

# **HEATING UP THE BATTLE: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE SOURING OF MALAYSIA-INDONESIA RELATIONS**

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## **Introduction**

The media, especially the press and television have become powerful instruments in shaping public opinion on domestic and international issues. The current disharmony in Malaysia-Indonesia bilateral relations is an example of the importance of mass media in influencing the perception of people about one another. For most people in the region, the mass media are the major sources of information about current events, people and politics. The advent of new forms of communications has made it easier for peoples to get in contact with one another and to disseminate information and an amazing speed, even if the information is not always accurate. Besides the current spat in Malaysia-Indonesia bilateral relations, the Malaysia-Singapore conflict in 1998 over contentious issues, fought mainly in the media of both countries also highlights the important role of the media in international diplomacy. The media in general can be considered as a factor to be reckoned with in international relations because of their ability to influence and shape public opinion, which in turn can affect policy makers. This paper explores the role of the Indonesian media in framing issues of contention in Malaysian-Indonesia relations and in influencing the perception of the Indonesian public towards Malaysia. It will also discuss the ways in which both the Malaysian and Indonesian governments respond to such trend and the implications on the future of the so-called special relations between Malaysia and Indonesia based on the concept of '*bangsa serumpun*' and the idea of "*abang-adik*" relationship.

The Indonesian press prides itself in being “free” with a wide range of newspapers and newsmagazines. The more important of these newspapers have strong networking among the population and enjoy large readership. It is argued that with such independence and being numerically strong, they are more effective in moulding public opinion and that the government find it to control. The Malaysian media on the other hand do not claim to be absolutely free, in fact readily admit that they do practice ‘self-censorship’ for the sake of national interest. If we agree with war experts’ postulation that any future war would largely be a war of the mind,<sup>1</sup> then the mass media will assume an important role as ‘weapons of mass persuasion’ in international politics. It remains to be seen however if policy makers, in this case Malaysian and Indonesian authorities are persuaded by the mass media in deciding policies towards each other.

### **Malaysia and Indonesia: The Same, Yet Different?**

Malaysia and Indonesia belong to that part of Southeast Asia that straddles the Malay Archipelago, also known as the Malay World, inhabited by more than 250 million people with many commonalities. They share a common language, Malay, which has evolved into national languages and acquired official names, Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia respectively. In addition, the majority of the population of both countries are Muslims. Bound by shared history, common language, cultural, ethnic and religious affinities, Malaysia-Indonesia relationship has often been described as siblings relations characterised by the ‘*abang-adik*’ (elder brother, younger brother) syndrome. Both countries have often evoked the existence of a special relationship between them within the context of ‘*bangsa serumpun*’ (belonging to the same racial stock). However, it must be said that the acceptance and appreciation of such concept is different in both countries. Malaysia as the ‘younger brother’ has always been more enthusiastic and earnest in its appreciation of the concept of ‘*bangsa serumpun*’ in its bilateral relations with Indonesia. In Malaysia, the general understanding of the concept is that the two countries have

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Rajib Ghani ‘Media Warfare: A Global Challenge in the 21st Century’. *Journal of Media and Information Warfare*. Volume 1, June 2008, p.2

a lot in common in terms of society, people, language, culture and history to the extent that these are ties that bind them transcend modern political boundaries and differences. Malaysians, especially the Malays tend to speak fondly of and are hopeful that their common roots with Indonesia may generate greater understanding and cooperation between the two countries and their peoples. It cannot be denied that there are many manifestations of such cooperation and goodwill, especially in the fields of culture, arts and language. In Malaysia for example, there is a favourable acceptance of Indonesian singers, artists, films among the old and younger generations. Indonesian films, tele-movies (*sinetron*), dramas, pop-songs, evergreens are popular in Malaysia. Even the folk song ‘*rasa sayang*’ which Indonesia claims unique ownership has been for a long time a part of Malay culture that people never thought of where it originated or how it came to be in Malaysia. So are *wayang kulit* (shadow play) and *batik* which cannot be dissociated with Malays. Malaysians see them as common cultural heritage and make no claim to exclusive rights over them. At the same time, they do not hesitate to acknowledge credits when they are due. An example is the recognition of the beauty and superior quality of the Indonesian *batik* or that the Indonesian *wayang* is more elaborate and refined. However, such acknowledgement and admiration do not mean that these cultural heritages belong exclusively to Indonesia.

Politically, the idea of ‘*abang-adik*’ in Malaysia-Indonesia relations stemmed from the fact that Indonesia is bigger, stronger and was born earlier than Malaysia. Many Malay intellectuals, independence fighters and ‘progressive’ individuals of the old generation had Indonesian connections through formation, education and intellectual formation and were awed by Indonesian cultural greatness. Students of Malay literature read Indonesian poets and writers, despite Sukarno’s disastrous *konfrontasi* against Malaysia. In the late 1960s and the 1970s Malaysia received Indonesians as teachers and lecturers in its educational institutions in its effort to promote teaching in the Malay language. Thus, Malaysians have always looked to Indonesia for cultural and intellectual inspiration. Politically and as a nation, Malaysia looked to Indonesia as its natural friend, if not a potential ally. In Malay culture,

the younger brother has an obligation to show respect and tolerance to the elder brother in many aspects of its actions and interactions. This behaviour was manifested by Malaysia in many occasions in its relations with Indonesia. Perhaps one of the best examples of such obliging attitude was in the 1990s when Malaysia's then Minister of Information hurried off to Jakarta to apologise for the 'accidental' footage shown on Malaysian TV of Indonesian involvement in Timor Timur. For a long time such obligation was considered 'natural' and expected of the smaller neighbour. However, over the years, the two countries developed differently internally and have different priorities in their international interactions. This was especially so under the leadership of Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister of Malaysia where his vision combined with long years of rule enabled the country to consolidate its own identity and emerged as a model for a progressive Muslim nation and an economically successful developing country. Perhaps Dr Mahathir unintentionally created a new attitude on the part of Malaysia vis-à-vis Indonesia when several years ago he responded a question posed by the press in Jakarta. To the question of "are you little Sukarno", Dr Mahathir humbly replied, "no, I am little Mahathir."

To Indonesia, the concept of '*bangsa serumpun*' has less utility and sentimental value in comparison to its acceptance by Malaysians. While the understanding of '*bangsa serumpun*' in Malaysia is based on its 'Malayness', this idea does not find resonance in Indonesia. Since independence, Indonesia has constructed its own "Indonesian identity" politically based on Pancasila and culturally built upon the strength of various indigenous cultures of the huge, but dispersed island nation. Physically, culturally and politically, the Indonesian nation extends from 'Sabang to Merauke', designating vast territory from east to western part of the archipelago. Still, the centre of Indonesia has always been Java. Over the years, its cultural and political dominance permeated throughout the republic. In this process of nation-building in Indonesia and the blending of various cultures, it is difficult to locate 'Malayness' as the core culture of Indonesia. While the concept of '*bangsa*' (race) in Malaysia has always had a twin identity of 'Malay and Islam', this is an alien idea in Indonesia. Therefore, when Malaysians speak of '*bangsa serumpun*', the centrality of it is the idea

of '*rumpun Melayu*', or the Malay stock, which does not correspond to the Indonesian understanding of the concept. Nevertheless, it must be said that in the past, because of the close cultural and intellectual ties with Indonesia that had been forged among the older generation, the idea of '*bangsa serumpun*' lingers on among certain segments of the population of both countries. There existed a feeling of solidarity of having a common cultural roots and speaking the same language. However, as both countries developed differently to suit their own domestic constituencies and national interests, they grew apart. It is not an exaggeration to say that while Malaysia retains the nostalgia of coming from the same roots, partly due to its own internal political dynamics, Indonesia grew out of it and found the concept of no practical or sentimental utility. Nevertheless, it did not publicly disavow attachment to it, as it remains a politically convenient tool in bilateral relations between the two neighbours. It is argued that the discrepancy between the understanding and acceptance of the idea of '*bangsa serumpun*' in the two countries has caused serious misunderstandings on cultural issues that derail Malaysia-Indonesia bilateral relations. The Indonesian media aggravated the situation through their lack of understanding of the historical and cultural ties between the two nations, aided by other factors.

### **Media and The 'Guidance' of Public Opinion**

It is without doubt that the current crisis in Malaysia –Indonesia relations is largely shaped and informed by the media, especially by the Indonesian press. Some even attributed the main cause for the strains in their bilateral relations to the manipulations and disinformation by the press, emboldened by its newly found freedom. Indonesian have reasons to celebrate this freedom of press, sometimes dubbed as an unintended consequence of democracy. For a long time under the Old Order, freedom of press, speech and association was kept under tight control of the state. It was not until the fall of Suharto government in 1998 that Indonesia began its transition to democracy, opening the way for freedom of expression and political association. The new environment gave rise to different political parties, interest groups,

strengthening of civil society and a proliferation of mass media especially newspapers. There is a mushrooming of newspapers and newsmagazines in Indonesia, especially in Bahasa Indonesia. Some of them such as the *Kompas*, *Jawa Pos*, *Republika*, *Poskota*, *Suara Karya* and are considered as national newspapers and are easily available. Some of 'Jakarta' popular papers include the English language *Jakarta Post*, *Sinar Harapan*, *Suara Pembaharuan* and *Tempo*. At provincial level, there are newspapers such as *Bali Post*, *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, *Sinar Indonesia Baru*, *Banjarmasin Post*, *Pikiran Rakyat* and many others. Altogether, they provide perspectives on Indonesia, focussing on issues pertaining to Indonesian society, politics and economics. They also provide perspectives and news of the outside world to Indonesians.

The press has become a vital part of Indonesian democracy; not only because of its numerical strength and large readership, but also because of the freedom it enjoys vis-à-vis the state. It is uncharacteristically free to criticise the government or to promote political rivals, at the same time takes its social responsibility seriously. Newspapers and news magazines in Indonesia are also used as platform for debates on a wide spectrum of issues by academics, public intellectuals, politicians, civil society groups and ordinary citizens. During the time of Suharto, the Indonesian press was described as a "free and responsible press" or "Pancasila press". Essentially such terms are designed to reflect the kind of relationship with the state where the state had effective control of the press. Formally this was exercised through the renewal of permit of publication by the state. This was rescinded when Habibie came to power in 1998. Since then the press became free, even to the extent of becoming 'irresponsible' such as seen in the current bashing of Malaysia to the extent of souring the relationship between the two countries to a level unseen since Sukarno's *konfrontasi* against Malaysia from 1963 - 1966. Much more than in Malaysia, the press in Indonesia today can be considered as an influential 'opinion shaper' because of that freedom.

While Indonesian media coverage of domestic issues are usually full of vitality, with a rich diversity of content and political positions, their reporting and analysis of foreign events are more 'monolithic'

in the sense that there is a unity of position. This is especially so on the information and analysis regarding the contentious issues in Malaysia-Indonesia relations. Despite the different undercurrents of the Indonesian media, their interests and those of the groups they represent appear to coincide with that of the government. In spite of the insistence of Indonesian officials that the state cannot be held responsible for what the press writes and that the Indonesian government cannot do much to control their media, it is also to the advantage of the government to go along with the animosity shown by the Indonesian press towards Malaysia. The inability or the unwillingness of the state to control the press in instigating and popularising the anti – Malaysian sentiment has led many to believe that this attitude is not contrary to government position on contentious issues that mar the bilateral relations of the two countries. It is an acknowledged fact that press, “like all other institutions cannot enjoy absolute freedom”.<sup>2</sup> There are limitations to that freedom. Even if the press is politically free from state control, there are other factors that can limit its freedom such as economic, cultural and the preferred political orientation of the editor or newspaper owner. So when Indonesian newspapers carry news and pictures of anti Malaysian demonstrations, one could pose the question as to whose interests do these demonstrators represent? Do they come out spontaneously to demonstrate? It is also known that in Indonesia demonstrators are willing to go out into the streets for a few thousand rupiahs or free meals, what more fuelled by the spirit of ‘crush Malaysia’. Do the media present issues fairly and accurately without the intention of manipulating public opinion?

### **Media Treatment of Crucial Bilateral Issues**

To begin with, what are the issues that derailed Malaysia-Indonesia relations resulting in heightened anti Malaysia sentiments in Indonesia? As highlighted by the Indonesian media, Malaysia was accused of stealing Indonesian cultural heritage, this time involving the Balinese ‘Pendet’ dance which was used in a video clip to promote Malaysian tourism. It was later revealed that a production company, KRU was responsible for producing the documentary with the 30 second video

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Negrin, *Politics and the Mass Media in Britain*, Routledge, London 1996, 2nd edition p. 23

clip of the Balinese dance. After protest from Indonesia, the company responsible for airing the program, Discovery Channel wrote to Indonesia's minister of culture and tourism to clarify the matter and apologised for the blunder.<sup>3</sup> Malaysia for its part has also explained to the Indonesians that it was not involved in the affair, but this failed to mollify the exceptionally strong anti – Malaysian public sentiment in Indonesia. Many in Malaysia wonder how a seemingly small and trivial matter could rock bilateral relations between two countries that professed to share cultural, linguistic affinities and historical experience.

The issue of Malaysia 'stealing' Indonesia's cultural heritage is not new. In 2007, Indonesia accused Malaysia of stealing Indonesia's cultural heritage such as batik, wayang kulit, the folk song of *rasa sayang*. They even claimed that the origin of Malaysia's national anthem was Indonesian. Indonesians also object to the use of the term "Indon" which they consider as derogatory to refer to Indonesians, especially those living in Malaysia. In recent anti-Malaysian demonstrations, demonstrators in Jakarta burnt Malaysian flags and pelted rotten eggs into the embassy compound. Besides the cultural issue, other issues identified as standing in the way of cordial relations between the two neighbours are Indonesian migrant workers (Tenaga Kerja Indonesia-TKI) and the dispute over Ambalat. In the current crisis, however, it is the cultural issue that seems to be the catalyst for the revival of antagonisms between the two countries where the 'battle' is mainly fought in the media. Malaysia is pictured as arrogant, insulting, insensitive towards Indonesia. Malaysia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dato Anifah Aman visited Jakarta recently to explain the 'cultural' issue, but his explanation was rejected by the Indonesian media.<sup>4</sup> The Minister's disappointment with the Indonesian media was widely reported in the Malaysian media with the effect of creating further disenchantment of the Malaysian public with the way the Indonesian media sought to prolong the anti-Malaysia sentiment. The Indonesian media remained unappeased even after Malaysia's high level official effort to resolve the matter was attempted. Malaysia seemed to have lost its pride in this battle of the media.

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3 BERNAMA, August 25 2009

4 New Straits Times, September 26 2009.

The government in Jakarta only began to voice its concern over the anti Malaysia sentiment when the Malaysian government summoned the Indonesian ambassador in Kuala Lumpur, Da'i Bachtiar following reports that Malaysians in Indonesia were threatened. The Ambassador also gave the assurance to the Malaysian government that Jakarta would take all necessary action to ensure the safety of Malaysians.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this, pictures of Indonesians '*sweeping orang Malaysia*' (sweeping Malaysians) were widely circulated in Indonesia but the Indonesian government did not seem to be overly concerned about the impact on its relations with Malaysia. Reports from Jakarta revealed that it was only after the Malaysian government protested over the threats towards Malaysians that Indonesian media became more guarded in its anti Malaysia campaign.<sup>6</sup> This is somewhat contrary to earlier insistence of the Indonesian officials that there was nothing the government could do to rein in their free press, even for the sake of putting bilateral relations back on track.

### **The Malaysian Response, Sort Of.**

In contrast to the Indonesian media that seem to be in control of orientating and shaping the views and actions of their government and citizens, the Malaysian media response to 'provocative' reports and presentation of events and issues remained restraint. In fact, initially, Malaysian media sought to reduce tension by downplaying the anti-Malaysian movements in Indonesia and trying to appeal to the sentiment of 'fraternal' relationship between the two peoples. Typically, a Malaysian journalist entitled an article regarding Malaysia-Indonesia relations as "*hubungan benci tapi sayang*" (love-hate relationship) in an attempt to provide reassurance that the current spat between the two neighbours is a part of that loving relationship between the nations of the 'same stock'. Even if such attitude is to be expected considering the habitually low self esteem of Malaysia vis-à-vis Indonesia, the overt appeasement behaviour in the face of Indonesian press belligerent tone towards Malaysia angered many as they see this insulting to the national self-esteem.

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5 New Straits Times 10 Septemebr 2009.

6 Utusan Malaysia 12 September 2009

This is especially so when such expression of sentimental ties is hardly manifested in the Indonesian media treatment of Malaysia. While this does not necessarily indicate Indonesia's total detachment from the concept of 'bangsa serumpun' in its relations with Malaysia, it is reflective of the indifference, if not the increasing disconnection between the elites of both countries. Despite being close neighbours, it must be admitted that there have been little intellectual and cultural interactions between the elite and 'enlightened' groups of both countries. Mutual ignorance about each other persists; there seems little enthusiasm or utility for the press in both countries today to enhance linkages to bridge the gap, or to develop available opportunities to foster close relations among peoples of both countries through greater cultural and societal understanding. Despite their historical ties, linguistic and cultural affinities. The free press of Indonesia, with its abrasive, belligerent, quite often condescending attitude towards Malaysia does not help to reduce this gap. When asked if the Indonesian press could be restrained from provocative treatment of issues affecting bilateral relations, Indonesian officials would say, "in Indonesia there is a free press, and there is nothing we can do about it." Such declaration tends to give reasons to the belief that the Indonesian government finds it convenient to hide behind the freedom of the press in the face of difficulties in its relations with Malaysia. In addition, it would be unwise for the government in Jakarta to be in disaccord with its own public and be seen as siding with a foreign government. The government faces many problems at home, including threat to regime security coming from various dissatisfied groups in the country. Any issue that can become a rallying point for public support is therefore a window of opportunity not to be wasted. Speculations as to which groups are behind the anti-Malaysian demonstrations are abound. For example, the group behind the 'sweeping Malaysians', the BENDERA (Benteng *Demokrasi Rakyat*) is believed to be supported by the PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle) led by Megawati Sukarnoputri who lost in the presidential elections of July 2009.<sup>7</sup> Some former members of the Susilo Cabinet is also said to be implicated in fanning the anti Malaysian sentiment, one of whom Jero Wacik, Minister of Tourism. It is said that he was instrumental in exploiting the Balinese dance 'Pendet' as an issue in Malaysia-Indonesia relations with the

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7 Utusan Malaysia , 12 September 2009.

hope that Susilo would maintain him in his new cabinet line-up.<sup>8</sup>

The Malaysian media response to provocative reporting in Indonesian press and the indecision of the Indonesian government has shown an evolution from being quietly tolerant to gradually becoming defensive and eventually more vocal. In Malaysia, for many reasons, the press is used to restraint, sometimes on their own consideration (self-censorship), at other times complying with orders from the top. As early as June 2009, after probing why the state - owned Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) shied away from making comments on Indonesian press belligerent language against Malaysia, a TV producer said that directives from the top caution them against provoking Indonesia! It was left to the Minister of Information, Culture and Communication, the eloquent and incredibly patient Dato Seri Dr Rais Yatim to inform and convince the Indonesians that Malaysia will not respond despite its embassy in Jakarta being pelted with rotten eggs by demonstrators.<sup>9</sup> The reverse psychology paid off, for the Indonesian ambassador in Kuala Lumpur was reported to have expressed his embarrassment by the Indonesian provocative attitude as compared to the mature and diplomatic manner in which the Malaysian authorities handled the situation.<sup>10</sup> In both ways, it is undeniable that the media are instrumental in shaping the public perception of one and the other.

## **Media Portrayal of Issues: Sensationalising, Manipulating and Instigating**

Are media omnipotent in shaping public opinion? Although it is difficult to ascertain the extent, there is substantial support for the view that the media are important in forming public perceptions.<sup>11</sup> It is also argued, “the media can and sometimes do, act autonomously and are not completely subservient to the state or political institutions.”<sup>12</sup> With regards to the current discord in Malaysia- Indonesia bilateral relations, it can be said that the Indonesian media have acted as such, being free to

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8 Ibid.

9 TEMPO interaktif, 9 September 2009.

10 Ibid.

11 Ralph Negrine, p 15.

12 Ibid.

fashion and present issues to conform to their desired objective or that of their sponsors. The way to achieve this is left to their own ingenuity. Some seek to sensationalise a trivial issue, while others may manipulate and capitalise on an issue that can unite a divided society. Indonesian officials insisted that their press is free and that the government has no control over how issues or events are framed and presented to the public. This is not the case with Malaysian media, especially the mainstream ones who must work within a framework that does allow absolute freedom, though not subjected to absolute control. In the case of Indonesia, after the ‘sweeping Malaysians’ incident, the media reduced the animosity content and instigations that characterised their previous reporting of events and issues related to Malaysia after the Indonesian government voiced out its disagreement with the use of violence against Malaysians. What this indicates is that even a free press will take clues from the authorities and that in developing countries especially, state can still exercise substantial influence on the media if it wants to. In the same manner that while the Malaysian media are said to be subservient to the state, there is no guarantee that it will remain so at the expense of compromising their credibility and sense of duty towards the public if there is convergences of purpose and interest. The Malaysian government relaxed its unwritten rule of not wanting its media to ‘provoke’ Indonesia when it felt that public disappointment at its own appeasement policy could no longer be contained.

Whatever the position the media chose to take or the constraints they are subjected to, they can manipulate and give importance to a seemingly unimportant issue. Such is the case of Manohara Odelia Pinot, an Indonesian teenager who wed a prince from the Malaysian state of Kelantan. In ordinary circumstances, why would a private matter be given such prominence in Indonesian press to the extent of creating ill feelings between Malaysians and Indonesians? A taxi driver in Jakarta remarked how terrible this Malaysian prince must be judging from his mistreatment of the young Indonesian woman. He asked if this is common in practise in Malaysia to insult and mistreat Indonesians.<sup>13</sup> It is not too difficult to see how he was informed of the issue. Upon arrival at Jakarta airport, I was surprised to see pictures of Manohara

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13 Personal encounter during a visit to Jakarta in June 2009.

and her story splashed across the television screen. The press also covered her story extensively, reinforcing the ‘Ugly Malaysian’ image previously linked to a few cases of abuses of Indonesian maids by their Malaysian employers. The story was also carried by other foreign press including those in Australia. “Royal abuse scandal splits Malaysia and Indonesia.”<sup>14</sup> In reference to the accusation of Manohara that she was slashed with razor blades, drugged and raped by the 31 year-old prince before escaping in May 2009. The Indonesian media managed to turn Odelia Pinot into an instant celebrity, with television interviews and talks of her becoming an actress. She was also portrayed as a hero when she took part in the demonstration in front of the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta, which was widely reported in the Indonesian press and television stations. The message was not lost to audience: here was another example of Malaysian insensitivity and insult to Indonesia. Even Indonesian academics could not refrain from contributing their views to the case in pages of newspapers and newsmagazines.

### **Ambalat and Its Provocations.**

Of the many issues dodging current Malaysia-Indonesia relations, the dispute over Ambalat received the most coverage from the Indonesian media. There is a consensus in the country, from politicians to the average person, on the seriousness of the issue and the way to resolve it. The Indonesian press was full of provocative headlines such as ‘*Ambalat block in rage*’, ‘*Ambalat threatened*’ ‘*Defend it to the last drop of blood*’ and warning to Malaysia not to be arrogant. The Indonesian press did not hesitate to find fault with Malaysia on this issue. In its analysis of the Ambalat incident involving Malaysian and Indonesian navies, the Indonesian newsmagazine, GATRA, attributed the origin of the conflict to Malaysia’s provocation, which occurred for the first time in January 2005.<sup>15</sup> Jusuf Kalla, then vice-president of Indonesia voiced the majority of Indonesian opinion when he said, “If negotiation leads to nowhere, we should be prepared for war with Malaysia”.<sup>16</sup> TEMPO, the popular Indonesian newsmagazine also accused Malaysia of ignoring the issue of Ambalat and lamenting that Malaysian electronic

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14 The Australian July 23 2009. <http://www.The Australian.news.com.au/story/0.25197.25823793-2703.00.html>

15 GATRA 10 June 2009

16 TEMPO 14 June 2009

and print media made no reference at all to Ambalat dispute. It did not occur to the Indonesian media that in Malaysia, the lack of reference to Ambalat was a deliberate policy by the Malaysian media and the government not to aggravate the relations between the two countries by making public the issue. Malaysia's deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said, "we don't want anyone to take provocative action".<sup>17</sup> Malaysia's Minister of Defence, Dato Dr Zahid Hamidi was reported as saying that he was confident that the issue could be resolved through negotiations.

In its analysis of the Ambalat dispute, another Indonesian newsmagazine, FORUM put the blame on Malaysian military's "expansionist tendency" and its navy's harassment of Indonesian fishermen. The Malaysian navy, according to the magazine "had in the past shot at Indonesian fishing boats, arrested the fishermen and tortured them."<sup>18</sup> The article further explained that "as the largest country in ASEAN, Indonesia has no territorial ambition on others, unlike Malaysia, who is actively expanding its territory. We all know that Malaysia has too often violated the land border with Indonesia in Kalimantan. Our territory is getting smaller while Malaysia's territory is growing bigger."<sup>19</sup> As a reminder about Malaysia's territorial "ambition", the article mentioned that Malaysia is also involved in territorial disputes with other countries as in the case of the Spratlys. It added, "Maybe Malaysia wants a repeat of its success in gaining Sipadan and Ligitan." The article also warned the Indonesian government not to compromise in its effort to secure the sovereignty of the Republic. Indonesian public's sentiment against Malaysia was aroused through television channels showing documentaries, footage of films on *konfrontasi* and sitcom programs to ridicule Malaysia. The black and white footage of *konfrontasi* showing Sukarno's fiery anti Malaysian speech during the period was repeatedly shown on television. Anti Malaysian demonstrators chanting "crush Malaysia" in Jakarta, Banjarmasin and other areas in Indonesia were reminiscent of the *konfrontasi* era. The public was urged to show their patriotism towards the country by joining in these demonstrations. The media also tried to discredit the Malaysian government by asserting that Malaysia tried to conceal the truth about Ambalat from its citizens

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17 New Straits Times Spetember 2009

18 FORUM 14 June 2009.

19 FORUM 14 June 2009.

through interviews with some Malaysians who presumably came from Sabah and revealed that they only knew about the incident at Ambalat when they arrived in Indonesia. The anchorperson concluded that the Malaysian government wanted to hide its ‘aggression’ into Indonesian territory from its own citizens.

## **Indonesian Maids as Victims of Greed and Cruelty**

Indonesia is the largest supplier of foreign workers in Malaysia. With the current figure of around 3 million’ including over one million are illegal immigrants.<sup>20</sup> The Malaysian official terminology for these illegal immigrants is PATI (Malay acronym of ‘*pendatang tanpa izin*’—literally those who are came without permission). Even the usage of the acronym has a history of its own which is reflective of the complexity of the relationship between the two countries. In the beginning, Malaysian authorities used the term “*pendatang haram*”—illegal immigrants. However, the Indonesians did not like to be called “*pendatang haram*” for reasons known only to themselves, so the Malaysian authorities used the term PATI instead. The issues surrounding Indonesian labour force in Malaysia are many and not new. They include abuse of housemaids, Indonesian government request for minimum salary to their workers in Malaysia, repatriation of illegal immigrants and their intrusion into this country, crimes committed by Indonesian migrant workers etc. Indonesians began to arrive in drove into Malaysia in the 1980s and the country continues to attract Indonesians despite the frequent spats between the two countries. In recent years TKI (Tenaga Kerja Indonesia –Indonesian labour force) has added to the growing pains in Malaysia-Indonesia relations. The story of ‘abuses of Indonesian maids’ has captured the attention of both the Indonesian and Malaysian media, although their presentation and motives for doing so differ.

Malaysia is not the only country to receive Indonesian maids. Other countries such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also recipients of this labour force. The issue of maids abuse is also not new. In 1998 for example, Indonesian press reported cases

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<sup>20</sup> Straits Times , September 10 2009.

of abuses against Indonesian maids in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, UAE and Malaysia. It was reported at that time that Saudi Arabia had the highest number of Indonesian maid abuse with 47 cases in the first quarter of that year.<sup>21</sup> Malaysia and Singapore recorded the lowest, with 2 cases each. Even then, Indonesian press was already ‘championing’ the rights of TKI and exposing injustices against them. But there was no war in the press on this issue. Indonesia seemed to accept the explanation by the Saudi Embassy in Jakarta that such mistreatment befell only on a “small fraction of those working in the country. Even when that happened, perpetrators cannot escape the arms of the law.”<sup>22</sup> The mood and the tone of the Indonesian press regarding the maids abuse seem to be different today and then. The attitude shown by the Indonesian press in its reporting and analysis of the cases of Indonesian maids being abused by Malaysian employers is undoubtedly belligerent and recalcitrant. So far there has been two infamous cases involving Indonesian maids. One was the Nirmala Bonat case in 2006 where she was physical hurt by her Malaysian employer. The Malaysian media carried the story and for days on end and there was such a huge public outcry against the way she was treated. Sympathy for her poured in, including a royalty’s offer of a job at the palace. The most recent case of Indonesian maid abuse happened to Siti Hajar in June 2009, with the double misfortune that it took place at a time when Malaysia and Indonesia are embroiled in other issues affecting their relations. Even though in both cases, the perpetrators were hauled to face justice, the Indonesian media was quick to seize this as another proof of Malaysia’s mistreatment of Indonesian TKI. The case of Siti Hajar also received the personal attention of President Susilo and the Indonesian press succeeded in galvanising the anti-Malaysian sentiment with their portrayal of the ‘Ugly Malaysia’. Demonstrations were held against Malaysia where women were seen carrying placards reading “*TKI victims of Malaysia*”, “*Ambalat threatened, TKI abused*” “*Malaysia, stop this barbarism and cruelty*” Such sentiments were also echoed on the internet. What took place as criminal acts and can be dealt with by relevant authorities in Malaysia moved to become an issue of national sentiment, jeopardising the goodwill of the public of both countries. In what seems to be a remedial act, the Malaysian minister of Human

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21 GATRA 26 September 1998.

22 Ibid.

Resources made known to the press that the Ministry is taking the necessary steps to accommodate the Indonesian government demand for the protection of its TKI in the country. However, he was quick to say that this has nothing to do with the rising temperature level in the discord between the two countries.

While there is no certainty that policy makers share the media perception of others, or the extent of their influence on policies decided, it is obvious that the state cannot ignore the ability of the media to galvanise and shape opinion that can influence bilateral relations. This is more so in the context of a 'freer press' in Indonesia where the media are at liberty to impart information to the public without any form of consultation from the state. Disinformation and selective reporting in the Indonesian press are more prevalent in foreign news coverage than in domestic ones. In addition, the political will of the state to correct any distortion is less urgent when it is found that it can also serve them or coincide with their own objectives. Such has been the case in the relationship between the media and the state in Indonesia about recent and current discord.

### **A 'Nation of Thieves'**

Perhaps no other issue is more trivial, yet acrimonious in the current discord than that of 'cultural dispute' that has affected negatively the goodwill between the two nations. This is so because the issue of culture is a sensitive one and where the general public can easily identify themselves. It is an issue that involves identity, pride and may hurt feelings. The English language newspaper, *The Jakarta Post* reported that Indonesia, through the very words of President Susilo Bambang Yudhyono 'reminded' the Malaysian government to deal more carefully with 'sensitive' cultural issues between their two countries and that the advertisement in a Malaysian tourism campaign had offended the Indonesian public.<sup>23</sup> The Indonesian public is also reminded that this is the not the first time that Malaysia had claimed an Indonesian cultural product as its own, and that the Malaysian government should not ignore this issue.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Jakarta Post, 26 August 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Many in Malaysia wondered as to how a trivial issue such as this could spark off a crisis between two neighbours comprising of peoples who share a lot of cultural roots and who, in good times claimed their affinities with one another. In presenting the issue, the Indonesian media adopted not only an uncompromising attitude, but added fuel to the fire by branding Malaysian as a thief. The ‘cultural burglary’ issue became the focus of discussion in the press, internet war and fodder for jokes among the Indonesian public. Indonesian delighted themselves with sitcoms depicting Malaysia not only as thief, but a people “without culture and deprived of cultural heritage, therefore they become thieves”.<sup>25</sup> Such comments, if meant and taken lightly as a friendly banter between Indonesians and Malaysians respectively could endear them to one another. Unfortunately, they came at the wrong time and out of anger and pique.

The Indonesian media have also attributed itself to another task of informing their public of the idea of self-entitlement that Indonesia feels others ought to show them. Indonesians, from the political elite, intellectuals to the ordinary citizens objected to the street jargon of “Indon” used by some Malaysians (mostly by young people in a hurry and without malice). Informed by the press, Indonesians saw this as an insult. A respected Indonesian scholar asked why Malaysians want to insult Indonesians by referring to them as ‘Indons’ rather than saying the full length and breadth of the word “Indonesian” or (“*orang Indonesia*” in Malay).<sup>26</sup> Despite my explanation that the usage of this term is ‘streetwise’ and unacceptable as formal usage, and that its birth is organic rather than cultivated, he was not appeased. The youthful generation in Malaysia also delights itself with other unbecoming appellation of others, such as ‘Bangla’ to mean Bangladeshis, Viets to refer to Vietnamese or ‘orang Siam’ to mean Thais and the enduring term of “*mat salleh*” to refer to Caucasians. So far Malaysians have not received any complaints from Bangladesh, Thailand or Europe, or made into an issue by their media. Indonesians on the other hand are more innovative in making comments about Malaysians. They have invented the term “Malingsia” to refer to Malaysia<sup>27</sup>, but Malaysians

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25 Indonesian TV sitcom viewed on 8 June 2009.

26 Ruhanas Harun, New Straits Times, 4 November 2007.

27 ‘Maling’ is an Indonesian word to mean thief, so ‘Malingsia’ is a corruption for Malaysia, a thieving nation.

have not reacted to it in the same manner that Indonesians reacted to the usage of “Indon”. The Malaysian press was not quick enough to seize upon an opportunity to increase the scope of the battle of words or wits. Perhaps were it not for a sense of humour, such labelling would have been exploited to arouse public sentiment against one another.<sup>28</sup>

## **Media and The Future of Malaysia-Indonesia Relations.**

Although the relationship between the media and the state is different in Malaysian and in Indonesia, the media play an important role in shaping relations between the two countries. The Indonesian media prides itself as being free from the control of the state while the Malaysian one is regarded as still subservient to the government. In certain circumstances, the ability to shape and influence public opinion is no different. This is seen in the current sabre-rattling environment that characterises their relations. From the Indonesian perspective, it can be summed up that the freedom of press in Indonesia is doing both a service and disservice to Indonesia’s relations with Malaysia. In being recalcitrant and acting as instigator of anti Malaysian sentiment among the Indonesian public, the media have caused considerable dilemma to the Indonesian government in its conduct of foreign policy towards Malaysia. Being one of the founding members of ASEAN and traditionally has enjoyed good political relations with Malaysia, Indonesia does not want to lose the goodwill of a country whose willingness to respect Indonesia’s position and self-entitlement is indeed clear. But for Jakarta to be seen as opposed to its media provocations and to ignore the general public’s demand for a tougher position against Malaysia as transmitted through the media would be political unwise especially in the period of general elections. Contestants in the recent presidential elections showed their preferences in dealing with the contentious issues of bilateral relations. Former vice-president Jusuf Kalla was one of those who did not hesitate to express a tough stand towards Malaysia and went along with the Indonesian press view that Malaysia needed to be taught a lesson. This in spite of the fact that

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<sup>28</sup> In 2007, I reacted innocently to a letter inviting me to present a paper on a conference in Kuala Lumpur on Malaysia-Indonesia relations. Thinking that ‘Malaysia’ was wrongly spelt in the conference title of “Indonesia-Malingsia relations”, I requested the organizers to correct it, but was told that it was the correct spelling. Subsequently academics at this conference added a touch of humour by rephrasing it to “Indonsial-Malingsial” which was intended to mean ‘Indonesia the bastard, Malaysia the thief!’.

during his term in office, he showed considerable goodwill towards Malaysia and in fact had close relations with some of the members of the Malaysian cabinet.

As for Megawati Sukarnoputri, she is not expected to show any flexibility, if not warmth towards Malaysia. During the mounting tension with Malaysia, her father's campaign of "crush Malaysia" again became a visible and powerful symbol of Indonesian tough stand against Malaysia on all the issues that influenced their relations. Megawati did not explicitly or openly condemn Malaysia and embraced the press active arousing of anti Malaysia feeling, and typically kept mum on the way the Indonesian government handled its relations with Malaysia. Preoccupied with election campaigns, and not being in the government, she preferred to focus on local issues and not those on foreign policy. Perhaps there was no need for her to ride on the tidal wave of nationalism sweeping Indonesia since June this year since pictures and arousing speeches of late father during the *konfrontasi* era were splashed and thundered throughout Indonesia. Elements within her party PDIP are believed to be behind the 'sweeping of Malaysians' movement in Jakarta.<sup>29</sup> Despite the lack of visibility of provocative press captions associated with Megawati in the current anti-Malaysia sentiment, Megawati is not expected to show an outpouring of warm sentiments towards a neighbour that her father sought to crush at birth.

It remains therefore crucial for President Susilo to carefully weigh his treatment of Malaysia with that of the media. Of all the presidents that Indonesia has had since Sukarno, Susilo is seen as the most capable of being both rational, yet warm with Malaysia. Suharto's era was not a problem as the press was under tight control and had little business to influence Indonesia's foreign policy towards Malaysia. Subsequent presidents did not make it their priority to single out relations with Malaysia as special. However, Susilo tried to mend that shaky fences, if not already dented out of neglect. Nevertheless, he faces competition from other Indonesian leaders who have considerable freedom to go along with public opinion's animosity towards Malaysia. He is in a difficult position to balance his country's interests in its external relations, in this case Malaysia, with that of domestic constituency's

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<sup>29</sup> Utusan Malaysia September 9 2009.

pressures to flex Indonesia's muscles vis-à-vis the smaller neighbour. The interests and goals of groups in Indonesia, including that of the media and their supporters may not coincide with the national interests of Indonesia in its relations with Malaysia. Indonesian media have several unexpected undercurrents and can be treacherous especially at a crucial period in the country's transition to a full fledged democracy. But now that the president has just clinched a victory for another presidential mandate, one of the reasons to appease the 'free press' in influencing foreign policy matters can be ignored without the undesirable consequence of loosing an election. In his efforts to mend the damaged ties and to foster closer relations with Malaysia, the Indonesian government is more likely to rely on the long established and traditionally close relations between the armed forces of both countries and the mutually agreed principle of economic interdependence. The lesson learnt for both countries is not to rely on misleading media reports deliberately disseminated to confuse unsuspecting citizens and to bring out animosity and hatred among the peoples of the two countries. Such is the power of the free and belligerent press. The current Malaysia-Indonesia woes are reminiscent of the media 'war' that was fought between Malaysia and Singapore in the mid 1960s when the two countries were breaking up and in 1998 over several contentious issues.

Despite the soured relations fuelled by the Indonesian media's open anti Malaysia reporting of contentious issues, it is unthinkable that bilateral relations cannot be mended. Both governments and their armed forces remain close and channels of communications are open. But the media sensationalisation of issues such as cultural heritage and maid abuse has deeply affected people to people relations, leading to a rethinking of such concept as "*bangsa serumpun*" and the "*abang-adik*" relationship which hitherto were taken for granted especially from the Malaysian side. It also raised the question of media responsibility vis-à-vis the public in circumstances where the state is constrained by the larger issue of 'national interest' or diplomatic nicety to remain silent. If the Indonesian government is powerless to control the belligerence and excess of its 'free press', then the Malaysian media should take up the responsibility of correcting the misinformation that shaped

the public perception. There is also an urgent need for the media to balance between what is 'newsworthy' and what is sensation. While reports of incidents such as maid abuse get repeatedly exposed in the media, stories of ordinary Indonesians living in Malaysia do not get to the press. By under-narrating the normal life of millions of Indonesians in Malaysia, the Malaysian media may also be seen to collude unintentionally with the Indonesian media in contributing to the adverse bilateral relations. In communication, not informing can also be misinforming.

## **CONCLUSION**

So what can be drawn from the show of animosity by the Indonesian media that has adversely affected bilateral relations? Can it be taken seriously by Malaysian policy makers and public in general as an indication of the state of the bilateral relations between the two neighbours? The Indonesian ambassador to the United Nations gave the assurance that the Ambalat dispute is to be settled in a manner that will prove the close relationship between the two countries, not as proof of enmity.<sup>30</sup> This is contrast to the message and shouts of demonstrators and the rounds of ridicule about Malaysia as portrayed in the Indonesian media. The diplomat's positive view on the future relations between the two neighbours was also shared by some Indonesian scholars who are of the opinion that the belligerent attitude towards Malaysia was partly due to the 2009 elections. The media was voicing out messages from different groups within domestic constituencies. To the Indonesian diplomat, the real indicator in the current bilateral relationship is what the official Indonesian statements are, not the demonstrators and the 'uncontrolled' media. However, it cannot be denied that more often than not, and in many situations, it is the media that are "breaking news" and "developing a story" for public consumption based on available information. So there is no smoke without fire.

The Indonesian media, judging from their reporting of sensitive issues such as Amabalat dispute, TKI and cultural heritage has little understanding of Malaysia despite being a close neighbour sharing

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30 Personal communication 9 June 2009.

many commonalities. If such low level of knowledge and understanding is not corrected, then the media as a disseminator of information will only perpetuate the ignorance, which has proven to be detrimental in the relations between the two countries, especially at people diplomacy. In discouraging the ‘sweeping Malaysia’ action of the demonstrators in Jakarta, the Indonesian newspaper ‘Republika’ cited a comment reflecting a typically condescending by an Indonesian youth leader saying that *‘Malaysia is only a small country and a monarchy. It doesn’t care too much about fundamental human rights. Indonesia on the other hand is a big nation and a democratic one. If Indonesia is well managed, we will be competing with China, India and Brazil, not with Malaysia. So do not get involved.’*<sup>31</sup> A group of Indonesian journalists who were invited to visit Malaysia as part of tourism promotion program expressed their amazement at the many similarities in the culture of the two nations, even at the popularity of Indonesian food in Kuala Lumpur!<sup>32</sup> Apparently, the Indonesian public, despite the existence of more than 3 million Indonesians working in Malaysia has little knowledge about Malaysia and its connection to Indonesia culturally and historically. No effort was made by the media to explain the cultural similarities between Malaysia and Indonesia that may generate a greater understanding as among the public. The Indonesian public’s ignorance about Malaysia as reflected in its media is quite astounding if not hilarious. In a report on the fate of an Indonesian worker who escaped death sentence in Malaysia, the Indonesian newspaper TEMPO referred to the Malaysian Prime Minister as ‘Sari Datuk Tun Najib Abdul Razak’! This maybe a trivial matter, but it is symptomatic of the indifference and ignorance about a smaller neighbour.<sup>33</sup>

Granted that it is not possible to filter or correct all misinformation or incorrect information that pass through the media, but at least major ones that may affect bilateral relations could be handled wisely. For the general public on both sides of the Malacca Strait, press and television remain the most common source of information. For those who have the power, the media can be manipulated and exploited towards achieving their own objectives. In an age where knowledge and information travel fast, the public has become more and more

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31 Fajroel Rahman in Republika online.9 September 2009.

32 Suara Karya. 9 September 2009.

33 TEMPO interaktif. <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/share> September 2009.

dependent on the media as source of information, even if their accuracy is questionable. The current souring of Malaysia-Indonesia relations goes to underline the importance of a free, but an objective media in shaping public opinion.

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