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Newspapers' Coverage During the Permatang Pauh By-Election

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani*

* Corresponding author: Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, azizuddin@uum.edu.my

School of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Abstract

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This paper is based on a research about newspapers' coverage during the Permatang Pauh By-Election which was held on 7 May 2015. Five newspapers were selected are the Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian, Sinar Harian, New Straits Times and the Star. This research will determine the coverage of the press in term of biasness tendency toward political parties contested in the by-election. The Permatang Pauh by-election was contested by four candidates, consisting of former opposition leader Wan Azizah Wan Ismail from People's Justice Party (PKR), Barisan Nasional (BN)'s Suhaimi Sabudin, Malaysia's People's Party (PRM)'s Azman Shah Othman and independent candidate Salleh Isahak. This by-election was won by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. However, this research has been able to find the link between ownership with the biasness of print media toward political parties empirically. The finding is that all newspapers were bias toward the ruling BN, except for the Sinar Harian which was balance in its coverage.

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Keywords: Permatang Pauh By-Election; Malaysia; Newspapers; Barisan Nasional; People's Justice Party.

1. Introduction

Permatang Pauh by-election was held for the Lower House (Dewan Rakyat) Parliamentary seat on 7 May 2015. The by-election was held after the seat was vacant. It was due to Anwar Ibrahim who was disqualified as Permatang Pauh's member of parliament after he was found guilty of sodomy in a highly controversial trial in the Federal Court in February 2015. Speaker of Dewan Rakyat, Pandikar Amin Mulia confirmed that Anwar who was the opposition leader in the parliament, lost his eligibility as a federal lawmaker after the Pardon's Board decision to reject the Opposition leader's pardon application (Ng, 2015). In the 2013 general election, Anwar won the seat with a majority of

11,721 votes beating Mazlan Ismail of BN. He polled 37,090 votes to Barisan's Mazlan Ismail who polled 25,369 votes.

Following the nomination day on 25 April 2015, the by-election was contested by four candidates, consisting of former opposition leader and Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail from PKR, BN's Suhaimi Sabudin, PRM's Azman Shah Othman and independent candidate Salleh Isahak. There were reports saying that PRM has denied that Azman Shah Othman is a member of their party. They were 25 centres opened for the by-election in the constituency covering 28 polling districts. The by-election was won by the PKR's Wan Azizah Wan Ismail with a margin of 8,841 votes (Tan, Cheah, Lim, & Thevadas, 2015). Wan Azizah's total votes were 30,316, while BN won 21,475 votes. PRM won with 101 votes and an independent candidate won by 367 votes. After winning the by-election, Wan Azizah said that: "I'm sad (about Anwar). This by-election shouldn't have happened, but life goes on and you have to fight. If you accept that any injustice is a test ... I think God wants to see what you're going to do, how you accept the challenge and meet it" (Channel News Asia, 2015).

The main question in here is that how the Malaysian press played their roles in determining the result of the by-election. The press is very important because electorates were getting their information about the candidates, political parties and issues through the media. This paper will analyse the coverage of print media during the Permatang Pauh by-election. Five daily newspapers were selected which are: the *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *Sinar Harian*, *New Straits Times* and *The Star*. This paper will scrutinise the Malay print media's slant towards political parties during election campaign period to measure the level of biasness of each newspaper respectively.

2. Methodology

Identifying the level of biasness that occurred in the press reporting in the three Malay newspapers studied, this paper will analyse the articles, including news reports, editorial items, opinion pieces, advertisements and letters from the readers, published in these three newspapers during the election period. The period of analysis starts from the nomination day on 25 April 2015 until the polling day on 7 May 2015. This paper will categorise the print media tendencies towards political parties by using five main categories notably positive BN (BN+), negative BN (BN-), positive PKR (PKR+), negative PKR (PKR-) and neutral (N). These tendencies are then summed up to show the total stance of each newspaper respectively whether it favours the ruling party, the opponent or is neutral.

The data or articles were coded using sentence-level content analysis (provide examples of a BN+, BN- and Neutral sentence). This is important especially in determining whether for example the article is coded BN+ or PKR- (it can go either way unless sentence-level analysis can show that, for instance, the article is focusing more for BN+ rather than PKR- after calculation of sentences were made and decided). Through sentence-level content analysis, coders had to calculate the words and sentences before determining the correct category for each article. This process was monitored closely to ensure reliability of the data. Random checking was also performed after getting the preliminary result. Therefore, the process was rigorous in order to get the actual final result or finding of this research. Articles were categorised according to several code lists under two main lists: 1) political background such as names of political leaders and candidates, political parties, organisations, constituencies and

states; and (2) political issues such as race/ethnicity, religion, ideology, social, economy, politics, security, policy, legislation and local issues.

First, the coders identified and collated all articles on the election. Each article was coded based on three elements:

- a) Which political party was the article intended for?
- b) Under what code lists would the article is identified?
- c) Was the article supportive, neutral or negative towards any political party?

For articles in which the coders had difficulty to decide on the category, deliberations were conducted to decide and random checks on articles analysed were performed to ensure consistency and reliability in the coding. As most of the articles culled for analysis were not available online, this research relied of the coders' ability to manually count and code the articles sentence by sentence as specified in the coding lists. Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to calculate the total number and percentage of selected articles in all the categories. The issues highlighted for this paper are only related to election issues during the by-election.

3. Research Findings

Ownerships are important because the owners can and will influence the coverage and reporting of the newspapers. If the newspapers are owned by political parties, definitely those political parties have advantages to dominate the public sphere and public opinion. It is clear that many of the newspapers in Malaysia are directly and indirectly owned by political parties from the ruling BN. For the Malay press, the *Utusan Malaysia* is published by Utusan Melayu (M) Berhad, a company that also owns the *Utusan Melayu* and *Kosmo* newspapers, which has a special relationship with the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the main component party in BN (Azizuddin, 2010). Meanwhile, the *Sinar Harian* is a daily newspaper published in Shah Alam, Selangor. It first hit the newsstands on March 31, 2006 in Kelantan and Terengganu before expanding its distribution to the state of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur in the West Coast in September 2007. The *Sinar Harian* is published by Akhbar Cabaran Sdn Bhd, a company related to the Kumpulan Karangkrak and Ultimate Group of Companies, a major publishing interest in Malaysia. It is not clear whether the *Sinar Harian* has direct linked to either of political coalitions, the BN or opposition parties (Azizuddin, 2013).

On November 4, 2010, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) paid RM1.28 billion for 42.4 per cent of Malaysia's largest-circulation English daily, *The Star*, saying it wanted to reorganize its investments and allow investment arm the Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd to seek other assets. An MCA statement said that the party purchased 313,315,760 shares of the paper's publisher, the Star Publications (Malaysia) Bhd, at RM4.09 a piece, at the prevailing market rate (Azizuddin, 2013).

In 2007, Media Prima Berhad, with closed link to UMNO, acquired all the private television stations including *TV3*, *NTV7*, *8TV* and *TV9*. It also has a 43 percent equity interest in The New Straits

Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad (NSTP), one of Malaysia's largest publishing groups that publishes leading newspaper titles such as the *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* (Azizuddin, 2013).

Several issues we highlighted in the by-election. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) vice-president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said that BN will tackle several issues which were included in the BN manifesto. The manifesto actually consisted of six main aspects of economy, education, health, rural welfare programmes, community development and safety. For instance, the economic aims include preparing a special micro-credit service for small traders in Permatang Pauh, the formation of a small and medium entrepreneur generation centre to attract youth, as well as job opportunities for youths (Sharmugam, 2015). Some of the major plans in other aspects are the construction of a mini rural transformation centre, opening more 1Malaysia clinics and shops, and forming a foundation under the TP1M for the maintenance of low-cost apartments. Zahid said that the BN manifesto was designed based on the needs of the Permatang Pauh constituents and BN's ability and track record (Sharmugam, 2015).

Meanwhile in the media statement at, PKR candidate Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail on 25 April 2015 argued on five key issues, not only for the voters in the constituency, but for all Malaysians (Lim, 2015, p. 1):

- a) As a clear and unmistakable vote, not only behalf of the people of Permatang Pauh, but of 30 million Malaysians, against the continued victimisation and persecution of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, with his second jail sentence and disqualification as an elected MP, and an unequivocal and categorical call for Anwar's immediate release from jail.
- b) Rejection of GST imposed on April 1 as imposing hardships on the people at large, demanding that the 6 per cent tax be abolished.
- c) Lead the country in demanding immediate transparency and accountability for "mother of mother" of all financial scandals in Malaysia, the RM42 billion 1MDB scandals. When the voters cast their vote in the by-election on May 7, it will be more than two months after the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak had ordered the auditor-general to independently verify the accounts of the 1MDB. The voters of Permatang Pauh must vote to demand that the Auditor-General should table his report on the 1MDB scandal to Parliament when it reconvenes on May 18 – or at least, an interim report.
- d) Vote to censure the growing repression in the country, not only with the passage of undemocratic laws like the Sedition Amendment Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act but also the double standards, the persecution and harassment of Pakatan Rakyat leaders and NGO activists particularly at the instance of the twitter trigger-happy Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Khalid Abu Bakar.
- e) To "Save Malaysia" by issuing a clear and unequivocal vote against the failure of the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak in 1Malaysia Policy, with worst racial and religious polarization under his tenure.

Regarding the press coverage in the Permatang Pauh by-election (see Table 1), it is clear that all newspapers were bias for the ruling BN except for *Sinar Harian* which gives a fair and balance coverage for both the BN and PKR. In term of articles, *Sinar Harian* published almost similar coverage for BN+ and PKR+, 33 and 30 articles respectively. *Sinar Harian* gave the highest number of positive coverage for both BN and PKR compared to other newspapers. But in term of negative coverage, *Sinar Harian* gave more to PKR rather than BN with 23 against 8 articles.

The *Utusan Malaysia* however covered the most negative coverage toward the PKR with 57 articles. Meanwhile, the Star provided the highest number of Neutral coverage with 45 articles. What is the most interesting is that *Sinar Harian* is the newspaper that gave the highest number of coverage to the Permatang Pauh by-election with 128 articles.

Table 1. Coverage of Five Newspapers in the Permatang Pauh By-Election

| Akhbar | BN+ | BN- | PKR+ | PKR- | N |
|-------------------|-----|-----|------|------|----|
| Berita Harian | 31 | 0 | 1 | 36 | 7 |
| Utusan Malaysia | 29 | 1 | 0 | 57 | 31 |
| Sinar Harian | 33 | 8 | 30 | 23 | 34 |
| The Star | 20 | 2 | 2 | 18 | 45 |
| New Straits Times | 11 | 1 | 2 | 21 | 12 |

Source: (Azizuddin, 2015)

4. Conclusion

It is clear that the biasness of coverage of newspaper was the main determinant factor for the newspapers to support each political party. Although four of the newspapers selected for this study favoured the ruling BN, they were still unable to assist the ruling BN candidate to win the by-election. This is because Permatang Pauh is known to be the fortress of former opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, husband of Wan Azizah. Sympathy vote was one of the major factors that led Wan Azizah to win the by-election.

It is obvious as well that the *Sinar Harian* newspaper was considered as quite balance in its coverage. Ownership of the newspapers was definitely contributed massively in the coverage of the newspapers. Hence, this research has managed to show empirical data to prove the biasness of these print media toward political parties in Malaysia.

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