

# Up close and personal for media relations

STAR 17 MAR 2002

**S**INGAPOREAN journalists are often surprised when told that it is relatively easy to operate in Malaysia. Like other foreigners, they assume that the Malaysian media is docile and takes orders from the authorities on how a newspaper should be run.

They find it incredulous that reporters, even the rookies, can call up Cabinet ministers at their office, home and even on the handphone for a quote. If these ministers are busy at meetings, they would return the calls of reporters most of the time.

When Parliament is in session, these politicians mingle freely with reporters at the lobby and at the canteen, exchanging information on politics.

In the case of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, they make it a point to speak to reporters after a function. If time is pressing, reporters are allowed to throw questions at them as they are leaving.

This same newsman-politician interaction, we can assume, is not enjoyed by our counterparts in Singapore. In fact, American journalists cannot get near their President. They are restricted, most of the time, to the White House press briefing room where a government spokesman would provide them with information.

Last week, Singapore's Minister of State for National Development Dr Vijian Balakrishnan found himself embroiled in a controversy when Umno politicians and the Malaysian press criticised him for purportedly calling Malaysian reporters "wild animals."

He had reportedly passed the remark at a luncheon hosted for a visiting Barisan Nasional Youth delegation in Singapore.

The rookie politician has said the remark was made in jest. He claimed that he was hurrying along because "wild animals" were waiting to pounce on Barisan Youth chief Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein.

In retaliation, Information Ministry parliamentary secretary Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, the former *Utusan Malaysia* editor-in-chief, said the incident showed that Singaporean journalists behaved like "mice" when they came close to their government leaders.

Not to be outdone, *New Straits Times* columnist Shamsul Akmar wrote that Malaysian reporters should feel proud because it proved they were not "domesticated."

Trying to defuse the situation, Dr Vijian said: "I could say I'm sitting in a lion's den now."

Malaysian reporters and Barisan leaders who attended Dr Vijian's luncheon have admitted that they did not find his remark offensive but others have joined in the fray to, presumably, settle political scores.



But there is certainly a need for Singaporean leaders, especially the younger ones, to understand how their counterparts function.

The visit by the Barisan Youth leaders, for example, is good for networking.

Over the past two years, the Singapore Government has, in fact, invited Malaysian journalists, civil servants and other officials to visit the republic.

But there is one area that Singapore needs to look into - until today, Malaysian media companies cannot open their offices there.

Except for national news agency Bernama, which has a correspondent in Singapore, none of the Malaysian newspapers can have representatives there.

It is a strange decision on the part of Singapore because other foreign reporters are allowed to operate there. In the case of Malaysia, we have been liberal by allowing Singapore newspapers to station "consultants" here.

In the past, it was worse. Each did not allow the other's newspapers to be taken into Malaysia or Singapore. Restricting information in this manner is no longer possible today with the Internet although Malaysian newspapers still cannot be sold in Singapore and vice-versa.

The restriction came about, presumably, because both sides did not want emotional stories, written by either side, to be widely read by the people.

But that should not stop Singapore from discontinuing its policy of not allowing Malaysian newspaper firms to set up offices there.

Allowing Malaysian journalists to work there would help Singaporean leaders establish a closer rapport with our media and, in turn, our media could understand their policies better.

Singapore should not expect contacts with Malaysian journalists to be made through a lunch or a visit. Relationship takes years to establish.

Over the past week, Singapore newspapers have published stories on how we have reacted to several issues, ranging from the *tudung* ban to the visit by Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

It's time for leaders such as Lee to influence their government to make bold decisions that are in tune with the times.

No doubt, they do not have the kind of relationship their predecessors had, but they also do not carry the baggage of history with them.

□ Wong Chun Wai can be reached at [onthethebeat@thestar.com.my](mailto:onthethebeat@thestar.com.my)