

Orientations of Government Public Relations Practice in Malaysia: A Pre-Independence and Post-Colonialism Perspectives

Muhamad Rosli Selamat, PhD

Senior Lecturer

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: m_rosli@upm.edu.my

Muhamad Ridhwan Rosli

PhD Candidate,

International University of Malaya-Wales

Kuala Lumpur

Email: ridhwan_rosli@ymail.com

Abstract

This article, conceptually explores the orientation of the practice of public relations in Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya) during the last decade of British occupation and the first decade of post independence based on historical perspective. The post colonialism of British administration addressed the significance influence of British strategic approach of public relations practice in the newly independence nation. Being a Malay state/country and gaining independence through negotiation and not war, the influence of post-colonialism is clearly acknowledged through the appointment of a local British and English educated Director Generals for the Department of Information, functioning as the head of the government public relations officer. Nonetheless, independence meant that the newly independent nation has every right to forgo the colonialism influence, but the case of Malaya is extremely different. Being the majority, the Malay administrators maintained their culture of loyalty by respecting and tolerating their former superior British administrators “post-colonialism” by assimilating and adopting their public relations strategic practices throughout the first decade of post independence Malaya.

Key words: Public relations, independence, post-colonialism, Malaysia

1.0 Introduction

“Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.”

Edward W. Said (Los Angeles Times, July 20, 2003)

Post-colonialism is defined in anthropology as the relations between nations and areas they (the colonists) colonized and once ruled.¹ “Post-colonial” is referred to the period after official decolonization.² Simon Gikandi considers post-colonialism as a “code for the state of undesirability in which the culture of colonialism continues to resonate in what was supposed to be its negation.”³

Post-colonialism is a concept within contemporary cultural studies that indicated the effort to explain the development, process, situations, and outcomes of modern colonialism on the culture and the politics of the colonised nations. Post-colonialism theory, often said to begin with the work of Edward W. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, looks at literature and society from two broad angles: how the writer, artist, cultural worker, and his or her context reflects a colonial past, and how they survive and carve out a new way of creating and understanding the world.⁴

Post-colonialism was also referred to the period after the major movement toward decolonization in the former European colonies in Africa and Asia. Postcolonial theorists generally focusing their discussions on the empires of the European nation-states, notably Britain and the colonization era were largely consolidated in the nineteenth century and were mainly dismantled in the mid-twentieth century.

In 1978, Edward W. Said published *Orientalism* which has been influential and nevertheless controversial in postcolonial studies.⁵ In his writing, Said redefined the term 'orientalism' to mean a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East. This is marked by a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture." Although Said limited his discussion to Middle Eastern, African and Asian history and culture, he mentioned that "Orientalism is, and does not merely represent, a significant dimension of modern political and intellectual culture."

Based on Michel Foucault ideas,⁶ Said emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and power in popular and scholarly thinking, particularly regarding European views of the Islamic Arab world. He argued that Occident and Orient worked as oppositional terms, so that the "Orient" was constructed as a negative inversion of Western culture.

Lockman (2004) noted that other than Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, was also important in shaping Said's analysis. Said can be seen to have been influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony in understanding

¹ Syed Hussein Alatas (2011). *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. London: Routledge.

² Susan Abraham (2008). "What Does Mumbai Have to Do with Rome? Postcolonial Perspectives on Globalization and Theology," *Theological Studies* Vol.69. pp.376-393.

³ Simon Gikandi (1996), *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴Moosavinia S.R.; N. Niazi, Lorestan & Ahmad Ghaforian (2011) *Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol.2 No.1, pp. 103-113.

⁵Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.

⁶Ibid.

the pervasiveness of Orientalist constructs and representations in Western scholarship and reporting, and their relationship and commitment to the exercise their power over the “Orient”.⁷

The case of Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya before 1963) was decolonize in 1957 and is a significance example of how British influence affects the identity, culture and politics of the nations in the post-colonialism era. The discussion of this paper will focus on the practice of government public relations in Malaysia during its last decade of colonialism and the first decade of post-colonialism era. Government public relations practice in Malaya during the first decade of independence is a good example of British “post-colonialism” or “orientalism” by which the independent Malayan government inherited the British Malaya government approach of implementing or practising public relations. The influence of post-colonialism is clearly acknowledged through the appointment of a local British and English educated Director Generals for the Department of Information, functioning as the government public relations entity of the country. As before the independence, the practice of public relations in Malaya was strategised by British Malaya who ruled the country with the main objective to fight terrorism, gaining support from the local and development.

According to Maureen Taylor in Hamdan (2010), "Since Independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has used public relations for nation building". Contrary to Taylor, the Government had actually used public relations for fighting terrorism (communist terrorist), nation building, national unity and socio-economic development since 31st August 1957 when the country gained independence from the British. In fact, the Malayan nationalist had been using public relations effectively to win support from the people for the independence and development for the country.⁸

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (p.6)”

Edward W. Said (1994), Culture and Imperialism

2.0 Historical Background

In Malaysia, according to Syed Arabi (2000), five events shaped the development of modern public relations. First, was the advent of the Second World war; second, was the period towards achieving independence in 1957; third, the formation of Malaysia in 1963; fourth, the May 13th incident in 1969, and finally, the Privatization Policy of 1980. Each event had it own share of the pressure and demands to shape the growth and development of governmental public relations in Malaysia. The history of the government public relations practice in Malaysia was started 31 years before the independence in 1957, through the establishment of Information Agency of the Malay States in 1926. This agency was responsible to perform the functions of government public relations until 24th September, 1945 prior to the establishment of the Department of Publicity and Printing.

This agency was later restructured to adapt to the civil administration beginning 1st April, 1946 and was given the new name, the Department of Public Relations. In 1950, the new name was changed to the

⁷Lockman, Zachary (2004). *Contending Visions of the Middle East: the History and Politics of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁸ Muhamad Rosli Selamat (2009). *Management of Public Relations (Malay)*. Petaling Jaya: August Publishing.

Department of Information with a more organised and expanded duties, roles and functions. This Department was placed under the Ministry of Information which was established in 1961 and maintains its core duties to coordinate and implement government public relations activities until today.

At first, the department was established under the objective to restore the image of the British Government which was badly affected by the Japanese occupation. A section of people in Malaya had lost their confidence in the British after the Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945 in Malaya. The British Military Administration (BMA) began on 5th September, 1945 and ended on 31st March, 1946. At the same time, several nationalist organisations had started moving to liberate Malaya from colonization of any foreign party.

The Malayan Union was thus established in 1946 by the British, however was dissolved in 1948. It was replaced by the Federation of Malaya which restored the autonomy of the rulers of the Malay states under British protection. In the same year of 1948, the Communists taking advantage of a weakened British administration and exploiting the growing anti-British sentiments among the population, launched their so-called 'War of Liberation' with the object of capturing power over the country and setting up a Communist republic. The British, however, officially termed the communist rebellion as an 'Emergency' - a name which stuck throughout the 12 years it lasted.

The Malayan Emergency refers to a guerrilla war for independence. It was between Commonwealth armed forces under the British Empire and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party, from 1948 to 1960. The official term by the colonial government of the conflict was Malayan Emergency. On the other hand, the MNLA termed it the Anti British National Liberation War. Here, the British industrialist used subtle public relations to ensure that they do not suffer total loss. Instead, they tried to make the best of the situation, instead of withdrawing as they did during the Japanese invasion.

Many western writers, especially the British, considered Malaya as one of the earliest victories of a legitimate government against a Communist insurgency. It must be reminded that no colonial government, of which Malaya was at the time the insurgency began, can be considered a legitimate government. The British imperialist had manoeuvred themselves to power into the Malay States and then shamelessly reclaimed them after they had left the Malaysians to the Japanese. In fact, it was only after several negotiations that the British promised to give Malaya independence. This resulted to the lost of claims by the communists on their propaganda on trying to liberate the country and it also made their cause almost meaningless to the people they claimed to be the champion.

However, it is true that it is one of the earliest victories of a legitimate government against the communist insurgency for when victory happened, Malaya is already a legitimate independent nation. It is not just a British victory or the West. It was a victory for the free world, which the Malaysians played a major part.

Nevertheless, it must also be said that it was the British strategy that made the victory against the communist terrorists possible. Most of the real fights were done by non-Westerners and the majority who died were Asians. The British separating the insurgents from the people, made it impossible for them to be armed and equipped with supplies, and eventually forced them to surrender after their base was lost due to

the nation's independence, the citizenship afforded to the Chinese, and the free elections that proved to the people that democracy had truly arrived. Also, it was claimed that the Malayan Emergency was the only war the West (British) won against Communism which had used guerrilla warfare successfully to overthrow governments not subscribing to its ideology. It must be said that it was not a War between the West and East. Basically, it was a war of ideology. Clearly, it was between capitalism and communism. Also, it was between imperialism and freedom/independence, with the spirit of nationalism ever increasing among the colonized nations. The war was won because the British decided to give independence and the majority of the people being Malays and Muslims were against communism, and are very appreciative to their superiors – British Military Administrators (BMAs).

During the Emergency, the Department of Information played a vital role in enhancing efforts to save the nation from communist threats. The Department provided a great deal of material for public relations activities, especially announcements to appeal and request the people to unite and fight the communists. The public were prohibited from helping the communist and were urged to support the government. Pamphlets or appeal letters were air dropped on the eve of Chinese New year to address the remaining communists still hiding in the jungle. The Department's staff members were in the front line to appeal the remaining communist to give up by even going into the jungle. In 1957, the Department launched a counter-subversion campaign trying to explain the dangers posed by communist subversive elements.

3.0 Orientation of Public Relations during Post-Colonialism Era

The orientation of public relations during post-colonialism era was coordinated by the Department of Information, a government information agency. There were several phases of post-colonialism era that significantly depicted the colonialism approach of public relations, namely rural development and first decade of post independence era (1957-1967), 1963 confrontation and 1969 incident.

However, when Malaya won its independence from the British rule in 1957, the Communists had no more reason to claim that they were fighting to liberate the country from British colonialism. In June 1960 when the last of the enemy's fighting men were withdrawn to the border area (Southern Thailand), the Emergency was finally declared ceased.⁹

Hence, the British decision to grant freedom to Malaya was a wise move. It virtually won the full support of the local people, through their willingness to join the public service and security forces (police and military) that were established by the British Malaya. Henceforth, the Government could rely on the support of every segment of the Malayan society in its war against communism. Simultaneously, the communist terrorists' promise of "liberating Malaya from the British imperialism" became empty and meaningless. If they chose to fight, they would only find themselves against the very people that they had pledged to liberate from the colonial control.

The Emergency years (1948-1960) are crucial in understanding modern Malaysia. Many of Malaysia's development policies and public relations practice over the last quarter of 20th century have their roots in this turbulent twelve years time frame. The Emergency, and especially the reversal of policy (e.g

⁹ Ahmad Nordin (1986) "The History of Government Public Relations". Conference on the Professionalism of Public Relations Practitioners in Malaysia, 16 September 1986. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information.

from a passive to a more aggressive approach in addressing the Emergency), which came about in 1952 by Sir Gerald Templer (who was a British Military Commander in Malaya), have positively impacted many areas of Malaysian life. But perhaps most importantly, the course of the Emergency and particularly the abandonment of a coercion and enforcement approach in favour of a hearts and minds approach.¹⁰

It clearly shows that the public relations and information aspects are all-important. Not only must the propaganda, indoctrination and, falsehoods of the insurgents be countered quickly and firmly, but the Government must also put across their own case forcibly and frequently. The local population will be subjected to powerful enemy propaganda and pressure, and the authorities must deploy and use all possible means, in order to defeat this and at the same time to persuade the people that their best interests lie with the Government. Here, it can be concluded that modern and current public relations in Malaysia began chiefly in the Government Information Department as part of the war effort and psychological warfare that were designed earlier by the British Malaya.

According to Syed Zainal Abidin, a former President of the Institute Public Relations Malaysia, it was "The Government who was the first to recognise its potentialities and usefulness and was used as part of its war effort as well as psychological warfare against the communist insurgents during the dark days of the Emergency."¹¹ In the meanwhile with the advent of independence, the Government's public relations services (which included the Information Department and Broadcasting Department) geared themselves to prepare the people not only to celebrate the joyous occasion but, more importantly, to accept the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. While 'Unity in Diversity' was the official motto, the popular catch-phrase was nation-building. How to build a nation out of such a great diversity of races and culture was the daunting task facing the Government then, as it is today.

The main vehicle for this process of education in citizenship was the civics courses organized at the various levels of society throughout the country. These courses included talks on the Constitution, the Government machinery and how it worked and so on. These talks were also delivered over the radio.

4.0 International Public Relations

Meanwhile in 1963 with the launching of "*Konfrontasi*" (confrontation) by the Indonesian-Sukarno regime against the newly-born Malaysia, the nation found itself again engaged in a propaganda campaign, but this time, at the international level. It was a campaign in which various psychological devices and instruments were fully utilized in order to mobilize public opinion, at home in order to support the government's policy of resisting Indonesia's aggression, and abroad, in order to win international diplomatic and political support for "a small country that meant no harm to its neighbours and only wanted to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty against the hostile designs of its bigger neighbours". The conflict derived from a belief by Indonesia's President Sukarno that the creation of the Federation of Malaysia (union of Malaya, Singapore and North Borneo of Sabah and Sarawak), represented an attempt by the British to maintain colonial rule behind the independence granted to her former colony.¹²

¹⁰ Lowe, Vincent (1986) *Asian PR*. Singapore: Times Book International.

¹¹ Morais, Benedict & Mohd Hamdan Adnan (1986) *Public Relations: The Malaysian Experience*. Kuala Lumpur: IPRM & Federal Publications.

¹² Muhamad Rosli Selamat (2002). *The Practice of Public Relations (Malay)*, Shah Alam: Malindo Communications.

The term *Konfrontasi* (confrontation) was first coined by Dr. Subandrio, Indonesian Foreign Minister, in January 1963. It came to refer to Indonesia's efforts at that time to destabilize the new federation (Malaysia) in an attempt to break it up. When Indonesia launched a series of cross-border raids into the Malaysian territory in early 1963, the actual war began.

In the early 1960s, Indonesian President, Sukarno was openly critical of the West. He viewed the 16th September 1963 establishment of the Federation of Malaysia, that included Malaya, Singapore, and former British North Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah), as a continuation of colonial rule. The antagonism that gave rise to Confrontation was already apparent in December 1962, when a small party of armed insurgents, with Indonesian backing, attempted to seize power in the independent enclave of Brunei, only to be defeated by British troops from Singapore. By early 1963, military activity had increased along the Indonesian side of the border in Borneo, as small parties of armed men began infiltrating the Malaysian territory on propaganda and sabotage missions. These cross-border raids, carried out by Indonesian 'army volunteers', continued throughout 1963, and by 1964 the Indonesian regular army units had also become involved incidents.

Most of the guerrilla war happened in the rainforest of Borneo. Only by September 1964, the Malaysian peninsula was penetrated. Britain sent troops to help the Malaysian forces seal the border on Borneo Island, while Australia and New Zealand forces lent their support. International condemnation forced Indonesia to abandon membership in the United Nations. Sukarno's military campaign largely intended to deflect attention from Indonesia's paralyzed economy proved the death of his regime.

However, according to the Department of Information, when the country was facing the confrontation in 1962-1963, its biggest responsibility was to combat the propaganda campaign launched by Indonesia and the opponents on the formation of Malaysia which comprised leftist political organizations in Brunei and Sarawak. During the early stage of confrontation, the Director-General of the Department of Information, Dato' Mohd. Sovie Ibrahim had to travel all over Malaysia to brief the officers of the department on the development of the event. The focus of activities was concentrated along the country's western and southern peninsular coastal areas. Members of the public were always reminded about the landings of the enemy and were asked to report to the police should they detect any strangers in their villages.¹³

Mobile Units kept the public informed, especially to the rural people, not to believe and instead to counter the accusations and propaganda made by Indonesia. The Department also helped to organise mass gatherings to explain to the people the real situation about the confrontation and on anti-Sukarno gatherings. The activities of explaining the situation outside the country were also intensified to obtain international support and help until the end of the confrontation.

Continued negotiations between Indonesia and Malaysia finally ended the Confrontation. The two sides signed a peace treaty in Bangkok in August 1966. For peace to sustain all parties must communicate. It must be remembered that propaganda and psychological warfare is often viewed as a part of a public relations exercise. However, if the methods used and adopted are unethical, the good name of public relations practice can be jeopardised. So, it is essential for public relations practitioners to maintain and sustain their ethical conduct, else they will lose their credibility. The public relations approach of understanding and agreement through Bangkok Treaty were accepted and signed between Abdul Razak

¹³ Department of Information Malaysia. *Annual Report 1963-1966*.

(Deputy Prime Minister) of Malaysia and Adam Malik (Vice President) of Indonesia, in August 1966, effectively ended the Confrontation between the two nations.

During the “*Kofrontasi*”, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, headed the Ministry of Information himself. In government public relations, the Prime Minister, the President or whatever the designation of the head of the state is called, will normally be accorded as the top most public relations officer of his or her nation.

5.0 Conclusion

“Despite the variety and the differences, and however much we proclaim the contrary, what the media produce is neither spontaneous nor completely “free:” “news” does not just happen, pictures and ideas do not merely spring from reality into our eyes and minds, truth is not directly available, we do not have unrestrained variety at our disposal. For like all modes of communication, television, radio, and newspapers observe certain rules and conventions to get things across intelligibly, and it is these, often more than the reality being conveyed, that shape the material delivered by the media.”

Edward W. Said (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*

With regard to the practice of government public relations in Malaysia, post-colonialism significantly portrayed the influence of colonialism era as the independence of Malaya was not won from, but granted by the British. Said's Orientalism not only taught readers to "read for the gap" in post-colonial studies, placing texts in broad political contexts, but also his writing had a liberated effect on intellectuals from former colonized countries and appealed the western intellectuals despite its obviously valid points about weaknesses of Euro-American thought. Inaccuracies on how the western view the east.

In the case of Malaysia, the colonial public relations programme denied the nation's identity. It is the matter of one's identity, as it have been shape according to what the British think is right rather than what is the best for Malaya. Consequences from that, Malaysia has become a post-colonial space, and not of one coherent “public space”. Other than that, colonialism has invaded the actions from its nature into new forms. The designed forms include domestic nationalistic tyranny imposed on minority groups, and collusions of nationalistic values to the global context. Post-colonial perspectives on globalization that point to the many ways academic frameworks exacerbate colonialist perspectives on times, places, and cultures different from western resist and oppose rigid disciplinary boundaries.

Action taken by the British also had fostered the otherness and difference, which find their source in the colonialization strategy. Where the oneness is emphasized, sameness is fostered as virtue and universality as ideal. The formation of Commonwealth (Union of former British colonies), nonetheless transpires the continuity of British colonialism endlessness within post-colonialism. According to Said (1978), “The Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation and notion about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent herself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist’s work.”¹⁴ Action was taken based on the decision where the locals were not the decision makers. It is also can be

¹⁴ Said, Edward W. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Pantheon

observed that the British were working on a “trial and error” basis in most of their strategy and decision making on their colonies.

Said (ibid) also noted that Western writings about the Orient depict it as an irrational, weak, feminised "Other", contrasted with the rational, strong, masculine West, a contrast he suggests derives from the need to create "difference" between West and East that can be attributed to immutable "essences" in the Oriental make-up. This is clear in the case of Malaysia, when all the decisions were made by many administrators (British Malaya) who even could not understand the language of the local during the colonialism period. The British influence and dominations in government policy design and decision makings continued during the first decade of post-colonialism era as many of the British administrators were contracted to service the public in Malaya/Malaysia after the independence until their retirement age.

In the context of government public relations in Malaysia, it is often been said that public relations prosper under adverse circumstances, especially when the nation is under extreme threat or when public support is urgently needed.¹⁵

Bibliography

Ahmad Nordin (1986). “*The History of Government Public Relations*”. Conference on the Professionalism of Public Relations Practitioners in Malaysia, 16 September 1986. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information.

Department of Information Malaysia. *Annual Report 1963-1966*.

Gwee Hock Aun (1966). *The Emergency in Malaya*. Penang: Sinaran Bros

Hamdan Adnan (2010). *Government & Political Public Relations: An Introduction*. Shah Alam: UPENA

Lockman, Zachary (2004). *Contending Visions of the Middle East: the History and Politics of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lowe, Vincent (1986). *Asian PR*. Singapore: Times Book International.

Moosavinia S.R.; N. Niazi, Lorestan & Ahmad Ghaforian (2011). *Studies in Literature and Language* Vol.2 No.1, pp. 103-113

Morais, Benedict & Mohd Hamdan Adnan (1986). *Public Relations: The Malaysian Experience*. Kuala Lumpur: IPRM & Federal Publications.

¹⁵ Hamdan Adnan (2010). *Government & Political Public Relations: An Introduction*. Shah Alam: UPENA

Muhamad Rosli Selamat (2009). *Management of Public Relations (Malay)*. Petaling Jaya: August Publishing.

Muhamad Rosli Selamat (2002). *Practice of Public Relations (Malay)*. Shah Alam: Malindo Communications.

Paget, Julain (1967). *Counter-insurgency Campaigning*. London: Faber & Faber.

Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.

Said, Edward W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Pantheon

Simon Gikandi (1996). *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Susan Abraham (2008). "What Does Mumbai Have to Do with Rome? Post-colonial Perspectives on Globalization and Theology," *Theological Studies* Vol.69. pp.376-393.

Syed Arabi Syed Idid (2000). *The History of IPRM*. Kuala Lumpur: IPRM

Syed Hussein Alatas (2011). *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. London: Routledge.