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They must tell it like it is

IT is nonsense to suggest that the Western media is always objective and fair in its reporting and analysis of news and events. There is no doubt that some, like other media in the world, do try to "tell it like it is". But quite a number allow themselves to skew their reports this or that way depending on the inclinations, be it political or ideological, of their owners and publishers. For instance, one cannot expect a right-wing newspaper to project left-wing views and vice-versa.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is an outspoken Third World leader who has been forthright in airing his views in interviews with the Western-owned media. Some have not been fair and objective in their reports about him and Malaysia. The latest example is Asiaweek's latest report about him and Malaysia. Its choice of the unflattering cover picture of him reflects its prejudice and attitude towards him.

There is truth in the observation that much of the Western media is unlikely to highlight news that runs counter to what they are trying to project about the Third World. For instance, they tend to downplay the argument that political stability and raising living standards are of overriding importance in the Third World.

But it will give extensive coverage to any person or organisations whom it considers to be challenging that argument and promoting the Western liberal definition of human rights. If a person in a Third World country speaks against a government which the Western-owned publications do not like, he suddenly becomes a hero fighting against a so-called "authoritarian" government though it may be popularly elected.

These publications and/or news agency may grudgingly acknowledge that the government is elected but it will constantly qualify this by reminding its readers that the democracy is a limited one. A Third World country such as Malaysia may have made great economic and social progress but its achievements are downplayed by some Western publications because it does not practise the kind of democracy that is practised in Europe and North America. Liberal though they claim they are, they cannot seem to accept models of democracy other than their own.

If some of the Western-based publications and agencies do not like the leader of any Third World country for being outspoken, articulate and exposing the hypocrisy and double standards of the West, there will be a barrage of criticism levelled against him. But they will write fondly of any leader in the Third World who grovels to the Western media's condescending and patronising attitude.

When the Cold War was at its height, for instance, some of the US-based publications and news agencies reported favourably of repressive regimes in the Third World because it was in the US own interest to use them in its world-wide campaign against communism. They turned a blind eye then to the abuse of human rights against their own people by the repressive but "client" regimes of the US. With the end of the Cold War, some of the sanctimonious Western publications and news agencies are suddenly promoting human rights and freedom in the Third World, but mostly in countries which do not "kow-tow" to their brand of liberalism or democracy but still doing so selectively.

The myth about the Western media's objectivity has been perpetuated for so long that many in the Third World accept blindly even what the Western media writes about their own countries.

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