

When the pride of Malay nationalism decays
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COMMENT These days the spectacle of Utusan Malaysia holding out a red bandana to draw out the bull of Malay nationalism would be disquieting if it weren't also abjectly comic in its failure to achieve that end.

This is the kind of failure that ought to induce self-corrective embarrassment, but this former sentinel of Malay nationalism persists in taking leave of its responsibilities as a serious newspaper, which is to inform its readership with fact and enlighten with insight.

From airing the absurd bloviations of some of its columnists to catering to the pyromania of Perak mufti Harussani Zakaria, Utusan - once the pride of Malay nationalism - has shown a deadly earnestness in perverting the *raison d'etre* of newspapers: "All the news that's fit to print", by substituting trash for "news".

After a few poor but idealistic Malays founded the newspaper in 1939 in Singapore, they quickly succeeded in making it the paper of choice for emergent Malay nationalism.

In its leftish inclinations, this strand of nationalism preferred the larger goals of national and economic self-determination to narrow identity politics.

said zahari and nstp utusan mergerBut things changed after 1961 when the independent Said Zahari (left) was removed as editor and Utusan came under the control of Umno.

Politically affiliated ownership of newspapers is a canker which over time encourages arrogance and superciliousness in political masters and servility and mediocrity in editors.

Master-ward relationship

This has been the result of the past five decades of politically aligned ownership of media in Malaysia.

The upshot: political masters only get to know what is simmering on the ground after-the-fact while editors assure their survival by anticipating and confirming their paymasters' false assumptions.

"Under the spreading chestnut tree, I sold you and you sold me," goes the euphonious adage that captures this two-sided deception that occurs in this master-ward relationship.

utusan guan eng sermon 200810Given enough time, this relationship not only conduces to a quality that is not only below the level of the ruling mediocrities, it descends further - to encouraging the forces of reaction which is dreadful especially when you have leaders in the governing hierarchy who are opting for reform.

This is what has happened to the Utusan. Once the proud leader of Malay nationalism, it is now become the harbinger of reaction after that nationalism has achieved its basic goals and the debate has shifted to giving those goals depth, breadth and elevation.

Precisely the kind of shift in the national debate which arises after the polity has made sure that mothers have enough to feed their babies to preventing young mothers from dumping their newborn.

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