AN 'ALLAH' ISSUE IN MALAYSIAN NEWSPAPERS

[1]SAFIYYAH AHMAD SABRI, [2]ZARIDAH ABDULLAH

[1]Faculty of Leadership and Management, Science Islamic University Malaysia, [2]Faculty of Communication and Mass Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia
E-mail: safiyyahsabri@yahoo.com

Abstract- This study analyzed the differences of how religious issues were being portrayed in Malaysian newspapers; Utusan Malaysia and The Star. Taking the 'Allah' word issue as a case study, it is vital to know how the Malaysian media helped in maintaining peace in such plural society in a country like Malaysia. A total of 181 Utusan Malaysia news articles and another 181 The Star news articles were being used as sample of the study. It was found that a majority of 252 news articles from both newspapers placed the issue under National/Nation section or Local news. Meanwhile, most of the stories were written as soft news but in various ways with the total of 267 news articles for both newspapers. Both Utusan Malaysia and The Star also themed a majority total of 213 news articles under religion perspective. Hence, the findings show that both Malaysian mainstream newspapers played their role effectively in helping to maintain the national peace through their concern of careful reporting of such sensitive issue.

Keywords- Media, Maintaining Peace, Articles, Local News.

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is unique due to her plural society living together peacefully under the same Constitution since Independence. The media, plays a very important role in helping the government. In maintaining 'peace', it has always been a challenge for a country. With the differences that exist among the citizens, sensitive issues can be categorized as a threat in achieving mutual understanding among the people. Due to that, the media in a country can be said as the watchdog of the Government either to maintain peace in the country or become the reason to make the issue or situation worse. Reference [2], in their study, have found that different Malaysian newspapers, were seen to be bias the subject they covered according the ethnicity as the ownership of Malaysian media were on ethnicity based. That is why it is vital to look at how the media play their role especially in a country like Malaysia when reporting on religious issues such as the 'Allah' word issue.

II. THE UNIQUENESS OF MALAYSIA - RELIGION

Malaysia is unique due to the plural society it has. Although Islam is the official religion of the Federation, all other religions are free to be practiced by their believers. This is mentioned under Article 11, which provides that every person has the right to profess and practice his own religion. It is stated that every person has the right to propagate his religion, but state law and, in respect of the Federal Territories, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among Muslims.

Even with the abiding law and regulations on the freedom of religion and that Islam is the official religion of the Federation; conflicts still emerge from time to time. This can be considered normal, as of perhaps due to the diversity of the community, different school of thoughts having power in different areas of authority. Reference [3] stated that no matter how good or experienced journalists are, they are still human beings with different feelings and ways in interpreting stories or issues. This relates to many aspects such as the politics, economics, socio-cultural and others. These contributing aspects to the emergence of conflicts from time to time include the media, which can be viewed from the ownership factor for example.

III. THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA

The media in Malaysia play their role as much as other media in other countries. What makes them different can be seen from the ownership of the media organizations, as the three largest ethnics; the Malay, Chinese and Indian mostly own the mainstream media. Apart of the ownership, the media, especially the newspapers also are made available in three different languages according to the mother tongue of the communities. Besides Bernama, a media outlet fully owned by the government, the other mainstream media organizations are still considered being under the control of the government as they are owned by component parties of the ruling government, BarisanNasional according to their different community groups mentioned. Due to this, there are tendencies of biasness or misconception in reporting controversies especially on religious issues.

For example, a study of a conversion case, M. Moorthy, a Hindu who converted to Islam in reference [2]. It was found that Utusan Malaysia and Malaysia Nanban allocated most space for the issue in their newspapers, The New Straits Times provided some space, while but Sin Chew Daily in contrast, gave only little coverage on the issue. In this paper, the study will only focus on Utusan Malaysia and The

Star, which are owned by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malaysian Chinese Association which represent the Malays and the Chinese communities. Perhaps, in order to maintain peace and harmony in the country, rules and regulations were also made in avoiding harmful contents that could become threats to the plural society. This is made especially for issues like word 'Allah', as in [5], religion and ethnicity relate to each other and that it can be reported in various ways and can be placed in different sections in newspapers, radio, and television bulletins. That is why it is important that the journalists understand their responsibilities that also define their work which include economic and political conditions, ownership, legislation regulating media outlets' activities, and social and cultural context too.

For example, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984; which relate to monitoring ownership of printing presses and production of printed materials such as books, papers, and newspapers, Broadcasting Act; which controls the contents of all radio and television channels, Imported Publication Act, which control foreign media circulation and transmission in Malaysia [4]. Although Malaysia was ranked 147th place in the Worldwide Press Freedom Index in 2014, perhaps for a unique diversity citizens of Malaysia, this can be said as one of the efforts of the government for the safety of the national peace since Malaysia's Independence in 1957.

IV. THE 'ALLAH' WORD ISSUE

Religion, race and gender are very personal and sensitive aspects either at individual or community level. Issues highlighted to the aspects mentioned happen everywhere in any countries in the world. Religion issues for example, have always been debated even at international level for instance, Islamophobia especially after 9/11, the transgender issues, Muslims being accused as terrorists etc. However, in this study, the focus will only be given to the 'Allah' word issue in Malaysia.

The issue started being highlighted in the media ever since it was brought to the Civil Courts by the Roman Catholic Church lead by Archbishop Murphy Pakiam over the usage of the word 'Allah' in The Herald magazine on 16 February 2009. The usage was a translation from the word God to 'Allah' in Malay Language. On 31 December 2009, the Court decided that the magazine was allowed to use the word 'Allah'. However, appeal was made by the government on 14 October 2012 which resulted in banning the magazine to use the word 'Allah' for their Malay language edition and that the Court of Appeal could not find any reason on why the church insist on using the word 'Allah'. The case continued with another appeal made by the church to the Federal Court on 11 November 2013 and that the Court will announce another date for the hearing of the case. The case continues.

On another issue of the word 'Allah', on 2011, a total of 35,100 Bibles written in Malay language which use 'Allah' which were imported from Indonesia were detained by the Malaysian Customs at the airport. However, the seizure received many protests from the non-Muslims especially the Christians including the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association which is also one of the component parties of the ruling government). The issue was being solved through a discussion amongDatoIdrisJala, a Christian with Malaysian Customs and MCA. The issue ended up through 10-point resolution agreement by all parties.

V. FINDINGS

A content analysis of 181 news articles from Utusan Malaysia and another 181 news articles from The Star were being used as samples in analyzing how the media report on the word 'Allah' issue ranging from year 2010 to 2014. Coding sheets were instruments used in obtaining the data. A pilot test was also held before gaining the real data in ensuring the validity of the questions of the coding sheets.

Table I, shows that a majority of 252 news articles from both newspapers (Utusan Malaysia; 119, The Star; 133) were placed under the National/Nation section, which also represents the Local News. Meanwhile, Utusan Malaysia placed 23 articles under Feature section compared to The Star, which prefer to place more articles under other sections with a total of 46 out of 181 news articles. However, both newspapers chose not to place the word 'Allah' issue on the main/front page most of the time with a total of 16 articles from Utusan Malaysia and one from The Star. Perhaps, this shows how both newspapers chose not to highlight the story on the front page either due to respect or trying to avoid misunderstanding or controversies among the public.

Table I: Section of the story (Utusan Malaysia and The Star)

		Section of the Story						Total
		Main	National/Nation	Op/Ed	Feature	Religion	Other	
Name of Newspaper	Utusan Malaysia	16	119	6	23	3	14	181
	The Star	1	133	1	0	0	46	181
Total		17	252	7	23	3	60	362

Table II on the other hand indicates that most stories were written as soft news with the total of 267 news articles for both newspapers out of 362 news articles, compared to hard news, which refers to front page with the total of 17 news articles. All of the soft news were written in various ways, with careful statements in considering the differences of that exist in the plural society which might understand the report differently. According to reference [1], it is important for the media practitioners to be alert of the fault lines of theological, ideological and political differences among the public.

Table II: Type of story (Utusan Malaysia and The Star)

		Type of story										Total
		Hard news	Soft news	List only	Opinion Column	Commentary	Letter to editor	Feature	Backgrounde	Q & A	Others	
Name of newspaper	Utusan Malaysia	16	130	0	12	11	1	5	2	3	1	181
	The Star	1	137	1	5	19	0	15	1	2	0	181
Total		17	267	1	17	30	1	20	3	5	1	362

Table III: Theme of story (Utusan Malaysia and The Star)

		Theme of the story								Total
		Legal perspective	Background of the case	Religion perspective	Ethical persnective	Political/cultural/ economic	Human right persnective	Unity persnective	Others	
Name of newspaper	Utusan Malaysia	42	2	74	11	26	0	11	15	181
	The Star	59	0	38	13	31	1	23	16	181
Total		101	2	112	24	57	1	34	31	362

Theme of story will show how the word 'Allah' issue were being reported by determining on what elements were being highlighted in the news articles. Table III shows that both Utusan Malaysia and The Star highlighted more on religion perspective with the total of 112 news articles (Utusan Malaysia (74), The Star (38)) followed by a total of 101 news articles, which emphasized more on legal perspective (The Star (59), Utusan Malaysia (42)).

There were also news articles, which emphasized on political/cultural/economic perspective (57 articles), unity perspective (31 articles), ethical perspective (24 articles), and others.

Reference [1] stated that the fundamental problem is that journalism is premised on reporting what is seen and provable, while issues of religion and faith are premised on what is unseen and spiritual.

However, the result indicates that since the word 'Allah' issue is a matter of a religion issue itself, therefore, it can be said that the media did tried to seek information, explanation and recommendation that relate to both religion, Islam and Christian from different angles but with careful statements in the reporting.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the findings, it can be said that the Malaysian media, despite the differences of demographical background of the media practitioners, are still playing their role with concern and responsibility in maintaining peace in the plural society.

Although the word 'Allah' issue may harm the existing mutual understanding among Malaysians, the media did report the issue in the best way in avoiding unwanted incidents that might happen due to their reporting of the issue.

This can be seen from the placement of the news articles under the National/Nation section, the way or type of story most news articles were written about the issue, and the different themes and priority of the theme given when reporting on the issue.

Therefore, the effort should be continued by the media practitioners in Malaysia by putting aside the differences that exist among the people in maintaining the national peace in the country and at the same time become a good example for other media in other countries when handling religious issues like this.

REFERENCES

[1] E.G. Loo & Mustafa K. Anuar (2010), Journalism in good faith: issues and practices in religion reporting. Selangor, Malaysia: Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd.

[2] HalimahtonShaari, V Raman & T.H. Ngu, "Covering race and religion: the Moorthy and NyonyaTahir cases in four Malaysian newspapers." Shah Alam: UniversitiTeknologi MARA.

[3] J.G. Stovall (2005), "Journalism: who, what, when, why and how." Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

[4] MohdAzizuddinMohdSani (2004), "Media freedom in Malaysia," Journal of Contemporary Asia, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 341-367.

[5] V. Rupar (2012). Getting the facts right: reporting ethnicity & religion. Belgium: Druk. Hoeilaart.

★★★