

**Against hostile press, Pakatan must change tack**  
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COMMENT "In victory, magnanimity."

Winston Churchill's wartime counsel ought to be Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng's guide in the flush of his court victory yesterday over Utusan Malaysia.

This victory may be overturned on appeal; the appellate courts in the country are not known to be Pakatan Rakyat-friendly, having upheld appeals against decisions awarded by courts in favour of the opposition.

Nevertheless, Lim's success in the Utusan case ought to be occasion for the lifting of a ban on the Umno-owned paper's coverage of his public functions.

To be sure, there was some justification for the ban: the paper had adopted a 'hostility first, objectivity take the hindmost' attitude towards DAP, particularly its Penang wing.

lim guan eng press conference on bicycle lane 251111 1From the time the DAP-led government was installed in Penang, Utusan had adopted a stance of rabid hostility towards Pakatan, particularly the DAP, selecting Lim for specially morbid coverage.

The DAP secretary-general had sued the paper a year ago for defamation over a speech he had delivered at the Pakatan convention in Kepala Batas on Dec 19.

Based on that speech, Utusan had published an article by correspondent Zulkiflee Bakar in its Dec 20 edition that High Court judge GV Varughese yesterday found to be defamatory towards Lim.

The judge ruled in Lim's favour, awarding the chief minister RM200,000 in damages and ordering Utusan to pay RM25,000 as costs.

The judge was unmoved by Zulkiflee's plea that he could not verify the claims he had made in his article because the CM had imposed a bar on Utusan journalists covering his functions.

Media ban unwise

This bar was always unwise though it may have given enormous psychic satisfaction to its enforcers.

The withdrawal of access, the banning of the attendance and circulation of hostile media, are not infrequently the responses of newsmakers when faced with inveterately hostile members of the fourth estate.

Not just the Penang CM's cohort has enforced this boycott against Utusan, but PKR had also imposed this ban on the paper covering their functions held at the party headquarters in Tropicana.

There were grounds to impose the ban: a shrill Utusan has often been malevolent in its coverage of the Pakatan parties.

When appeals to Utusan to be responsible in their coverage fell on deaf ears, both DAP and PKR resorted to barring journalists from the paper.

Still, it's a kneejerk reaction of dubious value. In Utusan's case, it did not lead to amended behaviour; in fact, the hostility only mounted.

utusan malaysia kritsian agama rasmiSure, it is easy to be high-minded when you are not at the end of the receiving line of abuse, particularly vitriol of the kind that can fan racial and religious tensions, as Utusan's bilge manifestly has been.

But a ban on established media covering public functions is an action that cannot avoid being viewed as anything else but arbitrary; just as the press's abdication of its duty of responsible journalism cannot avoid censure for being contemptible.

Both lapses from what is considered decorous are notably difficult to police, the interface between elected authority and the fourth estate in a democracy being an area that inherently defies parsing.

The area is best left disheveled, with the courts as the recourse to parties that feel libeled, or in the case of Utusan, impeded in pursuit of their function.

The gold standard

Pakatan should not resort to the ban towards hostile members of the fourth estate.

Pakatan, which have suffered much from repression by the ruling Umno-BN, and knowing how vital freedom of the press is to a democracy, should renounce such devices as boycotts and bans when faced with the adversarial press, no matter how implacable the hostility of members of the latter tribe gets.

NONETwo decades back, the late president of PAS, Fadzil Noor (right), displayed admirable understanding and composure during an annual assembly of the party when the perceived negative reporting of certain media drew angry threats from delegates to burn the publications and their representatives.

Fadzil interjected during assembly proceedings to remind irate delegates that members of the offending publications could not be held responsible for their biased coverage because they were merely hewers of wood and drawers of water.

He said the editors and owners of the press were the culpable ones so that action against their representatives at the assembly would only victimise those who were, in a sense, victims themselves.

Fadzil displayed commendable perspicuity at a point when the threat of harm to some journalists assigned to cover the PAS assembly was real.

Present-day Pakatan leaders ought to adopt the attitude of one of the coalition's founding lights as the gold standard in relations with a hostile press.

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