

Pledge for press pariahs
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Wow! Wah!! Alamak!!! Stop the presses, hold the front page, and stagger back in astonishment at the scoop of the century: Malaysia's National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is thinking about getting its members to go straight.

NONE Or so we're apparently expected to believe, with NUJ general secretary V Anbalagan (right) recently telling Malaysiakini that NUJ members may be asked to sign a "fair reporting pledge" to ensure balanced coverage of the forthcoming general election.

"Yes," Anbalagan breathlessly announced, "the executive council has unanimously agreed on the matter as it is one of NUJ's objectives – to practise ethical journalism."

Amazing news, huh? Too amazing for words, as far as I'm concerned. Call me cynical if you will, but the moment anybody mentions the word "ethical" in connection with Malaysian mainstream journalism, I get extremely suspicious.

And not without good reason. Here, to jog both your memory and mine, is the Code of Ethics that the vast majority of Malaysian mainstream journalists, NUJ members or not, have routinely failed to practise:

National Union of Journalists Malaysia - Code of Ethics

1. Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.
2. In pursuance of this duty he will defend the twin principles: freedom in the honest collection and publication of news; and the right of fair comment and criticism.
3. The journalist reports only in accordance with the facts of which he knows the origin. He will not suppress essential information or falsify documents.
4. He will use only fair methods to obtain news, photographs and documents.
5. Any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate he will do his utmost to rectify.
6. He will observe professional secret (sic) regarding the source of information obtained in confidence.
7. He will regard as grave professional offences the following: Plagiarism; calumny, slander, libel and unfounded accusations; the acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.
8. He recognises in professional matters, the jurisdiction of his colleagues only; he excludes every kind of interference by governments or others.

Of course most of Malaysia's offenders against the principles and ethics of journalism try and justify themselves by blaming the Umno/BN regime's pernicious Printing, Presses and Publications Act (PPPA).

And indeed they have a powerful point. The PPPA is the fundamental reason why Malaysia's lamentable placing on the Press Freedom index so starkly gives the lie to Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's assertion at the 2010 Press Club-Naza Awards that "I, for one, believe that the Malaysian media is something that we can all be proud of."

Job opportunities outside the mainstream media

But there are job opportunities for journalists outside the mainstream media, and indeed outside Malaysia. And to judge by the standard of work I've seen in some cases, many mainstream so-called 'journalists' would be far better employed in some other field altogether.

azlan As would a great many mainstream 'editors' who, in flagrant contravention of the fundamental principle of the press, the public's right to know, are nothing but pimps paid to prostitute journalism for the

political and criminal purposes of the ruling regime.

In fact mainstream media news editors work so assiduously to cover-up or excuse regime corruption and other crimes against the people that they may well be legally liable to prosecution or civil action as accessories.

But such legal considerations will be a matter for the current opposition when it finally ousts Umno/BN from government and starts to clean-up the residual mess.

Meanwhile, though, as laudable as the NUJ executive council's proposed 'fair reporting pledge' may be in principle, it's liable to be laughably ineffectual in practice.

Especially in light of the fact that, as Anbalagan stated following his announcement of the move, it remains to be ratified by an "extraordinary delegates conference" to be scheduled for "late February or early March," by which time the next general election could well be over.

This delaying of putting the 'fair reporting pledge' initiative into practice smacks to me of playing for time. And thus inevitably raises the suspicion that the pledge is more a regime-friendly ploy than a sincere attempt at media reform.

azlanCertainly the NUJ and its members demonstrated precious little support for its president, Hata Wahari, when he was summarily fired last April by Utusan Malaysia for criticising collusion between the media and Umno/BN.

And at the forum that that gave rise to the 'fair reporting pledge' idea, Anbalagan conceded that "lack of fortitude on the part of NUJ members, as a result of worry about losing their jobs" was the main obstacle to the union's fight for media freedom and ethical journalism.

"Lack of fortitude" is putting it kindly. As far as I'm concerned, any journalist worthy of the name should either have either the guts to stand up for his or her professional integrity, or the good grace to get the hell out of the business.

As Joseph Pulitzer wrote on his retirement in 1907, and I never get tired of repeating, journalists should "always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice and corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news; always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty."

Or, to refer back to that much-abused Code of Ethics once more, the purpose of the profession of journalism is to honour the right of the public to the reporting of the news without fear or favour; not to provide cushy employment to a pack of paid liars and pariahs.

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