

**Malaysia's futile paper chase**  
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COMMENT The recent controversy surrounding the Malaysian government's crackdown on the opposition parties' publications Suara Keadilan and Harakah rekindles the need for some much-deserved attention on the state of press freedom, or the lack of it, in the country.

Under the terms of Malaysia's Printing Presses and Publications Act, it is a criminal offence to possess or use a printing press without a licence from the Home Affairs Minister. Possession or use of an unlicensed press subjects the user to imprisonment for up to three years and/or fines up to RM20,000 plus forfeiture of the deposit for the licence.

The permit for Suara Keadilan, the publication of the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat, lapsed on June 30 and the government has declined to renew it. Harakah, the publication for Parti Islam sa-Malaysia, was issued a demand to show cause why it be allowed to continue to publish. In response, the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat has suspended all publications including the Democratic Action Party's Rocket until the government clarifies the situation.

azlanThe tiff has once again highlighted the negligible regard that the Umno-led government has for alternative voices and, more critically, lack of interest in fostering a civic culture respectful of a relatively free press.

By extension, however, and at a more pragmatic level, this latest attempt to put the squeeze on the alternative print press and other publications actually further exposes the increasing insignificance of the act that is – and has been for years - routinely invoked to crack down on opposition and independent media.

When Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister in 2003, about 97 percent of Malaysian homes already had television sets. So while the overwhelming number of Malaysians were connected to the world via television, the government, through its almost total domination of local electronic media, had a virtual monopoly and control of the public's access to national news.

This reality only augmented the government's already tight grip on the print media, thus rendering itself – and its mouthpieces - as the primary and dominant purveyor of news, information, analysis, and moderator of the public discourse.

The significance of this government domination of the electronic and print media was made all the more apparent given that despite dramatic growth in the number of households getting connected to the Internet, only about 32 percent of homes were wired, so to speak, at the start of the Abdullah era.

#### Heavy-handed responses

So until recently, while Umno dominated the electronic and print media, its impact was especially overwhelming because there was little else to compete with the government's propaganda.

Even as the percentage of homes connected to the Internet reached over 37 percent by 2005, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the number of alternative voices and local media – through the Internet - available to compete alongside the government's news and propaganda left much to be desired.

Under these circumstances, where alternative voices have had to primarily rely on print media, these voices – such as Suara Keadilan and Harakah – have of course been vulnerable to the whims and fancies of the government and its abuse of the Printing Presses and Publications Act for its own political

ends.

Indeed, we have seen other high-profile crackdowns of other publications in recent months. Two especially noteworthy cases were of course the close scrutiny of Barry Wain's book, *Malaysian Maverick*, which resurrected the focus on Dr Mahathir Mohamad's apparent misdeeds during his reign as prime minister, and the banning of books by the local cartoonist Zulkifli Anwar Ulhaque, popularly known as Zunar (below).

NONEDespite these heavy-handed responses to alternative voices, the government must surely appreciate the futility (not to mention the political consequences) of continuing to restrict the space for independent journalism and commentary to exist. As of 2009 it is estimated that over 65 percent of Malaysian homes were connected to the Internet.

Beyond this, not only have we witnessed the mushrooming of various online news outlets and sources competing for our screen time, there has also been an explosion of online citizen journalism and social media, which has – among other things - truly created a new political reality in the country.

We saw, for example, just how critical this new reality had become in the run-up to the 2008 general election as well as in the attempts to gag the other maverick, the popular blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin, by jamming and hijacking his website.

The simple fact is that government-controlled television and print media is no longer the only game in town when it comes to disseminating national news. Of course the government can continue to do what it has always done; that is, present the Barisan Nasional party line and simultaneously lean heavily on alternative voices, but the evidence shows that more Malaysians than ever are looking elsewhere for information, and government-controlled news outlets have become less relevant and powerful during this past decade.

Crackdown bodes well

Which brings us back to the recent crackdown on the print version of publications such as *Suara Keadilan* and *Harakah*. Both these publications are also available online, and it is reasonable to assume that the online versions are now more accessible and available to interested readers than the print version ever was or will be.

So while the government can continue to intimidate alternative print media through its abuse of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Web – and Malaysians' access to it - has made the act essentially impotent as a weapon of political control and propaganda.

azlanTherefore there is good reason for the opposition parties not to feel aggrieved. While in principle PAS and PKR certainly have an argument about being targeted selectively, there is a part of me that wonders if this government crackdown on the publications will only backfire and at the same time have a negligible impact on the opposition's momentum.

On the contrary, the crackdown must bode well for PAS and PKR. It once again actually reminds Malaysians of the government's contempt for freedom of the press, while the growing interconnectedness via the Web is rendering the act increasingly irrelevant.

As more Malaysian homes have become connected to the Internet, it stands to reason that more readers are also going to invariably be able to access not only *Harakah* and *Suara Keadilan* online, but numerous other outlets as well, thus really adding another nail to the coffin of the act as a weapon to censor and control alternative voices.

Malaysians may not have a government that has respected or valued a free press, but it looks increasingly the case, nonetheless, that the government is becoming less capable of preventing a free press and alternative voices from reaching the public.

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