



## **Consensus, terrorism and peace - The role of Malaysia's media to promote world unity in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> scenario\***

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### **Abstract**

September 11, 2001 has brought to the fore the issue of international terrorism calling for a global consensus to bridge ideological, cultural and political gaps between the West and East. Given that Malaysia is characterized by a blend of East and West as well as the status of a progressive Muslim nation, the key question posed in this paper is whether Malaysian media are able to build the much needed global consensus in a multilateral context, particularly amongst South East Asian countries. This calls for an examination of the Malaysian media culture as, for instance, through a random survey of media reports, commentaries, and letters from the Malaysian mainstream media following the two tragic events of 9-11 and the US-led strikes against Afghanistan. The study looks at both articles and letters to assess whether the government and the journalists' views are similar to those of the population at large. The results show that while the mainstream media in Malaysia can enlighten the West on perceived injustices leading to grievances, they are also in a unique position to initiate a reform of moderate and liberal thinking in the Islamic world. The emergent moderate and balanced stances as highlighted in this study lead to the conclusion that the Malaysian media have the scope of fostering greater understanding across religions, cultures and societies, the very foundation needed both to establish a consensus with regard to international terrorism and to build a world of peaceful coexistence for future generations.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, global consensus, international terrorism, Malaysia, media culture, 9-11

### **Peace and terrorism: Towards a global consensus**

September 11 or 911 has brought to the fore the issue of international terrorism calling for a global consensus to bridge ideological, cultural and political gaps between the West and East. The fateful day in 2001 will be remembered in history as a day of dramatic significance completely altering the world political scenario. Meticulously organized, today's international terrorism is no more confined to isolated incidents in conflict-strife regions of the world.

The world woke up to see that terrorists are no longer afraid of the United States of America, hitting her hard right from under her mighty military nose. The tragic strike on World Trade Centre left no less than 5000 people dead. True to its unpredictable yet volatile form, terrorism was to hit again in about a year's time. The serene island of Bali trembled with blasts on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2002 ending the region's belief it is safe from terrorism. It left more than 200 people dead.

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Such recurrent acts of terrorism accentuates the need to build a global partnership to resist terrorism irrespective of ideological, cultural and political identities. A multilateral consensus is needed on the very definition of terrorism, just as a physician is required to diagnose a patient before prescribing appropriate treatment. The Information Age enables the global media's far-flung wings to play a momentous role in building understanding and cooperation amongst people across societies. However, consensus remains a far cry as a result of increasingly divergent views represented by American or Western media on one hand and Muslim or Middle Eastern media on the other hand.

To expect a uniform monotony in media opinions across boundaries and cultures is to pin our hope on a false presumption that media is completely objective. The media is more often than not inclined to a particular side bearing the opinions and values of the writer, institution publishing it, and usually more subtly, the society in which it is produced and circulated. Malaysia is characterized by a blend of East and West as well as the status of a progressive Muslim nation. Given this, Malaysian may be able to rise above the partisan tendencies of their counterparts in West or Middle East to show a higher degree of objectivity and balanced perspectives. The key question posed is whether Malaysia's media is able to build the aforementioned much needed global consensus in a multilateral context, particularly amongst South East Asian countries. This calls for an examination of the Malaysian scenario, in particular, the media culture within the country.

### **Malaysia: Middle-of-road case?**

Has Malaysia carved a unique position for itself in the geo-political setting of the world? The country has been time and again addressed as a modern Muslim nation. Malaysia had one of the fastest expanding economies in the region prior to the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis from which it has recovered to continue its since march towards its vision of achieving the status of a developed nation by 2020. Malaysia maybe one of the most ideal candidates to lead the global initiative for consensus on peace and terrorism, given its status as a Muslim-majority nation emphasizing on growth and development instead of extremism. Irrespective of religious affiliations, Malaysia has pursued close economic ties with its neighbours within the Association of South East Asian Nations or ASEAN.

Malaysia stands tall today as a liberal Islamic country, stressing on the development of science and technology, being run by a democratically elected government and not by Muslim clerics. The country propagates a modern and progressive version of Islam acceptable to changing times. As the friendly, peaceful and modern face of Islam, Malaysia maybe in the best position to build a consensus to establish regional security as well as establish unity, cooperation and understanding between countries. Malaysia's policies have been to achieve a certain balance between matters of international concern, and those of Islamic nations. Similarly balanced perspectives are seen in the media, providing the opportunity to enlighten both ends of the spectrum thereby emerging close to the seemingly impossible consensus on terrorism and peace.

### **Malaysian media**

Malaysia has 27 daily newspapers, consisting of vernacular as well as English language publications. The key players in the English language press are The New Straits Times (NST) and The Star. The NST is the country's leading broadsheet newspaper and has had the highest readership over the years. It has a long-standing tradition of being the most credible daily representing the official views of the Malaysian government. The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition enjoys influence over editorial or news policy, which means the views represented by

the NST are almost synonymous with the government's stance. The same can be said of The Star and other vernacular dailies, which are related to major concerns of the ruling coalition parties.

The Malaysian media has been criticized time and again for its lack of transparency or independence from the government. Press freedom has been a sensitive issue, as the media is somewhat controlled when it reserves comments that may hamper national security. The press works within the directions of the government in the local and international arena as the mouthpiece of the government to voice its concerns and views of international importance. Given the balanced perspectives of the Malaysian government finding itself in the middle of East and West, this means the media also correspondingly sings a balanced tune trying to accommodate views of both ends of the spectrum. Ironically, the success of the Malaysian media to build consensus by providing balanced perspectives may actually be because of its lack of independence from the government's official stance, which seems also similarly impartial in understanding both East and West. Thus, as the Malaysian government plays the role of building a world consensus on peace it is only natural that its mouthpiece media also play a similar role. Before we proceed as to whether the media will be able to build such desired consensus, it is important to assess the neutrality of the views reflected in the pages of its English language and vernacular news media in the first place.

### **Hypothesis: The neutrality of the Malaysian media**

Given Malaysia's unique status as a modern Muslim nation and the mainstream media's role as a mouthpiece of the establishment, it can be hypothesized that the Malaysian media will generally provide a balanced view in respect to international terrorism like 9-11 or Bali bombings. It is expected that this view will generally accommodate concerns of the West as well as East, thereby establishing some form of multilateral consensus in terms of peace and terrorism in the global arena. After all, the present Malaysian government finds itself faced with grave threat of extremist political forces, including an opposition party aspiring to build a theocratic Islamic state, as well as illegal paramilitary outfits posing danger to the country's national security. The March 21<sup>st</sup> 2004 resounding victory of the ruling government under the leadership of the new Prime Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi put to rest the strong opposition from the Islamic political party. At the same time, Malaysia has been and still is a strident voice against unilateral international aggression such as the war on Iraq and its foreign policy has generally been sympathetic to the cause of humanity in terms of loss of property and life of innocent victims. Echoing the sentiments of the government, it is proposed that the Malaysian media will also be able to accommodate views from both sides of the spectrum thus emerging as a unique, rational and constructive voice in respect to current geo-political situation in the post-September 11 World. This unique voice of the Malaysian media balancing security concerns of the West and identity concerns of the East will help ensure greater understanding, cohesion and cooperation between countries in the ASEAN region. To test this hypothesis, a random survey is carried out on media reports, commentaries, and letters from the Malaysian mainstream media following the two tragic events, to assess whether they are able to strike a unique balance that may be a conduit for understanding between countries in the South East Asian region, as well as for the world as a whole. The study looks at both articles and letters to assess whether the government and journalists' views are similar to those of the population at large.

### **9-11**

Rarely has a single incident in recent times caught the attention of the worldwide press as much. The terrorist attack on World Trade Centre and Pentagon in the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>,

now infamously referred to as 9-11 was also the main highlight of media reports in Malaysia. The mainstream media's coverage of 9-11 and its aftermath attempted to give both sides of the story. They sympathized with America's concerns, but at the same time condemned American aggression in Afghanistan, similar to the official stance of the Malaysian government.

*Barbaric act of unmitigated terror*

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy, the Malaysia media joined the worldwide chorus of unequivocal condemnation of the attack on World Trade Centre and Pentagon. Columnist Askiah Adam (2001) termed the attack as a barbaric act of unmitigated terror perpetrated by cold blooded killers who have brought evil to anew, demonic high. In the same commentary published in the Focus segment of the newspaper, Adam observed that such attackers don't have a place in modern democratic societies.

In his weekly column, Abdul Kadir Jasin (2001) writes, .... our heart goes out to the American people in their hour of tragedy and states that such terrorism is an act of barbarism condemnable by civilized society. Shamsul Akmar (2001) felt that the international community is appalled by this horrendous act. Columnist Fatimah Abu Bakar wrote how she feels the pain and fear of the American people. There was no hesitation as NST vociferously condemned the tragedy of 9-11.

*Why? Victims of the folly of American leaders?*

Immediately after the attack, there were rampant speculations regarding the individuals or organizations behind the attack. The American government was under public (and media) pressure to point to the people responsible for the terrorist attacks as well as to explain to the public as to why the world's best intelligence system failed to predict a terrorist aggression of such a large scale. Intense soul-searching followed initial disbelief and the immediate question was the reason behind 9-11. The American media largely ignored the root causes of the tragedy, preferring to see such a vast demonstration of discontent as a mere terrorist event isolated from geo-political scenario vis - vis American foreign policy. In this respect, the Malaysian media was able to strike a better balance in terms of objectivity. Despite the fierce condemnation, the Malaysian media had a distinctively unique perspective representing the liberal Muslim ideology opposing such attacks but at the same time criticizing American policies. Adam (2001) identifies a number of factors that have led to anti-US sentiments worldwide, including American inaction allowing renewed Israeli violence against unarmed Palestinian civilians, support of Israeli atrocities on the displaced and stateless, unfair terms of trade and global hegemony. Columnists like Adam attempt to go one step further than mere condemnation of the assault, as they feel that America needs to do some soul-searching to discover why such zealous anti-US sentiments exist in the world today.

Columnist Aishah Ali (2001) declare that the American media needs to investigate why the devastation of September 11<sup>th</sup> happened, calling for an analysis of what might have contributed to the atrocities. Though Ali is undoubtedly against terrorism, she feels that this might have been a wakeup call for America as multitudes feel grievances against the US due to wrong handling of foreign policy matters by the United States, particularly the Middle East affairs. She says that there is a need for the US to find out which policies might have caused such resentment, frustration and desperation and to cause such a tragedy.

Some even directly blamed US leaders as the co-accused for 9-11. Columnist J.K Lee (2001) felt that the nearly 6000 people who lost their lives on September 11<sup>th</sup> were victims of the folly of American leaders and the brutality of the terrorists combined. He called upon America to learn how to win the hearts and minds of the people in the rest of the world instead of relying on bullets and bombs to ease anti-US sentiments. In terms of soul searching, Malaysian media was able to touch on possible flaws of the American foreign policy in causing worldwide resentment and in

risking lives of American citizens, unlike its American counterparts who preferred to see the terrorist events without attempting to understand possible causes.

Writers anticipated that the attack on Afghanistan would only provide fodder for fanatics. Columnist Johan Jaffar (2001) felt the Americans need to realize why they are despised in the Muslim world and to understand why the Muslim population is agitated, suggesting that the strikes against Afghanistan will only increase the grievances. Sarah Sabaratnam (2001) quoted one of her friends to sum up the Malaysian perspective that September 11<sup>th</sup> cannot be justified, whatever the cause. That is wrong and should be condemned. However, if foreign policy has been cited as the cause for the incident, then it needs to change. This reflects the Malaysian perspective. However, such calls for soul-searching should not be misconstrued as a form of rationalization of the September 11<sup>th</sup> mayhem. The Malaysian perspective did not condone violence and in fact vehemently condemned the attack, but at the same time proposed that some soul-searching is required on the part of both West and East to effectively stop recurrence of such human tragedies in the future. After all, the Malaysian government and media share the concerns of the West to ensure extremists do not threaten national and regional security in South East Asia.

Does NST's readership agree? It seems so. Similar balanced perspectives and sentiments were evident in respect to contributors amongst the public. Views of condemnation as echoed by letter writer Ainul Ghazali (2001) who says that September 11<sup>th</sup> was the work of desperados seeking world attention. However letter-writers also called for soul-searching to investigate the causes of 9-11. Another letter-writer Hashim Ambia (2001) questions whether such horrendous crimes can occur without any reason or cause? Some writers suggested Osama was a creation of Americans during the Cold War and slammed double standards: Aishah Abd Rahman (2001), another letter-writer stated that US foreign policy is crippled with double standards, citing how the US condemned Musharraf for his undemocratic assumption of power, but now he has become a buddy. One letter-writer J. L. Christopher (2001) wrote from Arizona stating that those who voice the need to search for the root cause of the attacks tend to believe that America is the cause and asserts a view of moral equivalency. He concedes that America has made mistakes in its foreign policy, but claims that almost every country has done the same. This soul searching attempts to see the bigger picture without unbiased stances is conducive to build a world of better understanding, peace and harmony. Such views should be seen as friendly and constructive advice to America and not mere criticism for the sake of opposition.

#### *Liberal Islam vs. extremism*

As Malaysia propagated a liberal, modern and progressive version of Islam compatible with economic and social development, its media can play a vital role to differentiate between extremists and liberal Muslims. Representing a unique liberal Muslim perspective, the Malaysia media predictably made great strides to absolve all Muslims of the collective guilt arising from the misdeeds of a few. This involved an attempt to distance misguided fanatics from liberal Muslims, which is why Adam (2001) wrote that true believers cannot perpetrate such cruelty and that Muslims cannot tolerate the inhumane sentiments that made possible the intended deaths of so many. The writer comments that if Islam is indeed the excuse for this act of extreme inhumanity, then no reasonable Muslim can applaud it. Writers like Adam also attempt to identify the attackers as misguided zealots not representing the true principles and faith of Islam.

Writer Datuk Seri Adib Adam (2001) states that terrorism is not exclusive to Islam and cites other cases of terrorism by people of other religions, including the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Ireland. Columnist Johan Jaffar (2001) says that Islam has been hijacked by these people. Another columnist Shamsul Akmar (2001a) questions whether the cause of fanatics is truly Islamic as killing, hostage-taking and armed rebellions killing innocents cannot be the teachings of the religion. The Diarist (2001) in his column regretted that innocent Muslims in the US and Europe have been bearing the brunt of an ugly backlash, calling upon the world not to associate

Islam with terrorism. These columnists and writers underscore that both Muslims and Islam should not be held responsible for the criminal activities of a few fanatics.

Similar views are expressed by NST's readership calling for a line to disassociate such fanatics from the peace-loving religion of Islam. Letterwriter JE (2001) said that the extremist brand of Islam propagated by fanatics was a deviation from the true faith. At a time when the wrong doing of a misguided few has equated Islam with terrorism in the eyes of many, the Malaysian media is able to play a constructive role to differentiate extremists from liberal Muslims. This is bound to create greater understanding between various religious groups in the region and elsewhere, as believers of other faiths will be able to see that Islam is not the cause but rather a lame excuse used by perpetrators of evil. This will help establish peace and cooperation as the significantly large population of non-Muslims in South East Asia will see that the violence perpetrated in the name of Islam in fact contravenes the basic tenets of peace emphasized by God in the religion's verses. This removes any suspicion of Islam and Muslims of this unhealthy activity in the South East Asian region given the demographic mixture of various religious groups in the population of the countries.

#### *Afghanistan: Civilian misery*

The Malaysian media represents a balanced perspective expressing tremendous empathy with the suffering populace of Afghanistan, who were tortured by Taliban and then further tormented by the US-led strikes. The balanced stance taken by the Malaysian media following the 911 tragedy accommodated views of the West as well as East, condemning the mayhem unequivocally but at the same time standing by the side of humanity in respect to Afghanistan. Malaysia has pressed for a multilateral approach to resolving international issues including Afghanistan under the banner of the United Nations instead of unilateralist action by the United States.

In the initial reaction to September 11<sup>th</sup>, there was much speculation on probably American retaliation. Though understanding America's reasons for retribution, the Malaysia media largely opposed a full-scale war. Columnists like Adam (2001) felt that such war was bound to lead to unsavoury circumstances in the form of civilian misery. One writer Ashraf Abdullah (2001) questioned whether the attack of a state by another state can be tantamount to a form of terrorism too, thus giving credence to the view that two wrongs don't make one wrong right.

The readership agreed. Letter-writer Kassim Ahmad (2001) pleaded for US to be sensible in its retaliation. He hoped that rational voices will emerge (in the US) to stop a process that will bring calamity to us all. Rozi Ali (2001) wrote that understandably, its citizenry demands retaliation, but the US should react strategically and rationally.

The fallout of the US-led strikes against Afghanistan in retaliation and retribution of September 11<sup>th</sup> saw the Malaysian media condemning the attack due to the suffering of innocent civilian victims. Once again, the Malaysian media represented a unique liberal Muslim perspective in that it does not condone atrocities of the Taliban regime but at the same time protest the air strikes due to civilian victims. Writers like Saleh Giles (2001) emphasized that even before the US-led strikes, the people of Afghanistan were already being abused, starved, maimed and killed due to the cruelty and callousness of the Taliban which legitimised murder and subjugation. Such writers don't mince their words in condemnation of the Taliban, stressing that Muslims wince in horror and shock at the way the Taliban has used a great religion like Islam to justify such cruelty and barbarism and no government that behaves with such cruelty and disdain against its own people has the right to continue to rule over them. She feels that the Taliban has unleashed their own peculiar version of death and destruction on the innocent people of Afghanistan and ought to be kicked out for terrorizing their own people, but agrees with the former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad that such air strikes will accomplish little.

Such writers like Giles feel that air strikes will only lead to further pain, fear, deprivation and death for the Afghan population unless real change comes to them. She feels instead that it is

more appropriate for countries representing the United Nations and Organization of Islamic Countries to unite in ousting regimes like Taliban for butchering their own people and immolating their own nations. In her column, Vasanthi Ramachandran writes, Killing innocent people is victory to terrorists. She criticises the attack on Afghanistan and questions whether two wrongs make one right, stating that children should not be made victims of war. She also questions the appropriateness of Bush's One for All and All For One motto in style of the Three Musketeers in attempting to show Might is Right. She says she grieved and mourned the Americans sorrow (of September 11<sup>th</sup>) but does not see the nobility of war. Johan Jaffar (2001) in his column pleads that the voice of reason should prevail as terror begets terror. Jaffar reminds the US that the suffering of the people in Afghanistan may be another battle cry for the militants and excuse for terrorists to wreak more havoc.

Some writers raised concern about continued bombardment of Afghanistan during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Diarist (2001) in his column hoped that the US will listen to the pulse of Muslims and wage the campaign against terrorism without of fending Islamic sensibilities. Writer K. P. Waran (2001) echoed the view and noted that bin Laden has to be eliminated because of his terrorist activities, but the strikes have to be swift to ensure it does not coincide with Ramadan and doesn't let civilian casualty numbers mount. Writer Datuk Mohamed Jawhar Hassan (2001) felt that the United Nations is the best bet for justice to be done for the lives lost in America ensuring there are no excesses done in the name of freedom and justice on one hand, or Islam on the other. Writers like Giles (2001) agree with the United States that the Taliban regime should be ousted, but seek other alternatives than air strikes. Other alternative measures are likely to yield more success than military offensives.

The Malaysian media has shown that protesting the mayhem of September 11<sup>th</sup> does not equate to blindly following the United States line. According to columnist Shamsul Akmar (2001 a), Malaysia is one nation that will never believe in the killings of innocents, Americans or Afghans and thus pulverizing Afghanistan is something as unpalatable to Malaysians as the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack.

Similar views are echoed by letter-writers responding to 9-11 and US retaliation against Afghanistan. One letter-writer Ainul Ghazali (2001) compared the US-led strikes on Afghanistan to a Malay proverb on someone who burnt the mosquito net in an effort to be rid of one tiny, irritating mosquito. He likens the strikes to an attempt to annihilate a race from the face of the earth and protests the attacks. Another writer Prabha Pankajan (2001) used a similar phrase, stating it is not necessary to burn the garden to get rid of the weeds. Bulbir Singh (2001) even commented that he preferred intervention of the UN, questioning whether America's attack was justice or revenge.

Letter writer P. D. Wren (2001) declares that, the regime in Afghanistan is responsible for its own fate. Letter writer Nuraina A. Samad (2001) opined that the world cannot be party to this war against Afghanistan and US should not act with revenge. One writer Hassan Talib (2001) appreciated what America has indirectly done for Malaysia and the world but at the same time feels that America should not react like King Kong on top of the WTC with its fury and anger. These views are in line with the balanced perspective highlighted above.

There were some who believe that Israel was exploiting the US wrath for its own interest. Azmi Atan (2001) wrote, using the US anti-terrorist campaign as a veil Israel is trying to convince the Bush Administration to act against the Palestinians. From another point of view, letter-writer Andrew Lam (2001) suggested that apart from calling US to halt strikes against Afghanistan, countries should press the Taliban to surrender Osama, which will make the Americans stop the attack. Another writer T.E.H says it is necessary to destroy the leaders at the headquarters to destroy terrorism, as Taliban train and spread terrorism to the world. T.E.H (2001) seems to justify life is such that many innocent people will lose their lives for the guilty. GMH (2001), a letter writer also supported US retaliation, declaring that those who ask US to stop bombing should also ask the terrorists to stop the attacks. The views by letter-writers Atan,

Lam and T.E.H were in contrast to the mainstream media perspective expressed by columnists and writers.

In the later stage of the US-led strikes on Afghanistan, there was much speculation on the next location of the War Against Terrorism. Different analysts and commentators believed that the next phase, is an attack on Iraq and some other Muslim countries. The attack on Iraq has materialised and still unresolved till today. The Malaysian media's stance on this was similar to the attack on Afghanistan, as columnists and writers felt that such military offensives do not help to combat terrorism but result in the suffering of innocents. Veteran journalist Munir Majid in his article felt that if the US takes the War Against Terrorism to countries like Iraq, it will destroy all hope of a truly international campaign against terrorism due to the unwillingness of many Muslim countries to participate in an extended campaign of such sort. Majid advised US policymakers of caution in drawing parallels with the Cold War, as the enemy this time is unconventional and shapeless. He suggests that under such circumstances the US should not pursue this war in the same manner as the Cold War strategies and should instead look for a worldwide consensus on fighting terrorism. He feels that excessive military action will split the world in two, causing a division that would pit the Western against the Islamic world and eventually lead to an international reign of terror. He urges US to come out of the Cold War thinking and feels that the US should play the card right to create a new world order which is not an uglier reflection of the Cold War. Columnists like Majid in the Malaysian media attempts to promote consensus and understanding to fight terrorism. Such consensus is vital to establish peace through greater understanding and cooperation of religious and ethnic groups within the South East Asian region, between countries like Malaysia and Thailand, and the outer world alike. The sympathies to America for 911 remain, but this is not necessarily equated to apologies for innocent victims of Afghanistan.

#### *Unholy jihad*

Representing a balanced stance, the Malaysian media also called upon the Muslim world to do some soul-searching of its own. This is indeed praiseworthy as the Malaysian media can be seen to be leading the initiative amongst the liberal Muslim intelligentsia to cause a reform in the thinking, perspectives and ideology of the Muslim world as a whole, which augurs well for relationship between Muslims and others in the South East Asian region as well as elsewhere. By asking the Muslim world to do its own soul-searching, the Malaysian media has effectively asked Muslims in the region and other parts of the world to be open-minded, liberal and pluralistic in nature.

Columnists like Farish A. Noor (2001) explains that it has become painfully clear that the Muslim world as a whole has lost its moral compass and sense of direction. Noor feels that tragedies like September 11<sup>th</sup> are a result of endemic crises in the Muslim world, for which the Muslim world deserves as much blame as the West. Noor urges the world to understand that vast power differentials and enormous cleavages of wealth in the Muslim countries have led to a social divide and that those who feel themselves marginalized and silenced by the structural inequalities shaping their political universe will rise up in revolt against the order. He feels that the world should come together as one. Both the West and Muslim world need to make honest and determined effort to correct the imbalances and injustices, including the gulf between rich and poor and haves and have-nots. The writer feels that the West needs to do more, but the Muslim world at the same time needs to regain its direction and sense of moral balance. He calls for an effort for the Muslim world to understand other communities, as well as a need to ensure that Islam is not pit against non-Islamic. The writer also underscores the need for discarding the defensive posture and instead accepting reality that life is hybrid, plural and complex. Noor suggests that Muslims need to be more dynamic, open and inclusive rather than being at odds with others. The article by Noor shows how the Malaysian intelligentsia and media have tried to provide an alternative Muslim voice that represents an open and liberal brand of Islam which



encourages broadmindedness, tolerance and modernism. At a time when the antics of a few misguided fanatics have unfortunately put Islam into disrepute, such views assure the world that Osama bin Laden and his cohorts may not be representative of true Islam and the Muslim community. In another article, Noor (2001 a) says that, Muslims in particular must realize that our true allies are those peace loving advocates of democracy and justice in the West, and not the mullahs who call upon us to murder others in the name of our religion.

Some columnists disputed the legitimacy of fanatics calling for jihad, or holy war, Abdul Kadir Jasin (2001) in his weekly column writes, that not every Muslim calling for jihad has sufficient understanding of the religion. Jihad itself has been so badly corrupted by politics and fanaticism that it has lost its true meaning. Letter-writers largely echoed views by Noor and Jasin. One writer Alex Zander Hashim (2001) commented that the divide between the so-called holy and unholy side is an artificial divide and that the Muslims should overcome the paranoia about the enemy out there syndrome, the enemies of Islam, etc. He urges Muslims not to heap bitterness and resentment to others. Such liberal views propagated by the Malaysian media attempts to reduce tension between Muslims and believers of other faiths in the South East Asian region and elsewhere by asking Muslims to be open minded and not swayed by the fuzzy logic of fanatics who have narrow vested political interests. It is hoped that this will lead to greater understanding and cooperation between the diverse religious and ethnic groups in South East Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia. As ASEAN expands in its role and operation towards greater economic cooperation and integration, such understanding is an imperative for success of the member countries. The Malaysian media has played a commendable role to ask the Muslims to clean their own backyard first.

#### *Vulnerable Malaysia*

The aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> mayhem held immense significance for the Malaysian media in trying to draw parallels with its own domestic political scenario. The New Straits Times is owned by a media group known for its closeness to the Malaysian establishment and ruling party. It is only natural that the newspaper attempted to help the establishment gain political mileage in the days following the assault. This was particularly visible in the Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper, which saw many readers condemning the opposition, ultra-right wing, PAS party for sympathizing with Osama bin Laden and Taliban. The same occurred with respect to columnists and writers. Despite the element of political mileage, the perspectives of the Malaysian media reflect a sense of vulnerability shared by Malaysia, South East Asia and the world alike after the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. The media has expressed the sentiments of intelligentsia and population that Malaysia should not sit idle while knowing potential terrorist threats maybe brewing right under the country's nose. This can be applied further to the region itself. It is important for the countries in the South East Asian region to be aware of the terrorist, extremist and theocratic threats existing within its boundaries in the greater interest of peace, understanding and cooperation within the ASEAN grouping.

Some columnists called upon the government to enact legislation to thwart fanatic terrorists in the domestic scenario. Farish A. Noor (2001b) in his column says if Muslims of the world want to do something about this crisis, they could do no better than to stop listening to the Mullahs who have brought them nowhere.

Ironically, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> has also given the opportunity for the Malaysian media to justify the existence of harsh legislations like the well-known Internal Security Act, which used to be decried as being oppressive by foreign countries and human rights organizations before this. In an article on his weekly column, columnist Harun Hashim (2001) justifies the existence of the law and declares that, Internal Security Act 1960 has to remain on the statute books to combat terrorism in Malaysia. He condemns the incident as a dastardly attack. He feels that other governments should also consider enacting such heavy-handed legislation to ensure there is an effective machinery to detect, curb and prevent the commission of terrorist acts.

Writers also did not miss the opportunity to justify the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). Datuk Seri Adib Adam (2001) also praised the wisdom of the former Prime Minister (Tun Mahathir) and the Malaysian establishment to invoke the ISA, stating that, it took terrorist attacks on the WTC in New York and the Pentagon in Washington and its tragic outcome to silence critics (of the ISA) who lived by the misguided notions of personal freedom. This effectively takes a snide at foreign critics of the ISA who have remained relatively silent after the attack. He also feels that the US should re-examine its exuberant value system and suggested that September 11<sup>th</sup> could have been avoided if the US had more aggressive surveillance to counter terrorism.

Some columnists referred to September 11<sup>th</sup> as a warning to Malaysia that it must remain committed to democracy and refrain from supporting extremists. Abdullah Ahmad (2001) writes that Malaysia must not turn to extreme view or practices and instead be committed to the principles of moderation. Such writers hope that US and other human rights organization will refrain from criticizing draconian laws in the near and distant future. Thus, it can be seen that the Malaysian media has used the September 11<sup>th</sup> incident to convince the people of the need to have such despotic legislations like ISA in the interest of the country. Many writers including Fatimah Abu Bakar (2001) expressed a sense of vulnerability and that what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup> can happen anywhere.

Letter-writers agreed. One writer S.A.M (2001) wrote that Malaysia is a beautiful country with a moderate government and capable leaders and urged people not to be deceived by those who are crazy for power, and absolute power at that, whose only desire is to impose their will on others for their own selfish gains. This can be considered as a subtle attempt to draw parallels between Taliban and PAS, both being associated with extremism that opposes individual freedom. S.A.M slams PAS for jumping onto the religion bandwagon by calling on Malaysians of the Muslim faith to engage in a jihad or holy war against the US and its allies. Many letter-writers shared Fatima Abu Bakar's sense of vulnerability. One letter-writer RBZ felt that any measures are justifiable in the interest of the nation's economic and security interests, hoping that the US has hopefully learnt the lesson.

#### *World peace: Inter faith understanding*

The Malaysian media attempted to analyze the long-term implications of September 11<sup>th</sup> on international relations, particularly relations between the United States and Muslim world as a whole. Former diplomat Datuk Yusof Hashim wrote an article predicting that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks could be the watershed in the relationship between US and Muslim countries, as the former is more aware of its vulnerabilities and would be more disposed towards a balanced and fruitful relationship. The writer feels this will help Americans avoid unending periods of uncertainty and insecurity in the future. This represents another liberal Muslim viewpoint that calls for greater understanding and interaction between the West and the Muslim world to achieve peace and harmony.

An editorial (Editor, 2000) felt that Malaysia's gentle strain of progressive Islam, consistent stand against terrorism, record in countering ideology-inspired militant extremism makes her the logical choice as one of the dominant parties in any coalition against terrorism. A Kadir Jasin (2001 a) hoped that America would understand that the hearts and minds of the people must be won; the battle against terrorism cannot be won by military operations alone. This means that the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world may have greater unity and understanding. Nuraina A. Samad (2001) wrote how there has never been a time when the interesting discussion of Islam been more intense since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Farish A. Noor (2001) in his column calls for the creation of a meaningful alliance built on a common understanding of universal justice that unite communities rather than driving them apart and against each other.

Some suggested that US should take proactive efforts to ensure that fanatics do not have a war cry or cause. Zaharan Razak (2001) compliments America as the epitome of human achievement but at the same time hopes the country can reconstitute itself in terms of its multi-

ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religion reality to ensure that the reasons of hate, the fertile soil for the Osamas of the world to grow, will be nullified.

Letter-writers also called for restraint and consensus through dialogue to achieve peace. One letter writer Yusuff Woozeer (2001) called upon President Bush to look for inspiration from Pope John Paul's call in Kazakhstan for dialogue and negotiations to solve conflicts. V. Thomas (2001), a letter writer suggested that UN should set up, a Religious Council to deliberate on and decide matters concerning inter-faith issues.

The call for greater understanding and cooperation between various faith groups underscores the fact that the definitions of humanity, peace and terrorism are not society-specific but universal in nature. Samuel Huntington's prophecy of the Clash of Civilizations is negated by the Malaysian media, which calls for universal justice irrespective of religious identity. In fact, what is denoted by the term civilization is one and this sets the theme for future relations between the Muslim world and other countries in the world. Such a stance and attempt by the Malaysian media to establish consensus augurs well for understanding between the various faith groups composing the diverse demographic structure of South East Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia.

#### *Osama the coward*

As far as the guilt or innocence of Osama bin Laden is concerned, the Malaysian media maintained a form of neutrality despite unequivocally condemning violence in the name of religion. Though they printed the excerpts of all the released tapes, including Osama bin Laden's statements as well as the tape the US claims proves his guilt, they have not made any comments charging or absolving him of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Most columnists and writers interestingly remained more or less silent on this issue, though letter-writers were vocal. However, a few writers suggested that evidence should be made public as a subtle attempt to question as to whether it is justified to implicate Bin Laden without evidence. K. P. Waran (2001 a) in his article also calls upon the US government to make public evidence gathered after the September 11 attacks implicating Osama bin Laden and his coterie. Perhaps, the silence of most columnists and writers on this issue is due to diplomatic sensitivity and lack of empathy for bin Laden. The Malaysian mainstream media establishment appears to be unsympathetic to bin Laden irrespective of his guilt or innocence in September 11<sup>th</sup>, given his fanatic credentials and suspected links with extremist parties within the country. Some even accused US of creating fanatics like Osama. Writer Johan Jaffar (2000) echoed the sentiments of many who believe Osama is undoubtedly the creation of American policy in the region, referring to the Cold War history. Another columnist Aishah Ali (2001) also questions that the US has not been able to establish proof as yet to the prime suspect Bin Laden.

Interestingly, NST wrote an editorial (Editor, 2001 a) on a relatively unrelated TIME's annual Man of the Year issue. In a write-up, the newspaper questioned the hypocrisy of TIME magazine in naming Rudy Guiliani as Man of the Year, instead of Bin Laden, a man whose impact did not stop at the steel-melting fires, the entombment of thousands of innocent lives, the visual hole in the Manhattan skyline and the hole in America's psyche. It is to remind the readers that TIME founder Henry Luce felt the criteria for the award is the person who most affected the news of our lives, for good or ill. This shows some form of objectivity by the local media in its views, despite the fact that it shed no crocodile tears for Bin Laden or his cause.

However, letter-writers were more vocal in this issue. There were attempts by some readers like Ainul Ghazali (2001) to question America's assault on Afghanistan based on suspicion that Osama bin Laden was there. He felt that US was being hypocritical towards Bin Laden dead or alive despite law stipulating that no one is guilty until proven so. This letter writer feels that, US should not be the world's police in championing human rights when it does not practice what it preaches. The same writer also questioned the influence of Bush administration on American media to propagate its own propaganda to convince people.

A letter written by Md. Zufadzli Mohd. Ali (2001) believes that pinpointing Osama Bin Laden and Afghanistan government is a means to divert attention from the US government inability to defend the country. Letter writers Mohidden Abdul Kader (2001) and Mariam Ansari (2001) also called upon the US government to declassify its evidence to inform the public of the evidence against Bin Laden, but at the same time questions the validity of such evidence. Aishah Abd Rahman (2001) wrote that twenty years ago, the Americans created Osama Bin Laden thus agreeing with Johan Jaffar. Letter-writer Andrew K. L. Lam (2001) calls Osama a coward who stirred up the hornets nest, but innocent people are becoming victims and that bin Laden is a coward hiding behind innocent Afghan people. Some letterwriters supported the hunt for Bin Laden, hoping that everyone will benefit and breathe easier if he is brought to justice, stating that they feel vulnerable as September 11<sup>th</sup> could happen in our own land as well.

The balanced stance of the Malaysian media is once again seen to be accommodating the perspectives of both West and East. It condemns terrorism and remains largely unsympathetic to Osama Bin Laden irrespective of his guilt or innocence in the New York tragedy due to his extremist credentials but at the same time asking Americans to rethink their foreign policy and avoid creating monsters. The Malaysian media does not ignore the fact that Bin Laden was in fact a creation of the West during the Cold War, something that the United States and the world as a whole have to pay for today. Such balanced perspectives help identify some causes of today's tragedy for us to take note of in the interest of averting future tragedies thus helping build peace in the South East region and world alike. A new world Order based on such understanding of past policy mistakes by great powers will augur well for a world consensus on peace.

## **Bali**

Similar to the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy the Malaysia media maintained a unique balance with respect to covering and analyzing the terrorist bombing in Bali. The aftermath of the Bali bombing saw a convergence in perspectives of West and East as the threat to security was now at the doorsteps of the South East Asian region, holding vast implications for countries like Malaysia and Thailand.

### *Universal destructive repercussions: It's the economy, stupid*

At the time the Bali bombing news reached Malaysian shores, the initial reaction was one of shock since Bali enjoyed a unique reputation as a tourist haven of the East and stood out as one of the most peaceful and safest places in Indonesia (Utusan, 2002) if not in the Southeast Asian region. The country's media found it unimaginable that a peaceful island of mainly Hindu believers would be the target of a terrorist attack. The region woke up to the ugly truth that international terrorism remains inherently unpredictable, hitting where it is least expected, thus, once again raising the importance of an urgent global consensus to fight it.

In its efforts to emphasize the destructive repercussions of such terrorist attacks for the region as a whole, the Malaysia media focused on the potential negative impact on the South East Asian economy. Newspapers highlighted the negative consequences of the Bali blast to the Malaysian economy, especially as the United States, Australia and several European countries issued warnings to its citizens to refrain from travelling to the region. The well being of the region was thus at stake by the wrongdoing of misguided fanatics.

### *Global partnership*

Once again, the Malaysian media maintained a unique balance by identifying the negative consequences of the bombing, but at the same time protesting the warnings issued by Western countries as being counterproductive and detrimental to efforts of stamping out terrorism. The mainstream media and the population as a whole were generally united in their discontentment

regarding the warnings stating that Malaysia or other parts of the region are prone to terrorist strikes. Malaysia's Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir (Murugiah, 2002) in an interview with the NST accused Western governments of making the situation worse. Western countries should help us, but by making baseless comments they are instead helping the terrorists and becoming their loyal allies. Terrorists know that if they blowup one place, they can create mass pandemonium, he said. Munir A. Majid (2002) agreed as he felt that the West ignored the fact that other countries like Malaysia were also victims of such terrorist attacks. Instead of issuing warnings detrimental to economic health of countries like Malaysia; which implies success of terrorists to instil fear and intimidation, the West should build partnership with the East to help each other to fight this common evil. Majid expressed displeasure of the West's lack of concern over the damage that indiscriminate advisories about impending terrorist acts would cause to national economies and life.

Letter-writer Dr A. Soorian (2002) opined that by discouraging its citizens from travelling to Southeast Asia after the bombing, the Australian government had fallen into the trap of the terrorists. He accused Australia for practicing double standards by not issuing similar warnings against its citizens travelling to the US after September 11<sup>th</sup> though Australians were victims of the tragedy as well. Attempting to strike a chord of unity between the West and East to fight international terrorism, Farish A Noor (2002) emphasizes that terror networks are not unique or exclusive to the Muslim world and there have been countless acts of terror carried out in other countries like Sri Lanka, India, Spain, Italy, China, Russia, France, Germany, Britain and even the United States itself.

The country's media felt that by issuing warnings to tourists visiting South East Asia, the West has been unfair to countries in the region like Malaysia which perceives itself as active an anti-terrorist country. Malaysia had taken pains to distance itself from factions that were considered terrorist sympathisers. The country's effective measures to combat extremists showed that the authorities would not tolerate any form of religious extremism that can cause social unrest or anarchy. News reports quoted former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad as saying that the warning issue made by the US made it obvious that the superpower had disregarded Malaysian cooperation in combating terrorism, while Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir emphasized that the country has taken all precautions to stamp out extremist thinking and inculcate a love for peace and goodwill and hatred for terrorism (Murugiah, 2002). The government has attempted to track down terrorists including members of the Jemaah Islamiah group in various phases of its antiterrorism campaign following September 11<sup>th</sup> and both prior to and after the Bali incident (Charles, 2002).

Despite condemning and expressing shock at the Bali bombings, the Malaysian media true to its moderate and balanced form, also called for soul searching on causes leading to such inhuman tragedies. Columnist Farish A. Noor (2002) highlighted that some of the Bali clubs adopted a whites-only policy barring Indonesians who have every right to go to a club in their own country. Careful not to condone violence, Noor, however, suggested that tourists should treat local customs and practices with care in order to help avert such future tragedies. Such statements should not be seen as justification for the bombings.

In fact the media has been unequivocal in its condemnation. Views calling for soul-searching intend to put the tragedy in the context of identifiable causes in order to avert future recurrence. Similar to the media's perspective with respect to September 11<sup>th</sup>, the Malaysian media has balanced the views of the West and East by sharing concerns of insecurity, but at the same time mentioning how future repeat of past mistakes can be avoided. While countries like Malaysia are adopting harsher anti-terrorism measures to clamp down on terrorists, the West should also reconsider some of its foreign policy attributes and attitudes of its people that may contribute to discontent. Avoiding future tragedies will mean reducing discontent as well as cracking down on extremist forces.

In its quest to build global partnership to fight international terrorism like the Bali incident, the Malaysian media prominently reported steps to cooperate with neighbours including Thailand to clamp down on terror camps. The media suggested setting up a multilateral regional framework involving Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Australia to combat terrorism by promoting cooperation and exchange of information regarding terrorist activities in the region. The Star Online (2002) reported that Malaysia agreed to setting up of the regional training centre on counter-terrorism that will be called the South-East Asia Centre for Counter-Terrorism to establish cooperation between the West and East.

The Malaysian media has been ardent in its assertion that international terrorism does not have boundaries or religious identity. Instead of blaming countries by issuing self-defeating warnings vindicating the skewed aims of misguided fanatics, the time is ripe for building a consensus between West and East to cooperate with each other. Once again, distancing extremism with peaceful Islam, columnists like Noor tried to explain how violence should not be equated to the religion, its adherents or countries with predominantly Muslim population. Such views attempting to establish consensus augur well for aims to establish peace and security within both the South East Asian region and the world alike. By highlighting the effective measures taken by authorities like the Malaysian government to combat extremism, the Malaysian media has opened the doors for the West to think of countries in the region as partners sharing the same concerns and fears of insecurity, thus requiring cooperation instead of self-defeating warnings. The country's mainstream media show the need for such cooperation across borders in the South East Asian region and elsewhere to fight terrorism as the negative consequences are universal, affecting not only the West, but also other countries including liberal Muslim states like Malaysia.

*Balancing and accommodating West & East: Malaysian media and world peace*

In the Information Age, media is considered to be a powerful tool affecting lives of millions across geographical and political borders. According to the Society of Professional Journalists (2002), public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty.

In order to maintain their ethical obligation to inform, journalists as reporters and opinion-makers need to ideally ensure objectivity, neutrality and impartiality. However, in reality, such complete neutrality rarely exists, as it is impossible to avoid news bias. According to Michel Parenti (1998), selectivity is needed as no communication system can hope to report everything. Once a process of selection takes place, there is no avoiding biasness because what gets chosen into the news is dependent on the journalists, editors and owners of the media organizations. The mainstream media in Malaysia, similarly, cannot be considered to be free of bias, but this writer concludes that the bias towards the official stance of the ruling coalition in fact leads to a form of neutrality when it comes to covering the international arena. Aware of its economic and business links with the West, the Malaysian government has continuously portrayed the country as a moderate, modern and progressive Muslim state. This is more importantly so because of domestic concerns as well, the ruling coalition sees a political threat in extremist parties led by opposition PAS party which aspires to build a theocratic state in diverse Malaysia. The Malaysian government thus understands the security concerns of the West because it suffers from similar threats within its borders. At the same time, the Malaysian government maintains a strategic balance in its line of rejecting unilateral action, instead preferring multilateral action under the auspices of the United Nations. The government's official stance has been one that is sympathetic to innocent casualties of humanity, while it clamps down on extremists within its borders. Echoing the sentiments of the government, the Malaysian mainstream media has been able to provide balanced perspectives in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> scenario by unequivocally condemning

terrorism but at the same time calling for soul-searching and rethinking of American foreign policy. The media view represents the government's perspective, which lies on humanitarian lines instead of religious identification. Such balanced objectivity accommodating perspectives of both West and East forms a good foundation for developing a multilateral consensus based on understanding and cooperation between both ends of the spectrum. Having played a largely objective role expressing both sides of the story but taking a principled stance on humanitarian grounds, Malaysian media's call for soul-searching amongst the West as well as Muslim intelligentsia may hold significance in bridging the gap between both sides.

This writer holds the view that the most significant contribution made by the Malaysian media is to question the root causes behind September 11<sup>th</sup>. While the writer shares the unequivocal view of universal condemnation of September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy, at the same time, the United States need to do some soul-searching especially with respect to foreign policy handling in the Middle East. The United States should understand the sentiments and sensitivities that breed violence, because only this can truly avoid future tragedies of such a scale. At the same time, the media passionately calls upon Muslims to carry out some soul-searching of their own and distancing themselves from misguided fanatics perpetrating violence in the name of religion. Concerted efforts of developed and developing nations in the West and Muslim world should seek to find an everlasting consensus to avoid recurrence of such tragedies. This will be possible only if the United States acts as a fair international policeman and truly seeks to understand the reasons for its perceived unpopularity in certain parts of the world, while the liberal Muslim nations and people make a united stance against terrorism in the name of their peaceful religions.

Instead of looking at the tragedies superficially as isolated incidents of terrorism, the country's media, to its credit, has shed light by analysing related issues of causes and consequences to provide a comprehensive picture in a historical context. At a time of greatest need for global consensus, the role of the Malaysian media in fostering understanding gains heightened impetus. Despite criticism, time and again, for its lack of independence from government, it is concluded that echoing the government sentiments has actually led to a balanced stance taken by the Malaysian media that maybe able to bridge a new world Order based on peace and coexistence for both sides of the spectrum, thereby effectively challenging Huntington's prophecy of the Clash of Civilizations. This writer concludes that Malaysian media has shown that definitions of peace and terrorism are not necessarily specific to civilizations or groups but in fact universal in nature.

It is imperative to organize greater exchanges amongst media publications in the South East Asia region, particularly Thailand and Malaysia. As the bilateral ties between these countries grow further, media exchanges should be developed. This will help expand coverage of the balanced perspective by Malaysian media in the international arena, creating greater understanding, cooperation and cohesion between the two countries as well as the South East Asia region at the same time. The balanced perspectives taken by Malaysian media shows that terrorism is a global concern, some of the security issues faced by the West are just as relevant to countries in this region. The views of the mainstream media also show that Islam cannot be single-handedly held responsible for carnage carried out by misguided fanatics. The call for liberal Muslims to distance themselves from the clutches of vested interests of fanatics is vital for the future stability of the South East Asian region, given the diversity in races, ethnicities and religions across the countries. In addition to this, the call for soul-searching on part of the West is bound to lead to a greater understanding and cooperation between all countries in the world alike.

While the mainstream media in Malaysia can enlighten the West of perceived injustices leading to grievances, it is also in a unique position to initiate a reform of moderate and liberal thinking in the Islamic world. The emergent moderate and balanced stances from the spectrum of views of West and East as highlighted in this study leads to the conclusion that the Malaysian media has the scope of fostering greater understanding across religious, cultures and societies leading to world peace. This is the very foundation needed in order to establish a consensus with

regard to international terrorism and to build a world of peaceful coexistence for our future generations.

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