

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AT
PERDANA DISCOURSE SERIES 6 “MEDIA AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT” ON
18 APRIL 2007 AT PERDANA LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION, PUTRAJAYA**

Nothing is absolute and there is no such thing as anything absolute. This is the first statement that I would like to make. Absolute freedom does not exist as freedom must always be limited by certain requirements of the society or even the environment. The same rule applies to the media whereby freedom of the media is not absolute.

Secondly, I would like to point out that the instrument is never wrong. For example, if you have a knife, you can use the knife in order to carve very beautiful objects or you may use the knife in order to stab a person. That is your choice. There is nothing wrong with the knife as it is a very useful instrument. However, if you use it wrongly, you will get bad results but if you use it correctly, you will get very beautiful results. So, I do hope that we will bear these two things: that nothing is absolute, that the instrument is not wrong. It's the application that can either cause problems or give benefits. If you remember that then I think the discourse on media and national development will be better understood. As we know, in Malaysia, we talk about the media being controlled.

In fact, if you read foreign press reports about Malaysia, even if they are talking about something else, they never fail to mention Malaysia where the press is controlled. And we cannot deny that the press is controlled. But again control is something that can be used either in a good way or a bad way. Some controls are good, I think our currency control yielded good results, but some controls are bad.

The media obviously plays a very big role in our lives. We all need information in order to do anything in life. We need information because without information we may do the wrong thing. If you go into a very dark place, you hesitate to walk freely because you have no information about what is there in front of you. There maybe some spears directed at you and if you walk right into the tip of a spear, you might hurt yourself.

In order to have information you need light and the media of course brings light to us because it tells us what is there around us and what is happening around us and this enables us to make a decision. In the case of the very dark place that I mentioned earlier,

if it is lighted then we get information about the actual surroundings. This will enable us to make a wise choice whether to proceed forward, or sideways or in any given direction based on our information.

Information is also obviously very important in the affairs of our country. This is because if you know the right information and you are wise enough to study it and decide which one to accept and which to reject, then you can make progress and achieve development. If you live in a country where there is no information, the likelihood is that you will make mistakes. It is because of this need for information that we prefer a country where people are informed and are able to make decisions based on the information. That is why we adopted democracy in this country because before independence we were very feudalistic.

I remember when I was a boy; people told me that politics is not meant for the people but only for the rulers and elites. They are the ones who make the political decisions while we have no say and we shouldn't try to influence politics in any way. What was the result? The result was that the rulers made very bad decisions. Among them was of course to accept the British protection; our rulers did not study the treaties very carefully.

The British interpreted protection as colonization, however the rulers were happy enough to sign the treaties without knowing fully the implications as long as they got a good life. They were given political pensions, provided with palaces, Rolls-Royce and yellow umbrellas. These were very important things to them. However the decision they made was based on improper, incorrect or incomplete information. If they had known what the British were like, I think they would have hesitated. Similarly they would have hesitated in selling Singapore for sixty thousand Ringgit. Selling Singapore for sixty thousand Ringgit was very cheap. Even now, I think, buying a piece of the land that size for sixty thousand Ringgit is quite cheap. In those days that was quite, quite costly but the people who sold Singapore thought they had a good deal. They did not realise, however that they were making a decision based on improper information.

Now in a democratic system, we presume that the majority of the people know what is best for them. However, this assumption that the majority knows what is good for

them may not be always correct. They may have some twisted idea they are a superior race and because they make up the majority, they would choose a government that would represent the majority but be very oppressive to the minority. Therefore, the majority is not always right, but they would be less prone to make mistakes if they were properly informed. But who is going to inform them?

Political parties will of course give information but this information which may be beneficial to the political party, may also be wrong. For example, if the economy is not doing so well, you can always quote figures to show that the economy is well and get people to vote for you. However in society where information is available not only from one source, but from many sources, then the people would be able to make a decision as to which one to believe. In this case, when they make their choices, they are most likely able to make the correct decision compared to if they were fed with information from one source only.

In politics, particularly, all of us will say things about ourselves which make us look very attractive. They, however may not be always correct. If we were to have a democracy that will be beneficial to people, it is necessary the people are given all kinds of information so as to enable them to assess the information and then to make a decision as to whom to choose or what kind of government they would like. If they get information from one source only, it is most likely that they would be wrong. But then, information coming from many sources can be destructive. Some information may also be untrue. People may have certain agenda and because of their agenda, the information may be twisted. Nowadays we have spin doctors who can spin anything. No matter how bad things are, they can be made to look good. That is what doctors are for: if you are sick, they are supposed to make you well. But sometimes if we have wrong information, they can make the information look good.

I was once advised to have a spin doctor because Mr. Blair had a spin doctor when he was elected as the Prime Minister of Britain. A friend of mine in England wrote to me and said that I should have spin doctors. But I have a habit of doing things myself and shooting my mouth so, I do not think that spin doctors will do me any good because they might say something and I might go off and say something else. Therefore, I decided not to have spin doctors.

The main thing is that one should have access to real news and not only the spin doctors feeding you with the wrong information. Others, for certain reasons, may give you the wrong information resulting in you making the wrong decision. This is something that happens all the time. However beyond that, there must also be a limit to the information you receive.

Today, we live in a world where information is readily available. But, they have been abused; abuse of the media in spreading the wrong information. Because of this freedom, people have abused it to the point where it has hurt society. The information that we get today can damage society. Others may not agree with me, but I would like to say this, today we see the spread of crimes especially sexual crimes, rapes and other things connected with rapes. Even a baby or old ladies are not safe from rapists. Why is this so? This is so because information is free to everyone. And if you care to access the internet you can get all kinds of pornography. I am not very computer literate and I thought that it is not easy to get these dirty pictures on the internet but I found that accessing pornography on the internet is the easiest thing in the world.

If we have some control over ourselves, although we may get excited, but we know that we should not do certain things because they are wrong. However, imagine a teenager looking at all these filthy pictures, he may get uncontrollably excited and feels that he has to do something about it. As a result, almost everyday we hear news about sexual crimes committed by young people and not so young people and in order to hide these crimes, they will resort to murder. I am not sure whether it is because today we get more information and data compared to before, but it does seem to me that the crime rate has mounted. The number of crimes involving rapes and murders has increased and we even see unusual crimes being committed.

And I think this is basically caused by people having access to pornography and that is also information. We did not have this information before. When I was a child we could not imagine anything like this at all because everything was kept hidden from us and we lived in a very conservative society where nobody even talked about these things. Although we were curious, there was no way for us to access this information and get excited over it.

So you can see that when information is too free, it can be abused. Some people say, well so what? You have a right to know and that is the most important thing, the right to know and the right to be informed. We had this International Advisory Panel (IAP) for the Multimedia Super Corridor and one lady asked me whether we ever thought of censoring the internet. Although freedom of information is very important, I still think that there should be limits. The promotion of behaviour not acceptable to society which may result in crimes being committed, I think, should be limited and controlled.

When I was in the government, I suggested that we take this up with the United Nation so that anyone who puts pornographic materials on the Internet be arrested and prosecuted and jailed. People might say that we are denying freedom of information. Although this might be true, but it is done for the good of the society as a whole.

So, while we must uphold the freedom of the media to provide information, we must also remember that the media must be responsible. Tell the truth certainly but do not fabricate things in order to achieve certain ends which are not really good for human society.

How does the media play a role in development? I believe that the development of a nation depends upon the quality of the people living in that country. This is extremely important because if you look around, you will find that some people do better than other people, some countries do better than other countries. And we are different, but why? Is it because they are made differently? They have bigger arms perhaps, or bigger brains and they are much better built? But we see that generally the human body is about the same. No matter whether he is black, white or yellow, no matter whether he is Caucasian or Mongol, or Mongolians or Africans or brown people. They are about the same.

However, if you study them, you will find that they have a different way of life, different cultures and different value systems. Some value systems contribute towards development while other value systems obstruct development. So, value systems are very important and it may develop naturally over the years, over the countries. We inherit much of the value system of our ancestors and we absorb them without questioning, that

is our way and culture. But value systems do change over time. If they do not change then it is not possible for human society to progress. Value systems change due to some realisation that such value systems are either good or bad. The value systems which are good should be promoted while those bad ones should be eliminated.

These things do happen throughout the centuries, probably without any conscious effort. But today we have the media and the media can play a role in shaping the value system of the people so that they can succeed in developing their country. The media can play a very big role here because the media can influence and shape the minds of the people. They are able to tell the readers repeatedly by using clever phrases in well-written articles that these are the things that need to be done in order to develop the country.

But for this to happen, the media must of course be conscious of its responsibility and its role. The media however is also influenced by other things like making money. Certain people have invested in the media and want to make money out of it. They teach people that a little corruption is all right or they might tell people that you should not be corrupt which is good for the society.

But this may not sell the papers and may not be interesting to the readers. They may not read or buy and this may result in the media not making money. What will make money? On TV, for example, we hardly see any film anymore about families and things like that. You do not even see "Mind Your Language" anymore. I use to love this series called "Eight is Enough", an American family with eight children, unthinkable now, but it was great fun watching what happened in the family of eight children.

Today you see nothing else except guns blazing away and killing many people, gory scenes and of course to make it more interesting there will be pretty girls. The lesser they are clad the better. It will sell more. I know because this is their freedom, their right. But the fact is that they are being exploited and we tolerate this exploitation of women because we enjoy it. I do not know what the girls think about looking at pictures of their own sex in such positions but I think the men buy them. That is why fewer men go to universities because they are busy studying these magazines. And this makes money.

Therefore, you are torn between the desire to contribute towards human development and the development of the country, the nation and the desire to make money. Those who try to be correct and be morally upright do not make money. They will not get any advertising at all and people will just not buy their newspapers or watch their channel. So, there is a big conflict bugging the minds of media moguls and other people involved in the media. They are caught between the desire to make money which is important in order to stay in business, and the desire to do something good for the society and contribute towards development.

It is very seldom that newspapers can succeed in being popular while at the same time being responsible. So you are subjected to this conflicting demand. As was said just now, it is like having a knife in your hand where you can either use it to carve something beautiful or you can use it to stab a person and kill him. The newspaper and the media is in the same position where you can use it in order to help develop the country or you can use it to make money and in the process, you prevent the country from developing.

We feel that the media can play a very big role but we also feel that it needs supervision to ensure that the media does not become irresponsible. Of course in Malaysia you will try to produce tabloids with a front page similar to that produced in London. Do you know that every front page of the tabloids in England are always decorated with pictures of pretty girls? Scantily clad pretty girls. That is what sells.

But if you try that in Malaysia, I am quite sure that the government will decide that your license might not be renewed at the end of the year. That is why there is a licensing law in this country. This absolutely legal because it does not exceed the legal power of the government. It ceases to be the rule of law if you do something which is not provided by law, for example if you ask a policeman to frighten somebody. This not provided by the law.

If you ask a policeman to stop people from holding meetings or such, it is going beyond the law. But if you apply the ISA, it is still legal because it is provided by the law. It is not an action outside the law. The rule of law also says that the government can

take away your license without a reason. That also would be wrong because laws are made in order to prevent certain misdeeds and so you have to know what the misdeeds are.

There is also a law that would enable the government to arrest people, but you need to have proof. In some countries, you can arrest people without any regard for the law. But in Malaysia, you cannot arrest people by disregarding the law. But these things are quite elastic. Clever people can somehow manipulate the law and do wrong things and still get away with it.

Therefore, when we have a law, publications and the media need to be licensed. It is there for a good reason. I have explained what the possible abuses of the media are and we do not want that. But on the other hand, if we prevent the truth from being publicized, it may result in people making the wrong decisions as they want to know the truth. So, in order to enable the truth to be known, we need to allow the information to be publicized.

In Malaysia, we have many types of newspapers. Many people say that in Malaysia, the newspapers are censored. We have certain guidelines, but the vernacular papers, the Malay papers, the Chinese papers and the Tamil papers enjoy more freedom compared to the English press for some reason or the other. So, if you want to develop the country it is good that you read the vernacular papers and not only the English papers. English papers are very prosperous because they get all the advertisements including governments notices and therefore they do very well. The Malay and Chinese papers may not do so well because they do not get revenue from advertisements but they are likely to give more reports as compared to that reported by the English press.

The most important thing is to have many sources of information. Now we have the internet and the bloggers who publish things that normally the media would need license for. At the moment the bloggers do not have to get any license to publish anything that they want on the internet. However it is very necessary for the bloggers to stick to the truth and not give false information although they are not subjected to the law. In this way the bloggers can play a role in correcting any false information that come

from other sources. If we are allowed only one source of news, we might be misinformed and make the wrong decisions.

Although some countries dispute the fact, Malaysia is a democratic country, elections are held every five years and these elections are generally fair. We are a democratic nation and in a democratic country, information plays a very important role. If you find that you are being fed with one source of information and that source has an agenda of its own and does not mind telling lies in order to support itself, then of course you are going to make wrong decision.

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In Malaysia, it is not only information that influences us in making decisions. Sometimes, we make decisions quite blindly based on our race, our religion and our party. I do not care what really happens but this is our party and therefore I must vote for my party, even though I know that the party is doing something wrong. With this kind of mentality, information will not work very well. So, these are the problems that we face regarding the information which comes from the media. However, if we want to use the media for development we obviously need a responsible media.

There are times when we need to suppress some news and this imposes a very difficult choice for the press. In fact, it also presents a difficult choice for the government because they have to suppress some news because they may lead to disasters in the country. In Malaysia, the ISA was initially used to prevent people from supporting communist ideology. When anything goes wrong, the communist always takes the blame and there is also a tendency to label people who are not communists as communist so that we can take action against them.

I believe that in some countries, people are arrested not because of what they are accused of but because of opposing authority. For example, a newspaper editor can

be accused of being a communist so that he can be arrested and detained under ISA. This is of course wrong as this provision is to ensure that the media is responsible. But, when the government abuses its power by using this provision in order to prevent people from speaking the truth, the country would be facing problems.

The people might be able to get over this but if it is frequently used and wrong information is fed to the people, this might invariably result in a lack of development. And so, the law in Malaysia that requires the media to have a license can be used for the good of the country or can be used to abuse it. In fact, law can be used to perpetuate certain things such as the power of certain leaders.

I do not know whether when I was a Prime Minister, I used such a provision to ensure that I stay in power for 22 years but I am quite sure that many people are quite confident that I did. But, my conscience is clear; if people want to oppose me, they may do so. I am not going to arrest them and abuse the law. Sometimes, however, leaders are afraid that information might undermine their authority and therefore they would try to stop information from being disseminated, either by individuals or by the media.

The media is of course very important because it can reach practically every individual in this country. If they disseminate the right information to the people, this will contribute to the development of the country, but it is not impossible for the media to give the wrong information. Recently, we had a case of a child who disappeared but was finally found after two weeks. The people who found the child were, however, arrested, causing the parents of the child to receive many abusive letters. This news was highlighted by the media and although I am not sure whether this is good or bad but I think that we should be mature enough to judge whether the information given is good or bad.

Although that is not very serious, there are other serious matters which might affect our country and destabilize it. After ISA was used to prevent the spread of communism in Malaysia, we find there is a need to restrain people from talking or promoting racialism. This country consists of three races that are differentiated not just by ethnicity, but also by religion, language, culture and most importantly, economic achievement. And this is in a way a tinderbox; all that you have to do is to get people to

feel envious and jealous of each other because over long periods of time, there will be animosity between the different races and this in turn will bring political instability to the country. We, therefore, must try to prevent this from happening.

This is why the media will have its license withdrawn if it is proven that the media was deliberately causing racial tension in the country. What they are reporting may be quite true but it may not be wise. They have to restrain themselves from telling the truth and instead help to stop the slide towards conflict between the races. If they do not, then they are likely to their license revoked in Malaysia. Sometime, even if the media feels that there is something wrong with the country but it (the issue) will not attract the readers, they publish pictures of scantily clad girls. A responsible media, however, must report the way things are in a country, whether it is good or bad, so that the people can make a reasonable choice when they go for the elections.

This is very important because the media can play a role in ensuring that we have a government that can rule the country and rule it well. This is because indirectly, by choosing the right government, you will help in developing the country. We have seen many countries that failed to develop because they do not have the right government. Although sometimes it is not the government that is wrong but the people themselves, the government plays a very important role in development. The media therefore can help in determining the kind of government that should govern a country and contribute towards national development.

There will be contradicting views. Even in terms of how to develop the country there will be differences in terms of opinion to as what needs to be done. The role of the media in a modern society is very important as it is a very powerful weapon that can either develop or destroy the country. We have to remember that people do not always act rationally. Common sense is one thing that is not very common and people do things which we know are wrong.

Let's take for example a film which I saw recently entitled "Downfall" which was about the last days of Adolf Hitler in Germany. From the film you will wonder how was it possible for the German people to have chosen him as a leader and supported him until the last moment when he committed suicide. Although he was raving mad, the Generals

were still standing erect raising their arms and saying “Hail Hitler”. Here we can see not only that leaders can be irrational, but the people can also be irrational. Hitler’s behaviour was not rational but the people still followed and obeyed him showing that they do behave irrationally under certain circumstances.

In a country like Germany during Hitler’s reign, where people are fed with wrong information all the time, they are not going to be rational. And not only that, although they are being fed with the wrong information, they still agree and follow because to the people the leader must be right. That is why the very intelligent and highly cultured people like the Germans allowed themselves to be led by a mad man for so many years until there was total destruction of Germany.

That happened in a highly civilized and advanced country like Germany, what about a country that is not so advanced? The chances of being misled by the wrong information is greater. If the media does not feed the people with the right information or tell the truth to the people then obviously irrationality will rule the day. For example, even if you know that there is freedom of speech but you fear that something might happen to you should you speak out, then you might choose to play it safe and toe the line. By this you are not helping the country.

The point that I would like to stress here is that although we believe in the freedom of the press but we also believe that there is a limit to that freedom. It is the exercise of that limit that is important. If the authority abuses its power and stops the press from telling the truth, then this will cause the country to suffer. On the other hand, if the press steps over the limit and does something that will not contribute to the development of the country then the press deserves to have their license withdrawn or action taken against it.

We live in a very complex environment legally and we know that we have to comply to the morals of the society, to the beliefs of the society and also be conscious of our responsibilities. In a complex modern society, we would like to see good things happen and so the freedom that we have should not be abused to the detriment of the society. Although we are in the internet age where we can get alternative sources of

information and which provides an avenue to have our views heard, I hope that we will always be conscious of our responsibilities and not abuse the freedom that we have.

Both the government and the press need to be restrained. The press and the government must also discipline themselves and think very carefully whether they are contributing towards the development of the nation or just merely thinking of their own personal or private interests. Resolving conflicting interests is a very difficult thing to do. But, a country that is able to make wise decisions on what can and cannot be abused would be a country that will achieve development fast to the benefit of the people.