use their newspapers, magazines and TV channels to ply their political opinions and biased reporting.

What Dr Mahathir has and is doing bothers them, and the fact that Dr Mahathir likes to poke his finger in their eyes and point out their own shortcomings and myopia, and seems to enjoy doing so, only serves to infuriate them even more.

In return they write even more venomous reports on Malaysia and on Dr Mahathir. Facts, to them, in their battle with Dr Mahathir, are irrelevant and ignored.

Dr Mahathir is a proponent of Asian values - values that are hard for the Western media to accept, though Lee Kuan Yew is spared by it because it know what to expect from him.

Lee practises what he preaches and is ruthless against those who dare displease him. The foreign media respects and fears him though they may not like him.

The Americans loved Fidel Castro when he was fighting the dictatorship of Batista. Their media portrayed him as a social democrat, and Suharto, Marcos and the Shah of Iran as benign leaders when they were useful for US foreign policy.

Now, however, Washington and its media are in a revisionist frame of mind and therefore apply different journalistic standards, to the very same people it had put on a pedestal and praised only a few years ago.

Dr Mahathir has been unfairly pictured by the foreign media because of his strong stand against rampant Western interference in developing nations. I do not know if he is suffering as a result of this but I do know for sure that he does not care.

The West and its media were so much against the selective capital controls and related policies that they have succeeded make them vengeful. For some of them, to be made to look the fools that they are by the same person they had labelled an ignoramus is too much too swallow.

Dr Mahathir's real sin is that he is an apostate in an age of political

conformity dictated by Washington and its media surrogate.

The Prime Minister is fearless in his devotion to principles and because of that he has become an anachronism in the eyes of Western media's ethos, owned and run to serve the interest of globalisation and Western political/social values.

The Western media is bulging with too many opinion features and has lost much of its one-time zeal for hard and fair news reporting.

A fair media should tell readers what happens in the world as it stands. Granted, sometimes we do not do it too well ourselves, but on most occasions, I believe, we do a good job.

Events make news and although owners and editors might disagree on which events are important and how it should be covered and presented, it must be reported as comprehensively as possible and with a great regard for facts.

The foreign media when reporting on Malaysian affairs applies different rules. It writes good stories about people and nations it advocates and bad copy on those it dislikes and wants to discredit or destroy.

There has been far too much editorialising instead of straight, hard news. Western media is beholden to a liberal social/political agenda, when it ought not to follow any agenda at all.

It should stop bending the rules of journalism and stop posing as independent and impartial media and hacks when they are clearly not. Let us have some dissenting voice in world politics and be fair to that voice.

After all, they clearly advocate dissenting voices within Malaysia, so why can't they allow dissenting voices against themselves and be fair? Is it because this voice has, time and again, shown them up for the hypocrites that they truly are?

I know, as you know, people have been lying for as long as they have been talking. In fact I have a sneaky admiration for journalists who can spin facts into fiction and even for outright lies on a grand scale.

Dr Mahathir, whether the foreign media likes it or not, has no potential rival nor real threat to his position both in the government and party. The foreign media and Dr Mahathir need not have to like each other but it would help if impermissible editorialising stops and hard news replaces it.

The truth will come out and free you from deceit sooner or later. Remember what Rupert Murdoch did to Andrew Neil and Harold Evans and to Arnett?

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