



PERDANA DISCOURSE SERIES 6  
MEDIA AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
WITH KEYNOTE SPEECH BY

**TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD**  
HONORARY PRESIDENT  
PERDANA LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION



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# Preface

With a view of deliberating and defining the role of Media, the organizers, Perdana Leadership Foundation together with Institute of Quality and Knowledge Advancement (InQKA), University Technology Mara, convened the sixth discourse series on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 2007. The fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, shared his thoughts on Media and National Development in Malaysia. The discourse was an interactive platform where participants had the opportunity to share and discuss issues relating to the role of the media in sustaining stability for the country. There were also concerns raised on media freedom, responsibility, transparency and objectivity. The participants comprised of university students, academicians, senior civil servants and members of various youth associations.

The discourse started with a keynote address by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, followed by a moderated discussion chaired by Professor Dr Faridah Hassan of UiTM. The discussants were Datuk A. Kadir Jasin (Editor -In-Chief of Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd), Mr. Steven Gan (founder and editor of Malaysiakini), Mr. Jeff Ooi (blogger cum columnist and Prot... Vice President of National Alliance of Bloggers) and Dr. Kamalan Jevaratnam (student representative from International Medical University). Each presenter took the opportunity to reiterate, list and illustrate several key decisions, and the contributions of the past four leaders on Media and National Development in Malaysia.

More than two hundred participants took part in the group discussion to further deliberate on the issues and reaffirm on the important aspects of the topic discussed, such as the role of media and national development during the four premierships; the role of the media and multicultural relationships; media and national language issues; media and human capital development, media and corporate governance. Students from various tertiary institutions played key roles during the sessions as facilitators, scribes and presenters. The outcomes of the group discussion were presented as a closing remark for the discourse.

Editors



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We would like to thank the Board of Trustees, Perdana Leadership Foundation (PLF) and the Vice Chancellor of UiTM, Dato Seri Professor Dr Ibrahim Abu Shah for their continued support and confidence in PLF and InQKA to again come out with this joint publication. In this sixth series, we are very honoured to have Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who shared his ideas and forthright opinions with clarity and intelligence on the topic of Media and National Development in Malaysia. We are also very grateful to have with us personalities, each distinguished in his or her own particular field, such as Dato A. Kadir Jasin, Mr. Steven Gan, Mr. Jeff Ooi, Professor Dr Hajjah Faridah Hj. Hassan and Dr. Kamalan Jevaratnam who have further contributed to our knowledge on the topic. Our gratitude goes to Associate Professor Dr Mustaffa Mohamad Zain, the UiTM Assistant Vice Chancellor for his support and direct involvement in this series. Our appreciation also goes to all the participants who have contributed during the group discussions. The results of the discussions have further enriched the information gathered for documentation. Last, but not least, we would like to thank the staff of Perdana Leadership Foundation, Fellows and staff of InQKA and UiTM for their tireless effort in making this discourse a success. A special thank you also to the transcribers of Perdana Leadership Foundation and friends of InQKA who have helped us come out with this sixth issue of the Perdana Discourse Series.



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# Prologue

Information has become an essential tool in a nation's development process, in enhancing good governance and empowering people around the world. The relationship between the media and government and its influence on democracy and national development is inevitably non-separable. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the emergence of modern nation states, media is an essential aid to development, becoming an important channel for good governance and transparency. Governments all over the world have been concerned with ensuring that the public is informed about their activities and programmes. This involvement has always been translated into the setting up of various bureaus of information by governments and their agencies throughout.

In Malaysia, the mainstream press has been characterised as having stringent political, legal and economic controls imposed. Nevertheless, the mainstream press in Malaysia has gone through a major period of evolution, beginning in the early 1980s, coinciding with the period in which Mahathir Mohamad became the Prime Minister. This is apparently a trend that has extended into the 1990s. The fourth Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad, assumed that the mass media must be organized and utilized as an instrument of leadership to achieve national development goals and the ideals of Rukun Negara while avoiding any divisive public controversies or inciting public sentiment over 'sensitive issues'. Malaysia perceives and practices democracy differently than developed countries. In general, the Malaysian state kept a tight rein on news of information through specific press laws and broader rules relating to perceived sedition, internal security and official secrets.

So far, Malaysia has achieved growth, equity and structural transformation in an ethnically diverse society with the assistance of good governance and transparency that comes partly from the media. Media operations play a major role in shaping the legislation and ordinance in Malaysia sustaining stability for national development. Nevertheless, there are concerns raised on the role of the media towards national development in Malaysia with regards to transparency and objectivity.

A few central questions arise in evaluating the role of media in national development. They are:

1. What is a free press?
2. To what degree is there “freedom of the press” in Malaysia?
3. Can “freedom of the press” go against national interests?
4. Is legislation necessary to ensure media responsibility?
5. How do new media tools such as weblogs and online news portals shape the role and future of journalism, and how do they affect the communication channels between government and citizens?

# III MEDIA AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## KEYNOTE SPEECH

### Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

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 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 surrounding. 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 the 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 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 realize, however that they were making a decision based on improper information.



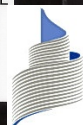
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