

Minority Group and the Media: Media Coverage on Shia Muslims in Malaysia

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Abstract. Malaysia has always been concerned about harmony given that the population is comprised of various races and religions. However, there have also been a huge number of individuals who perceive that they are often marginalized and subjected to excessive action by the Malaysian government. The majority of Malaysian population practice Islamic Sunni and reject any other Islamic teachings including Shia as stated by the Malaysian government. In this context, Shia Muslims in Malaysia have been faced with numerous challenges, including being widely tracked by Malaysian religious authorities for the purpose of minimizing the spread of Shia teachings throughout Malaysia. Nevertheless, the actions taken by the religious authorities have been criticized by several parties, especially the international media and human rights activists. Therefore, this study aims to examine the depiction of Shia Muslims in Malaysia that is reported in the Malaysian media, specifically by a daily Malay newspaper popularly known as Sinar Harian which is owned and linked to the current government's party. Finally, another purpose of this study is to look at the role played by the newspaper in reporting the minorities in Malaysia, in which in this context refers to the Shia Muslims in Malaysia.

Keywords: **Shia Muslims, Media Portrayal, Malaysian Media, Minority Groups, Discourse Analysis**

1. Introduction

Generally, media is known to play a major role in providing information to the public about any event that is happening around them. Montgomery expressed that the media does not necessarily reflect the actual occurrence, but rather the subject matter of the interests of those in power[1]. According to Said, the mass media and public opinion do not exist naturally which seems to be a result of several factors including the history, social conditions and institutions of a particular country[2]. Hence, the media has a high tendency to favour certain views and representations of certain parties in their reporting.

In addition, the media is a significant social agent and has the potential to influence public perceptions towards minority groups[3]. In most cases, their influence can have a serious impact on minority groups considering the stress posed onto them as a result of being marginalized. This is more likely to happen when most often than not they are implied to have foreign

characteristics that do not fit to the norms of the local community.

A journalistic organization known as *The Ethical Journalism Initiative* has also expressed concerns about the role of the media which has been observed to be prejudice, stereotyping, and hateful towards certain religions, ethnic groups, and minorities. On top of that, a few journalists pointed out that they do not practice the right ethical ethics when reporting on these groups. In relation to this, any unethical reporting on immigration, globalization, economic uncertainty, and cultural diversity has further increased the negative perceptions about certain minority groups around the world[4].

Therefore, this study is deemed very important in investigating the role plays by the media in reporting on minority groups. This is crucial considering that the representation of minority group in the media and how the news is capitalized have a huge effect on society's perceptions towards the minority. In the context of this study, Shia Muslims is considered as minorities because majority of Muslims in Malaysia are from the Sunnis

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background. Hence, it is crucial to understand how news related to Shia Muslims is being presented to the audiences. Overall, these in turns help to shape public opinion and public policy which then becomes a national concern.

2. Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the nature of news coverage on Shia Muslims in a local Malay newspaper. This method involves analysing the written texts in the newspaper to have a full understanding on how Shia Muslims are covered and reported. The study will also include the analysis of news narratives in order to understand how issues on Shia Muslims are constructed and portrayed by the newspaper. The three-year samples were collected from the year 2013 to 2016 which consist of several controversial cases involving Shia Muslims in Malaysia, including several raids by the authorities on the gathering and banning of the books on Shia's ideology.

The present study has chosen a daily Malay newspaper particularly known as *Sinar Harian* as the means of data collection. *Sinar Harian* was established under *bumiputra* owned publisher with the best achievements in Malaysia known as the *Karangkrak*. The purpose of selecting *Sinar Harian* is due to its distinctive characteristic that is not possessed by other mainstream newspaper which allows both parties to freely express their notion and stick to their belief, thus enabling a balanced reporting to be produced. This is clearly an effort of adhering to the current trend of media that emphasizes on the soundness of news reporting[5].

Furthermore, their online news portal has become one of the most viewed pages for the past years. This is the result of "objective and independent" reporting which complements the main objective of *Sinar Harian* that is to promote journalistic integrity. Hence, it has managed to attract more loyal readers based on the evidence of more than 35 million-page views monthly over the years, thus turning the online news portal as one of the most popular pages in the country⁶. It would be very interesting to determine whether *Sinar Harian* really practices fair and objective reporting as has been proclaimed, especially on issues involving justice to minority groups such as Shia Muslims in Malaysia.

3. Discussion

In this case, it is important to note that social entitlement was once given to Shia Muslims in this country, which also led to the acknowledgement of their

existence by the Malaysian law and government but only for the period of two years from 1984 to 1986⁷. However, a turning point to this could be witnessed in 1996 whereby the Islamic Sects Council of Malaysia started to regard Shi'ism as a diversion from the true Islamic practice in Malaysia. Hence, the change has allowed legal discrimination against Shia Muslims which had worsened their situation in Malaysia[7].

Following the discrimination, the Malaysian government made it as clear as possible that all Muslims in Malaysia are supposed to be subjected to Sunni school of thoughts only⁷. Hence, part of the changes also expressed that the teaching that tend to promote other school of thoughts through books or other forms of media is strictly prohibited. As soon as the new law regarding Shi'ism was announced, majority of the states in Malaysia were observed to implement the change, thus adding more problems to the Shias in Malaysia.

The changes did not just stop there when the situation was turned into a bigger issue with the involvement of authorities that were put in-charge by Malaysian governments to publicly oppose anything related to Shi'ism[7]. Hence, there was no longer public freedom for Shia Muslims as a result of constant monitoring by the Malaysian intelligence and security agents.

In relation to this, the safety of Shia Muslims was also threatened when the police or the Salafist/Wahhabist extremists was authorized to ruthlessly abolish any assembly conducted by the Shia Muslims[7]. As part of the new law, conversion from any Islamic sect to Shi'ism is strictly prohibited and the individual will be prosecuted under the law.

More importantly, Shia Muslims have no rights to keep any written instrument on Shi'ism in their. These fatwas have triggered the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) which is the majorly favoured political party in the Malaysian parliament to fight for the establishment of a new law that states Sunni'ism as the only Islamic sect in Malaysia[7].

Media Prima controls several of the nation's biggest newspapers market and it is widely known as the media investment wing of the UMNO which is the dominant party in the BN coalition⁸. *Media Prima* dominates the *New Straits Times* (English language newspaper) as well as *Harian Metro* and *Berita Harian*. Apart from that, UMNO also holds controlling shares in the *Utusan Group* which is responsible for *Utusan*, a daily Bahasa Melayu publication that is widely perceived as an UMNO mouthpiece, including a daily newspaper, namely *Kosmo!* and as well as several weeklies[8].

Hence, it is safe to say that most of the major newspapers in Malaysia are being owned or linked to the current government. As a result of the ownership, news coverage presented to the audience are only in favour of only one party and tend to support the policies

made by the government without considering any oppositional views[9]. Therefore, any reporting that is against the current status quo will not be published, thus preventing the readers from getting a full picture of a story or issues that are discussed by the media[10].

According to the findings, a total of 99 news articles on Shia Muslims and Shia's teaching have been published by *Sinar Harian*. On top of that, it is worth to note that there several other themes written in the discourse of Shi'a despite the common news on raids by the authorities on Shia Muslims' gatherings and banning books on Shia's teachings. First, Shia's teachings are reported to be deviant and not in accordance to the true teaching of Islam. For example, Shia accepts the notion of contract marriage (mut'ah marriage); being disrespectful towards women, and the representation of women as sex objects. Moreover, Shia teachings have been said to be born from Jewish religion which tend to violate actual Islamic religious laws based on certain arguments given by the authors who are religious scholars with Islamic Sunni background[11],[12].

In addition, Shia teachings have been described to cause violence as well as turbulent in Middle East such as Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Hence, it further elaborates the main excuse reported by the newspaper to why Shia's teachings should be rejected by Malaysians[13]. Furthermore, most of the news articles published during the three-year period were in the form of a call by various quarters stating that the Shia's teachings need to be prevented and closely monitored by the government, while existing laws need to be empowered by the government to strictly prevent the ideology from spreading to Muslims in Malaysia[14],[15],[16].

The *Sinar Harian* newspaper also attempts to create anxiety and fear among the audiences by providing various labels to Shia's teachings which describe it as "misguided," "dangerous", and "illegal" to be practiced in Malaysia[17],[18],[19]. In addition, private and public universities have also been urged to monitor foreign students who allegedly try to spread Shia's teachings to the local students[20],[21],[22]. The news articles utilised sources from the state Muftis as well as comments from the religious authorities which suggests that the newspapers really rely on government officials as their main source of news.

Finally, the issue on Shia was also being politicized by political parties, especially the UMNO leaders. For example, former PAS (an opposition party in Malaysia) Vice President, Muhammad Sabu or better known as "Mat Sabu" was said to be practicing Shia's teachings. Following it, the Home Ministry under Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi at that time had clearly urged Mat Sabu to be executed by the authorities[23].

Nevertheless, Mat Sabu was also given the room to deny the accusation by giving his views and explanations related to the matter to the

newspaper[24],[25]. However, it could be argued that the coverage by *Sinar Harian* to link PAS with deviant teachings merely succeeded by taking into account the extent that PAS had to issue a hard statement on their stand related to the issue[26]. On top of that, they also made a statement by issuing a warning to fire the party's members who are believed to be practicing Shia's teachings.

4. Conclusion

Generally, it can be concluded that *Sinar Harian* is still practicing news reporting that tent to support the existing status quo by clearly labelling Shia as misguided, illegal, and harmful to the country in line with the government's policy. Thus came the idea if the news with a different context that is preached by *Sinar Harian* correspond to reality or prone to exaggeration as news about the natural environment, social environment, etc. Moreover, Shia Muslims believers were denied space and opportunity to explain about their religious beliefs in the newspaper.

As a country that practices constitutional democracy, the newspapers should act as a platform for the people to express their views and opinions regardless of their religious/ethnic background. However, the situation is still not yet materialized in the Malaysian context. Perhaps, this could be one of the reasons to why the middle-class citizens started to turn to alternative media as their preference to get a more objective and balanced news.

Therefore, the mainstream media in Malaysia is supposed to take into account all of the discussed factors for the purpose of improving their reporting on minority groups, especially in voicing the rights and voices of the marginalized groups. Moreover, it is unjust for the minority groups such as the Shia Muslims in Malaysia to be oppressed by the media as they are also part of Malaysian population. Finally, it is hoped that the voices and struggles of this minority group will be heard and fought by the media in Malaysia particularly the press, with the purpose of promoting the betterment of Malaysia.

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