

Unilateral Conversion Controversy in Malaysia: A Study on News Coverage by the Star Newspaper

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Abstract

In recent years, Malaysia has been embroiled with religious conflicts that cause fractions among its citizens. Most of the conflicts involved Islam which is generally known as the official religion of the country. Overall, a total of 60% that represents majority of the Malaysian populations are Malay Muslims, while the remaining consists of other ethnics which include Chinese, Indians, and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. In regard to this matter, the minorities tend to have the thoughts that they are marginalized by the government policies imposed on them. Mass media especially the newspapers have been regarded as a powerful tool in disseminating information to the population. Apart from that, it is also known to have a strong influence on the mind of individuals in regard to its reporting on a particular issue. However, it should be understood that they can either help to maintain good relations or cause more harm among the citizens. Hence, it is deemed very important to study the news that has been reported by the media to the populace, especially in the Malaysian context that is widely known to consist of multi ethnics and religions. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to study how a controversial issue was reported by The Star, an English mainstream newspaper in Malaysia in regard to the conversion of M. Indira Ghandi's three children to Islam. Finally, it is worth to note that The Star is owned by a political party linked to the previous regime, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which has been targeting the middle-class citizens as their audiences.

Keywords: Islam and the Media, Media Portrayal, M. Indira Ghandi, Media Messages, Qualitative Content Analysis

Introduction

In the socio-political landscape of the country, it has long been acknowledged that there are various “black” histories in the context of racial and religious relations. In this case, it is worth to note that almost all the conflicts occurred between the minorities of Malaysian population and the majority represented by the Malay Muslims. The major incidents include the racial riots that took place in 1969 between the Chinese and the Malays as well as the disputes that happened at Kampung Medan involving the Malays and Indians. Apart from that, there are also other incidents such as the demolition of Hindu temples, the demonstration of the cow’s head in Selangor, and the laying of pigs’ heads at one of the mosques in Kuala Lumpur [1].

In addition, it should be noted that the racial and religious tensions which have been happening in Malaysia include the issues of racial controversy, disputes over the use of the word ‘Allah’ in the publication of the Christians, issues regarding the implementation of Syariah law, attacks on the churches, and raid on a church controversy which have caused fractions among the Malaysians [2,3,4]. Recently, a case of unilateral conversion of M. Indira Gandhi’s children towards Islam has sparked a great debate among the Malaysians because it involved the conflict between the Muslims and the Hindus.

In the year 2009, a Muslim convert with the name of Muhammad Riduan Abdullah or also known as K. Pathmanathan

converted his three children to Islam from his civil marriage to a Hindu wife, M. Indira Gandhi without her consent before going to the Shariah court to obtain custody over them [5]. Nevertheless, Indira successfully challenged the unilateral conversion in the High Court, but the Court of Appeal ruled against her. However, in January 2018, the Federal Court cleared up the confusion by declaring that the unilateral conversion of the children was unlawful.

In regard to this issue, it is important to emphasize that all the stated conflicts can be deemed worse than the real situation when the media are being irresponsible in their reporting with the purpose of exploiting the issues. In this era of modern technology, it is undeniable that mass media play a significant role in shaping public opinion. According to Van Dijk [6], media can maintain and reproduce social and dominating power relations because it has the special access to publish news discourse. In addition, the mass media also plays a significant role in the production and reproduction of the characteristics of beliefs, opinions, stereotypes, prejudices, and ideologies [7]. Furthermore, mass media is widely known as a significant social agent which has the potential to influence public perceptions [8]. Therefore, it is not surprising that the influence of mass media can have a serious impact on certain

groups through the negative image conveyed in regard to religion, race, and nation.

Mustafa [9] stated that it is very difficult to report religious and ethnic issues in a multi-racial and religious country, particularly in the Malaysian context. Moreover, more issues on religion and ethnicity can occur when the news on religion and ethnicity is erroneously flagged and biased by the media, thus causing the audience to come up with a wrong judgment. Other than that, the media have been acting as a source of conflict between race and religion instead of playing its role as the agent of change.

On another note, it is crucial to understand the discourses presented in the news considering that they are a form of cultural products which does not operate in vacuum, but instead most of them are subtly loaded with certain ideologies with the purpose of structuring the ideas of the dominant groups to the society, thus maintaining the existing hegemony [10]. Said [11] described that the media actually reflects the subject matter of those with a particular interest, especially those in power instead of reflecting on the real issue that is happening.

Therefore, this paper aims to study how a controversial issue is reported by The Star as an English mainstream newspaper in

Malaysia, which in the context of the present study refers to the conversion of M. Indira Ghandi's three children to Islam. As has been mentioned, this study is deemed very important in order to investigate the role played by the media in reporting controversial issue, especially involving Islam. In relation to this, it is highly relevant to conduct a research involving Islam in the Malaysian context considering that Islam has been widely viewed with suspicion and prejudice by the world due to several unfair and unsubstantiated reasons.

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative approach in its investigation regarding the nature of news coverage on unilateral conversion controversy in Malaysia produced by a local mainstream English newspaper. The method adopted in the present study involved performing an analysis on the written texts in the newspaper for the purpose of obtaining a full understanding on how the issue was covered and reported. Apart from that, the present study also carried out an analysis on the news narratives in order to understand how the issue was constructed and portrayed by the newspaper. A total of three-month samples was collected from the month of January 2018 to March 2018 which represent the highlight of the issue,²⁶⁸ just

before the Court issued a final decision on the issue.

The present study chose a daily mainstream English newspaper known as The Star as the means of data collection. In addition, it is worth to note that The Star is a party-owned paper which is associated with the former regime, Barisan Nasional. Another fact that should be pointed out is that The Star is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) that is considered as the third-largest party in the opposition, Barisan Nasional alliance. The Star was chosen due to its distinctive characteristic that is not possessed by other mainstream newspapers which refers to its practice of balanced reporting that provides space for both parties involved in a conflict [12, 13]. Furthermore, The Star which has been targeting middle-class citizens as their main audience have published the highest number of circulation for the English-language press category with a total of 546,553 copies sold in 2015 [14].

Furthermore, their online news portal has become one of the most viewed pages in the past years. The Star Online was the top read news portal in 2014 [15]. As a matter of fact, The Star Online ranked ahead of Harian Metro and Sinar Harian which were respectively placed at the second and third place among other news portals. Meanwhile, the report also listed The Star's website,

www.thestar.com.my at the seventh place from the overall total of 30 local websites.

Findings

In general, it was found that the most published theme by The Star newspaper is “supporting the decision made by the Federal Court” based on the fact that the judges set aside the unilateral conversion of Indira Gandhi's three children to Islam by ruling that consent must be obtained beforehand from both parents. Most sources that were referred by The Star praised and supported the decisions made by the court by classifying that the decision was indeed courageous and wise. The sources mentioned include several important figures from various parties such as Barisan Nasional (BN) especially the MCA, Pakatan Harapan politicians, non-Muslims lawyers, human rights advocate, and the public. However, it was discovered that The Star mostly referred to Muslims references who are moderate and open-minded such as the G25 group, Sisters in Islam, Zainah Anwar, Zaid Ibrahim as well as Siti Kassim who are well known as one of the Muslim liberals.

Nevertheless, The Star also reported several opinions that seemed to disagree with the Court's decision as found in two articles out of the total of 47 articles collected. For example, the Malaysian Muslim Lawyers Association described the decision issued by the court as a “strange” precedent in the light of a previous Federal Court decision on unilateral conversion, which in this case refers to the issue of R.

Subashini vs T. Saravanan. In the case that took place in 2007, the apex court ruled that a single parent could convert a child below the age 18 [16]. On a similar note, there was also a letter written by a public who disagreed with the verdict issued by the Court and sympathized with Riduan Abdullah considering that his battle is crucial for the rights of all fathers in Malaysia [17].

In addition to the theme discussed above, there was a lot of report produced by The Star on the struggle of M. Indira Ghandi personally [18, 19]. In this context, it is clear that The Star used the “human interest” value in its reporting by highlighting the sufferings and the joy of Indira’s family. More importantly, Indira was portrayed as a fighter, a loving mom, and a pious lady. Apart from that, she was hoping that she would be able to meet her youngest daughter in the near future considering that her daughter is currently with her ex-husband who has gone missing.

Last but not least, The Star also reported on the willingness of the authorities to find and arrest Riduan Abdullah who is the husband of Indira Ghandi [20]. The police especially the IGP, Tan Sri Dato’ Sri Mohamad Fuzi Harun has repeatedly guaranteed that they will seek and arrest Riduan Abdullah immediately and expect the help of the community to arrest him by providing clues to the police in the effort to track him down. Moreover, he also provided assurance to unite Indira with her youngest daughter as soon as possible. Finally, the police also urged the public not to take this

issue for granted considering that it is a sensitive issue and can trigger racial tensions among the citizens.

Discussion

The findings of the present study clearly showed that The Star’s reporting generally supports the court’s verdicts by upholding and respecting the constitution of the country. Moreover, it is very obvious considering that most of the sources mentioned that the court has made the right decision based on the provisions stated in the constitution of the country. The findings of the present study are consistent with the findings of Eichenauer [21] which states that The Star is very concerned about maintaining the harmony among the public through its reporting, including the importance of respecting the constitution of the country.

According to the sources utilized in this study, it can be seen that The Star also referred to politicians from Pakatan Harapan (current government party) such as Dr. Mahathir and Mujahid Rawa in obtaining their comments and opinions on this issue despite the fact that The Star is owned by the MCA which is linked to the previous ruling regime. However, The Star still provides space for views contrary to the majority opinion especially from pro-Islamic groups even though The Star is seen to support Indira Ghandi on this issue. Apart from that, The Star is seen to have a modest approach in reporting the issues on Islam by choosing to refer to open-minded and liberal Muslims in commenting on this issue such as the G25,

Zainah Anwar, Sisters in Islam, and Zaid Ibrahim. More importantly, they are known as those who support the spirit of goodwill among different races and nations. As stated by Eichenauer, The Star often referred to a variety of views and opinions on an issue regardless of one's political background.

The findings are also in line with the study of Yang and Md Sidin [22] which stated that The Star tends to frame on an issue based on "human interest". In addition, it can be seen that The Star reported about Indira Gandhi's personal life in detail. In this case, the way Indira chose to celebrate her victory was also given the elements of humanity in the story, and she was described as a caring mother, steadfast, and very obedient to God. Finally, the findings of this study also showed that it is in agreement with several previous studies as The Star referred to the police as one of the major sources in obtaining reliable information for their reporting. The police is generally known to have the authority and power in making decisions, which explains why it has been the media first choice as a source of news. The Star utilized the police as a news source to report on Riduan Abdullah's search and their youngest daughter who is still with Riduan. Finally, The Star also used the police as a source to ask the public not to sensationalize the issue for the purpose of preventing any conflicts in the multi-religious society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that The Star

newspaper had given a significant importance on maintaining the harmony between multiracial and multi-religious society in reporting this issue. It is also important to note that it has a target group of multiracial and middle-income group considering the fact that it is an English-language newspaper. Hence, it comes to no surprise that the spirit of unity has been the main thrust of The Star reporting in regard to this controversial issue.

Furthermore, The Star continued to report by taking into account the diversified views and opinions that either support or against M. Indira Gandhi in the context of this case. The Star was also seen to play its role as a medium for society to obtain diverse information because it actually published letters written by the public, thus making it as a platform for the public to express their views on this issue. Therefore, the press media in Malaysia is expected to play an important role in the current political scenario for the purpose of preserving the relationship among the citizens of Malaysia through a diversified view, which is expected to maintain the relationship among the citizens of Malaysia.

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