

Managing the Content of Malaysian Television Drama:
Producers, Gatekeepers and the *Barisan Nasional* Government

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Tee-Tuan Foo
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This dissertation entitled

MANAGING THE CONTENT OF MALAYSIAN TELEVISION DRAMA:
PRODUCERS, GATEKEEPERS AND THE *BARISAN NASIONAL* GOVERNMENT

BY
TEE-TUAN FOO

has been approved

for the School of Telecommunications
and the College of Communications by

Drew McDaniel
Professor of School of Telecommunications

Kathy Krendl
Dean, College of Communication

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Director of Dissertation: Drew McDaniel

Abstract:

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe and analyze how drama television content is managed in Malaysia. By looking at the production process of local drama television programming, this study examines the interactions among the three major players – the *Barisan Nasional* regime, the major television networks and independent producers – who are responsible for shaping its content. Three research methods are used for this study: in-depth interviewing, the informal conversational interview and documentary research. Between June 2001 and November 2002, 32 interviewees participated in this research.

The research finds that the Malaysian drama television producer's ability to generate program content is constrained by the *Barisan Nasional* regime. Three observations are made to outline the power relationship between the government and the television industry. First, the government often encourages television producers to make drama programs with the theme of friendship and goodwill (*muhibah*) among different ethnic communities in order to nurture racial harmony. However, as the racial interactions portrayed on television fail to reflect the reality in Malaysian society, it makes the viewers even more racially conscious. The implied message of social

polarization, however, is an advantage to the government, as it reminds viewers that without the regime's firm hand, Malaysia might slip into racial conflict.

Second, as government officials can ignore established rules when it is convenient, and reinterpret existing rules in distorted ways to force producers to create the kind of content they desire, it renders useless the censorship guidelines issued by the Malaysian government. The guidelines, however, serve a different purpose. They are used to inform the public that the government is safeguarding the content of national television.

Third, while some media producers might have been forced into compliance, many work for the government. The authority grants privileges to these producers; in return they ensure that the will of the regime is visualized on the small screen. In view of this, Malaysian television practitioners should not be seen merely as victims, they should also be understood as willing collaborators for the regime.

Approved: Drew McDaniel

Professor of Telecommunications

Preface

In retrospect, this study was inspired by two unexpected experiences. In 1985, when I was pursuing my first degree at Taiwan's Fu Jen Catholic University, I was often perplexed by my Taiwanese friends' fixation with Mainland China. As a Singaporean, their perception of their counterparts across the straits as an evil empire seemed far-fetched. At the time, the People's Republic of China (or Communist-bandit as my Taiwanese friends call it) was slowly but surely embracing a market economy and becoming an important and integrated part of Asia. Taiwanese mass media, however, was ignorant of such development and continued to portray China as a military threat to the region. More importantly, my Taiwanese pals seemed to accept this interpretation of China presented by the media as commonsense. At the time it was difficult to convince them otherwise.

In 1996, when I returned to Singapore after being abroad for more than ten years, I was again surprised to realize that we Singaporeans also have our own "commonsense." The self-imposed constraint to speak about racial matters to our counterparts in the Malay and Indian communities is certainly one example of such commonsense. As a Singaporean, I was not unaware of such sensitivities. However being away from home for more than ten years, I could no longer accept this social norm without questioning. In essence, I have become an outsider questioning the "commonsense" of my own society, just as I questioned the commonsense of my Taiwanese counterparts 11 years earlier.

This dissertation is about how media convention is shaped and reinforced. At the time when I proposed this research to my committee, I was not aware that I was actually responding to experiences that I had had years ago. It was in the later part of my writing

that I realized how my past experiences in Taiwan and Singapore led me to this project. By looking at how media conventions were shaped by social and historical conditions and subsequently maintained by interest groups that benefit from them, I have managed to clarify some of the confusions I experienced many years ago.

To a large extent, commonsense in Taiwan and Singapore is not so different from media conventions in Malaysia. Both are social norms established under a particular social situation which were quickly absorbed and adapted by the establishment to maintain its social, political and economic hegemony. Investigating how commonsense or media conventions are established and maintained is in essence to expose the power structure beneath the respective society.

For my father,

Foo Toon Hoo (1934-2004)

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Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents, my father Mr. Foo Toon Hoo and my mother Madam Hing Lan Wa. Without their love, patience and support I would not have been able to fulfill my dreams of being an image-maker, teacher and researcher. I am sad to say, my father passed away while I was working on the final chapter of my dissertation. He will forever be missed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Television became an important part of daily human life after World War II and scholars have sought to understand its impact on society. One approach to the study of this medium has been to focus on the question of content and control. Because of the characteristics of television, such an approach is not surprising. McQuail (1994) pointed out two distinctive features of television:

1. A high degree of regulation, control or licensing by public authority —initially out of technical necessity, later from a mixture of democratic choice, state self-interest, economic convenience and sheer institutional custom; and
2. The center-periphery pattern of distribution and the association of national television with political life and the power centers of society as they have become established as both popular and politically important (p. 18-19).

McQuail (1994) further pointed out that due to this closeness to power, television has “hardly anywhere acquired, as of right, the same freedom that the press enjoys, to express views and act with political independence” (p. 19). As television is considered an important means to disseminate information, many studies focused on the content of television news and its relationship with the dominant ideology. For instance, studying the political economy of news media in the United States—including television—Herman

and Chomsky (1988) found that money and power have penetrated the media by direct control or indirect influence. Using five news filters that fix the boundaries of media discourse and the definition of what is newsworthy, media institutions have become the propaganda channel for the rich and the powerful. These news filters are the following:

1. The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant media firms;
2. Advertising as the primary income source of the mass media;
3. The reliance of the media on information provided by the government, business, and “experts” funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power;
4. “Flak” as a means of disciplining the media; and
5. “Anticommunism” as a national religion and control mechanism (Chomsky, 1988, p. 2).

While many scholars are keen on studying the relationship between television news and the political economy (or ownership) structure of the media and social environment, relatively fewer researchers have used the same approach to study another important television genre: drama.

In contrast to television news, the main purpose of television drama is to entertain, not to inform or educate the public. As a result, the commercial values of prime time drama are the most important (sometimes the only) means of evaluating success or failure of programs. However, this does not mean that drama programs are exempt from

the dominant ideology. Studying the ideological perspective of the British television drama *Coronation Street*, Terry Lovell (1981) found that although entertainment is not primarily a vehicle for the transmission of ideas in comparison to news program, it still produces ideas that can “certainly be locatable in terms of ideology” (p. 47). The question then becomes how certain ideologies, in particular the dominant ideology, prevail through the television production process and through what means. Studies by Muriel Cantor (1979) and Todd Gitlin (1979) of television drama in the United States focused specifically on this area. The former sought to identify who plays an important role in creating drama programs; the latter tried to understand the process that is in favor of the dominant class. Cantor (1979) pointed out that drama television is “not necessarily a reflection of the tastes and ideology of either the creators or those who control the channels of communication; rather, it represents a negotiated struggle between a number of participants” (p. 387). These participants include the television networks, advertisers, the government, social critics, citizen groups, program providers and program creators. While Cantor (1979) identified the participants who take part in creating television drama, Gitlin (1979) described the hegemonic process that ensures the dominance of the mainstream ideology. He pointed out the “interrelated ways in which television messages are integrated into the dominant system of discourse and the prevailing structures of labor, consumption and politics” (p. 251). In his conclusion, he stressed:

One point should be clear: the hegemonic system is not cut-and-dried, not definitive. It was continually to be reproduced, continually superimposed, continually to be negotiated and managed, in order to override the alternative

and, occasionally, the oppositional forms. To put it another way: major social conflicts are transported into the cultural system, where the hegemonic process frames them, form and content both, into compatibility with dominant systems of meaning. Alternative material is routinely incorporated: brought into a body of cultural production. Occasionally oppositional material may succeed in being indigestible; that material is excluded from the media discourse and returned to the cultural margins from which it came, which elements of it are incorporated into the dominant forms (p. 264).

The studies by Cantor (1979) and Gitlin (1979) are just two of the studies that focus on drama television. These studies clearly demonstrate that the way television drama is shaped by an underpinning ideology and its processes is a complex but worthwhile subject of analysis. These studies reveal the social, political and economic interactions of media institutions and society in general. However, most studies of television dramas are located in liberal, democratic and relatively homogeneous Western societies, such as the United States or the United Kingdom. There are very few similar studies done in the developing nations. Such a shortcoming prompts the researcher to question whether the findings—and understanding thereof—provided by these studies could be applied to societies or nations that have different social, economic and political contexts. The answer to this question appears to be unclear. On the one hand, television is a Western invention that has been transferred to other parts of the world. This transfer

included not only television technology but also the industrial practices and socio-cultural institutions. As a result, it is not difficult for one to find that television organizations in different parts of the world share more or less the same production process. On the other hand, one would also find that many non-Western nations tend to alter the institutional practices, which originated in the West, in accordance with their social, political and cultural needs. For instance, Karthigesu (1986) found that “it is in the developing countries that television is formally assigned with objectives and directions by authorities which are often government” (p. 2). It appears that while the findings provided by Cantor and Gitlin are valuable to understanding the issue of control on drama television production in the Western world, its applicability in other parts of the world remains unknown. It seems that unless more studies focus on the drama television production process and its institutional and social environment in different social, political and cultural contexts, the relevance to a non-Western society of findings from studies in a Western context remains questionable.

To address this problem, it is therefore necessary to look at some of the concepts proposed by William Hachten (1996) on the differences between Western and non-Western media. Hachten pointed out that perceptions about the nature and role of communication differ from country to country depending on the respective nation’s “political systems and historical traditions” (Hachten, 1996, p. 14). He categorized these different perceptions, which greatly influence their respective media system, under five nominative concepts: Western, authoritarian, communist, revolutionary and developmental. Among these five concepts, the Western concept stands out most prominently. It is the only concept that argues that media should be “well protected by

law and custom from arbitrary government interference” (Hachten, 1996, p. 19) and enjoys a high degree of autonomy similar to other private enterprises. In comparison, the other four concepts position media as an instrument for serving the interest of particular political regimes or agendas. While the western concept is adopted by mainly Western nations – such as France, Denmark, Germany, Australia, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States – authoritarian, communist, revolutionary and developmental concepts are practiced in other parts of the world. In particular, authoritarian and developmental concepts are widely accepted by the governments of many developing countries.

Such an outcome is not surprising. By adopting the authoritarian concept, these governments are able to exercise stringent control over media content by imposing censorship. The developmental concept is also appealing to many Third World nations. Under this nominative concept, media are positioned to be used by government to mobilize its people on developmental matters. While the Western concept advocates that media must be free from government interference, both authoritarian and developmental concepts provide a rationale for direct government control. As the studies done by Cantor (1979) and Gitlin (1979) were conducted in the United States where media practitioners are relatively free from government interference, how would their findings apply to a media industry that is tightly controlled by the government? This dissertation seeks to answer this question by studying the tightly controlled Malaysian drama television industry.

The culturally pluralistic and politically authoritarian landscape of Malaysia makes it an ideal society for this study. Under the leadership of its former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia is one of the few Third World nations that have openly

argued that developing countries need not adopt the practice of Western media. In the 1990s, Malaysia, together with its neighbouring country Singapore, had been in the vanguard of Asian values, which advocate that Asian media should work for the government instead of serving as the fourth estate. Such position makes Malaysia distinctly different from Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, in term of managing media content. The study of Malaysian television drama may lay the foundation that could, in the future, lead to a comparative study between Western and non-Western media. Also, as Malaysia is one of the founding nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), studying how its dominant power manages the content of drama television could provide findings that render an understanding of the region's television institution.

Background of the Problem

Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic country that gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, was once considered one of the Asian Tigers because of its rapid economic growth in the 1980s and early 1990s. Since its independence, Malaysia's political scene has been dominated by *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), a coalition government under the leadership of United Malays National Organization (UMNO) that includes political parties representing minority groups such as Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Although its political position was seriously challenged by opposition parties in the 1997 general election because of the Asian economic crisis, *Barisan Nasional*, under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, continued to retain considerable support from its diverse population. The nation has thus been continuously dominated by a group of

political elite—represented by *Barisan Nasional*—which, on one hand, has won every general election since 1957 and, on the other, has exercised draconian measures such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) to control political opponents. Such a contradictory “authoritarian with mass appeal” nature has prompted Australian scholar Harold Crouch (1993) to point out:

The political regime, therefore, could be understood neither as a form of democracy nor as a form of authoritarianism but as a distinct model combining both democratic and authoritarian elements. The democratic and authoritarian characteristics of the regime, however, were not so much in conflict with each other as integrated to constitute mutually supporting aspects of a cohesive system. On one hand vigorously contested elections were held regularly at the national and state levels as well as within individual parties. But on the other hand restrictions on political activity made it difficult for the opposition to win. A balance was achieved in which democratic institutions forced the government to be responsive to popular demands while authoritarian restrictions ensured that it remained in power (p. 139-140).

However, Crouch’s interpretation of Malaysia’s political scenario was questioned by Gomez and Jomo (1997). They stated:

In spite of fairly regular multi-party elections and some other features requiring accountability of the regime, the Malaysian state has been authoritarian since the colonial period, though analysts have characterized the political system as semi-authoritarian, semi-democratic, or quasi-democratic. Although these qualified descriptions suggest that some democratic aspects and forms remain, most of the minimal conditions necessary for the practice of democracy in the Schumpeterian sense, particularly fair elections, adequate opportunities for independent political opinion-making and political organization, and minimal protection for the individual from arbitrary state power, hardly exist in Malaysia (p. 2).

Whether Malaysia is an authoritarian state or a nation that is neither democratic nor authoritarian as Crouch described, the fact remains that the *Barisan Nasional* government has in the past five decades successfully used the available resources to ensure its continuous domination of the nation's political scene. One of these resources is the mass media institution. According to Gomez and Jomo (1997), "The government-controlled media have been used by the *Barisan Nasional* to promote and legitimize itself as well as to discredit political opposition and dissent more generally" (p. 3). However, the criticisms raised by scholars such as Gomez and Jomo referred mainly to the news programs while entertainment programs such as television drama appear to be exempted from such censure. Such a scenario does not mean that drama television production in

Malaysia is not under the direct control of the *Barisan Nasional* government. According to Norila (1994), media policies implemented by the government are one of the means to regulate the content of news or entertainment programs shown on Malaysian television. Studies done by John Lent, Drew McDaniel, and Vincent Lowe and Jaafar Kamin demonstrate further this repressive relationship between the Malaysian government and its mass media institution.

In 1975 Lent, a professor of communications at Temple University, who studied Malaysian media development from the end of World War II to the early 1970s, argued that the British and, later, the Malaysian government used political crises to formulate laws and regulations to control the country's mass media industry. In his paper (1975), he pointed out that historically the Malaysian "mass media had been patterned along linguistic and political party lines; their loyalties, for the most part, were to the motherlands of ethnic communities, not to Malaya" (p. 663). Such a media environment, however, was gradually reshaped by authorities—first by the colonial power, and then by the indigenous government—under the context of political crises and this led "to increasing official control and restraints on a culturally pluralistic system of mass media" (p. 663). Lent specifically highlighted four political crises that were used by the authorities in controlling the Malaysian mass media industry: (1) the Emergency (1948-60); (2) the creation of the Federation of Malaysia and the Indonesian Confrontation of 1963; (3) the split with Singapore in 1965; and (4) the racial riots of May 13, 1969.

Lent noted that in 1948, as British Malaya was facing a serious threat from Communist insurgents, the British sought to prevent subversive Communist publications by promulgating a Printing Presses Act and Sedition Ordinance. Under these laws, annual

printing permits and licenses were needed for media personnel, and individuals were “liable to fines or imprisonment for acts, words, speech and publications which have seditious tendency” (Lent, 1975, p. 664). Lent pointed out that the tactics that the British government used in controlling mass media were later borrowed by the indigenous Malaysian government.

In the three subsequent political crises after the nation’s independence, Lent found that these crises, in particular the race riots between Malays and non-Malays that erupted on May 13, 1969, were used as reasons for the Malaysian government to assert control over the media. He stressed that after the three previous crises, the May 13 riots were the “culminating point in setting Malaysian mass media policy.” In the aftermath of the riots, the Malaysian government instituted “policies, altering laws and restructuring society—and mass media—to force them to assist in implementing government goals” (Lent, 1975, p. 664). The indigenous government altered measures that were first instituted by the British to cater to the post-colonial political and social situation. Such measures included prohibiting all discussion in the mass media of four sensitive issues: (1) the Bahasa Malaysian language policy; (2) the special rights granted to the Malay ethnic group; (3) the special roles of sultans and other royalty; and (4) the policy which denies citizenship to certain non-Malays and grants the government the right to deny licenses to publications not owned by Malaysians. Another communication scholar, McDaniel (1994), echoed Lent’s finding on the impact that internal crises—in particular the May 13 racial riot—had on media policy:

Events of 1969 have had a powerful effect on the media.

First, they were obliged to assist in the healing process.

Secondly, media's main responsibility was defined as the support of Malaysia's social unification (p. 84).

Lent (1975) found that in addition to using political crises as a rationale for controlling the mass media, the Malaysian government used other means to increase its control of the media industry. Among these measures were the Second Malaysia Plan, effective from mid-1971, and the *Rukunegara* (National Ideology). The aim of the Second Malaysia Plan, according to the government, was to foster national unity and harmony among races. To eradicate poverty, in particular among the Malay population, the Second Malaysia Plan also aimed at having Malay participation, in terms of ownership and management, in at least 30 percent of the total commercial and industrial activities in all categories and scales of operation. As a result of such goals the hiring and ownership practices of the mass media were greatly affected, especially at the government-owned broadcasting organization Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) in which there was little room at the top for non-Malays. The *Rukunegara* was another part of the Malaysian government's plan to restructure society which had a great impact on the mass media industry. The *Rukunegara* prescribes five beliefs (united nation, democratic society, just society, liberal society, progressive society) and five principles (belief in God, loyalty to king and country, upholding of the constitution, rule of law, good behavior and morality) which all Malaysians, including the media workers, should practice.

Lent pointed out that besides regulating the mass media through legislation, the Second Malaysia Plan and *Rukunegara*, the Malaysian government also exercised its control through other channels. Studying the structure of the Malaysian mass media,

including newspapers, radio and television, and the advertising industry, he stated that many of these media organizations were either owned by the government, or controlled by UMNO and/or political groups/conglomerates from different ethnic communities that were closely affiliated with it. Under such social, political and ownership structure, the Malaysian mass media were more or less forced to restrain themselves from criticizing the authority.

In 1982, Lowe and Kamin published their book titled *TV Program Management in a Plural Society: Decision-making Processes in Radio and Television Malaysia* which provides a glimpse of how hegemony worked in the Malaysian television industry. Unlike Lent, who studied historical facts, political campaigns and industry structure to understand the relationship between the government and the mass media, Lowe and Kamin studied the relationship through a series of interviews with RTM's staff. They examined the program management's decision-making processes in the state-owned television organization, and found that the unbalanced interaction between the external influences—including intervention from political forces—and the television professional was apparent. They pointed out:

Most of the decisions on local media content come from sources outside of the professional structure of the department. The main influences on these decisions are therefore external and they emanate from the delicate political position of the country resulting in delicate racial balances as shown by compromises and different emphasis

on questions of religion, language, and culture (Lowe & Kamin, 1979, p. 31).

Pointing out that the notion of sensitivities was constructed within the decision-making processes of RTM and constantly in the minds of broadcasting professionals, Lowe and Kamin's study also revealed that suppressive interaction was evident not only between the government and the broadcaster but also within RTM. According to the authors, "The organization uses a wide range of policy maintenance mechanisms. These mechanisms as well as other socialization instruments ensure (and reward) conformity to rules" (Lowe & Kamin, 1979, p. 31). As a result, it created "the atmosphere of control, the tightness of the hierarchical structure" (Lowe & Kamin, 1979, p. 32) in the state-owned broadcasting organization.

The Lowe and Kamin study of RTM provided important findings regarding the decision-making process in the government-owned television organization. However, this study is not without its shortcomings. Firstly, Kamin, at the time of the research, was the Controller of TV Programs at the Malaysian Department of Broadcasting. Such a position, while it provided the researchers easy access to RTM and its staff, might also have prompted Lowe and Kamin to be less critical of the television organization in particular, and the government in general. Secondly, it is important to note that this study was published 18 years ago. In the past two decades, as major changes have transformed the Malaysian television industry—from the introduction of a private television channel to the emergence of satellite television—the study by Lowe and Kamin is no longer comprehensive and its information is dated. Therefore, it is the purpose of this dissertation to provide a comprehensive understanding of how control is exercised in the

Malaysian television industry. However, unlike Lowe and Kamin who looked at all forms of program, this study plans to focus on one particular television genre: drama production.

Statement of the Problem

Television was introduced in Malaysia in the 1960s. When Lent (1975) and Lowe and Kamin (1979) published their findings on the Malaysian mass media, the nation had only two government-run channels. The first television network, Talivishen Malaysia, was inaugurated by then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman on December 23, 1963. In 1969, a second channel was added. According to Zainur and Nawiyah (1996), these two state-run television channels, commonly known as RTM 1 and RTM 2, serve slightly different functions. While RTM 1 “is committed to promoting national unity, security and development,” RTM 2 “has been given a more entertainment-oriented role” (Zainur and Nawiyah, 1996, p. 45). From 1963 to 1984, RTM 1 and 2 dominated the Malaysian broadcasting scene. Then, in 1983, a privately owned television channel, *TV-Tiga*, was granted a license to operate alongside the two government channels. This provided an alternative for the Malaysian viewers. It is also important to note that at about this time—the 1980s—privatized drama television program providers began to emerge in Malaysian television. McDaniel (1994) pointed out that these “privatized programs in Bahasa Malaysia have become the mainstay of evening entertainment programming” (p. 122). He further states:

With growing audiences in the rural areas and better production quality in independent production houses, these shows are now among the most popular on Malaysian

television Huge successes experienced by these independently produced shows have encouraged officials to move the bulk of local drama production to outside firms. Independent productions can be justified on economic grounds also—outside creative personnel are considered more efficient than government workers (p. 122).

As the locally produced drama programs are among the most popular on Malaysian television, it is not surprising that drama has become the genre that government-owned and private stations use to lure audiences. Such competition is intensified by the approval and licensing of several new television program providers. These were Mega TV (pay television which was launched in 1995 but ceased transmission in 2001), ASTRO (satellite television launched in 1996) and NTV 7 (privately owned television launched in 1998). Because government-owned and private television stations, as well as old and new program providers, are using drama programs to attract their targeted audiences, it is likely that the Malaysian government would have less control over the content of the privatized drama production. However, this does not mean that the political elite would lose their hegemony through these programs. The question is through what means is the dominant power in Malaysia able to gain favorable treatment from the drama production industry? As stated earlier, the studies by Cantor (1979) and Gitlin (1979) inform us that in a liberal, democratic and relatively homogeneous Western society the dominant ideology is likely to “re-negotiate and redefine” in order to continue to win a public consensus. How would this re-negotiating and

redefining process function in a culturally pluralistic but politically authoritarian society such as Malaysia? How would the nation's experience on ethnic conflicts—one of the four crises that occurred between 1948 and 1969, as pointed out by Lent—play a role in this process? Most importantly, who play the major roles in shaping the content of drama production and what is their relationship with the dominant political force—*Barisan Nasional*— in Malaysia? It is the purpose of this dissertation to provide answers to these questions.

Purpose of the Dissertation

This study will describe and analyze the drama television production industry in Malaysia. By looking at the issue of how the dominant political power — the *Barisan Nasional* government — manages the content of television drama programs, the researcher hopes to understand the drama production process in a culturally pluralistic but politically authoritarian society. Specifically, this study will examine the interactions among the three major players who are responsible for shaping the content of Malaysian drama television programs. These three major players are the *Barisan Nasional* regime, the major television networks – in particular the government-owned network Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) – and local television production houses. In order to properly discuss the complex interrelationship among the different players, it is essential to position the issue of influences on drama content within a larger framework of mass communication studies.

Review of Literature and Theory

Two concepts are particularly important in guiding this research: (1) television as a producer medium; and (2) the theory of gatekeeper. By using these two concepts, this

study seeks to understand the factors that influence the content of drama television. The following segments discuss the important literatures of these concepts, point out how they further our understanding in this field of study and, more importantly, guide the direction of this dissertation.

Television as a Producer Medium

Several studies (Cantor, 1971; Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Tunstall, 1993) have pointed out the importance of the television producer in shaping the content of drama program. In her 1971 book, *The Hollywood TV Producer: His Work and His Audience*, Cantor identified the crucial role that producers play in creating programs for the three major television networks in the United States. She stated that the television producer has “both executive and creative authority” (Cantor, 1971, p. 7) for making his or her program. It is through controlling the story; casting and editing the drama television program via negotiating with television network executives, scriptwriter, director and other artistes that the producer becomes important in the process of creating the product. The crucial role of the television producer was also recognized by other scholars.

Influenced by the auteur theory of cinema study – which positions the director as the main creative force or auteur of a motion picture – Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley (1983) suggested that a television producer should also be seen as the auteur who drives the creative aspect of television drama. They acknowledged that television, like motion pictures, is indeed a highly collaborative medium. However, two factors make the television producer unique and crucial in the process of making a drama program. First, the producer is often responsible for legal and financial responsibility for the final television product. Secondly, the producer is the one who is “involved with the project

from beginning to end, sees to it that continuity is maintained, that peace is kept among other members of the team, and, most importantly, that the series concept remains secure” (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p. xii). With such understanding, Newcomb and Alley argued that the producers are the “creative centres of their endeavours” (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p. xiii) and television is, in essence, a producer medium.

Having studied television in a different social context—the United Kingdom—in the early 1990s, Jeremy Tunstall (1993) shared the same viewpoint. He saw the British television as a producer-driven medium, requiring “the individual producer to create the TV service that the public has received” (p. 1). All of these studies have agreed that television producers play a crucial role in shaping the content of drama television; however, this creative aspect of the producer is not without its constraints. To ensure that the program would eventually reach the audience through the television network, the drama television producer needs to ensure that the program caters to demands from different segments of society. To understand these demands, as well as to put this study into a larger context of mass communication study, this research borrows a theoretical framework that is commonly used to study controls of news content: the gatekeeper theory.

Gatekeeper as the Force of Constraint

The theoretical framework of gatekeeper was first introduced by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1947 and subsequently taken up by David Manning White (1950) who studied the selection criteria of the telegraph-wire editor of a local newspaper. White’s study found that gatekeeper’s selection criteria were “highly subjective” and were affected by two factors: the gatekeeper’s personal evaluation of the

story's content, in particular the trustworthiness of the information, and whether there was enough space for the local newspaper to run the story. After White launched the study of gatekeeper in the field of mass communication, many scholars (such as Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1973; Berkowitz, 1990; Pamela, 1991) used this model to study the factors that influence the content of mass media, in particular the content of news media. Over the years, researchers have found that other than individual preferences, the decisions of gatekeepers, such as news editors, are heavily influenced by non-journalistic factors. To the study of the gatekeeper theory, Pamela Shoemaker (1991) suggested that these factors could be divided into five levels:

- Individual level: Gatekeeper personal values, characteristics and ideas about what his or her job entails are some of the factors that shape the selection criteria at the individual level;
- Communication routines level: Audience appeal, news value, objectivity and minimizing media organization risks of libel suits are some of the factors that inform the selection criteria of gatekeeping at the communication routines level;
- Organizational level: Media organization's size, internal structure, economic goals, ownership and policy play an important part in shaping the gatekeeping criteria at this level;
- Extra-media, Social/Institutional level: At this level, such external factors as audience, advertiser, interest groups, government, public relation, and interaction with other media influence the gatekeeping criteria greatly;

- Social system level: The culture, societal interests, social structure and ideology of the society are the factors that mold the selection criteria at this level of gatekeeping.

Although the gatekeeper theory is generally used to study influences on news content, Shoemaker showed that this theoretical framework could also be used to study other genres. This understanding of gatekeeper and his or her selection criteria on what items or stories to accept or reject is of particular importance to this study. While a television producer is generally responsible for directly shaping the content of television program, he or she must also cater to the demands of the gatekeeper. The selection criteria of gatekeeper, on the other hand, are influenced by different levels of factors mentioned above. For the purpose of this study, the influencing factors at the organizational and extra-media, social/institutional levels are particularly important. The following segments would elaborate on how these two levels of influencing factors could affect the content of drama television.

Organizational Level of Gatekeeping

For drama programs to be aired through television, the first gate through which its producer must pass is the television network. Studies (Cantor, 1971; Gitlin, 1983; Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Tunstall 1993) have found that network executives who are in charge of program procurement often serve the role of gatekeeper on behalf of the television networks in interacting with producers. For these executives, as employees of the television networks, gatekeeping criteria inevitably are affected by the organizational policies of the networks. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) found that internal structure of most media organizations can be divided into three levels: front-line employees, which

includes staff such as writers, reporters, and creative personnel; the mid-level executives who are managers, editors and producers; and top-level executives who make organizational policies, set budgets and protect the commercial as well as the political interests of the organization. While the gatekeeping criteria of mid-level executives are informed by network policies, these policies are set by top-level executives who seek to safeguard the interests of network owners. Within the television network, media owners or their appointed top executives are the ones who “have the final say in what the organization does” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 163). Therefore, knowing the ownership of a television network is essential for understanding the decisions made by its mid-level executives.

In Malaysia, Zaharom Nain and Mustafa Anuar (1998) have used this understanding to point out the relationship between the *Barisan Nasional* government and the media industry. Tracing the ownership of mass media organizations in Malaysia and their relationship with the government, they found that, in addition to censorship and regulation, the Malaysian government also used control of ownership as a means to indirectly control the national mass media industry. It is important to note that as early as 1990, E. T. Gomez (1990) had already noted the peculiar relationship between Malaysia’s ruling political parties—mainly UMNO, MCA and MIC—and private corporations. However, it was Zaharom and Mustafa’s study (1998) that described this relationship as a factor in government control of the media industry. They looked beyond the appearance of liberalization of media policy and relaxation of control and pointed out:

Indeed, going by crude quantitative indicators, it would appear that in the mid-1990s Malaysians were spoilt for

choice, being well served by the media. . . . Unfortunately, crude quantitative indicators, while seemingly impressive, have a nasty habit of cloaking hard, cold facts; in this case, facts regarding concentration of ownership, elements of legal, political and economic control, and their implications for newspaper content and genuine variety of choices (Zaharom & Mustafa, 1998, p. 9).

However, these studies focused mainly on how the ownership of media organizations affects the content of news production; the issue of drama production was not addressed. Therefore, part of this study seeks to answer the question of how the ownership of media organizations affects the network executive's decision in selecting or rejecting projects provided by drama producers.

Extra-media/Social/Institutional Level of Gatekeeping

Other than constraints from the television network, drama producers also have to consider concerns coming from other social institutions such as advertisers, audiences, and the government. It is through pressuring the television network that these social institutions exercise their influence on the producer and shape the drama content in favor of their respective interests. Knowing that the television network in general and network executives in particular are facing these external pressures, the drama producer tries to ensure that his or her drama program will not cause any controversies and put the media organization in an awkward position. Such consideration would mean that the drama program would not be rejected due to external pressures while at the same time help build a "trusting" relationship with the television network. The "side effect" of these

interactions, however, is that the autonomy of the television producer in creating drama content is compromised. The following segments discuss the important studies that focus on the triangular relationship among the drama producer, the network executive and the respective social institutions. How these gatekeeping actions affect the autonomy of television producers in creating drama content is also considered.

Cantor (1971) is one of the pioneers who looked into the issue of control over television content and the relationship among the producer, the network executive and the social institutions. Through her interviews with 59 producers who specialize in drama or children's programs in the United States, she pointed out that creativity and autonomy in television are highly controlled by the social milieu. In the case of the American drama television industry, a profit-driven industry within a capitalist society, the producer has to pay particular attention to reactions of three reference groups:

1. Those in control of the medium: studio and network executives, sponsors and their representatives, the advertising agencies;
2. Those groups that might represent artistic excellence or achievement; and
3. The viewing audience the producer may be trying to reach.

Of the three reference groups, producers tend to regard those in control of the medium as the most important, in particular the television network executive who serves as the gatekeeper on behalf of the television network. As television is profit-driven in the United States, the network executive has to ensure that programs provided by producers are able to deliver advertising revenues to his or her network. In the process of interacting with the producers, network executives often serve as censors to guard against content that might antagonize the viewing audience and, more importantly, the advertisers.

The contribution of Cantor's study is that she highlighted the relationships among the television network executive, drama producer, viewing audience and advertiser within a capitalist society such as the United States. By highlighting the television network executive as a mediator between the producer on one hand, and the audience and advertiser on the other, she pointed out that part of the role of a network executive is to filter out content deemed undesirable by the audience so as to keep them from switching to other channels. However, the purpose of such an endeavor by the network executive is not to serve the interests of the audience; rather, it is to deliver them to the advertisers. As a result of these considerations—constraints from audiences, advertisers and network executives—many drama producers find that they are unable to bring forward progressive values through the programs they produce.

Cantor's position that drama programs are shaped by the television network in favor of economic forces within the society was supported and developed by Gitlin. In his book *Inside Prime Time* (1983), Gitlin illustrated how the different forces, which include network executives, producers, writers, advertisers, agents and actors, negotiated with each other in shaping the content of drama television programs. Although there are so many parties involved in the decision-making process, within the context of a capitalist society, the decisions ultimately are determined by economic factors. He pointed out that the condition of drama production in a capitalist society is such that "the advertisers set the terms, the networks order up the shows, the producers produce to order, and audiences play their part by accepting the results" (Gitlin, 1983, p. 272). The result is that it leaves little room for producers' creativity and the role of the audience is minimal. However, Cantor and Gitlin's arguments that television programs are highly

constrained by economic considerations and hence prevent drama producers from bringing forward their progressive values in their programs, did not go unchallenged.

Newcomb and Alley (1983) argued that although it is true that the television network executive does play an important role in shaping the content of drama programs due to the pressures coming from within as well as outside of the media organization, the television producer is still able to “mold constraint into creative contour” (p. xiv).

Obviously influenced by the auteur theory of cinema study, they perceived the producer as the creator of drama television who needs to treat it as a business as well as an art form. Thus he or she needs the support of the television network to back up the production, distribution and exhibition aspects of the project on the one hand, and the artistic values of the program to attract audience support on the other. Newcomb and Alley argued that producers successful with the latter are likely to gain more support from the former without compromising too much creative autonomy.

Through interviews with 11 successful American drama television producers, Newcomb and Alley (1983) found that television producers with continuous successes in terms of ratings are able to gain greater autonomy for subsequent projects from network executives. With such autonomy, these proven successful television producers are able to break “new ground in form and content” and distinguish themselves by creating a “distinctive” or “recognizable” style (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p. 38). Unlike Cantor (1971) and Gitlin (1983), who believed drama producers are unlikely to escape from profit-driven constraints set by network executives, Newcomb and Alley (1983) used these success stories to argue that such a maneuver is possible.

However, such maneuver is not without its price. In order to gain audience support, which is reflected in the form of ratings, the producer has to ensure that his or her programs cater to the tastes of the audience. In essence, such consideration turns into another form of constraint faced by the drama television producer, a constraint which Newcomb and Alley (1983) believed is a “disagreeable but accepted condition,” for it allows the television producer to maneuver within the established system and challenge the existing creative boundary.

Another scholar who raised a different viewpoint is Tunstall (1993). Using interviews between 1990 and 1992 with 254 British television producers, his study focuses on individuals in control of seven programming categories across British national television, including drama and comedy. As with Newcomb and Alley, Tunstall’s conclusion contradicted Cantor’s (1971) notion that television producers are unable to escape from the highly controlled commercial environment safeguarded by network executives. He argued that the legal framework of a society could require the television network executive (or commissioning editor, in the context of the British television industry) to grant producers more autonomy in making drama television. Using the British commercial television network Channel Four as an example, he pointed out:

Although the business competition was fierce, this was very far from being a total triumph for commercial values over producer autonomy. Alongside business competition went continuing producer autonomy; Channel Four from 1982 onwards represented perhaps one large stride towards commercialism, but it also represented another large stride

towards renewed producer autonomy. Its commissioning editors shunned efforts to maximize the audience; instead, they focused on their legal obligations in the directions of “distinctive”, “innovative” and “minority” programming. Many independent producers found themselves in highly autonomous control of highly innovative (or eccentric) program projects (Tunstall, 1993, p. 158).

Such statements are significant, especially in view of the time period when Tunstall did his research. The study was conducted the year after the implementation of the Broadcasting Act of 1990, through which the Thatcher government aimed to commercialize as well as de-regularize its broadcasting industry. As a result of such a change, the British television production practices started to shift heavily from the “integrated-factory” to “publisher” model. Under the “integrated-factory” model, programs are produced and transmitted within the same broadcast organization, a system that has been used since the beginning of British television. In the “publisher” model, the television network commissions independent producers to do the projects and concerns itself only in the areas of supervising, scheduling and transmitting of acquired programs, a system similar to the American model.

Summary: Social Institutions, Network Executives and Drama Producers

Previous studies have shown that the television producer plays a crucial and direct role in shaping the content of drama programs. However, producer autonomy is constrained by the network executive, who must consider many factors in the process of commissioning drama programs. As an employee of the television network, the executive

must ensure that the commissioned drama program will help the media organization deliver the audiences to the advertisers while at the same time satisfying government the requirements. As these social institutions — audience, advertiser and government — exercise their influences via the network executive, in essence they are the indirect forces that shape the content of drama television programs. Therefore, the producer is actually facing interferences from two levels: directly from the network executive and indirectly from social institutions. While it is clear that the content of drama television is shaped primarily by social institutions, television network executives and producers, the interactions among them appear to be less clear. On one hand is the understanding that as the drama producer is at the bottom of the hierarchical order, it is difficult for him or her to bring forward progressive values in programs. On the other hand, studies by Newcomb and Alley (1983), and Tunstall (1993) have shown that the television network and social institutions do not necessarily always share the same view, but there are opportunities for the producer to gain greater autonomy. This contradictory understanding on the issue of influences and constraints on television drama content becomes even more intriguing if we set it within the context of authoritarian nations which also seek economic development, a phenomenon that is common in many Third World countries, including Malaysia. The subsequent chapters in this dissertation seek to address this contradiction under such a different social and political environment by looking at how the Malaysian government manages the content of local drama television programs.

Research Questions

Guided by the above-mentioned literature, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What is the extent of autonomy the Malaysian television producer has in creating drama content?
2. At different levels—organizational and extra-media/social/institutional—what are the factors that guide the gatekeeper's (producer and network executive) decisions in shaping drama content?
3. Through what means do these forces, at different levels, influence the content of drama television programs?
4. How does the culturally pluralistic but politically authoritarian nature of Malaysian society influence these gatekeeping decisions?
5. How do the government in general and the *Barisan Nasional* coalition in particular influence the content of Malaysian drama television?

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation has been organized into six chapters. Chapter Two discusses the methodology used to collect data for the study. To understand the forces that shape drama content in Malaysia, a combination of data collection methods is utilized: in-depth interviews, written materials and televised drama programs. Chapter Three reviews the historical development of Malaysia since the nation gained its independence in 1957 but specific focus is placed on the period from 1980 till 2002, a period when Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad championed privatization, a policy that has greatly restructured Malaysian television industry. By outlining the important political, social and economic events that impact Malaysian society, this chapter also provides the context for understanding what can or cannot be said via national television networks and reveals the role that the *Barisan Nasional* regime plays in shaping the nation in general and the

content of drama television in particular. Chapter Four outlines the important factors at the extra-media/social/ institutions level that affect the content of Malaysian drama television. In particular, three factors of influence are highlighted: (1) government controls, (2) pressure groups and (3) technology. Since the *Barisan Nasional* government is the dominant force that dictates the content of Malaysian drama, a significant proportion of this chapter is devoted to government control. By examining how different government agencies, especially the National Censorship Board and the Ministry of Information, interact with television practitioners, this fourth chapter outlines the concern of the *Barisan Nasional* government and how it manages the content of Malaysian drama television. In addition to government control, this chapter also looks at how pressure groups and technologies (in particular video and satellite technologies) play a part in shaping the content of drama television. Chapter Five describes the process of producing drama programs for the government-owned RTM, a major buyer of locally produced programs. By looking at the interactions between producers and RTM officials, this chapter points out how considerations from organizational and extra-media/social/institutional levels turn into constraints on a program supposedly created for entertainment purposes. As RTM is a government-owned network, this chapter also pays particular attention to how the Cabinet in general and the Ministry of Information in particular exercise direct control over the network. Finally, Chapter Six addresses the issues of producer's autonomy and gatekeeping set under an authoritarian regime. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how the *Barisan Nasional* regime justifies and exercises its control over Malaysian drama television industry.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Qualitative methodologies were used to study the forces that shape the content of Malaysian drama television production at the social institutional and media organizational levels. Specifically, in-depth interview and documentary research were used to gather the bulk of data for analysis.

In-depth Interviewing

In-depth interviews, also called intensive interviews, were utilized to gather information regarding Malaysian drama television production industry. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) pointed out, in-depth interviewing is a useful way to get large amounts of data quickly. They further pointed out that “When more than one person participates (e.g., focus groups interviews), the interview process gathers a wide variety of information across a larger number of subjects than if there were fewer participants—the familiar trade-off between breadth and depth” (pp. 108-110). Stacey (1969) pointed out interviews may be divided according to how structured they are. He further stated that

In a structured interview all the questions are decided precisely in advance. There is no hard and fast dividing line between the structured and the unstructured interview. They should be seen as two ends of a continuum. In between the completely structured interview and the completely unstructured one fall a whole range in which varying degrees of control are exercised by and over the interviewer (p. 75).

While Stacey pointed out structured and unstructured interview as two ends of a continuum, Patton (1990) categorized this form of data collecting method in a more concrete manner. He categorized interviews into three general types: the general interview guide approach, the informal conversational interview, and the standardized open-ended interview (pp. 280-290). For the purpose of this study, the general interview guide approach and the informal conversational interview were used to gather the information.

The General Interview Guide

The general interview guide approach involves outlining before the interviewing begins a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent. This outline or interview guide simply serves as a basic checklist during the interview to ensure that all relevant topics are covered. One advantage of this approach is that it “helps make interviewing different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be discussed in the interview” (Patton, 1969, p. 111). Patton (1990) points out that

The interview guide presumes that there is common information that should be obtained from each person interviewed, but no set of standardized question is written in advance. The interviewer is thus required to adapt both the wording and the sequence of questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview (p. 280).

For the purpose of this study, the guided interview processes were recorded on mini disk (MD) as well as in the form of field notes taken by the researcher.

The Informal Conversational Interview

The informal conversational interview relies mainly on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction. Unlike the general interview guide approach, no predetermined set of questions is possible under the informal conversational interview. This is because the interviewer does not know beforehand precisely what will happen and therefore does not know what question would be appropriate under different social environment. Patton (1969) pointed out the strength and weakness of this type of interviewing method:

The strength of the informal conversational approach to interviewing is that it allows the interviewer to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. Questions can be individualized to establish in-depth communication with the person being interviewed and to make use of the immediate surroundings and situation to increase the concreteness and immediacy of the interview questions and responses.

The weakness of the informal conversational interview is that it requires a great amount of time to get systematic information. . . . Data obtained from informal conversational interviews are also difficult to pull together and analyze. Because different questions will generate different responses, the interviewer has to spend a great deal of time sifting through responses to find patterns that

have emerged at different points in different interviews
with different people (p. 110-111).

Because of the nature of this type of interview, a mini-disk recorder was not used.

However, field notes were taken by the researcher after the interactions.

Sampling

Quota and snowballing sampling techniques were used to select interviewees.

Both techniques are non-probability sampling. Neuman (1997) points out “in quota sampling, a researcher first identifies categories of people, then decides how many to get in each category” (p. 205). He also points out that “snowball sampling is a method for identifying and sampling the cases in a network,” which “begins with one or a few people or cases and spreads out on the basis of links to the initial cases” (p. 205). In this study, quota sampling was used to select interviewees because it provides responses from different aspects of the drama production process. Snowball sampling was used because it provided access to people who have insight regarding the industry who were previously unknown to the researcher.

As this is a qualitative study, the principles of *completeness* and *saturation* of information were used to determine the sample size of the respondents. The principle of completeness means that the researcher keeps adding interviewees until is satisfied that he or she understands the complex cultural arena or multistep process. When each additional interviewee adds little to what has already been learned, the researcher stops adding new interviewees. This is called the saturation point (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p72-73).

Data Collection and Administration of Interviews

To ensure that viewpoints from different segments of the Malaysian drama television industry were represented, three categories of interviewees were targeted for the study. These three categories are (1) gatekeeper at the social institutional and media organizational levels, which included members of Malaysia's Censorship Board and network executives for national terrestrial television networks, namely RTM, TV-*Tiga*, and NTV-7; (2) drama television producers, directors and writers for local production; and (3) media researchers or practitioners who studied or observed the local drama television industry.

The contact information for the initial group of interviewees was gathered through three sources. Firstly, Professor Drew McDaniel in the School of Telecommunication, Ohio University and the academic adviser of the researcher, as well as an expert on the media industry in Southeast Asia, provided a list of contacts in May 2001 that allowed the first group of interviews to be conducted in June 2001. One of the contacts provided by Professor McDaniel is Hyacinth Leo, who serves as a program manager in AIBD (Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, located at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, AIBD is an inter-governmental organization serving the countries of UN-ESCAP in the field of electronic media development). Through Ms Leo, a second list of contacts was provided in June 2001. Thirdly, through the researcher's colleagues from the School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, the third list of initial contacts was gathered in November 2001.

With the list of contacts, the researcher contacted the interviewees by telephone either from Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. The initial phone call informed the potential

interviewee of the intent of the researcher and the purpose of this study. Once the interviewee agreed to participate in the study, arrangement was made to meet for the interview. However, as some of the interviewees are television practitioners with hectic schedules, it was not unusual that some interviews were postponed at the last minute.

Before each interview was conducted, the interviewee was informed that his or her identity would not be revealed in the dissertation. Such gesture was to ensure the interviewees that their responses to the questions for the study would not be used against them by the authority mentioned. A number of the interviewees have expressed their appreciation for the anonymity. Once an interviewee understood what was required for involvement in the study, a consent form was signed before the interview was conducted.

As pointed out earlier, quota and snowballing sampling techniques were used for this study. Therefore, at the end of each interview, the interviewee was asked to recommend other people who might be of benefit to this study. As a result, a total of 33 interviewees participated in the study. However, only 32 of them provided information that was relevant to this study. The interviewee who was unsuitable for the study, however, was helpful in recommending potential interview candidates.

Of these 32 interviewees, 13 provided information from the perspective of gatekeepers, either as network executives for national terrestrial television networks or censors for the Censorship Board. Two of them began their careers in the 1960s and 1970s, eight started in the 1980s and three started in the 1990s. Eleven of them served as gatekeepers at the time the interviews were conducted. One of the other two has retired from the industry and the other is involved in independent production. Another 13 interviewees provided information from the perspective of producer or creator -- Three of

them started their careers in the 1960s and 1970s, four in the 1980s and six in the 1990s. At the time the interviews were conducted, ten were still actively involved in local drama production. Three who began their careers in the 1960s and 1970s have retired from the industry, but their past experience as producer or creator for local television drama was still relevant to this study. Six interviewees were scholars or media practitioners who studied or observed the local television industry (See Table 2-1).

There were 20 male and 12 female interviewees. The ethnicity distribution included 15 Malays, 12 Chinese and five Indians (See Table 2-2). Such distribution, although reflecting the ethnic composition of Malaysian society, was not premeditated by the researcher. In addition, 21 of the interviews were conducted in English while nine were in Chinese. The interviews were done between June 2001 and November 2002. The majority were conducted in Kuala Lumpur, two were conducted in Penang and two were done in Singapore. Specifically, the interviews were conducted in the months of June, July, and December of 2001 as well as May, June, July and November of 2002. All except one of the interviewees were interviewed in person. Due to a schedule conflict, one interviewee was unable to meet the researcher in person; therefore the interview was conducted by telephone.

Table 2-1

Career-entry Era and Categories of Interviewees Participating in Study

Categories	Gatekeeper	Producer or	Media	Total
Began working in	(Network Executives	Creator for	Critics	
	or Censors)	Local drama		
60-70	2	3	1	6
80	8	4	5	17
90	3	6	0	9
Total	13	13	6	32

Table 2-2

Gender and Ethnicity of Interviewees Participating in Study

Gender\Ethnicity	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Total
Male	7	9	4	20
Female	8	3	1	12
Total	15	12	5	32

Transcription and Coding Interview Data

After each interview was conducted, the recorded information was transcribed. Fielding (1993) pointed out that there are two types of transcriptions: verbatim and selective transcription (p. 146). Verbatim transcription, according to Fielding, offers the advantage that all possible analytic uses are allowed for. As a researcher may not know what would be the most significant points of analysis when doing the transcription, doing it verbatim means no data that may later become significant would be lost. However, Fielding also pointed out that the disadvantage of verbatim transcription is that it is laborious and time-consuming (p. 146-147). As there was limited manpower to transcribe all the recorded materials verbatim, verbatim and selective transcription approach were both used for the purpose of this dissertation. Twelve interviews conducted between June 27 and July 27, 2001, was transcribed verbatim, while the remaining interviews, conducted in December 2001, May, June, July and November 2002, were transcribed selectively. The first 12 interviews were transcribed verbatim so that common themes could be identified through coding. Coding is the process of grouping interviewees' responses into categories that bring together similar ideas, concepts, stories, or themes that the researcher has discovered, or steps or stages in a process (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.226-251). Once these themes were found, only selected portions of interviews conducted at the later dates were transcribed. All transcriptions were done by the researcher.

Interviewees' Anonymity

In Malaysia, conducting communication research – in particular on the topic of imposing constraints upon media content – can be difficult. Some of the gatekeepers,

which included members of the Censorship Board and network executives from RTM, TV-*Tiga* and NTV 7, were concerned that their unfavorable comments against the status quo in general and against certain *Barisan Nasional* government's officials, could put their careers or media organizations on the line. Independent producers, directors, and writers, were equally concerned that by speaking against the authorities – the television networks, the Censorship Board or the Ministry of Information –they might jeopardize their affiliated production houses. Perhaps for this reason, most of the interviewees participating in this study were extremely careful when they spoke on record. In some instances, the interviewees provided additional information or different explanations for the matter at hand, which were unfavorable to the authority, after the interviews were conducted. In other instances, the interviewees would request the researcher to switch off the recording device, but allowed the researcher to record the conversation in written form, so that they could speak freely. To ensure that these interviewees' careers or their affiliated media organizations would not be penalized for participating in this study, all interviewees remain anonymous, only their occupations and the dates of the interviews are provided throughout this dissertation.

Documentary Research

Documentary research was used to understand the Malaysian drama television industry. Written materials used in this study included primary documents such as government publications, newspapers and magazines and secondary documents such as dissertations, journal articles, conference papers and unpublished documents. The following libraries provided access to these written documents: In the United States, the Southeast Asian Collection of Ohio University's Alden Library was used extensively; in

Singapore, the libraries of National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, the National Institution of Education and the Asian Media and Information Center and National Library of Singapore were used to gather crucial information for this study. In Malaysia, RTM's library and FINAS's library were also used.

In addition, such visual documents as Malaysian drama television programs were used to put the production of Malaysian drama television program in a larger context.

Government and Organization Documents

Government or organization documents included censorship guidelines, industry statistics, official reports, yearbooks, company annual reports and publications on media laws and regulations. Other relevant documents included speeches and books by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, which were published by the government. These materials were collected through the researcher's contact with practitioners, local bookstores, libraries of media organizations, and official websites of various ministries.

Newspapers and magazines

Media coverage of television drama production constituted an important source of information in understanding the Malaysian drama production industry. This information was useful not only to verify the stories told by the interviewees but also to provide an opportunity to understand the media institution's perception of the events surrounding drama production in Malaysia. Newspapers used extensively for the study were Malaysian English newspapers *The New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *The Malay Mail*, *The Sun*, Malaysian Chinese newspapers *Nanyang Shiang Pao* and Singapore's English newspaper *The Straits Times*. Magazines used were *Television Asia*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *The Economist*, *Asia Week* and *Aliran Monthly*.

Visual Documents

According to Macdonald and Tipton (1993) visual documents such as paintings, photographs and film provide the link to understand the relationship between creators of artwork and clients of artwork. Citing the work by John Berger (1972), they pointed out that by examining a number of 17th and 18th century paintings, the researcher was able to show the way in which patrons of painting of that period were concerned with their possessions, and how this trend can be associated with the emerging power of capital (p. 195). Therefore, to understand how different social actors influence Malaysian television drama production, it is essential to view previously produced programs. Such viewing provided the common understanding that the researcher needed to establish rapport with the producers, directors, writers, network executives, censors and media critics for the interviews.

Malaysian television drama programs were gathered through two sources: television programs aired by Malaysian terrestrial networks and VCDs that were sold in the local stores. Recent television drama programs, which were aired by RTM, TV3 or NTV7, were viewed and recorded on VHS format for future reference. The researcher also purchased these television programs in VCD format.

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected through in-depth interview and documentary research, the process of analysis began. At this stage, the researcher organized the data in ways that help to formulate themes, refine concepts, and link them together to create a clear description or explanation of Malaysian television industry's culture. The material was then interpreted within the theoretical framework of this study, which was based on

the notion of gatekeepers and television as producer medium. In this dissertation, the presentation of this understanding is in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

This chapter provides the historical context of Malaysia. Particular attention is focused on how past political and social events shape the understanding of contemporary issues. In doing so, it places the study of Malaysian drama television production within the larger framework of its society. Many contemporary issues in Malaysia are not new. They are recurring issues that have their roots in the nation's distant or recent past. Tracing the origins of these issues and the reasons they became integral parts of the society is necessary and important. It helps one to understand the many hidden dynamics within Malaysian society in general and its television industry in particular. This chapter is divided into three sections.

The first section focuses on the time in Malaysia's history when the country transformed from a predominantly Malay-Muslim community into a pluralistic society. The discussion of such transformation is important because it provides an understanding of how different ethnic communities – particularly Chinese, Indian and Malay – interacted with each other from the British Malaya period till the time the colony gained its independence. One of the topics that will emerge from this discussion is the issue of Malay special rights, the issue deemed most “sensitive” by today Malaysian government.

The second section focuses on the racial relationships between the Malay and non-Malay communities before and after the communal riot of May 13, 1969. The impact of this historical event cannot be overstated. As the result of the riot, a chain of affirmative actions in favor of the Malays took place that shaped the political, economic and social development of the nation in the following decades. Two sets of public policy

are particularly worth mentioning: the New Economic Policy (NEP) and *Rukunegara* (Articles of Faith of the State). The NEP is a set of policies aimed at drastically changing Malaysia's economic structure and subsequently providing opportunity for Malays to venture into the business sector. *Rukunegara*, on the other hand, is a national ideology that aims to nurture a harmonious society where Malays and non-Malays can live together peacefully. This deliberate attempt by the authority to bring different communal groups together has had a great impact on the society in general, but particularly on the content of contemporary Malaysian drama television programs. In addition to NEP and *Rukunegara*, another important development that emerged after the ethnic conflict in May of 1969 was the formation of the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN) government, a coalition government that recognizes the dominant role of one of its member political parties: UMNO (United Malays National Organization).

The third section of this chapter focuses on some of the important developments that occurred in the period from 1981 to 2003, a period when Mahathir Mohamad was the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Particular attention will be focus on two policies – privatization and Islamization – that Mahathir introduced in the 1980s. It was within the framework of his privatization policy that the nation's first private television network was launched in 1984. However, it was also under his administration that Islamic values became one of the guiding principles for censoring television programs and motion pictures. While the television practitioners welcomed the privatization policy, their feelings towards the authority using Islamic teachings as part of its censorship principles are less than enthusiastic. The discussion of these two policies will put the study of the Malaysian drama television industry within a larger social and political context.

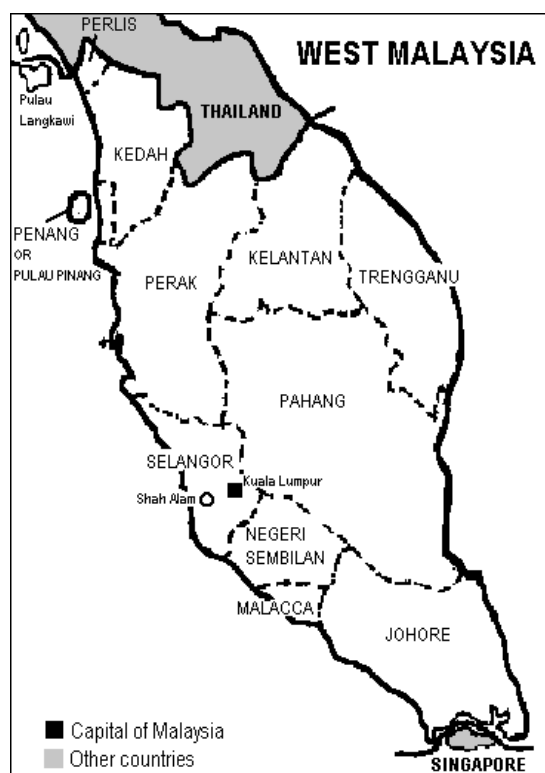


Figure 3-1: West Malaysia. From “All About Malaysia.” Retrieved May 28, 2004, from <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Shores/3187/>)

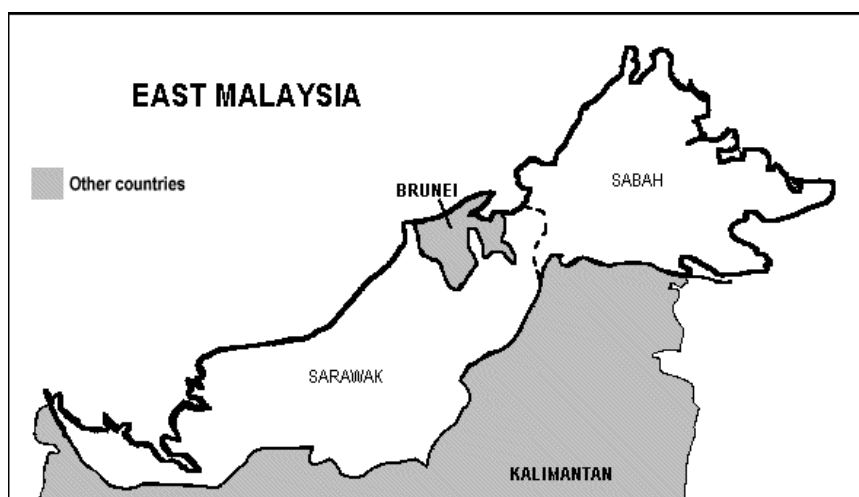


Figure 3-2: East Malaysia. From “All About Malaysia.” Retrieved May 28, 2004, from <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Shores/3187/>)

Emergence of a Pluralistic Society

The Federation of Malaysia consists of two distinct parts: East Malaysia and Peninsular Malaysia (sometime called West Malaysia). East Malaysia is located on the island of Borneo. It comprises two states: Sabah and Sarawak. Separated from Borneo by the South China Sea, Peninsular Malaysia is located 530 kilometers west. The Peninsular Malaysia is made up of 11 states: Johor, Kedah, Perak, Melaka, Pahang, Penang, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor (including the Federal Capital Territory of Kuala Lumpur). With a population of 23.27 million, Malaysia is 60.61 percent *Bumiputera* (which includes Malays and other indigenous groups), 28.1 percent Chinese, 7.9 percent Indian and 3.4 percent of other races. As for Malaysian religious beliefs, 60.4 percent are Muslim, 19.2 percent are Buddhist, 9.1 percent are Christian, 6.3 percent are Hindu and 2.6 percent are Taoist or hold Chinese traditional beliefs. (“Malaysia census shows,” 2001).

The above statistics reflect the pluralistic nature of current Malaysian society but it is important to note that at the beginning of the last millennium the region had a rather different racial composition. The multiracial and multi-religious nature of present-day Malaysia’s population is a phenomenon that emerged relatively late in the nation’s history. It was a series of interactions among indigenous Malays, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans from the 18th to the 20th century that shaped the society’s racial composition into its current form. The geographical location and the natural resources of the Malay Peninsula were two of the reasons that people from different parts of the world eventually immigrated there.

Geographically the Malay Peninsula is at the crossroads of Asia. It is the midpoint between East Asia to South Asia. Such a unique location makes the Straits of Melaka, situated between the west coast of the Malay Peninsula and the east coast of Sumatra, “a bottleneck in the sea route between the Far East and the Middle East” (Lamb, 1964, p. 107). In the days of sail power, the Straits of Melaka were not only a passage between East and South Asia, but also a place where ships could be repaired or protected from the monsoons. More importantly, the area provided an ideal location where the traders from Arabia, China, India and Europe could meet and conduct business with each other as well as with the locals. Taking full advantage of this strategic location for trade, around 1400 a maritime power emerged from the region: the Melaka Kingdom.

It was under the Melaka Kingdom that “a pattern of government and a lifestyle” were established which subsequently “became the basis of what was later termed ‘traditional’ Malay culture and statecraft” (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, p.39). It was also during this time that Islam became an integrated and crucial part of the Malay culture. During this period, although some Arabs, Chinese and Indians traveled to or resided in this part of the world, the Malay Peninsula was populated predominantly by the Malays. This scenario changed rapidly, however, when the Europeans, particularly the British, arrived and began colonizing.

Other than its strategic location for trade, the Malay Peninsula is also rich in natural resources. When the British colonized the region between 1819 and 1957, they tapped into these resources. Consequently, several industries emerged and contributed to the colony’s export economy. Two of the industries, tin and rubber, were particularly

important. Their existence did more than boost the local economy, they substantially transformed the racial composition of the colony.

British Administration and Its Policy in Malaya

Before the arrival of the British colonial power, the Malays on the peninsula had already been involved in tin mining to satisfy the demands of China, India and Europe. However, the extraction method used was able to reach only about 500 tons annually. (Andaya & Andaya, 2001, p.214). In the 19th Century, with most European countries already in the Industrial Age, such a rate of production was unable to satisfy the demand of tin from the West. To increase the production, the British government encouraged the importation of Chinese laborers from the Southern part of China to join the local labor force. Early in the 20th Century, when the local rubber industry was booming and more manpower was required, the same strategy was used by the British Administration and consequently, workers from Southern India were imported to work on the rubber plantations.

Due to the government industrial policy, by 1921 the British colony had been transformed from a predominately Malay society into a multiracial society of 49.2 percent Malay, 35 percent Chinese and 14 percent Indian. Between 1911 and 1941, with China in the midst of a civil war, more Chinese fled from their homeland to Southeast Asia to seek better fortunes. By 1941, with 43 percent of the total population Chinese, the Chinese community had overtaken the Malay community (with 41 percent) and became the largest racial group in the British colony (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Racial Population of British Malaya

	1911		1921		1931		1941	
	000+	%	000+	%	000+	%	000+	%
Europeans	11.1	0.4	15.0	0.4	17.8	0.4	31.4	0.6
Eurasians	10.9	0.4	12.6	0.4	16.0	0.4	19.3	0.4
Malays	1,437.7	54.0	1,651.0	49.2	1,962.0	44.7	2,278.6	41.0
Chinese	916.6	34.2	1,174.8	35.0	1,709.4	39.0	2,379.2	43.0
Indians	267.2	10.0	47.7	14.0	624.0	14.2	744.2	14.0
Others	29.3	1.0	33.0	1.0	56.1	1.3	58.1	1.0
Total	2,672.8	100	3,358.1	100	4,385.3	100	5,511.1	100

Note. From *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore* by Jim Baker, 1999, p. 183.

+ Population in thousands

Transforming British Malaya, as the colony was called at the time, into a multiracial society was an outcome unforeseen by the colonial administration. At the time, the authority assumed that the Chinese and Indians would eventually return to their homeland but such an assumption proved to be wrong. While some of these emigrants did return home, many decided to make Malaya their permanent home.

The British decision to use foreign labor instead of the local Malays in the newly established industries was a reflection of how the colonial government viewed the Malay community. Andaya and Andaya (2001) described the British perception of the local Malay at the time:

In British eyes the foremost of the unMalay traits was industry. Malays, it was widely accepted, were lazy, unwilling to work for wages and therefore could not be considered a potential pool of labor in the colonial economy. The measure of their lack of industry was provided by the Chinese, who labored in tin mines and on plantations and operated the tax farms. As a rule of thumb, the British believed, the rate of migration and the numbers of Chinese settlers were a reliable index of economic progress (p.178).

As a result of this perception, the Malay community was excluded from major economic activities during the colonial period. The new emigrants, on the other hand, were not only brought to British Malaya as part of the labor force but were also given the opportunity to prosper economically. This was particularly true of the Chinese emigrants.

By the 19th Century, the Chinese not only dominated tin mining but also the agricultural industry. In the 20th Century, they ventured further into small-scale enterprises such as pawn shops, buses, food processing and rice milling (Baker, 1999, p. 182). The statistics of 1932 showed that Chinese were highly visible in occupations such as rubber estate owner/manager, tin mine owner/manager, proprietor or manager of businesses, salesmen and shop assistants -- occupations that had them heavily involved in the colony's economic activities in different sectors. The Malays' economic activities, on the other hand, were still concentrated in such traditional areas as agriculture. Such contrast between Chinese and Malay communities in terms of participation in the colony's growing economy inevitably created a society where the financial well-being of an individual was closely associated with ethnicity. The association of Chinese with being rich and Malay with being poor undoubtedly estranged the two ethnic communities.

Such a hostile relationship was worsened by the fact that most Chinese resided in the urban areas while Malays concentrated in the countryside. The divisions of Chinese versus Malay, rich versus poor and urban versus rural eventually brought the issue of race to the forefront. For the British administration, racial issues had become a political and touchy matter that had to be dealt with carefully.

Table 3.2

Principal Occupations by Race (1932)

Occupation	Europeans	Malay	Archipelago	Chinese	Indians
	Immigrants				
Fishermen	-	5,715	307	7,291	56
Rice planters	-	78,009	11,113	1,038	1,892
Rubber estate owner/managers, etc.	1,121	1,803	910	1,514	58
Others in rubber cultivation	-	27,618	20,825	100,789	131,099
Coconut estate owners/managers, etc.	11	744	66	23	9
Others in coconut cultivation	-	4,262	5,982	1,256	8,010
Unclassified and multifarious agriculture	23	18,168	7,381	16,115	9,883
Tin mine owners/managers, etc	48	8	-	214	-
Others in tin mining	282	543	465	70,704	4,622
Proprietors and managers of business	246	475	574	16,894	4,428
Salesmen, shop assistants, etc	144	541	105	16,576	3,790

Note. From *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore* by Jim Baker, 1999, p. 187.

Japanese Occupation and Its Impact on Racial Relations

The racial tension between Malays and Chinese was further heightened during and after the Pacific War. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched a military campaign that attacked Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Malaya simultaneously. Within months, Southeast Asia was in the hands of the Japanese military. The Chinese community was devastated by such an outcome. Prior to launching the Pacific War, the Japanese military had already invaded China in 1937 which inevitably upset many Chinese emigrants who still considered China their homeland. With this widespread sentiment, the Chinese community launched an anti-Japanese campaign known as the National Salvation Movement, when “boycotts of Japanese goods were organized, demonstrations held, money raised for China, and campaigns set up to promote Chinese unity” (Baker, 1999, p. 215). The Japanese military did not take kindly the Chinese sentiment towards China. At the beginning of the occupation period, the Japanese implemented a special operation known as *sook ching* (purification through suffering) which ended with the execution of thousands of Chinese (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, p. 261). To avoid being rounded up and executed by the Japanese, many Chinese fled to the jungle and joined the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

While the Japanese dealt harshly with the Chinese in the *sook ching* operation, Malays were treated much more favorably. Many Malays who had served as civil servants under the British administration were promoted to positions formally held only by the British. In addition, more government positions were offered to the Malays, especially in the police and security forces. Japanese preferential treatment towards

Malays and its strategy to use them as police and security forces ultimately brought an unprecedented level of distrust and tension between Malays and Chinese ethnic communities. With the Pacific War coming to an end, this hostile relationship turned violent.

On August 15, 1945, the Japanese military surrendered. After three years and six months under Japanese rule, the ordeal for many Malaysians was supposedly over. However, with the Japanese surrendered and the British yet to return, the Chinese-dominated MPAJA/MCP seized the opportunity to capture and execute those locals who had collaborated with the Japanese during the occupation. As these individuals were predominantly Malay, it quickly turned into an ethnic conflict between Chinese and Malays. Andaya and Andaya (2001) described the outcome of MPAJA/MCP action:

Communal relations were . . . seriously damaged because the MPAJA/MCP used this opportunity to deal harshly with old enemies and those perceived as working with the Japanese or displaying “capitalist” sympathies. Although some Chinese also suffered, the major MPAJA/MCP targets were Malays, especially those classed as “collaborators”. Responding to what they saw as “Chinese” aggression, Malays organized themselves under village secular and religious leaders and retaliated in kind (p. 263).

On September 3, 1945, when the British finally returned to the Malay Peninsula, the conflict between the two ethnic groups had slowly diminished though social order was not completely restored until 1948. The hostility between the two largest ethnic groups of

the land had led many observers to speculate on the possibility of communal riots if the colonial power were not present to mediate. This was a concern that the founding fathers of the Federation of Malaysia had to address.

The Alliance and “Bargain”

In 1952, the British government announced its intention to grant the colony independence in the near future. However, to achieve such a goal, racial issues had to be resolved among the different ethnic communities, particularly between Malays and Chinese. Between 1945 and 1952, the political development of Malaya had ensured that the interests of different communities were taken care of by their respective political parties. In May, 1946, under the leadership of Datuk Onn the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was formed to look after the interests of the Malay community. Subsequently, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) was formed in August of that year to serve a similar function. For a brief period, Chinese interests were represented by the Malayan Communist Party although the majority of Malayan Chinese were not Communist. However, when MCP attempted to seize power through an armed insurrection in 1947, the British government declared a State of Emergency throughout the colony and began to arrest and detain members of MCP and their sympathizers. To avoid capture, MCP retreated into the jungle. With MCP gone, another Chinese political party rose to fill the vacuum. Under the leadership of English-educated politician Tan Cheng Lock, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was formed in February, 1949. The formation of MCA was not only welcomed by the Chinese community it was endorsed by the British government and UMNO's president Datuk Onn. Datuk Onn's endorsement of MCA under Tan Cheng Lock's leadership was particularly significant.

For a brief period of time, the cooperative relationship between these two men and their vision of establishing a truly multi-ethnic party seemed to provide resolution of the differences between the two races.

In the early 1950s, as an effort to gradually transfer political power to the locals, the British government announced that town- and municipal-level elections would be held. However, the British government had also made it clear that for Malaya to gain its full independence the new country must be “a united Malayan nation” (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, p. 275) with people from different ethnicities working together hand in hand. To fulfill this requirement, both Datuk Onn and Tan Cheng Lock attempted to transform their communal-oriented parties to non-communal by opening the membership of UMNO to non-Malays and MCA to non-Chinese. However, both attempts were rejected by their parties’ majorities. Despite their leaders’ vision and effort to bring forward political parties that were truly multi-ethnic, years of distrust and tension between the races prevented such attempts. In fact, as a result of his attempts to bring Chinese and Malays together under one roof, Datuk Onn was replaced by Tunku Abdul Rahman (whom the Malay community perceived as the true defender of Malay interests at the time) as the leader of UMNO. Under Tunku Abdul Rahman’s leadership, UMNO and MCA experimented with a new strategy to accommodate the interests of both Chinese and Malay communities as well as to fulfill the demands set by the British government.

In 1952, UMNO and MCA formed an alliance to run for town and municipal council election in Selangor, a state with large numbers of non-Malays. Such a move proved to be a success. In the Kuala Lumpur municipal election, the UMNO-MCA

Alliance gained nine out of 12 seats. In April, 1955, with MIC as a third member party, the Alliance again won, 51 of 52 seats from the federal legislative council. As the UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance was the dominant majority in the council, its leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was elected as the first chief minister of Malaya. With the Alliance's overwhelming victory at the federal level, UMNO, MCA, MIC and the British government had finally found the answer for "a united Malayan nation." As Andaya and Andaya (2001) pointed out, the appeal of this arrangement was that the respective "parties retained their separate identities and political objectives, while acting as one body in determining the candidates and the party to contest a particular seat." But more importantly, "this arrangement appeared to hold out the only hope for a workable independent Malayan government" (p. 275).

With the formation of the Alliance Party, a series of compromises was made by the leaders of MCA, MIC and UMNO to ensure a peaceful co-existence between Malay and non-Malay in post-independence Malaya. The terms for "the bargain," a set of compromises reached by these political elites, can be divided in two parts: unwritten and written. The unwritten bargain covered the political rules of the game in post-independence Malaya: "Malay political hegemony in return for unhindered Chinese (and Indian) economic activity" (Mauzy, 1983, p. 20). The written bargain, on the other hand, set out the actual terms that were later incorporated into the Federation of Malaya Constitution. These terms included:

- a. Recognition that Malays are *Bumiputera* (sons/daughters of the soil). With this status, the Malays have special rights which comprise the four-to-one ratio of Malay to non-Malay in the civil sector, the status of the sultans, and Malay as the national language;

- b. Islam as the state religion. Other religions may be practiced by other ethnic groups but are barred from converting the Malays;
- c. The make-up of police and army forces should continue to be predominantly Malay;
- d. In return for these concessions, all those born in Malaya, regardless of race, would be given citizenship automatically;
- e. With Chinese and Indians accepting Malay as the national language, UMNO recognized that non-Malays have the right to maintain vernacular education for their respective communities.

These agreements made by the leaders of UMNO, MCA and MIC on behalf of their respective communal groups were not without criticisms. Many ordinary Chinese felt that with the concession on Malay rights, in essence they had been given second-class citizenship. The Malays, on the other hand, complained that too much political and economic power had been granted to the Chinese. However, as the Alliance was the only political party able to accommodate the demands of all three major ethnic groups in Malaya, these criticisms were largely ignored. On August 31, 1957, under the leadership of the Alliance government, the colony declared independence. Six years later, joined by three other former British colonies Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore, the Federation of Malaysia came into existence on September 16, 1963.

While UMNO, MCA and MIC were able to reach a compromise to gain independence for the nation in 1957, the tension and distrust between the Malays and the Chinese did not subside. In 1963, when Singapore, a predominantly Chinese state, joined the Federation, racial tension again was heightened. The Malaysian Solidarity Convention (MSC), a coalition of opposition parties under the leadership of Singapore

politician Lee Kuan Yew, advocated for equal rights for all Malaysians. With MSC and Lee Kuan Yew gaining support from largely non-Malay populations throughout the federation, Malays and UMNO leaders (in particular Tunku Abdul Rahman) perceived that their status as *bumiputera* was under serious attack. Such perception, as well as pressure within UMNO, eventually led Tunku Abdul Rahman to cast Singapore (along with Lee Kuan Yew) out of the Federation. However, such an act could only delay for a short time the inevitable confrontation between Malays and Chinese.

Before and After the May 13, 1969 Communal Riot

The “bargain” made by UMNO, MCA and MIC to form an Alliance government in which all ethnic groups of the land were represented gained Malaysia its independence but it also put these political parties in a hegemonic position. In the decades to come the nation political power was always in the hands of the coalition formed by these political parties. One of the main reasons these parties are able to work together was that their leaders had similar social backgrounds and approaches to resolving political differences. The part leaders at the time, UMNO’s Tunku Abdul Rahman, MCA’s Tan Cheng Lock and MIC’s V. T. Sambanthan, were western-educated individuals with strong ties to their own communities. The supreme leader of the Alliance, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was a prince from the state of Kedah and a British-educated lawyer. Tan Cheng Lock was an English-educated community leader who believed that Chinese heritage in Malaysia should be maintained through its own language education system. V. T. Sambanthan, the president of MIC from 1954 to 1973, was also an English-educated man with a strong tie to the Indian professional and business community. The shared experience of an English education informed these political leaders that a democratic political system was the

cornerstone of an independent Malaysia. However, their elitist perspective also led them to believe that important political decisions could not be left to the general public. Instead political leaders should take charge and make those difficult decisions on behalf of their several communities. This was especially true when “the bargain” was made to gain the nation’s independence.

Expecting strong resistance from their respective communities over the terms of “the bargain,” the Alliance leadership adopted a decision-making process that was rather authoritarian in nature. Instead of campaigning and persuading the masses to accept their political viewpoints, these political leaders made a deal behind closed doors. With Tan Cheng Lock and V. T. Sambanthan both in a close personal bond with Tunku Abdul Rahman, “the bargain” was finally reached among these three political parties. However, this practice of solving problems in closed sessions did not stop after independence. In her study of the Malaysian government, Diane Mauzy (1983) described the decision-making process under the Alliance government:

The style of the Alliance required a mode of decision-making based on compromise, consensus, and reciprocity at the apex of the hierarchy. Decisions could be made first in the Cabinet, given the high overlap between the top party officials and Cabinet membership, the Alliance Executive Council, where unanimity was required, or more often informally by the top elite. Once a decision was made, even though it might disadvantage one of the other community

[sic], a united front was presented publicly. In all cases, before a decision was made, secrecy was observed. (p. 23)

The founding fathers of modern Malaysia probably had their reasons for privately making crucial but unpopular decisions. However, with such an important precedent set by Tunku Abdul Rahman and his counterparts in MCA and MIC, politicians making compromise decisions in secret has turned out to be “the Malaysian way.” In the ensuing decades, this “behind closed doors” strategy was often practiced by the coalition government for introducing unwelcome public policy. Such practice ensured that only the political elites within the ruling coalition were aware of and involved in the public policy’s decision-making process. So-called “compromise” and “consensus” are nearly always popular among the political elites but not among the people whom these politicians claim to represent. The people merely accept the outcomes made by their respective communities’ political leaders. Any objections against these outcomes were often termed “insensitive” to the feeling of other communities and not understanding the fragility of Malaysian society. Such an approach in handling public issues and policies has turned a supposedly democratic governing system into an elitist authoritarian regime.

A political culture that intentionally prevents public debate over difficult issues means that ordinary Malaysian involvement in public policy is limited. One could argue that general elections, events that happen only once every four or five years, are the only arena where the public is able to voice their concerns. Other than that their voices are muted. In essence, democracy is limited under such a political culture. Unfortunately, the “secrecy” approach adopted by Tunku Abdul Rahman and his peers was inherited by their successors, which greatly undermined the democracy of contemporary Malaysia.

The Social and Political Atmosphere of the 1969 General Election

In May 13, 1969, 12 years after “the bargain” was reached by UMNO, MCA, and MIC behind closed doors, conflict again erupted between Malays and Chinese. The Alliance government’s inability to deliver the compromise made by its member parties was part of the reasons that the event occurred. Throughout the 1960s, the Malay community was extremely concerned about whether the agreement that *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay language) as the official national language would eventually come true. Malay politicians, including many from UMNO, joined the National Language Action Front (NLAFF) – an organization that worked closely with the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Malay student activists – to pressure the Alliance government to honor the agreement. On the other hand, a number of Chinese groups including MCA Youth had called for the government to take “a more liberal stand” towards language issues (Mauzy, 1983, p. 34-5).

With this tug of war between the Malay and Chinese communities, the Alliance government once again introduced a compromise solution. In 1967, the Parliament passed the National Language Bill which stipulated that other than *Bahasa Malaysia*, English could also be used for some official purposes. In addition, the Chinese and Indian languages were permitted for non-official purposes and vernacular schools. This outcome inevitably upset the Malay community which strongly believed that “language is the soul of the nation” (*bahasa jiwa bangsa*) and determined to make *Bahasa Malaysia* the nation’s soul. With such resentment against the Alliance government in general and UMNO in particular, many Malays shifted their support to PAS.

The Chinese and Indian communities were equally dissatisfied with the Alliance government. In particular, the concession on the issue of Malay special rights had turned many Chinese voters away from MCA. In 1968, a new political party called the Malaysian People's Movement (*Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*) was formed. Advocating for "equality, justice and equal opportunity" and positioning itself as a non-communal political party, *Gerakan* gained the support of many non-Malays. In addition to *Gerakan*, another opposition party – the Democratic Action Party (DAP) -- also attracted support from non-Malay voters. DAP was even more vocal than *Gerakan* and openly called for an end to Malay special rights. While MCA faced severe challenges from *Gerakan* and DAP, the UMNO leadership within the Malay community was also undermined by the opposition party PAS. Accusing UMNO of allowing non-Malays to prevail in the economic sector which resulted in the Malay population continuously suffering from poor economic conditions, PAS proposed a greater Malay presence in both political and economic realms. This proposal appealed to many Malay voters. With PAS advocating for greater Malay domination on one hand and DAP and *Gerakan* calling for an end to the Malay special rights on the other, racial tension between Chinese and Malay was again heightened. It was under such a social atmosphere that Malaysia's third general election took place.

The Tragedy of May 13, 1969

On May 10, 1969, Malaysia held its third general election. With the issue of Malay special rights at the core of its debate, the nation was divided. On May 11, the poll results showed that a majority of non-Malays had abandoned MCA, which had made a deal with UMNO, and supported opposition parties DAP and *Gerakan*, which opposed

Malay special rights. The Malay votes, however, were split between UMNO and PAS. Although the Alliance was still able to retain a majority in Parliament (*Dewan Rakyat*), its seats had dropped from 89 to 66 (out of a total of 103 seats). But more importantly, the Alliance had lost its majority in Selangor and Perak, two economically vital states with predominantly Chinese populations. While the Alliance maintained only 19 seats in Perak (a total of 40 seats) and 14 seats in Selangor (a total of 28), opposition parties DAP and *Gerakan* controlled the remaining seats. The Malays in these two states were horrified that they might end up with a non-Malay state chief minister (*Mentri Besar*). To make matters worse, then chief-minister of Selangor, Harun Idris refused to acknowledge his defeat, instead he “used his residence as a staging area for Malays who wanted to retaliate” (Baker, 1999, p. 333). As a result, the police reported truckloads of frustrated Malays armed with *parangs* (long knives) had entered the city (Mauzy, 1983, p. 37). After decades of tension and distrust between Malay and Chinese, Malaysia was on the verge of an all-out communal conflict.

On May 12, 1969, to celebrate their victory in the general election, predominantly Chinese supporters of DAP and *Gerakan* organized a demonstration in the streets of Kuala Lumpur. Such an act was not taken lightly by the Malays. On the following day, May 13, 1969, a counter-rally was organized by UMNO supporters. With hostility felt in both camps, the rally quickly deteriorated into violent clashes between Malays and non-Malays. As a result, army was called in and a curfew was declared at 8pm on May 13. On May 14, at the request of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (the ruler) proclaimed a state of emergency. However, in the following days, bloody fighting continued. The tragedy of the May 13 communal riot finally ended the

following week. Officially, the government reported that 196 people died and 409 were injured during the conflict but these numbers were contested by local newspaper correspondents who claimed the numbers were much higher. Regardless of the statistics, the communal conflict of May 13, 1969, was considered “the worst racial riot in the history of the country” (Comber, 1983, p. 71).

When the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* proclaimed a state of emergency, the control of government was turned over to a ten-member National Operations Council (NOC) headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. At this juncture, Tunku Abdul Rahman was still officially the Prime Minister of Malaysia; however, his career as a statesman had ended. In September, 1970, Tunku Abdul Rahman resigned and Tun Abdul Razak succeeded as the nation’s second Prime Minister. Between 1969 and 1971, as the country was under a state of emergency, parliament was suspended. Malaysia was then under the direct control of NOC. As a majority of the council members were Malays, a series of measures, favoring the Malay population were introduced.

The Aftermath of May 13, 1969 and the Formation of the Barisan Nasional

A few months after the May 13 riot, NOC published a document titled “The May 13 Tragedy: A Report.” In the report, the council “laid out a course of action to prevent future repetitions of bloodshed and to attack the fundamental causes of antagonism among racial groups” (McDaniel, 1994, p. 83). Through the report a series of recommendations for social engineering was suggested. One was to raise the socioeconomic position of the Malay community, which owned only 1.5 percent of the shares of peninsular Malaysian companies at the time (McDaniel, 1994, p. 80). With this in mind, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced. Its purpose was to “cut in half

non-Malaysian ownership and to increase Malay-held stock to 30% of the total traded” (McDaniel, 1994, p. 80). These recommendations proposed by NOC were clearly in favor of the Malays. However, as all political activities were banned under the state of emergency, opposition against them was muted. By the time the ban was finally lifted on August 31, 1970, the recommendations had become policies that were not to be questioned. As Mauzy (1983) pointed out, “Political utterances were now subject to the restrictions established by an amendment to the Sedition Act (Emergency Ordinance No. 45 of 1970) which made it illegal to question certain ethnically-sensitive provisions of the Constitution” (p. 39). With the Malay political power controlling the government and not wanting to face another racial conflict, the non-Malays accepted those unfavorable terms.

Throughout the state of emergency NOC, under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak, was also seeking ways to ensure racial harmony to prevent similar events from happening again. As the Malays had control over the government during this period, Malay extremists such as Ja’afar Albar and Mahathir Mohamad advocated for creation of a Malay government, so that UMNO would be more effective in taking care of Malay interests (Baker, 1999, p. 334). Such a suggestion, however, was rejected by Tun Abdul Razak. As a moderate, Tun Abdul Razak recognized that in order for the future government to work, the administration must have Chinese and Indian participation. On the other hand, he also acknowledged that the Alliance model no longer worked. What prompted such understanding was that both UMNO and MCA could no longer claim to represent the whole of their communities. In the 1969 general election two things became clear. First, Malay voters were split between UMNO and PAS. Secondly, the majority of Chinese votes did not support MCA. Understanding this, Tun Abdul Razak decided that

the coalition government must widen its political base. By doing so, he hoped that future debates and resolutions regarding public issues would “occur within the government and not in society itself” (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, p. 325). Such a mind-set in shaping the new government body is important to note. To some extent, the methods of Tun Abdul Razak and his predecessor Tunku Abdul Rahman in handling public issues were quite similar. Both were inclined to handle public issues, particularly controversial matters, behind closed doors with ruling political elites instead of presenting their arguments to the general public. Such elitist notions of politics appeared to be a distinctive characteristic of Malaysian political leaders’ style of governing.

With the notion of containing debate within the government, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) government was formed in the first half of the 1970s. In addition to the member parties of the former Alliance government, UMNO, MCA and MIC, the new government body also consisted of *Gerakan* and PAS. With *Gerakan* and PAS in coalition, *Barisan Nasional* could now claim to represent the interests of all major ethnic groups in Malaysia. However, the partnership with the coalition was neither fair nor equal. In her study of *Barisan Nasional*, Mauzy (1983) pointed out that shortly after the May 13 tragedy, Tun Abdul Razak and his counterparts within UMNO had decided that in order for the new regime to work, two political parameters had to be accepted by all member parties of the coalition. First, “. . . it was necessary to reduce ‘politicking’ in order to ensure ethnic harmony and to allow the government to get on with the major task of reducing Malay economic grievances; that the Westminster model of democracy needed to be adapted to fit better with Malaysia’s political and social environment; that Malay unity would be a major goal; and that any changes enacted must not undermine the

dominance of UMNO” (pp. 46-7). Secondly, the politics of Malaysia must remain Malay based. In his interview with Mauzy (1983), Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, then Minister of Home Affairs, pointed out the rationale of Tun Abdul Razak and UMNO on this matter:

The politics of this country has been, and must remain for the foreseeable future, native based: that was the secret of our stability and our prosperity and that is a fact of political life which no one can simply wish away. It must be native based which believes not in false compromises or in compulsion but in co-operation with all the other races in the country (p. 47).

With these two parameters – UMNO dominated and Malay-oriented – accepted by all member parties in the coalition, the hegemonic position of Malay community in general and UMNO in particular became unquestionable. Unlike the Alliance government which saw UMNO, MCA and MIC as equal partners, the *Barisan Nasional* government positioned UMNO above all other political parties. In the decades to come, all key political positions in the *Barisan Nasional* government such as Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Information were always held by senior members of UMNO. As a result, major public policies in Malaysia, including broadcasting policy, were often drafted, introduced, and implemented by UMNO politicians with their party’s interests in mind.

Rukunegara and Sensitive Issues

Other than widening the political base of *Barisan Nasional* and ensuring UMNO domination within the coalition government, measures were also taken to prevent

members from different communal communities from intimidating each other. Two courses of action were taken at this juncture. *Rukunegara* (Articles of Faith of the State) was proclaimed and a series of “sensitive issues” was banned from public discussion. These two actions by the *Barisan Nasional* government had one purpose. Together they form the dos (*Rukunegara*) and don’ts (sensitive issues) for Malaysia in general and the nation’s public policy in particular. On August 31, 1970, a new ideological *Rukunegara* was proclaimed. The new ideology stated:

Our nation, Malaysia, being dedicated to achieving a greater unity of all the peoples: to maintaining a democratic way of life; to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably shared; to ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions; to building a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology; We, her people pledge our united efforts to attain those ends guided by these principles:

Belief in God

Loyalty to King and Country

Upholding the Constitution

Rule of Law

Good Behavior and Morality.

For many years to come, but particularly in the 1970s, *Rukunegara* became an ideology that all Malaysians had to follow. All public policies drafted thereafter had to be

in line with these principles. However, the *Barisan Nasional* government feared providing these guiding principles for Malaysians would not be enough to prevent incidents similar to the May 13 tragedy from happening again. To achieve this goal, a second measure needed to be in place.

On February 23, 1971, 20 months after it was suspended due to the state of emergency, the Parliament reconvened. However, the return to parliamentary government was contingent upon Parliament passing the Constitution (Amendment) Bill. With this condition, Article 10 of the Constitution was amended. The amendment was to set a boundary on freedom of speech within Malaysia. The amended Constitution prohibits “any questioning of citizenship rules and policy, *Bahasa Malaysia* as the national language, the special position of the Malays and the legitimate interest of other communities, or the sovereignty of Rulers” (McDaniel, 1994, p. 83). Any discussion of these “sensitive issues” in a public forum either by common citizens or members of Parliament would be considered an act of sedition under the new law.

With the introduction of *Rukunegara* and amendment of the Constitution, the *Barisan Nasional* government hoped to slowly but surely settle disputes between Malays and non-Malays in the foreseeable future. However, by completely shutting down discussion of these issues, the government has merely swept these matters under the carpet. In years to come, the issue of Malay Special Rights continues to be at the core of heated debate between Malays and non-Malays.

The May 13 Tragedy and the Mass Media Industry

When a racial riot broke out and the state of emergency was declared in May 1969, among the actions taken by the Alliance government was to shut down all

newspapers; place government radio and television networks under severe restrictions; and confine all broadcasting to emergency announcements and statements by authorities (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 190). Such action clearly indicated that the authority did not trust the media. Without media to provide credible coverage of events, rampant rumors of bloodshed and conflict circulated among the different communities, further heightening the tension. This error in judgment did not go unnoticed by the authorities. To rectify the problem and to ensure that mass media – in particular government-owned radio and television networks – would be used to more effectively deliver government message to the general public, corrective measures were introduced. In 1970, then Minister of Information Hamzah bin Abu Samah formulated a code which later evolved into the five objectives of Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), the only radio and television network in Malaysia at the time. These objectives were:

1. To explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage, policies and programs of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the people;
2. To stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of government;
3. To foster national unity in our multi-racial society through the extensive use of *Bahasa Malaysia*;
4. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and in fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture; and

5. To provide suitable elements of education, general information and entertainment (McDaniel, 1994, p. 85).

In reference to these five objectives, McDaniel (1994) pointed out “the familiar theme of educating, informing, and entertaining audiences is included, but only as the list’s final item. In Malaysia, a higher consideration is that radio and TV motivate the public to respond to the government’s requirements” (p. 85). This observation is crucial in understanding the relationship between the *Barisan Nasional* government and the media industry. This idea that mass media should work closely with the administration – to support its effort in building the nation and delivering its message – applies not only to the government-owned media organizations, but also to privately owned ones. In the following decades, the *Barisan Nasional* government has used different strategies – such as buying up the ownership of private media organizations via affiliated political parties, suspension of publishing licenses, or granting ownership of newly established media to its supporters – to ensure that media played the role of a submissive supporter for the administration.

While the Malaysian government is able to mould local media into playing such a submissive role, its ability to control foreign media is limited. As a result, the Malaysian government has been in constant disputes with foreign media, especially those from the United States or other Western nations. The Western media’s idea of freedom of the press, which William Hachten (1996) defined as “the right of the press to report, comment on, and criticize its own government without retaliation or threat of retaliation from the government,” (p. 18), is a notion which goes against *Barisan Nasional* government understanding of the role of mass media. The Malaysian government claimed

that in view of the fragile relationship between Malays and non-Malays, the Western notion of freedom of the press is simply unsuitable for the country. To counter the journalistic practice of Western media, which tends to criticize rather than support authority, the *Barisan Nasional* government often depicts Western media as agents for the West. Therefore, any attempts by the Western media to portray Malaysia in an unfavorable manner are often interpreted by the *Barisan Nasional* government as part of the West's effort to "re-colonize" the nation through ideas that are unsuitable and dangerous to Malaysian society. By making such connections, the *Barisan Nasional* government seeks to legitimize its action against the idea of "freedom of the press."

The Malaysian government's suspicious view of foreign media is not limited to journalistic materials but also to entertainment programs. After the tragedy of May 13, 1969, as the Malay hegemonic position become a reality not to be questioned by the non-Malays (at least not openly), their religious belief Islam has become an increasingly important part of the society in general. As a nation, Malaysia began to experience a revival of Islamic values in the 1970s. Many factors – including international affairs such as the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of predominantly Muslim Afghanistan, Arab-Israeli wars and oil crises exerted by OPEC (Hussin Mutalib, 1990, p. 73), as well as domestic matters such as ethnic tension between Malays and non-Malays, rapid economic development and disparity between rich and poor (Muzaffar, 1987, pp. 13-26) – can be attributed to the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia. One of the reasons for such resurgence was the launching of NEP. Under NEP's major offshoot, the New Education Policy (NEDP), many Malay youths were given the opportunity to study in overseas universities, particularly in the Western nations. As a result of their experiences

in the Western nations, many turned out to be increasingly committed to Islam. In his study of Islam in Malaysia, Hussin Mutalib (1993) pointed out one of the reasons for such outcome:

Being transported from their rural settings or milieu, in the village (*kampung*), to one completely different and alien, namely, the overseas universities in the West, these youths felt a sense of alienation and anomie. Overawed and ill-equipped to face the cultural shock of Western society with its attendant liberal values and norms, these Malay youths tended to develop a sense of disillusionment, and at times, revulsion, against things associated with Western lifestyle (p. 28).

With this understanding of the West, entertaining programs such as soap operas and dramas are perceived by this sector of Malays as embedded with corrupted values, which are often associated with drug, sex, alcohol, and violence. As a result, over the years, the *Barisan Nasional* government has been trying hard to control circulation of foreign media products, of both journalistic and entertaining content, in Malaysia. However, these attempts seem to have had limited success.

It is important to note that under more than three decades of *Barisan Nasional* government rule, the notion that media should play a supportive role for the government is a belief no longer held only by *Barisan Nasional* politicians but also by many media practitioners. In 1996, a Malaysian leading English newspaper, the *New Straits Times*,

published an article titled *Burden of press freedom* that best demonstrated the position that some Malaysian media practitioners take:

The question arises as to which of the following comes first—national interests or objective and truth? The ideal situation is, perhaps, to balance the two but, as the Prime Minister pointed out to journalists on Monday nights, it is impossible to achieve anything that is ideal. The local Press has always been supportive of government policies, even if they are not pro-government. Perhaps, maintaining this status quo would be a good start before journalists start pondering over Dr. Mahathir's poser ("Burden of Press," 1996).

The Mahathir Era: Islamization and Privatization

After the May 13 tragedy, with the implementation of NEP, the *Barisan Nasional* government under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak (1970 to 1976) and Hussein Onn (1976 to 1981) focused most of its attention on two matters. First, to reduce poverty among the Malay community, especially those in rural areas; second, to remove the association of ethnicity to economic function (Andaya & Andaya, 2001, p. 303-310). Their efforts in these two aspects were continued by their successor, Mahathir Mohamad. Unlike his predecessors, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Hussein Onn, all Malay aristocrats and educated in Britain, Mahathir was a common man from the state of Kedah and was trained as a medical doctor in Singapore during the colonial period. This

social background shaped his view of racial relationships between Malay and non-Malay, as reflected in his 1970s publication, *The Malay Dilemma*.

While a junior member of Parliament, Mahathir argued that the disparity of wealth and opportunity between Malay and non-Malay was partly due to the colonial government's discriminating treatment of the two groups and partly due to Malay inabilities – genetically, psychologically and socio-culturally – to compete against non-Malays. To undo these shortcomings, he advocated that the administration should use public policies to nurture both a Malay business culture and a Malay bourgeoisie. In this regard, he criticized the Alliance government for not doing enough for the Malay community and therefore responsible for the disparity of wealth between Malay and non-Malay. Mahathir's outspokenness and confrontational style was deemed "unMalay" by many older generation Malays (Baker, 1999, p. 351) and did not well received by Tunku Abdul Rahman. As a result, the *Malay Dilemma* was banned by NOC in 1970 and Mahathir was expelled from UMNO. However, for the younger generation of Malays, Mahathir's criticisms highlighted some of the shortcomings of the Alliance government. With this popularity, Mahathir was brought back to UMNO by Tun Razak. In less than ten years, he emerged as the nation's fourth Prime Minister. As the nation longest-serving Prime Minister, from 1981 to 2003, Mahathir's impact on Malaysia was tremendous. His viewpoint of the disparity of wealth between Malay and non-Malay reflected in the *Malay Dilemma* shaped public policies under his administration. Two of them, privatization and Islamization, are particularly worth mentioning, both had and still have a direct impact on the Malaysian television industry.

Mahathir's Privatization Policy

In 1982, when Mahathir became Prime Minister, he selected a group of influential *bumiputera* businesspeople who had benefited from NEP as his advisers. It was this group of advisers who convinced him to implement the privatization policy (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, pp. 313-4). In March, 1983, the privatization policy was officially launched. Its aim was to transfer state-owned enterprises, such as Syarikat Telekom Malaysia (STM), Malaysia Airlines System (MAS) and Malaysian International Shipping Corporation (MISC), to the private sector. By changing “the control of a business, service or industry from state, government or public to private ownership or control” (Jomo, 1995 p. 43), the government hoped to increase efficiency of these enterprises and to ease the financial burden of the government (Gomez, 1990, p. 24). For Mahathir, privatization served another purpose. In the early 1980s, after more than ten years of NEP, the Malaysian government found that instead of nurturing the *bumiputera* to take part in economic activities through various incentives provided by the government, the policy had prompted a substantial number of *bumiputera* to abuse the policy for immediate financial gain. Privatization, therefore, was used as a means to counter this “subsidy mentality” and to instill a sense of competitiveness among the *bumiputera*. As Gomez and Jomo (1999) pointed out, Mahathir saw “privatization as a crucial means of sponsoring the emergence and consolidation of Malay renters, whom he hopes would somehow transform themselves into an internationally competitive industrial community” (p. 80).

However, the implementation of privatization raised serious questions on the issue of patronage. In his study of UMNO involvement in the private sector, Gomez

(1990) also noted that under the privatization policy many lucrative projects were awarded to UMNO-owned companies or enterprises that were closely linked to the *Barisan Nasional* government. (p. 24). One of the sectors in which this is clearly evident is the television industry.

On September 15, 1983, when the parent company of the nation's first private television network, TV-*Tiga*, Sistem Televisyen (M) Berhad (STMB), was established, its initial shareholders were Fleet Group (40 percent), Syed Kechik Foundation (20 percent), Utusan Melayu (20 percent), Maika Holdings (10 percent) and Daim Zainuddin (10 percent) (Gomez, 1990, p. 73). The relationship between these shareholders and UMNO is important in understanding the control that the government has over TV3 in particular and television in general. First of all, Fleet Group, the major shareholder of STMB, is a major investment arm of UMNO. The Chairman of Fleet Group, Daim Zainuddin, who became Finance Minister in 1984, held ten percent of STMB. Utusan Melayu Press, which held ten percent of shares of the new station, was controlled by then Deputy Prime Minister and deputy president of UMNO, Ghafar Baba. This meant that a total of 70 percent of STMB shares were under direct UMNO control. As for the rest of the shareholders, Maika Holdings is the investment arm of MIC – a member party of the *Barisan Nasional* coalition – and Syed Kechik is a former politician-turned-entrepreneur as well as a close associate of Daim (see table 3-3).

Table 3-3

STMB's Ownership and Their Relationships to Barisan Nasional

Shareholder	Relationship to <i>Barisan Nasional</i>	Percentage of Shares
Fleet Group	UMNO's investment arm	40
Syed Kechik	Controlled by Syed Kechin	20
Foundation	An associate of Daim	
Utusan Melayu	Controlled by Ghafar Baba (Deputy Prime Minister)	20
Maika Holdings	MIC's investment arm	10
Daim Zainuddin	The Chairman of Fleet Group	10

While the *Barisan Nasional* government claimed that TV-*Tiga* was an alternative television network for Malaysia, its indirect control over the network ownership was evident and has persisted over the years. In 2001, 49.65 percent of Sistem Televisyen (M) Berhad (STMB) shares belonged to Alliancegroup Nominees (Tempatan) Sdn Bhd, which was owned by Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB), an enterprise controlled by four individuals (Khalid Ahmad, Mohd. Noor Mutalib, Kadir Jasin and Ahmad Nazri Abdullah) who were closely linked to UMNO (Zaharoom Nain, 2002, p. 116). In the 1990s, when satellite television service and second national broadcasting network licenses were awarded by the *Barisan Nasional* government, the same pattern of corporate ownership emerged. In 1996, when the nation's first satellite television service was established, it was controlled by Ananda Krishnan, a close friend of Prime Minister Mahathir. In 1998, when the nation's second private television network, NTV-7, was established, it was owned by Effendi Norwawi, an individual who became the Agriculture Minister of the *Barisan Nasional* government after the 1999 general election (Zaharom Nain, 2002, p.122).

It is important to note that such a pattern of ownership is not limited to the television industry. Major newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia* (Malay), *Berita Harian* (Malay), *The Star* (English), *the New Straits Times* (English), *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Chinese) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Chinese) are owned by *Barisan Nasional* coalition's member parties, in particular UMNO. By using the *Barisan Nasional*-linked companies as the "behind the scenes" investors, the authority is able to benefit from the financial investment on one hand and to ensure favorable coverage by the media on the other.

The policy of privatization has not only impacted the Malaysian mass media industry but has also transformed the practice of politics in the country. On November 6, 1993, *The Economist* published a story on UMNO's 1993 national conference that was held in Kuala Lumpur. In the article, titled *Malays in the money*, the magazine revealed the practice of "money politics" in Malaysia:

Money politics works in two interlocking ways. Candidates for [UMNO] party office use cash for campaign expenses and other more direct inducements to UMNO delegates. Once in office they are able to recoup the money they spent in their campaign and reward their supporters with favorable business deals.

....

The stockbrokers dealing in Kuala Lumpur's booming market have little doubt that politics and business are deeply interlocked in Malaysia. The brokers have noticed that the hottest properties are often 'UMNO stocks', meaning those thought to be tied to the political fortunes of rising stars within the party. A UMNO stock can work in a number of ways. The prices of some companies are thought to have been artificially driven up as politicians have raised money for their political battles. Other companies become hot tips when they are taken over

by politically well connected people who stand to benefit from public contracts (“Malays in the money,” 1993).

Apparently, the practice of “money politics” was not limited to the UMNO conference. According to the studies by Gomez (1990, 1991), Gomez & Jomo (1999), Hilley (2001) and Lim (2002) such practices were commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s under the Mahathir administration. As a result, terms such as favoritism, cronyism and nepotism are often associated with the decisions made by the authority. Such allegations have seriously undermined the creditability of the *Barisan Nasional* government.

Mahathir Administration and Islamization

In addition to privatization, another important policy brought forward by the Mahathir Administration is the Islamization of the Malaysian government machinery. In his study on *Islam in Malaysia*, Hussin Mutalib (1993) pointed out that Mahathir’s bias towards Islam became apparent in the first year of his administration. In 1981, the Mahathir administration adopted recommendations that were suggested in a seminar entitled *The Concept of Development in Islam*, which touched on aspects such as law, economics, education, science and technology (Hussin Mutalib, 1993, p. 30). In 1984, his administration advanced the cause further by officially announcing a policy of Islamization, which included setting up an Islamic Bank, an International Islamic University and an Islamic Teachers College. But more importantly, Mahathir wanted Islamization to be an “inculcation of Islamic values in the government.” Following the announcement of the policy, the local media, in particular government-owned television and radio networks, were encouraged to reflect the move towards Islamization. As a result, there was a dramatic increase in Islamic programs on RTM. This trend prompted

other religious communities to call for equal time on the airwaves. The requests were rejected by Mahathir on the grounds that “Islam is the national and official religion and every citizen should learn its values” (as cited in Hussin Mutalib, 1993).

Mahathir’s policy for Islamization, however, should not be seen as simply his aspiration towards the religion. Political motivation should also be considered as a reason for such a move towards Islam. After the implementation of NEP, with Malays in general and UMNO in particular in a hegemonic position, many issues that had concerned the Malay community in the years under the Alliance government had been resolved. Politically, economically and culturally Malays had been granted special privileges and *Bahasa Malaysia* had indeed become “the soul of the nation” (*bahasa jiwa bangsa*). With *Bahasa Malaysia* becoming a common language used by all races, Malays as well as non-Malays, it had gradually “lost its capacity to generate a symbolic quality of ethnic exclusiveness of ‘Malayness’” for the Malay community. As a result, Islam turned out to be “the last barrier protecting the Malay ethnic identity” (Mauzy & Milne, 1986, p. 87).

As a political party that claimed to represent the interests of the Malay community, UMNO was eager to respond to such calling. However, it was not the only political party in Malaysia that sought to rally the support of the Malays by embracing Islam. PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) was equally if not even more determined to inject Islam into all aspects of the nation’s life. From 1970 to 1977, with PAS part of the coalition, the *Barisan Nasional* government gained solid support from the Malay community. During this period, with PAS working within the coalition and pressure groups such as ABIM (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*, or Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) advocating for Islam from without, the *Barisan Nasional* government began to

be actively involve with Islamic affairs. The Islamic Research Center was established in 1971, followed by the Institute of Islamic Mission and Training in 1974 (Syed Ahmad Hussein, 2002, p. 87). Such unity between UMNO and PAS for the Malay community, however, did not last. In 1977, PAS broke away from the *Barisan Nasional* coalition and has remained as an opposition party ever since.

For UMNO, PAS was a threat to its hegemonic power. In a communal-based political system set up by the Alliance government and inherited by the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* government, UMNO's hegemony depended largely on the support of the Malay community. As PAS had been the only constant political force since 1957 that was able to undermine that support, Mahathir was determined to diminish the opposition party's influence when he took office in 1982. The Islamization policy appeared to be move toward that objective.

However, in order for Mahathir's Islamization policy to succeed, it first had to establish its Islamic credentials. For most Malays, UMNO was a secular political party. This was especially true when it was compared to PAS. Joining forces with an Islamic advocacy group that had good Islamic credentials appeared to be an immediate and effective means to undo such an impression. ABIM, one of the most vocal Islamic youth groups representing the voice of well-educated urban Malays to emerge in the 1970s, was ideal for that role. Being well-organized and well-financed, ABIM was considered by UMNO a pressure group that would be formidable if it linked up with PAS. In the early 1980s, Mahathir successfully co-opted the youth group's charismatic leader Anwar Ibrahim into joining UMNO. Promised that he "would not abandon the principles and ideals for which he had fought – that he was not selling out, but would fight for ABIM's

goals from inside the party in power” (Mauzy & Milne, 1986, p. 91), Anwar joined UMNO on September 29, 1982. One of the early tasks that he undertook after joining UMNO was as deputy minister of the Islamic Religious Affairs section under the Prime Minister’s Office. The pact between ABIM and UMNO appeared to be a win-win situation. For UMNO, such a move consolidated its position with the Malay community. In the 1982 general election, “the Malay vote was convincingly won by UMNO” (Sankaran Ramanathan & Mohd. Hamdan Adnan, 1988, p. 19). As Sankaran Ramanathan & Mohd. Hamdan Adnan (1988) pointed out, part of the reason for such outcome was that UMNO “credentials as a Malay party committed to advancing Islamic goals were authentic and in good order” (p. 18). For ABIM, joining forces with UMNO ensured that Islamic concerns were addressed within the ruling political party. Partly due to the alliance between ABIM and UMNO, the Islamization policy was announced in 1984.

From 1981 to 1997, with Anwar Ibrahim working “inside the party in power,” the Mahathir administration fiercely promoted an Islamic agenda through public policy. However, as the leading party of *Barisan Nasional*, UMNO also recognized that its Islamization policy could alienate the non-Malay voters. For this reason, in an interview with the Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu* on October 26 and 27, 1984, he argued that:

What we mean by Islamization is the inculcation of Islamic values in government. Such an inculcation is not the same as implementation of Islamic law in the country. Islamic laws are for Muslims and meant for their personal laws. But laws of the nation, although not Islamic-based, can be

used so long as they do not come into conflict with Islamic principles (Hussin Mutalib, 1993, p. 30).

As the leading political party of the coalition government, UMNO injected an Islamic agenda into public policy to address Malays' religious concerns on one hand but claimed to understand the concerns of non-Malays on the other. Under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, UMNO re-positioned itself from a secularist to a moderate Islamic political party. PAS, on the other hand, had been constantly portrayed by the mainstream media, under *Barisan Nasional* control, as an extremist Islamic political party. Such strategy apparently worked well to maintain UMNO's hegemony. By positioning itself as a moderate Islamic political party, UMNO had been eager to point out that the political and social stability of the country, in particular "racial harmony" between Malay and non-Malay, depended largely on Malaysians (Malay and non-Malay alike) accepting the ruling party's version of Islam. Its rationale had always been that if PAS were to be voted into office, Malaysia would become an Islamic state that would disallow non-Malays to exercise their religious and cultural practices. Such a scenario would provoke hostility between Malays and non-Malays and as a result, events similar to the communal riot of May 13, 1969 would once again occur. This rationale appeared to be very persuasive for many Malaysians. For the non-Malays, to prevent PAS from coming into power, they would have to accept (or at least tolerate) that Islam plays an important role in Malaysian society in general. For the Malays, the *Barisan Nasional* government under the leadership of UMNO had been able to push for Islamic agendas while at the same time preventing racial conflict between different communal groups.

It was within this political context that Islam agendas were fiercely promoted by the Mahathir administration through public policy. Censorship for all media had to adhere to Islamic values and teachings. Such an effort was implemented not only by the government but also vigorously examined by the conservative Malay-Muslim community. In his study of the Malaysian television industry, Karthigesu (1990) pointed out that in the 1980s “Malay newspapers constantly monitored TV programs for conflicts in Islamic values and the slightest hint of such came under fire” (p. 167).

For Mahathir, in order for UMNO to maintain its hegemony, the Islamization policy was necessary. With Anwar Ibrahim as the rising political star within the *Barisan Nasional* government from 1982 to 1997, UMNO’s credentials as a moderate Islamic political party were ensured. However, UMNO was unable to completely marginalize PAS. PAS had continued to serve as a force with which UMNO had to deal in order to rally the Malay voters. Although it was unable to seriously challenge UMNO at the federal level, at the state level PAS is a threat that cannot be ignored. Since the 1990s, PAS had been able to challenge UMNO’s hegemony in the states of Kelantan, Trengganu and Kedah, considered to be the heartland states of the Malays. In the 1995 general election, PAS managed to capture the state of Kelantan. In the 1999 election, PAS expanded its territory to the state of Trengganu. Observers (Gomez, 1996; Jegathesan, 1999, Suh and Rangwana, 1999; Lau, 2000) pointed out that the Malay community was split between PAS and UMNO. This was especially true in the November 1999 general election, in which the Malays were “split right down the middle with almost exactly 50 percent voting for the opposition” (“Mahathir thumbs nose,” 2001). To counter PAS,

UMNO had been extremely sensitive to the Malay community's criticisms, especially on matters related to Islam.

Mahathir's policy of Islamization, a policy that emerged for political reasons rather than public concern, had a great impact on society in general as well as the government. In his study of Malay's issues in the modern day, Musa (1999) argued that:

In Modern Malaysia, Islam is more than a religion. It is a government within a government. Religious functionaries are as well versed with their civil service codes as the holy Koran, if not more so. Because of the exalted status they enjoy in Malay society, religious officials feel appropriately important and glorified. The government has made them so and they in turn behave accordingly. Hence their frequent overreaching attempts at imposing their views on the rest of the country, on non-Muslims and on matters outside of religion" (p. 68).

The television industry apparently was not exempted from such influence. As the Prime Minister positioned Islamization as an "inculcation of Islamic values in the government," the Film Censor Board – the ultimate gatekeeper of entertainment programs on television and cinema – had ensured that Islamic teachings and values were safeguarded, an issue to be discussed in the following chapter.

Summary

The historical development of Malaysia in the past hundred years has greatly shaped the mindset of Malaysians in general. Three themes are particularly important to

note. First, the issue of communal relations is a matter that cannot be ignored in studying Malaysia. Thirty-five years after the communal riot between Malay and non-Malay on May 13, 1969, the event continues to be used by the UMNO-dominant *Barisan Nasional* government to justify its policies – including the Islamization policy under the Mahathir administration – that favors the Malay community. Any attempts by critics inside or outside of Malaysia to challenge its decisions are often labeled as “insensitive” to the nation’s unique political and social history. Second, the governing style of Malaysian political leaders is another theme that needs to be remembered. The practice of high-level closed-door meetings among political elites from the respective communities to resolve communal differences appears to be a tradition adopted by political leaders from Tunku Abdul Rahman to Mahathir Mohamad. This practice of making compromises on behalf their communal groups instead openly debating issues in order to gain public support appears to be a consistent pattern that ran throughout Malaysian history since its independence. Such a pattern of decision-making inevitably shaped Malaysian political practice in general, its culture in particular. Third, the implementation of a privatization policy under the Mahathir administration which later mutated into “money politics” and “cronyism” (a theme that emerged only in the 1980s and 1990s) has an importance that cannot be underestimated. Many decisions made by the authority – including those that involved the television industry – appear to have been greatly influenced by this particular factor.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL OF GATEKEEPING ON MALAYSIAN DRAMAIC TELEVISION

It was 12:30 in the afternoon of January 20, 2003 when a 12-man police team led by Superintendent *Mohd Kamaruddin Md Din* (head of *Bukit Aman*'s computer crimes unit) arrived at the office of *Malaysiakini*. Their purpose was to request the online newspaper's editors to disclose the identity of a writer known as *Petrof*, who on January 9 of that year had posted a letter titled "*Similarities Between 'New Americans' and Bumiputera*" on the *Malaysiakini* website. The letter prompted UMNO Youth, the youth wing of the ruling political party, to lodge a police report against the online newspaper for publishing a letter that made "false accusations, as well as questioning the Malay special rights." The group was concerned that such a letter "could instill hatred towards the government in non-Malay Malaysians" ("UMNO Youth lodges report," 2003).

The Editor-in-chief Steven Gan refused the request on the grounds of "readers' right to freedom of expression as well as journalistic ethics on the protection of confidentiality of sources" ("*Malaysiakini* online again," 2003). As a result of the refusal, the police moved into the editorial offices and seized 15 CPUs and four servers for "forensic examination" ("Suhakam to the defence," 2003). The next day, Steven Gan and four other senior editors were called into the *Dang Wangi* police station to give statement. Two days after the police raid the online daily was served with an eviction notice to vacate the premises by the end of February. The landlord, PC *Suria*, wholly owned by *Barsion Nasional*, a government-backed enterprise *Perbadanan Komputer*

Nasional Bhd (Nascom), gave as its reason that the website “had been found to be involved in ‘unlawful activities’” (“*Malaysiakini* slapped with,” 2003).

The *Malaysiakini* incident was downplayed by the local media, but the news manage to spread quickly within and outside of Malaysia, in the days that followed non governmental organizations, opposition parties, the Bar Council, and the Human Right Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) voiced their support for the online daily and condemned the police action (“Support speaks volumes,” 2003). However, responses from the component parties’ politicians for the ruling *Barisan Nasional* highlighted the core of the matter. Both MCA Youth chief Ong Tee Keat and Gerakan Youth chief Mah Siew Keong pointed out that the government had pledged there would be no censorship of the Internet as it is a crucial part of the nation’s Multimedia Super Corridor project, the police raid, therefore, was “definitely a cause for great concern” (“MCA, MIC, Gerakan Youth,” 2003). The Internet is the latest communication technology to put the authoritarian government in a dilemma. While the government aspires to make Malaysia a major information technology hub in the region, its political leaders attempt to control the free flow of information within its own nation. The raid on *Malaysiakini* was merely a reaction to such dilemma. Knowing that control of information is impossible in the age of the Internet, the *Barisan Nasional* government turned to a strategy that has served the regime well for the past decades: Instilling the need for self-censorship among the media practitioners.

The raid of *Malaysiakini* might have caught the editors of the online daily by surprise, but the incident was hardly anything new for either the Malaysians or its authoritative government. The complaint lodged by UMNO Youth, the raid by the police

and the eviction order served by the government-backed private company were accumulative attempts on the part of the establishment to warn media practitioners to be “more responsible when disseminating information” (“UMNO Youth lodges report,” 2003). The purpose of such overwhelming pressure against media practitioners is to prompt the latter to be more cautious about the material handled and to exercise self-censorship in hope that the wrath of the authority would not again fall upon them. With the ability to impose pressures politically and economically, the threat posted by the authoritarian regime and faced by the media practitioners is intense. The tendency for them to exercise self-censorship therefore is strong.

While *Malaysiakini* was able to draw national and international support to fight for its existence and rejected the call for self-censorship, many others give in to the authority. For these media practitioners self-censorship is the only means to survive in the media industry. This is especially true for those who produce drama television programs for the local television networks. Unlike their counterparts at *Malaysiakini* who get their support directly from their Internet subscribers and advertisements, drama television producers reach their audience through the local television networks, which are directly or indirectly controlled by the *Barisan Nasional* government. Such industry structure makes it unlikely for the drama television producer to initiate any projects that might antagonize the authority. Self-censorship, hence, is part of the requirements for staying in the business. As these media practitioners quietly observe the many dos and don'ts set by the authority, their struggles are unknown to the outside world. Occasionally there were disputes between the practitioners and the authority over the many creative constraints, but as these were considered “showbiz” and were easily and conveniently dismissed.

There would be no calls for freedom of expression for these drama television producers as happened with *Malaysiakini*. On the contrary, there are constant reminders to stay out of themes or ideas which the authority deems offensive. In fact, 11 days before the *Malaysiakini* raid, at the launch of the National Film Censorship Board's convention, the Deputy Prime Minister (also the Minister of Home Affairs) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urged "those involved in film-making to avoid producing and importing negative films themed on superstitious or fictitious element" ("Outsiders now using arts," 2003). In the same speech, he reminded his audience that the guidelines for film censorship by the board have references "not only to the Federal Constitution but also other related laws such as Seditious Act, Police Act, Broadcasting Ethics Act, *Syariah* law as well as the *fatwa*" ("Outsiders now using arts," 2003). Indeed, as the Deputy Prime Minister pointed out, there are many constraints imposed upon the Malaysian television drama producers, while at the same time they are supposed to turn in programs that attract the Malaysian audience. Such is the struggle many Malaysian drama television producers face in their art as well as their business. To understand how these drama producers struggle to make their art, it is crucial that we first look at the forces that shape the Malaysian drama television industry.

The most dominant force that shapes the content of Malaysian drama television programs comes from its government. Through formal and informal means, the will of the *Barisan Nasional* very often guides the dos and don'ts of the drama producers. However, the power of the authoritarian government is not without its limits. The guidelines it introduced to orientate the local television industry for drama production are unable to fully constrain the same type of program that are originated outside Malaysia,

namely the imported drama programs, welcomed by the Malaysian public and needed by the local television networks to draw in advertising revenues. The popularity of the imported programs prompted the *Barisan Nasional* government and the National Censorship Board (LPF) in particular to implement two different sets of guidelines – one for the local producers and the other for the imported drama programs. This caused many Malaysian drama producers charge the authority with having “double standards.” Such phenomenon indicates that while the authoritarian regime is able to control from within, challenges from without undermine its authority.

For the remainder of this chapter, this study seeks to uncover these two opposing forces: one that constrains and one that undermine such constraint. The discussion is divided into five segments. The first three segments identify the key components in the *Barisan Nasional* government that influence the content of local drama television. The last two segments, however, highlight two factors with which the government has to deal carefully. These are pressure groups and new communication technologies. These factors have the potential to undermine the *Barisan Nasional* government’s dominant control. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how these two contradicting forces – constrain and subvert – prompt the “double standards” of the censorship board highly criticized by many media practitioners.

The National Censorship Board (*Lembaga Penapis Filem* – LPF)

On February 3, 1994, the Singapore English newspaper *The Straits Times* printed an obituary titled “He Produced First Malaysian Film Banned at Home” to commemorate a Malaysian filmmaker and television drama producer named Haji Zain Mahmood. He was one of the pioneers in the Malaysian television industry. He headed the drama unit of

Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) for 16 years beginning in 1971 and retired as the station's director-general of broadcasting in 1987. Upon retirement, he set up a film company called Telerade Sdn Bhd.. His first movie, *Phenomenon (Fenomena)*, released in 1988, was a hit and became the first Malay movie to gross RM 1.7 million in ticket sales. However, his much-anticipated second movie *Fantasia (Fantasia)*, produced in 1990 at the cost of RM 500,000, almost did not make it to the silver screen. The National Censorship Board banned the movie on the grounds that it contained anti-Islam elements. It was the first time in the nation's history that a Malaysian film was banned. Only after undergoing massive editing was the film allowed to be screened in March, 1994. Haji Zain Mahmood did not see the film hit the cinema. He died one month before it was screened.

The story of Haji Zain Mahmood is commonly known within the television and film community. It is one of those stories practitioners always recall when asked to talk about the creative constraints in the Malaysian media industry. The significance of Haji Zain Mahmood's story is not just that his film was the first Malaysian movie to be banned by the LPF. More importantly, though he supposedly knew the dos and don'ts of the industry, having lived with those guidelines for almost 20 years, his project still ran into trouble.

Established under Section 3 of the Film Act (Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971), LPF is the organization that oversees the content of both television and film in Malaysia. Under the same act, the board's chairman, deputy chairman and 63 members are recommended by the Ministry of Home Affairs and appointed by the King (Yang DiPertuan Agong). These board members work on a full-time basis and serve for a term

not exceeding three years. To ensure that LPF decisions coincide with the government's position, the majority of its members are retired senior civil servants ("Censorship Board members 'competent,'" 2001). Such a pool of censors had once prompted a member of Parliament from the ruling party to say, "Younger people should also take part when screening the movies as the elderly easily fall asleep and might miss parts which should be censored" ("Film Censorship based on," 2001). The Deputy Minister of Home Affairs protested that some of the members were not too old and "all have been checked for sanity and alertness of mind." He further added that all members were chosen for "their credibility and experience in various disciplines" ("Censorship Board members 'competent,'" 2001). Working closely with the Ministry of Home Affairs, LPF decides which movies or television programs – foreign as well as local – may or may not be seen within the country: An authority with which all television producers, filmmakers and foreign program importers must reckon.

Censorship Process

All movies or television programs screened in Malaysia, whether in movie theaters or television stations, need to be approved by LPF. Once a program is received by LPF, a panel of three censors views it individually. One former censor explained that every morning each panel member receives a stack of videotapes of feature films, commercials, or television dramas. Each censor watches the program from beginning to end while simultaneously recording (in hour, minute and second) the parts that need to be censored and the reason for such action. The written record and the videotape are then sent to the head of the panel who subsequently would chair a panel discussion to finalize a decision, which would then be sent to the Chairman of LPF for approval. Under Sec. 9

Table 4-1

Censorship Outcomes Stipulated under the Film Act (Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971)

Censorship Outcomes	Description
Clean approval (<i>LB</i>)	Approve the film for exhibition in Malaysia without alteration or excision
Approved with excision (<i>LDP</i>)	Approve the film for exhibition in Malaysia with such alteration or excision as it may require.
Banned for exhibition	Refuse to authorize the exhibition of the film in Malaysia.

of Film Act (Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971), the panel may assign categories of clean approval (*LB*), approved with excision (*LDP*) and banned for exhibition (refer to Table 4-1 for details).

Committee of Appeal

The owner of a banned or censored program could appeal to reverse the decision. Within 30 days of notification of the board's decision, a written notice of appeal would be lodged with the Secretary to the Board to begin the process. Established under Section 18 of the Film Act (Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971), the Committee of Appeal generally consists of 18 people. These are (a) a Chairman appointed by the King; (b) the Inspector-General of Police or his nominee, a police officer at or above the rank of Assistant Superintendent; (c) an officer appointed by the Minister of Home Affairs; (d) the Chief Education Adviser or an officer of the Education Department nominated by the Minister charged with responsibility for the Department; and (e) 14 members nominated by the Ministry of Home Affairs and appointed by the King.

When LPF's decision is clearly inappropriate, the Committee of Appeal very often is the filmmaker's last best hope. One such example was the Malay comedy *Lagi Lagi Senario* (a spin-off movie from the TV-*Tiga* Malay sitcom *Senario*). When the film was sent to LPF, it was heavily censored. The scenes that were cut included a segment in which a *roti canai* (Indian fried bread) maker was sweating profusely while working. The censorship board found it problematic because the scene "insults the dignity of the *roti canai*" (Give our cinema more air," 2002). After appeal to the committee, the scene was restored.

However, while the filmmaker has the right to appeal, the outcome can sometimes be worse than either the filmmaker or the television producer expected, especially if it goes against the sentiments of government officials at the time. In 1995 several government officials raised concerns about sex and violence shown on Malaysian television. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad commented on February 4, 1995, “Television stations were screening sex and violent scenes despite repeated warnings” (“Censors ‘Can’t be lenient’,” 1995). At the time a Malay movie titled *Amok* was sent to LPF and on January 5 received a ruling to cut six scenes. To protect the integrity of the film, producer Ruhani Abdul Rahman referred the matter to the Committee of Appeal on January 30. On March 6, the filmmaker received a letter from the committee dated February 20, which stunned the film and television community by banning the film entirely (“RM800, 000 Malay movie,” 1995). While many practitioners refrained from comment, some criticized the ruling as “restricting the creativity of our filmmakers” and “undermining the wisdom of the first committee” (“Ban on Amok,” 1995). However, the Committee of Appeal decision was final.

Cabinet Intervention of Censorship Process

The 1995 ban on *Amok*, a supposedly final decision by the Committee of Appeal was later reversed by a higher authority, namely the Cabinet. In July 1995, the government lifted the ban and the film opened, grossing about RM140, 000 in two weeks--a happy ending for the filmmaker after all. Although reversal of Committee of Appeal decision by the Cabinet was unusual, a case such as *Amok* was not an isolated one. In 1994, LPF banned one of the biggest motion pictures at the time, Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. LPF refused to elaborate in public on the reasons for the

ban, but through a letter from the Board to Universal International Pictures, the movies' distributor, it was known that the film was rejected on the grounds it was "propaganda with a purpose for asking for sympathy (for Jews) as well as to tarnish the other" ("Malaysian Government bans," 1994). A subsequent appeal by the film distributor was also rejected. When LPF's decision was protested by Jewish groups in Australia and the United States, Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat defended LPF's decision by linking it to domestic concerns and pointed out, "Malaysia has to take action from time to time if there is anything that could cause a security problem and affect racial and religious harmony" ("Malaysia defends ban," 1994). However, such reasoning was undermined in late March when the Cabinet reversed the decision. Then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who also chaired the Cabinet meeting, said in a statement:

. . . the cabinet noted that the film dealt with the atrocities of the Nazis against the Jews in Krakow, Poland, during the Second World War. The decision is in keeping with the government's consistent opposition to all forms of suppression, oppression and atrocities, past and present. Common humanity demands our sympathy towards victims of atrocities irrespective of race, nationality or religion ("Ban on *Schindler's List* reversed," 1994).

Some insiders have suggested that sympathy people of "higher up" often helped to ease pains that many practitioners face. However, unlike turning to the Committee of Appeal, there is no formal procedure for "re-appealing" to the Cabinet. While the role of the Censorship Board and the Committee of Appeal is outlined in the Film Act

(Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971), the law does not speak to the capacity of the Cabinet in such matters. In fact, section 17A (3) of the Film Act (Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971) clearly states that “Any decision made by the Committee of Appeal on an appeal under this section shall be final.” Due to the authoritarian nature of the government system, however, intervention and requests from higher authority are simply to be obeyed and not questioned by subordinates. As the Cabinet has the ultimate authority to overturn Committee of Appeal decisions – supposedly final – it raises the question of how certain motion pictures or television programs are able to get the attention of the Cabinet.

There is no formal procedure for the Cabinet to reassess Committee of Appeal decision, so media practitioners need to be resourceful and tactful in persuading Cabinet members to their particular concerns. If a practitioner were able to gain the sympathy and support of Cabinet members through some personal connections there is a good possibility that the Committee of Appeal’s decision might be overturned. However, such extra-legal activity must be conducted discreetly to prevent the Cabinet’s being accused of favoritism. As a result, only the outcome of the maneuver is known to the general public. Questions of why the Cabinet pays particular attention to certain projects or who brings such matters to the Cabinet’s attention are generally left unanswered.

When the Cabinet overturns a Committee of Appeal “final decision”, the committee must quietly accept the outcome. Under an authoritarian government, it is rare and unusual for subordinates to publicly protest against the higher authority. Such an act would only guarantee the protester being punished. While such events may happen only occasionally, it nevertheless makes an impression among filmmakers and television

producers. Media practitioners with good political connections have access to the possibility of a “re-appeal” to the Cabinet.

When the Cabinet rejects a decision made by the Censorship Board and upheld by the Committee of Appeal, it certainly shows that guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs are vague and open to interpretation. The members of the Censorship Board and the Committee of Appeal are compelled to interpret the guideline rigidly to prevent being criticized by the conservative Muslims whose support the *Barisan Nasional* government seeks to gain.

The Cabinet’s occasional intervention in censorship matters has also shown that the *Barisan Nasional* government has a tendency to micro-manage. Instead of having the appropriate agency, in this case the Committee of Appeal, make the necessary decisions, the Cabinet takes charge in a manner inconsistent to its level of authority. By overturning decisions made by the Committee of Appeal, it undermines rather than supports the decision made by its subordinate. Such action certainly has an effect on the members of the Censorship Board and the Committee of Appeal. At the least, it shows these censors that political connections of television producers and filmmakers does matter. This is likely to lead censors to treat more favorably projects sent by media practitioners with good political ties.

Film and Television Rating

On January 1, 1996, to provide guidance for cinema viewers as well as television audience, a film/television rating system was introduced by the Ministry of Information but executed by LPF. Once television programs were approved by the Censorship Board, they would be divided into two main categories: one for general viewing and another for

those above 18 years of age. Programs that fall under the U (*Umum* for general viewing) Category, can be shown at anytime of the day, while 18 Category programs can only be screened after 10pm. To provide additional guidance, programs under the 18 Category are further divided into four sub-categories: (a) 18 SG (*Seram/Ganas*) for programs that contain some elements of violence and horror that are non-excessive; (b) 18 SX (*Seks*) for programs that contain some elements of sex that are non-excessive; (c) 18 PA (*Politik dan Agama*) for programs that contain elements related to aspects of religion, society and politics; (d) 18 PL (*Politik dan lain-lain*) for programs that contain a combination of two or more elements of violence, horror or sex that are non-excessive or related to aspects of religion, society and politics.

A week after implementation of the rating system, the local newspaper *New Straits Times* ran an article titled *Rating system, but cuts still rule* (1996) to sum up the responses from the practitioners. The responses were very doubtful. One practitioner cited *Die Hard 2*, which was screened on New Year's Day with a U rating, as an example and pointed out, "Obviously the movie was censored – maybe not excessively – but then, what is the point of having the rating system when all the films and programs are still censored heavily so that they could be rated U?" Another producer also stressed, "In the first place, films with elements of violence like *Die Hard 2* should not be rated U, as there are scenes that are quite violent which could probably be agreeable' to a certain age limit." Knowing that LPF goes by the process of first censor and then categorize, it is not surprising that most of the programs would fall under the U category. As for programs that fall under the 18 category, the "cuts still rule." When the first episode of *Friends* was screened with an 18SX rating on RTM2 in 1996, a viewer complained in the *New Straits*

Times that, “The censorship that was imposed was so extreme as to render the entire program incomprehensible and incoherent.” The viewer then criticized the authority by pointing out, “The assumption is that responsible adults were watching the show so the treatment accorded to the show was insulting to us all” (“Give us adults,” 1996). The same episode also led *New Straits Times* commentator Suraya Al-Attas to wonder, “Why bother giving it an 18SX rating if they were going to butcher the program so? Throughout the 30 minutes of the pilot episode, there were more silences than anything, and silly me thought there was something wrong with my TV set!” (“Censorship Board runs,” 1997).

As for the local television drama producers, such a rating system has little relevance. Television producer/film director Yusof Haslam pointed out, “Our films have always been very minimum. And I think most producers are aware that sexual scenes, for example, are a definite no-no. I can’t think of any locally-made movies that could not be watched by all. Generally we could easily get the U rating” (“Rating system, but,” 1996). His comment highlighted the main reason that the Ministry of Information implemented the new rating system which is to further censor imported-foreign programs in terms of violence, sex, horror and counter-culture (VHSC). The Ministry accused private television stations of being too profit-minded and using “unhealthy” foreign programs – particularly programs from the United States – to boost ratings and attract advertising revenues.

Official Censorship Guidelines

The guidelines used by LPF members to vet the programs have many references, which include the Federal Constitution, Internal Security Act, Printing Presses and Publications Act, Seditious Act, Police Act, Penal code, Defamation Act, Official Secret

Act, Broadcasting Code of Ethics, National Ideology (*Rukunegara*), Islamic (*Syariah*) law and recommendations from various government organizations. Such overwhelming numbers of references make it extremely unlikely for any producers to track down all the original documents that stated the dos and don'ts in Malaysian television. To simplify matters, copies of "Guidelines for Local Film Producers" (*Garis Panduan Untuk Penerbit-Penerbit Film Tempatan*) were issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs' Publication Control, Film Censoring & Al Quran Text Division to the producers. The guidelines laid out the four censorship aspects for film and television in Malaysia. These aspects are (1) ideological and political aspects, (2) religious aspect, (3) social-cultural aspect, and (4) etiquette and moral Aspects (Appendix A).

Sex and Violence

Browsing through these guidelines, it is not difficult to find that part of LPF concerns is quite similar to other parts of the world, namely sex and violence. According to John Lent (1976), sex and violent content in motion pictures had always been an issue that the administration has had to face since colonial days. However, at one point in Malaysia's history, in the early 1970s to be exact, sex films were allowed to be shown in the cinema. Norila Md Zahari (1994) recorded this particular account in his thesis:

The Ministry of Home Affairs on 1 March 1972 approved the showing of pornographic films. This type of film was given an X rating and only people ages eighteen and above were allowed to view the x-rated films

. . . Some welcomed the introduction of such films, whereas others totally opposed the showing of adult films.

Anti-sex and anti-violent film campaigns began, with the young, religious, and political groups lobbying for a total ban on films portraying sex and violence. . . . A Parliamentary Select Committee on Controversial Films was formed in May 1972 to study the matter. The Committee's report recommended that adult and violent films be banned in Malaysia. In September of 1973, the Parliament approved the ban (p. 68-69).

However, according to Lent (1976), although sex films were shown from March 1972 to September 1973, the sexual themes had always been deleted by the censors, therefore it really made no difference whether sex films were banned or not. Regardless, the movement to censor sex and violent materials that started in the 1970s apparently has continued until today. However, certain instances have indicated that some LPF members have taken these guidelines too literally. One such example is the American film *Nine Months*. When the film was aired on RTM2, the lead character, portrayed by British actor Hugh Grant went to see his wife's gynaecologist who told him his baby would be a boy. Grant in his bashful manner asked if she had seen the baby's penis. Deemed as an element of sex, the word "penis" was taken out ("What, censorship?" 2000).

Sensitive Issue of Race

In addition to violence and sex, other parts of the guidelines are derived from concerns which have very much to do with Malaysia's recent past, in particular the communal riot of May 13, 1969. Promoting racial harmony has been part of nation building since Malaysia gained its independence in 1957. After the communal riot,

introducing any issue that might disturb that harmony has practically become a social taboo. Under such an environment, it is uncommon for a Malaysian local filmmaker or television producer to work on a project with the intention of disturbing the current stage of racial relations. As one of the participants stated:

Whatever programs that we do, we have to be alert to the political surrounding. . . . You know what I mean. That kind of thing. And then the thing is that we are always aware [of] not to hurt any body's feelings. For instance. . . we will not create a scene whereby if I put that on-air, if you. . . [are] a Chinese you watch the program you will feel slighted. Or being an Indian you would feel slighted. So likewise, the Chinese and the Tamil programs they would not do anything that would slight the Malay or the Muslim feelings. Even Sabah and Sarawak [are the] same thing. We always respect each other's sensitivity (personal communication, June 30, 2001).

The Malaysian government's fear of social disturbance due to television or motion picture portrayal of racial matters is not without reason. Malaysian motion picture critic Hamzah Abdul Majid bin Hussin (1997) in his memoir recalled that in 1954 a cinema manager in *Kota Baru* received calls threatening to burn down his theater for showing a Malay motion picture titled *Selamat Tinggal Kekasihku* (Goodbye my love). The movie was objectionable to some quarters within the multiracial society simply because it portrayed a love story between a Malay man and a Chinese woman. Fifty years

later such fear apparently still exists, at least within the Censorship Board. Such fear makes it difficult for practitioners who attempt to reflect the real life situations of multiracial Malaysia. One such example is Malaysia's first English-speaking feature film *Spinning Gasing*. Through telling the story of a five-person music group, consisting of two Malays, one Chinese, one Indian and one Eurasian (often categorized as other or *lain-lain* under the Malaysian context), the movie was able to tap into a cultural spectrum of different ethnic groups and gave a rich yet diverse portrayal of Malaysian multiracial society. However, the romantic-triangular relationship between a Chinese man and two women (one Malay and one Eurasian) seemed to fall under the prohibited category of racial issues for the Censorship Board, so the film was banned initially ("Give our cinema more air," 2002). After appeal, the ban was lifted but not before 25 cuts were made. Fortunately these cuts did not prevent the film from receiving recognition at several international film festivals.

Religious Concern and the Tahyul Policy

Last but not least is the concern of Islam. As Norila Md. Zahari (1994) rightly pointed out, the *Barisan Nasional* government in general, UMNO in particular, used the censorship guidelines as a vehicle to advocate for Malay values. In Malaysia, it is an accepted fact that Malay values are synonymous with Islamic values, therefore the religious aspect of constraints plays an important role in the censorship guidelines. Under the Mahathir Administration, due to his Islamization policy, Islam has become an increasingly important element for guiding the direction of censorship. One of the creative constraints that derived from these religion-influenced guidelines was the *tahyul* (superstitious beliefs) policy: A policy that clearly ruled out any possibility for Malaysian

filmmakers and television producers to produce projects that contain superstitious elements, such as ghosts, vampires, fairies or deities. Portraying these nonexistent subjects goes against Islamic teaching and might turn Muslims away from their belief. One of the earliest victims of such policy was probably Haji Zain Mahmood's *Fantasia* which was banned in 1991. Since then this policy has been faithfully exercised by LPF. Many Malay filmmakers and television producers have voiced their objection against such policy; but since the non-Malay practitioners were equally concerned to avoid being labeled as anti-Islamic they tended to stay silent about such matters. Siri Bintang, a columnist for the Malaysian leading English newspaper *The Star* as well as an independent television producer, is such a voice and has on several occasions addressed this concern through her column *Freeze Frame*. She pointed out that a lot Malay classic cinema produced in the 1950s and 1960s has the elements of *tahyul*, though these classic movies "have yet to be proved that they have made deviants out of Muslims ("Classics not to be missed," 1998). Instead she urged, "The censorship board should relax its *tahyul* policy and allow movies with such an element to be produced today, be it a modern or period setting. After all, fairy tales are very effective in teaching children human values" (we allow them to read fairy tale books, don't we?).

Separation of Content and Artistic Values

It is important to note that these guidelines that LPF uses to assess movies and television programs focus only on the content of the product. As the Chairman of the Committee of Appeal, Prof Abu Bakar Hamid pointed out, "The issue of artistic values does not arise as far as the board is concerned; our main task is to sift negative elements from the film" ("Let's talk," 1995). Under such a mode of operation, the decisions made

by the censor were based on literal understanding of the product and not on the deeper comprehension of the story. Instead of looking at a program holistically and deciding whether the nude or violent scenes were justifiable artistically, the censors took them out simply because they contain such elements. On the issue of unruly piracy in Malaysia, one viewer put the blame partly on censorship for not looking at a film's "overall message." Using *Saving Private Ryan*, which was banned in Malaysia, as an example he stated:

Saving Private Ryan was a good portrayal of World War II especially the Allied Forces' invasion. The violent scenes of the landings on the beaches of France should serve as a reminder of the horrors of war and the courage of naïve and young soldiers ("Why film and music piracy," 2000).

The viewer also pointed out if the board found a film really objectionable why not place it under the 18 category. The Censorship Board's approach of looking at a movie or television program without considering its artistic values has also prompted some commentators in the *New Straits Times* to question the censors' "taste" and point out:

What is more important, our Censorship Board should also comprise people who have a considerable amount of taste. In this case, "safeguarding" the people's interest should also mean getting quality entertainment and stopping "badly-made" and bad films from being shown to the public rather than saving the public from themselves ("Rating system, but," 1996).

Other than the issue of separating content from artistic values raised by a certain quarter of society, LPF's estranged relationship with the industry is also important to look at for better understanding of the constraints placed on Malaysian television drama.

Interactions Among Board of Censorship, Industry and Government

Most television producers and filmmakers were unaware of the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, a document supposedly important to all of them. In 1995, when called upon by Prof Abu Bakar Hamid to review the guidelines, acclaimed television producer and film director Shuhaimi Baba openly responded, "I understand there is supposed to be some new guidelines but ironically, many of us are not even aware of the old ones" ("Let's talk," 1995). The situation apparently has not improved. The majority of the participants whom the researcher has interviewed were either unaware of or unconcerned about the document. Rather they depend on a different kind of guideline for themselves: their experience within the society in general, with the authority in particular. As one producer aptly pointed out:

In the sense. . . Malaysia has the Censorship Board [to tell you] your story-line, your visual and things like [that] have to fall into certain constraints or guidelines . . . I would say [that a] simple [way of] understanding. . . these constraints is [to refer to] the morality. As long as you find that what you do is within the tolerance [level] of our Malaysian society I think that is what the Censorship Board is all about. Anything that you do in the sense of the dressing, in terms of the kind of language, in the sense of storyline, the

culture and things like that. As long as you know that it is within our Malaysian tolerance level, I think you should be able to go through. That is the easy guideline for you to use. That is what we have been using in our company for our directors and scriptwriters. You know as long as--- sometimes the story, if you want to put in a lot of conflicts or whatsoever to make the story good, we always ask ourselves is it within the tolerance level of our society? If it is then I, as a producer, would go out to explain to the Censorship Board you see. But if it is not then we must well forget it. You have to, you know (personal communication, July 3, 2001).

The television producers and filmmakers' "experience" approach in dealing with LPF is understandable, for they know that, in fact, the censors are not blind to the dos and don'ts laid out in the guidelines provided. The guidelines are to inform the practitioners where the general boundaries are, which many believe they already know. One interviewee pointed out there are general principles and smaller principles. The general principles are those laid out in the guidelines, namely sex, violence, horror, racial issue, and religious matters. They are basically about being thoughtful towards the feelings of others. For most television practitioners grasping these general principles is not a problem.

While it is relatively easy to comprehend the general principles, the smaller principles are much more elusive and many television practitioners have been caught off

guard by them. These smaller principles are usually unwritten rules, rules that the censors have learned through years of experience as civil servants. As these former civil servants used to work for a variety of government agencies, their concerns as censors tend to be different from one another, which makes it even harder for the television practitioner to avoid violating their unwritten rules. While many of these unwritten rules are stored in the minds of the censors or those unfortunate television producers who have unknowingly violated them, it is clear that these smaller principles have an underlying theme, that of being respectful of authority.

Within the context of an authoritarian society, such a discovery is not surprising. However, the Censorship Board has appeared to be so consumed with this notion of respect for the authority that it has implemented some rather rigid constraints. For instance, to protect the image of the Police Department, policemen cannot be shown being shot, killed or corrupted on local television (“Funny man director,” 2000). Another example of a smaller principle is that “No Muslim can assume any role but that of a Muslim” (“Board’s crippling blow,” 1995), a ruling that was part of the reasons that *Amok* was banned in 1995. The film’s lead actress, who was a Muslim, played the role of an American Peace Corp worker who was not. However, as the terms are dictated by the Censorship Board, the practitioners have to adapt and learn the smaller principles. The problem is they are sometimes rather unclear even to veteran filmmakers and television producers. Referring to the ban of *Amok*, veteran director Othman Hafsham pointed out:

He [*Amok*’s director Adman Salleh] is one director who would adhere to the guidelines. But with the guidelines getting obscure, you don’t know when you’ll be caught. At

the rate they are going, no matter how careful we are, we don't know how they are going to read the interpretation of the movie.

Another director, Shuhaimi Baba, referred to her own experience and pointed out

When our film, *Ringgit Kasorrga*, was approved, we all thought, yes, we know what is allowed. We thought we had a fairly clear picture to what the censors would object. Then this happens to *Amok* and we are back to square one. We don't know, now, whether what we've done in our last movie will be approved the next time ("Ban on *Amok*," 1995).

To prevent being rejected by the censors after everything has been shot and edited, most filmmakers now send their scripts to National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS, *Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia*) while television producers send theirs to the respective television networks for approval before sending them to LPF. This results in an additional layer of censorship for the practitioners (which will be discussed in chapter five). In order to increase the chances of safe passage through the Censorship Board, so that their efforts can be exhibited to the public, these practitioners have no choice but to endure the process of dual censorship. Although the additional step increases the chances of getting a Clean Approval (*LB*) verdict, such outcome is not guaranteed. The script of *Fantasia* was approved by FINAS ("Of red tape," 1991) before the filmmaker began production, but the film was still banned by the censors.

In general, the relationship between the board and the filmmakers is top-down: the filmmaker needs the board to approve his/her project in order for it to be screened in the theaters or go on the air and thus recoup their investment; the censors on the other hand, are merely performing their job as civil servants. They are not answerable to the filmmakers but to the Ministry of Home Affairs in particular and the government in general. As stated in the Censorship Board document, “They had to give their full attention to their work and, at all costs, further the objective of the government” (as cited in *Norila*, 1994). Most of these censors do not have experience in film or television production, deemed unnecessary since their function is not to appreciate the artistic values of the products but to “protect the ‘public, country and Government’ from unhealthy elements be they religious, social, cultural, etc” (“Board’s crippling blow,” 1995). Just as the Chairman of the Appeal Committee, Abu Baka Hamid, pointed out, “It is not the duty of the Board to protect the aesthetics of a film” (“Board’s crippling blow,” 1995).

For most of the filmmakers and television producers, these censors are faceless; their only interaction with the censors is usually through a letter that notifies them of the result for their latest submission. Such “distant” relationship is probably intentional to prevent any wrongdoing on the part of the practitioners as well as the censors. Since most of the censors have no industry-related experience in film or television, it is probably easier for the authority to maintain the “faceless” feature of the ultimate protector of Malaysia’s “public, country and Government.” Instead these former senior civil servants bring in their expertise from various ministries, such as Education, Defense, Home Affairs, Information, and Foreign Affairs, to decide the creative constraints of television

programs and motion pictures. Such combination of censors probably partly explains the reason the board is constantly making inconsistent decisions. In addition, as programs are vetted by different panels, the inconsistency among panels is inevitable. As Fatiman Abu Bakar observed:

. . . The Board members do operate from their own window of reference (experience), depending on their own sense of judgment of what they should censor and what to pass. For the guidelines can merely be what they are – guidelines – and it is left to whoever is on the panel at any sitting to judge.

One panel can, therefore, make ‘more liberal’ judgments as opposed to another panel, hence the frequent complaints that movies ‘banned’ for screening for one TV station have been screened by the other station” (“Of red tape,” 1991).

For television producers and filmmakers, their profession is “a high-risk business” (“Board asked to iron,” 1994), but the censors merely follow a daily routine. Within the bureaucratic environment of the Censorship Board, it is not surprising that the conservative view tends to outweigh the liberal in the decision-making process. One former censor recalled an incident when she approved a television program containing some sexual elements which he deemed a “small matter” but the panel head later banned the program after reviewing it. While the former might disagree with the latter’s

decision, there was really no incentive for him to argue on behalf of the program's owner and go against his immediate supervisor.

While the Censorship Board could afford to disregard calls for consistency and leniency in censorship from local media practitioners, it could not ignore the requests coming from the public sector, especially demands made by high-ranking officials from different ministries or agencies. Although these officials do not necessarily have the authority to direct LPF, their requests are taken very seriously by the Board.

Knowing the hierarchical relationship of the government, Censorship Board and practitioners is important, for it allows one to have a comprehensive understanding of the many decisions made by the authority and accepted by the practitioners. For most of the practitioners there is no option other than to accept the verdict of the Censorship Board. The same can be said of the Censorship Board. Although it is supposedly the authority that decides what can or cannot be shown within the boundaries of Malaysia, its autonomy is minimal. Housed under the Ministry of Home Affairs, however, its obligation extends to other ministries as well. The Ministry that concerns the Censorship Board the most is the Ministry of Information. However, others, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM, *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*) under the Prime Minister's Department, also play important roles in deciding the dos and don'ts of the Malaysian television and motion picture industry.

Ministry of Information (*Kementerian Penerangan*)

In addition to the Censorship Board, the Ministry of Information is another authority with which filmmakers and television producers must reckon. The function of

the Ministry of Information is to “create an informed Malaysian society on the Government’s philosophy, policies and programs in an effort to enhance understanding and participation in Government activities” (*Information Malaysia 2000, 2002*, p. 704). In short, the Ministry utilizes all means of communication from interpersonal to mass media for Government propaganda. However, the ministry does not have authority over some of the media organizations. For instance, licenses for local newspapers, which are renewable yearly, are issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Also, licenses for private (TV-*Tiga* and NTV7) and satellite (ASTRO) television stations are issued by the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia, which is also in charge of all matters related to the Internet. On its own the Ministry of Information is only able to exercise control over the filmmakers and television producers through two of its agencies, National Film Development Corporation (FINAS, *Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia*) and Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). The FINAS is in charge of issuing licenses for production houses (one of the documents required for supplying programs to RTM) as well as providing financial support for filmmakers, while RTM is the government-owned television station and major commissioner for locally produced programs. As such, the Ministry has no legal authority over the private stations (TV3 and NTV7) or their programs’ suppliers. However, by working closely with the Censorship Board, namely by dictating the dos and don’ts of locally produced as well as foreign-imported programs, the Ministry of Information is able to extend its influence over the whole television industry, including the private television stations and their suppliers.

Departments and Agencies under the Ministry of Information

Under the Ministry of Information, there are six departments and agencies each of which plays an important role in distributing information or propaganda for the Malaysian government at all levels within the country. These organizations are: (1) Department of Information Service, (2) National News Agency (BERNAMA), (3) National Film Department, (4) National Film Development Corporation (FINAS), (5) Tun Abdul Razak Broadcasting Institute, and (6) Department of Broadcasting.

The Department of Information Service is the organization that on behalf interacts of the Government with the general public through the means of interpersonal communication. Since its inception in 1945 under the colonial government, it has carried out “information campaigns” for psychological warfare, anti-Communism, anti-AIDS, and lately Vision 2020 (*Information Malaysia 2000, 2002*, p. 705). The National News Agency (BERNAMA), on the other hand, serves as the Malaysian news agency providing news coverage from the viewpoint of Malaysian government. Most news of or statements by high-ranking officials are disseminated through this organization to media organizations within and outside Malaysia.

The Ministry of Information also uses motion pictures to inform the general public. The National Film Department (*Filem Negara Malaysia*) makes documentaries and trailers to “strengthen the hearts and minds as well as to get the active participation of all towards the establishment of a progressive, just and united nation” (*Information Malaysia 2000, 2002*, p. 707). National Film Development Corporation (FINAS), on the other hand, is in charge of nurturing, promoting and monitoring the local motion picture industry in three aspects: production, distribution and exhibition. FINAS also exerts its

influence on the industry by providing a three-year film diploma program to train the next generation of filmmakers. As a regulatory body for the motion picture industry, FINAS is in charge of issuing licenses to film and video (including television) producers, distributors and exhibitors. Television producers who do not have a Production of Video (PV) category, are unable to provide programs for local television networks. However, it is generally understood that only RTM is strictly following such ruling. As a Government-owned television network, RTM has to closely follow the ruling issued by the Government. As there are no consequences for not requesting the production houses to present their PV license upon submitting programs, such ruling is simply ignored by the private television networks. FINAS after all could only take action against the licensed production houses but not against the television networks.

The Department of Broadcasting is the largest organization under the charge of the Ministry of Information. The Department generally known by Malaysians as RTM disseminates information through radio and television. There are a total of 30 radio stations operating under the brand name of Radio Malaysia: 22 two local or regional stations, seven national ones and one international radio broadcasting service. There are two Government television channels: TV1, which broadcasts more than 90 percents of its programs in *Bahasa Malaysia*, and TV2, which broadcasts a combination of *Bahasa Malaysia*, Chinese, English and Tamil programs. Often cited by the Ministry of Information as a benchmark for the private television networks to aspire to in terms of the kind of programs it provides, RTM strictly follows the guidelines issued by the Censorship Board and instructions (or memorandums) circulated within the Ministry. To

provide training for broadcasting professionals, the Tun Abdul Razak Broadcasting Institute, generally known as IPTAR, was established in 1972.

Ministry of Information and Its Strategies for Control

The function of the Ministry of Information is quite clear. It is to disseminate information or opinions favoring the Government through the means of interpersonal and mass media. The resources that the Ministry controls, in particular news agencies, film, radio and television, allow it to generate contents in the form of news, documentaries and drama programs that reach the masses through various mass media. From 1963 to mid-1984, the Ministry controlled the only television network in the nation. The Ministry monopolized the radio services till the early 1990s. As for the motion picture industry, the Government began its heavy involvement in the early 1970s and has dominated the scene ever since. During this period, the only alternative electronic media available to Malaysian audience was paid wire speaker service provided by Rediffusion, with service limited to populations residing in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang (McDaniel, 1994, p. 139-147). However, the landscape started to change drastically in the mid-1980s and more so in the 1990s. The first private television network, TV-*Tiga*, launched in June 1984, started as an alternative against what was offered by RTM. It soon became the most-watched television channel in the country. In early 1990, a private radio station, named Best 104, was launched by a royal family member from the state of Johore, and quickly gained popularity. The power of disseminating ideas through radio, television and film is no longer the sole right of the Ministry of Information.

To compete in the new landscape, which does not favor RTM as it no longer monopolizes the bandwidth, the Parliament controlled, by the *Barisan Nasional*

Government, passed the Broadcasting Act 1988 to give the Minister of Information the power to control privately owned electronic media organizations. Therefore if these private owners do not comply with the Ministry's demand, their broadcasting licenses could be revoked. At the same time, guidelines were recommended by the ministry and executed by the Censorship Board to ensure that programs shown in these electronic media met its requirements.

As these private media organizations – owned by affiliates closely linked to the “people higher up” – were unable to generate the majority of their content, imported programs, especially those from the United States, were heavily relied upon. In 1985, before the launch of TV-*Tiga*, Mohamed Tawifik Ismail, the person responsible for setting up the network, stated that they were looking at “70 percent foreign content and 30 percent local” (Robinson, 1984). The private media, in particular TV-*Tiga*, depending heavily upon foreign programming, stirred up concern from the conservative quarter of the society. Three months after TV-*Tiga* was launched, the then Secretary-General of the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (*ABIM*) pointed out:

There's kissing and hugging in *Dynasty*. The women in *Mike Hammer* wear dresses with plunging necklines that show their cleavage. Their skirts or shorts reveal their buttocks. Such scenes are dangerous to morals and detrimental to Islam (“I have found,” 1984).

Regardless of the criticism, using imported programs had positioned TV-*Tiga* as a fierce competitor of RTM. To level the competition and boost ratings, the government channels, particularly TV2, also started to air foreign programs. As a result of the competition

between RTM and TV-*Tiga*, in early 1991 both television networks were further criticized by the Malay community for screening “a lot of foreign production that depict sex and violence” (“KL taking steps,” 1991). However, unlike the complaint in 1984, to which the Ministry of Information did not respond, the *Barisan Nasional* Government political leaders began a campaign against sex and violence on television. This happened because earlier in the year the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had voiced the same concern and stated, “There were too many shows with violence and sex scenes on television.” Therefore, he urged that such shows be replaced by “programs with family or development themes” (“More family – oriented shows,” 1991). A month later, in February 1991, Information Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Fauzi Abdul Rahman, who was also a Member of Parliament, claimed that the moral values of Malaysians had gone up. He echoed the Prime Minister, stating,

In the past, viewing women clad in mini skirts on TV was a normal thing. But now such scenes are no longer acceptable by Malaysian society

. . . .

Feedback from community leaders, State Assemblymen and members of the public reveal that they want the TV to play a more constructive and positive role in promoting knowledge and moral values.

This is in line with the Government’s aim of fostering a caring society. There is no room for violence

and sex in a caring society and TV programs depicting such scenes are unacceptable (“Violence, sex on TV,” 1991).

In April, the Ministry of Information stated that it was “taking steps to reduce television shows that portray excess violence and sex on all channels, including TV3” (“Bid to cut violent shows,” 1991). In May 1991, the issue apparently was escalated as the Ministry of Information received a directive from the Cabinet to review the guidelines for radio and television, so “to ensure that broadcasting contents were imbued with good moral and family values without compromising on its commercial and entertainment values.” Talking to reporters in regard to the directive, the Information Minister pointed out the “review was imminent because broadcasting eschewed influence and, properly harnessed, could help achieve the objective of nation building pertinent to the 2020 Vision” (“Utilizing radio, TV for,” 1991). The *New Straits Times* stated the directive to the Ministry as follows,

- The LPF will come out with a guideline defining or interpreting what constitutes sex and violence in television programs – an issue currently debated by many viewers concerned with its proliferation;
- The overall role the Information Ministry, its departments and agencies can assume to fulfill the vision;
- Ensure that local content, which must be 80 percent of network programs by 2000, is produced with quality in mind; and,

- Programs that emphasize the family unit will be featured more prominently (“Utilizing radio, TV for,” 1991).

This directive was significant for it dictated the trend in the Malaysian broadcasting industry in years to come, which on the one hand were censored or banned foreign programs using the VHSC guidelines through the Censorship Board, while on the other it hand promoted local production via the Ministry of Information.

The VHSC Guidelines

In January, 1992, to further cut down on sex and violent content on the small screen, the Ministry of Information announced a new set of guidelines on television and cinema censorship to be enforced starting on February 22 of that year. The guidelines, commonly known as VHS – acronym for violent, horror and sex, clearly outlined the elements deemed offensive by the authority. Television programs with these elements would either be banned or heavily censored (“Air time cut,” 1992). The first casualty under these new rulings was the Hong Kong television series. One week before the actual implementation of VHS guidelines, the Minister of Information announced government channel TV 2 and private channel TV3 had already cut from four to five hours a week the airtime for the Hong Kong television series. The Minister claimed that they “contain scenes depicting violence and sex which the Government feels that, if left unchecked, would be a bad influence on the youths” (“Air time cut,” 1992).

Three years after the VHS guidelines were introduced, in February 1995, a new acronym C (for counter-culture) was added to the guidelines. This new addition was meant to ensure that “unsuitable Western culture like the use of four-letter words which

are rampant in Western movies could be checked” (“TV stations to get detailed guide,” 1995). However, the term “counter-culture,” very often used by the authorities to refer to sub-cultures such as heavy metal, punk, and homosexuality, was problematic for some practitioners. As one interviewee described his view of VHSC in general and counter-culture in particular,

Counter-culture can mean anything. Anything you don’t like. You [cannot] show young people whether it is drug or lifestyle which is not approved by the authority or whole other things [that] they reject . . . That is part of the problem. The guidelines were not that specific. . . They [are] deliberately vague, so [that it is] open to all sorts of interpretation [and] abuse (personal communication, June 28, 2001).

Advocate for 80 percent Local Content in 2000

When the Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat introduced the VHS ruling, he promised that the guidelines would be “very stringent” to prevent Malaysia from becoming “a violence-prone society” (“New censorship guidelines,” 1992). The consistent charges that violent and sex-related television would turn a society violent or its audience into people with corrupted values was a voice that echoed throughout the whole of the 1990s and even today such understanding still prevails within the *Barisan Nasional* Government, particularly in the Ministry of Information. This assumption that media could directly influence audiences pushed the Ministry of Information into constant at warfare with television programs and motion pictures imported from different

parts of the world, particularly Hong Kong, India and the United States. To solve this problem, the Government campaigned against foreign programs claiming that they contained too many VHSC elements, while it sought to use locally produced programs to replace foreign programs on the local television networks.

The directive issued by the Cabinet to the Ministry of Information in May 1991, demanding that 80 percent of airtime on national networks – government or private – go to locally produced programs by the year 2000 emerged as an important part of the Ministry's strategy to control what the public should hear or see. By placing more emphasis on locally produced programs, it gave the Ministry more control over the contents that eventually were shown on national television. Unlike dealing with foreign-imported programs, with options limited to either ban or cut, the Ministry had more than one way to ensure that local television producers adhered to the stipulations of authority and produced "family dramas" as advocated by the Prime Minister ("Mahathir urges TV," 1991). The policy of 80 percent local content by year 2000 worked well for the Ministry of Information in another way. In the late-1980s, going with the trend of privatization advocated by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the Ministry had already been pushing for the Government channels, TV1 and TV2, to commission more projects to local production houses. In fact, a month before the policy was announced, statistics show that 80 percent of TV 1, 60 percent of TV 2 and 50 percent of TV-*Tiga* movie and television drama programs were locally produced ("KL taking steps," 1991). With resources supported by the government and championed for local content, the Government channels were put in a more favorable position in competing against the private network.

As a result of the government's policy promoting local production, which the authority deemed as having a better grip of the nation's sensitivities and able to support the government's efforts toward Vision 2020, the Malaysian drama television practitioners enjoyed a boom period from 1991 till 1997. During the boom, television networks acquired more programs from local production houses with bigger budgets. However, stringent constraints from the censorship board with reference from the Ministry of Information continued. These constraints put the local practitioners in a dilemma, on one hand there were ample opportunities for projects, on the other there was limited room for creativity. However, such dilemma was not recognized by the authority. The Parliamentary Secretary of Information Ministry Fauzi Abdul Rahman rationalized the constraints and pointed out, "It all depends on how you look at it. If you can work within the boundary, then there will be abundant space for creativity to be explored." In the same interview, when the Parliamentary Secretary asked whether the ministry would get input from academicians, intellectuals and film critics for the guidelines, he responded, "At present the situation did not warrant it" ("Ministry: Rules won't stop," 1995). The model for generating censorship guidelines continued to be top-down from people with little understanding of the media who at the same time expected the local practitioners to compete against foreign programs within those constraints.

Broadcasting Code of Ethics

In addition to the VHSC guidelines for television programs and motion pictures executed through the censorship board, the Ministry of Information also from time to time implemented other guidelines for media practitioners. In May 1992, the ministry announced that male artists with long hair or wearing earrings, as well as artists (both

male and female) with sleeveless shirts and sexy outfits, would be banned on all television networks (“TV dress code,” 1992). Parliamentary-general of the ministry Fauzi Abdul Rahman reasoned that, “We want to weed out completely all elements which are alien to Malaysian values.” “Elements alien to Malaysian values” evidently referred to “negative Western values” to which he referred earlier in his speech (“Government ‘No’ to,” 1992). The ban initially was targeted at local rock artists, who were deemed to “ape Western fashion” (Rationale behind short-hair,” 1992), but later applied to all artists. Such ban prompted resistance from two local rock bands, Search and Wings. The artists openly refused the call from the Ministry to cut their hair. As a result, their television shows and concerts throughout Peninsular Malaysia were canceled (“Search, Wings members to cut hair on TV,” 1992). To prevent a further slide in popularity, the bands gave in to the Ministry’s demand and through a third party requested the minister be the one to cut their hair. Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat agreed to personally cut the hair and stated “I will be happy to have the honor of cutting their hair” (“Members of rock groups,” 1992). The no-long-hair ruling was later incorporated into the Broadcasting Code of Ethics, which stated what would be banned on the small screen:

- Close-ups of men and women making love
- Homosexual sex
- Erotic sounds during the sexual act
- Extreme cruelty, violence and force
- Voices and backdrop visuals in a language other than Malay at functions attended by government officials

- Artists with dyed hair; men with hair that falls below the shoulders
- Men in clothes that expose the area between navel and knees; women in dresses that show parts of the body other than wrists, ankles and head (“Safe from sex,” 1995).

While the problems of the rock groups Search and Wings were easily solved by simply having the minister cut their hair, others were not that simple. In May 1995, the ministry banned all film and drama television programs produced by Malay director Nasir Jani who “was involved in a series of scuffles with press photographers” and had “unkempt hair and clothing” (“KL bans controversial,” 1995) that could “tarnish the image of the local movie industry.” It appeared that the concerns of the Ministry of Information were more than merely on screen but also the off screen behavior of the artists and practitioners.

Influences from Other Government Agencies

Other than the Censorship Board and Ministry of Information, there are also specific concerns raised by government agencies over the content shown through television programs and motion pictures. Two government agencies were particularly important and active in this regard: The Department of Islamic Development and the Police Department. The following section outlines their specific concerns.

The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM)

The Department of Islamic Development, commonly known by practitioners as JAKIM (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*), is an agency directly under the charge of

the Prime Minister's Office. All Islamic religious programs aired on television are either produced or approved by this organization. Its role within the context of the drama television and motion picture making process, however, is to ensure that Islamic teaching is interpreted and presented correctly by the creators. Any programs that have elements even remotely related to the religion of Islam, need to be approved by the department. Although there is no formal requirement for filmmakers or producers to send their product to JAKIM, the common understanding among them is that any productions pertaining to Islamic religious matters would be sent to JAKIM by the Censorship Board. Knowing that their project would eventually be vetted by JAKIM, many practitioners just sent their script for department approval before commencing production. This additional process tends to save the filmmakers and television producers much pain in the later stages of production, as it is much more economical to fix a script than to reedit a finished product. One of the department's concerns apparently coincides with the *Tahyul* (superstitious belief) policy. When filmmaker Abdul Razak sent his script titled *Mystic (Mistik)* for JAKIM approval, he was told to cut one scene that "showed a woman rising from the dead." Taking the advice from JAKIM, when the film was completed and sent for the censorship board, it "passed with flying colors" ("The horror of *Mistik*," 2003).

The Police Department

For practitioners who sought to produce programs containing the elements of law and order, the Police Department is an agency that cannot be avoided. Scripts need to be sent for department approval as well as requests for logistic support. The department is particularly concerned about its public image. For that reason, producers are not allowed to portray police officers as undisciplined, inefficient, or corrupt. One producer pointed

out that because of this mentality, whenever the department provides logistic support for a scene such as raiding a crime organization, at the end of the scene the police must return triumphantly with all the criminals apprehended, to show the effectiveness of the police force and the message of “crime does not paid.” When a script was approved and logistic support provided (for a fee, of course), a police officer would be sent to the location to serve as a consultant to ensure accurate portrayal of the police action. Such practice has made local police drama too predictable for the creators as well as the audience. To avoid compromising the dramatic element because of constraints from the police department, many drama producers switch from police stories to private detective story, which have all the elements for fighting crime while at the same time allowing portrayal of its characters with more colorful traits. Although television producers are not required to submit scripts for police department approval, knowing that the latter is concerned for its public image, (which was less than desirable due to complaints from the general public of department inefficiency and corruption) practitioners either give in and work closely with the department or give up on stories that are police related. One producer recalled that after his detective drama was shown on the private television channel without first going through the police department, he was served with a warning letter for not depicting law enforcement officer in a rightful manner.

Other Considerations

JAKIM and the Police Department are two government agencies outside the Ministry of Information and the Censorship Board that practitioners often cite as intervening in drama production. Sometimes, however, a decision is made by the Censorship Board on behalf of another government agency. On March 15, 2001, a

viewer questioned private television network NTV7's last-minute decision to cancel the airing of the Indonesian film *Tjoet Nja Dhien*, a historical film that "depicts the struggle of gallant Muslim Acehnese against the colonialist Dutch." The network replied:

The station was advised by the Censorship Board not to screen the movie at the present. The main reasons are: firstly, the clashes in Aceh where the Acehnese are fighting for independence from Indonesia. In the movie, the story is about independent fighters of Aceh fighting against the Dutch. The second reason is the trial of the Al-Ma'unah cult group.

The board was concerned over the sentiments, especially religious groups, that may arise from the screening of the movie.

As a TV station, we are socially responsible towards the well-being of society. Hopefully, we will be able to air the movie at a more suitable time ("Why was '*Tjoet Nja Dhien*' cancelled?" 2001).

The concern of the board was that showing the film might appear to be insensitive to the Indonesian government's difficulty at the time. A producer also recalled his banned project due to Censorship Board's concern over foreign affairs with a neighboring country:

In that episode, there was a burglary that took place in a house. The burglars spoke [*Bahasa Malaysia*] with an

Indonesian accent. But at the end of the episode, [it was revealed that] they are not Indonesian; they are Malaysian burglars [who] try to pretend that they are Indonesian.

They banned it (personal communication, July 1, 2001).

When asked on what grounds the Censorship Board banned the episode, the producer responded, “Because they don’t want to have any problem with Indonesians.”

However, the government concerns over maintaining good relationships with foreign countries appear to be limited to Asia countries in general and ASEAN nations in particular. When matters involve Western nations such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, maintaining a good foreign relationship does not seem to be a major issue. The Malaysian government’s constant challenge to Western nations in the foreign affairs arena might be the reason for such a double standard.

The “Power” of Pressure Groups

While the power of the Ministry of Information with aid from the Censorship Board is overwhelming in deciding the dos and don’ts on national television, there were times it had to give in to pressures outside its control. Such incidents, although uncommon, do exist and indicate that the authority’s decisions do have to take into account reactions coming from certain quarters of the society. Looking at two cases – the Chinese television serial *Judge Pao* controversy in 1995 and the Bollywood film controversy in 2001 – might aid in understanding the other factors that shaped the contour of the Malaysian television landscape.

The Judge Pao Controversy, 1995

In October 1995, six months after the *Barisan Nasional* government won a landslide victory in the general election partly because Chinese voters swung their support from the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) to the ruling coalition party Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Ministry of Information announced that the popular Chinese drama serial *Judge Pao* was banned on national television. The decision shocked the Chinese community. Before the program was bought by Malaysian subscription television station MetroVision, which served the population in the Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley areas, the Taiwanese-produced serial had already gained popularity in many parts of Asia including South Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia. Therefore when the drama was scheduled to be aired in October, with 33 episodes already passed by the Censorship Board with minimal cuts, the public anticipation was high. With the ministry's decision to axe the program at the last minute, many questioned the ruling. Speculation rose that the ministry's move was to stop the private television channel from "stealing viewers away from government-owned TV2's Chinese language serial *Twin Happiness* being aired currently" ("Ban on costume drama," 1995). The minister denied the accusation, stating that, "I am not bothered whether RTM, TV3 or MetroVision makes money. The reason has nothing to do with financial consideration" ("Ban on *Justice Bao*," 1995). Instead the ministry's secretary-general Zawawi Mahmuiddin argued that it was government policy, in particular the Broadcasting Act 1988, allowing no foreign-made costume dramas on television, which prompted the ministry to ban the program. This claim, however, was countered by opposition leader Lim Kit Siang who pointed out that, "Other costume dramas, such as

Shakespeare's plays, Japanese serials and Middle Eastern dramas, had been screened before" ("Reasons for ban'," 1995). Lim's statement was supported by the English newspaper *The Star*, which listed some of the costume dramas that were on TV2, TV-Tiga, and MetroVision that same year. Another English newspaper, *Sunday Mail*, published a sarcastic article by columnist Loo Si Fer:

I don't relish the thought that after contending with the Sex, Violence, Horror, Counter Culture ruling, we've got to add another C to it for Costumes.

Maybe a little luck, we'll make it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the most controlled TV programming guide in the world topped with the longest acronym – right up there next to our tallest flagpole and our biggest *ketupat* [rice cooked in container made of woven coconut leaves].

....

And no matter how much the Ministry deny the fact that they inadvertently look as if they have been penalizing Chinese costume dramas, (I swear I saw Samson or Hercules running around in a Roman toga on TV just a week ago, which goes to show that 'some' of them got in home free) it will take a lot more to prove to the viewing public that they haven't been doing exactly that ("A lack of Justice (Pao)," 1995).

In the midst of this controversy, the Censorship Board announced that another Chinese drama, *Fatherland*, was banned on the grounds that, “It is a costume drama and cannot be screened” (“Another costume drama banned,” 1995). While it seemed that the popular Chinese drama serial was likely to be banned for good in spite of all the complaints from the public, MCA president Ling Liong Sik, who was also a member of the Cabinet, announced that he “would meet with Information Ministry officials and would bring up the matter at the next Cabinet meeting.” When asked for his response on Ling’s statement, the Information Minister said, “There was no need to further discuss the issue” (“Mohamed – Don’t turn,” 1995). It appeared that Ling did bring up the issue a few days later at the Cabinet meeting and the Information Minister was directed by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to review the Broadcasting Act 1988, particularly the existing regulations on costume dramas, and upon the completion of the revision of the regulation, the Chinese costume drama would be allowed to be aired. In his meeting with reporters on this particular, the minister stated he had briefed the prime minister that the existing regulations in the Broadcasting Act 1988 pertaining to costume dramas on television were now no longer suitable as they were formulated during the Communist insurgency. He stated:

I explained to Dr. Mahathir the problems which have arisen owing to the ‘outdatedness’ of certain provisions in the Act which need to be reviewed.

. . . .

The Prime Minister said it was difficult to maintain these policies in present times and as such, a review was the only answer.

Dr. Mahathir asked me to study these regulations which include the powers vested to the Censorship Board and the Broadcast Code of Ethics to allow the screening of all programs which used costume dramas (“Dr M orders,” 1995).

The ban of the drama serial was lifted and it was shown on MetroVision in November 1995.

Bollywood Film Controversy, 2001

In February 2001, the Conference of Muftis, a national body of Muslim clerics, urged the government to cut the number of hours for Bollywood movies on national television. The spokesman of the council, Seri Harussan Zakaria, claimed that the values of the movies were unhealthy and were influencing youths. The call from the organization drew support from other Muslim groups. The Muslim Consumers’ Association of Malaysia (PPIM) and Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) joined the action and stated that the same measures should also be taken against other programs containing negative elements (“Gauging opinions on,” 2001). However, the call was met with cold response from Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who stated, “The call by the Conference of Muftis to reduce TV airtime for Bollywood (Hindustani) movies did not hold water” (“Film aired over TV,” 2001). Eventually, Information Minister Khalil Yaakob announced there would be no ban on Bollywood

films on television and pointed out that, “Negative influences on viewers were not solely caused by Bollywood films but it could also be seen in films from Western countries, Hong Kong and Japan (“No ban on Bollywood,” 2001). However, to pacify the protesters, the Ministry said that it had announced a more stringent censorship of the negative influences.

Pressure Groups, Political Power and Censorship

While it is accurate to say that the Ministry of Information and the Censorship Board play the dominant roles in shaping what is to be (or not to be) shown on Malaysian television channels, with the “right” support the public are still able to have a say in the matter. The “right” support in this sense refers to politicians within the *Barisan Nasional* coalition government. Observers have pointed out that the best way to get a response out of the television networks or the authorities is to have the members of Parliament to voice the concerns. However, the concerns that would be taken seriously are those that come from politicians who are affiliated with the member parties of the coalition government. As UMNO, MCA, and MIC are the biggest political parties that represent the respective ethnic communities within the coalition, the concerns from their politicians are usually carefully dealt with. This was particularly true in the case of the *Judge Pao* controversy.

There were several political reasons that the ban on the Chinese television drama serial was eventually lifted. First, MCA president Ling Liong Sik, a member of Parliament and the cabinet who became involve in this matter and acted on behalf of the Chinese community, certainly is a voice that the authorities cannot overlook. Secondly, the controversy over *Judge Pao* occurred about six months after the *Barisan Nasional* won its general election in which the support of the Chinese community was the

determining factor. At that juncture, banning a television drama program demanded by the Chinese community appeared to be ungrateful on the part of the ruling coalition. Thirdly, the ban on the program had made the Chinese community suspicious of the Information Minister's intention and raised speculation that the ban might be motivated by racial considerations. Such concern had prompted the Information Minister to deny the allegation and state that the *Judge Pao* controversy was blown out of proportion to become a racial issue ("Dr M orders," 1995). However, the crucial factor that led to lifting the ban was probably Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's judgment of the controversy. Although the controversy had prompted some tense moments between the Chinese community and the authority, the outcome worked out fine for the ruling coalition. The successful intervention by Ling Liong Sik, showed the Chinese community that MCA did have their interests at heart and was able to fight for their rights within the ruling coalition.

While the *Judge Pao* controversy showed that race is an issue with which the authority must deal carefully, the Bollywood controversy showed that concern from the Islamic community is another important political consideration for the coalition government. Since Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister in the early 1980s, along with his Islamlization policy, Islamic teaching has been the guiding principle for Malaysia's broadcasting industry. Such policy apparently is meant to attract the support of moderate Malay Muslims, which is the main concern of UMNO. Under such circumstances, for the authority to go against a request from the Conference of Muftis – a national Muslim clerics' organization – for banning a Hindi movie might show that UMNO was not truly committed to the Islamic cause. But to give in to the demand of the

Conference of Mufis and drastically cut down the airtime for Bollywood movies was equally problematic, for the Indian minority might perceive such an act as discriminating against them.

The Bollywood controversy was an unforeseeable outcome of the government public policy. Traditionally, television programs that target a minority ethnic community, such as Bollywood aiming at the Indian population, usually do not concern the Muslim community. However, with the Ministry of Information requesting *Bahasa Malaysia* subtitles to be included on all non-Malay programs, these programs have attracted many Malay audiences. Observers have pointed out that the Malay television viewers, especially those from rural areas, are now watching not only the Malay but also English, Chinese and Indian language programs. This trend has prompted the Malay Islamic leaders to question the content of other languages' drama programs. The government's strategy to resolve the Conference of Mufti's complaint against the Hindi movies, as one commenter pointed out, was to choose "the middle ground" ("Malaysian fans reject," 2001): On one hand the government announced stringent censorship would be implemented against Hindi movies, on the other hand, it has allowed these motion pictures to continue showing on national television.

The *Judge Pao* and Bollywood controversies showed that the government does take the issues of race and Islam very seriously, for mishandling these matters could easily turn the political environment unfavorable for the ruling political coalition. In addition, it also showed that through appropriate channels, particularly through a politician who is affiliated with the *Barisan Nasional*, ethnic groups and Islamic leaders are able to make their voices heard.

Impact of Technologies

In August 2002, the National Censorship Board released a list of 37 films, television series and advertisements banned in Malaysia that year (Appendix B). These items included an episode of the popular American sitcom *Friends* (Season eight, Episode 11) and the motion picture *Almost Famous*. The former was banned for portraying casual sex, promiscuity among youth, pregnancy outside of the institution of marriage, and prostitution, while the latter was banned because of alcoholism, drug abuse, promiscuity and portraying free sex among youths (“37 films, TV series, and ads banned,” 2002). The ban did not cause much reaction among Malaysians. There were a few reasons for such responses. First, these bans were not related to racial or religious concerns. Second and more importantly, most of these materials either had already been sold in video compact disks (VCDs) format at stalls in many parts of the country or had already been aired on Malaysian satellite television ASTRO (“Pointless shutting the stable door,” 2002).

While the Ministry of Information and the Censorship Board through their stringent requirements are able to channel the local producers into doing projects that are more attune to the aspirations of the authority, they are comparatively powerless against foreign imported programs. The problem is twofold. First, between 1995 and 1998 the second private television network NTV7 and the first satellite television station ASTRO were launched. Unlike their counterparts RTM and TV-*Tiga*, which have the resources to acquire locally produced programs, NTV 7 and ASTRO have to depend heavily on foreign imported programs. This sudden increase of foreign programs seriously undermined the Ministry of Information’s effort to have 80 percent of locally produced

programs by 2000. Secondly, the Malaysian government has not been able to completely eliminate the syndicates that distribute pirated foreign audio/visual products within the country. This outcome has allowed Malaysians to watch practically any materials that are banned by the government, and hence has severely undermined the authority's effort at maintaining control over foreign-imported programs. These two problems challenging the Malaysian authority, however, should not be seen as separate issues. This is because the emergence of these problems is related to a common factor: the introduction of new communication technologies.

The End of 80 Percent Local Content Policy

In the mid-1990s the Malaysian government issued several television licenses to the private sector: the launches of its first cable operator Mega TV and regional television station MetroVison in 1995, satellite television station ASTRO in 1997 and the second terrestrial private television NTV 7 in 1998. However, these new television organizations were unable to meet the Ministry of Information's requirement of having substantial amount of local content on their program schedule; foreign imported programs had to be heavily relied upon to fill the airtime. Such a scenario had rendered impossible the effort by the Ministry of Information to have 80 percents local content by the year 2000 for all national television networks. Comparing the amount of television programming imported in 1995 and in 1998 helps in understanding this scenario.

In 1995, the year when the Malaysian television industry started to expand, the government networks aired about 254.98 hours per month (comprising of 41.35 percent of total airtime for both TV1 and TV2), while TV-*Tiga* aired up to 254 hours per month (75.6 percent of its airtime) of foreign programs. In total, RTM and TV-*Tiga* had about

508.98 hours of foreign programs per month (Goonasekera and Holaday, 1995, p. 105).

In 1998, the total foreign programs aired on Malaysian television networks had increased to 15,818.40 hours per month. In 2001, the number had moved up further to 53,289 hours (see table 4-2). The majority of these programs were from the United States, Hong Kong, and India, the sources of television programs that were often criticized by the authority for highlighting the elements of violence, horror, sex and counter-culture.

Looking at the hours of monthly television programming by language provided another aspect of how the composition of local and foreign television programs had changed over this period. In 1995, there were 389.4 hours of Malay (40.9%), 417.9 hours of English (43%), 97.2 hours of Chinese (10.2%) and 40.95 hours of Tamil (4.3%) language television programs. As it is generally known that locally produced programs are predominately Malay productions and non-Malay programs are mainly imported, it is safe to say that the ratio between local and foreign program in 1995 was about 40:60.

In 1998, the composition of programs by language on Malaysian television had changed drastically. There were 4,233.6 hours of Malay (21%), 13,406.4 hours of English (66.5%), 1,673.3 hours of Chinese (8.3%) and 846.7 hours of Tamil (4.2%) language television programs. While the number of hours for Malay programs had increased from 389.4 to 4,233.6, its ratio on overall programming had dropped from 40.9 percent to 21 percent. On the other hand, English programs had increased from 417.9 hours to 13,406.4 hours, an increase from 43 percent to 66.5 percent. In 2001, the composition of different language programs was Malay 9.5 percent (5,742 hours), English 60.4 percents (36,507 hours), Chinese 23.3 percent (14,104 hours) and Tamil 6.8 percent (4,126 hours). The numbers of locally produced Malay programs again had increased remarkably

Table 4-2

Hours of monthly imported programming by country

Country		1998	2001
United States	Hours	11,894.40	31,258.00
	Percentage	59.00	58.60
United Kingdom	Hours	1,000.80	4,210.00
	Percentage	5.00	7.80
Australia and Canada	Hours	504.00	1,048.00
	Percentage	2.50	4.90
Hong Kong	Hours	1,411.20	12,008.00
	Percentage	7.00	22.50
India	Hours	806.40	3,928.00
	Percentage	4.00	4.70
Middle East	Hours	201.60	846.00
	Percentage	1.00	1.50
Total	Hours	15,818.40	53,289.00
	Percentage	78.50 ^a	100.00

Note. Figures compiled from *Asian Communication Handbook* 1998 and 2001.

^a *Asian Communication Handbook* 1998 only indicated 78.50 percent of imported program were from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, India and Middle East, no statistic was provided for the remaining 21.50 percent.

from 4,233.6 (1998) to 5,742 hours (2001), but it was merely 9.5 percent of all television programs. This prompted Information Minister Khalil Yaakob to say, “The percentage of foreign productions in television is now too high.” The 80 percent local-content policy introduced in 1991 was generally understood as “difficult for stations to meet the target due to the scarcity of quality local fare” (“More local TV,” 2001).

It was unlikely that the *Barisan Nasional* government did not understand the act of issuing new television operation licenses would eventually undermine its 1991 policy of 80 percent local content by 2000. To understand this contradiction, it is necessary to trace back in time to observe the recurring pattern that the current regime had in dealing with new communication technologies.

Trouble with VCR and the Introduction of TV-Tiga

The first problematic encounter that *Barisan Nasional* had with communication technology could be traced back to the early 1980s. At the time, Southeast Asian governments from Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia were facing the same problem: illegal video cassettes. The Malaysian Information Minister at the time had complained that, “Housewives now return from the market with their vegetables and fish under one arm, and the weekly video fare under the other” (“Southeast Asian television,” 1983). To solve this problem, the Malaysian government launched a two-part anti-video offensive, first by cracking down on the illegal venders via coercive forces and second by introducing a new private television, TV-*Tiga*, to win back the viewers (McDaniel, 1994). To achieve the objective of switching the audience from watching illegal videotapes to watching TV-*Tiga*, the new television network relied heavily on foreign programs. This proved to be a successful strategy; at least for a period of time it

Table 4-3

Hours of monthly television programming by language

Language		1995	1998	2001
Malay (Bahasa Malaysia)	Hours	389.40	4,233.6	5,742.0
	Percentage	40.90	21.0	9.5
English	Hours	417.90	13,406.4	36,507.0
	Percentage	43.00	66.5	60.4
Chinese	Hours	97.20	1,673.3	14,105.0
	Percentage	10.20	8.3	23.3
Tamil	Hours	40.95	846.70	4,126.0
	Percentage	4.30	4.2	6.8
Total	Hours	952.55	20,160.00	53,289.00
	Percentage	100.00	100.00	100.00

Note. Figures compiled from *Asian Communication Handbook* 1995, 1998 and 2001.

had forced the illegal video cassettes vendors to go underground. Through this experience, the *Barisan Nasional* government also learned that by giving the general public an “alternative media” such as TV-*Tiga* which was still under its control through private ownership, the authority was able to control the content delivered to Malaysians.

However, the introduction of the new private television network and satellite television station created a new problem. The competition between the government and private networks had increased the amount of foreign programs aired. This stirred complaints from the conservative sectors of the society, forced the authority to introduce the Broadcasting Act 1988 to enable the Ministry of Information, which was already controlling RTM, to regulate TV-*Tiga* via licensing. However, in order for TV-*Tiga* to continue its success in attracting an audience and to prevent them from returning to the illegal video cassettes, the ministry had to give the private television network some leeway. As a result, the practice of “double standards” became inevitable. While the programs for the government network have to go through stringent censorship, censorship for the private network was comparatively relaxed. The public as well as the practitioners began to question the standard that was set by the authority. While the public and practitioners were puzzling over the established standard, the introduction of satellite television further complicated the matter.

Challenge of the Satellite Television and the Launch of ASTRO

In 1991, the first pan-Asian satellite television station, Star TV, was launched by Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing. A year later, it was sold to another bigger player in the media scene, Rupert Murdoch. By 1993, Star TV was offering four English-language channels: MTV, Prime Sport, BBC World Service and a light entertainment channel. Its

footprint covered more than half the world's population, including Malaysia. The Malaysian government was not enthusiastic about opening its market to the new medium. On August 2, 1991, the cabinet announced that only the King, sultan and foreign missions could use parabolic antennae for direct satellite television reception ("Antennae rule," 1991). However, such a ban did not prevent the Malaysians to illegally set up satellite dishes for reception, especially in East Malaysia. In 1992, there was a report that there were 2,000 illegally installed satellite dishes in the state of Sarawak. The report stated:

The equipment can be bought for about RM 4,000 here, inclusive of installation and a six-month guarantee.

It is understood that these dish "aerials" were smuggled in component form from Singapore, Taiwan and Indonesia.

They are well-received here because they can tune in to any television program in the world transmitted through satellite ("Satellite dish ban," 1992).

The spread of satellite dishes was so rampant in Sarawak that when the ban on them was announced, the Minister of Information had to appeal "to all parties concerned not to blow up the issue of parabolic satellite receivers as it might create tension between the people of Sarawak and the federal government" ("Govt wants ban," 1992). The minister further pointed out that the government understood that Sarawakians wanted to use satellite dishes to gain access to television programs mainly because the terrain of the region made it problematic to receive terrestrial television broadcasting signal. But the

demands for satellite television came not only from the people of Sarawak but also from other parts of Malaysia (“Govt wants ban,” 1992). While the minister was fully aware of the demand for satellite television from the people, the ban continued. The government argument was not new. It was afraid that allowing satellite television into Malaysian homes, would lead to a decline in moral standards; as one Cabinet member stated, “We don’t want our society to pick up negative elements by allowing them to watch programs which have no moral values” (“Samy Vellu sets deadline,” 1992). However, it was probably the Information Minister who really expressed the true concern of the authority. He pointed out that the government wanted the people to be exposed to the important developmental programs and policies within Malaysia. He further added, “It will be pointless to have local TV stations on air if the viewers started switching to foreign stations via parabolic dish antenna” (“Mohamed: No plans,” 1993).

In April 1994, three years after the ban, the Malaysian government finally came to recognize that, “The time would come when technology would be too sophisticated to stop satellite broadcasts” (“Malaysia to lift ban,” 1994), and decided to review its ban on satellite television. Two months later, in June 1994, the Information Minister announced that the Broadcasting Act 1988 would be amended to allow Malaysians to use a wider range of broadcasting facilities including satellite dishes. With the amendment, it would also allow the nation’s first satellite, Malaysia East Asia Satellite (Measat), which was scheduled to be launched in 1995, to be utilized to provide 20 satellite television channels to the nation. The hope, as the Information Minister pointed out, was to “make Malaysia the regional center for information and broadcasting, away from Hong Kong. Our neighbors and other countries in the region can also view these channels” (“Malaysia

seeks,” 1994). In 1996, the ban on satellites was lifted and the Malaysian satellite television station ASTRO was launched.

The change of the government attitude toward satellite television was not surprising. In the early 1990s, while the Malaysian government was banning satellite television, a neighboring country, namely Singapore, had been trying to deal with the problem in a more aggressive manner. The Singapore government solved the problem by introducing cable television to Singaporeans. Through cable television, Singaporeans were able to watch programs provided by major satellite television channels. Such an attempt allowed the Singapore government to maintain control over the programs that were shown to the public while at the same time turning satellite television into a business opportunity to compete against Hong Kong as a broadcasting hub. The attempt was a successful one. On one hand Singaporeans were content with the satellite programs provided via the cable operator, on the other hand with the Singapore government opening its market to satellite television rather “creatively,” it sent a positive message to the satellite television content providers that the government was willing to accommodate their demands. In addition to Singapore’s strategic geographical location, within a few years, major satellite television channels such as HBO, MTV, Discovery, and ESPN started to house their regional headquarters as well as the uplink and downlink center in Singapore. In essence, Singapore had become a strong contender in competing against Hong Kong as a regional broadcasting hub.

The example of Singapore had shown that the threat of satellite television could be contained. However, unlike Singapore, which is an island small enough to be covered by fiber optic cable, Malaysia needed satellite television to cover both the peninsula and

East Malaysia. To ensure that its public received only ASTRO's channels, the new law stipulates that only satellite dishes no bigger than 60 cm in diameter were permitted. In addition, ASTRO had to set up its own censorship division, which to be trained by the Censorship Board, to oversee the content via its channels.

The strategy of the Malaysian government against satellite television in the 1990s was similar to its campaign against illegal video cassettes in the 1980s. The authority first resisted the new technology, claiming that introduction of such would bring problems to the society in general and bad influences from foreign cultures in particular. When such attempts failed, the authority introduced an agent, closely affiliated with the *Barisan Nasional* government and within the jurisdiction of the authority, to win back the audiences: TV-*Tiga* for the campaign against illegal video cassettes and ASTRO for the campaign against foreign satellite television. Such measures seemed to be working well for the authority. The illegal video cassettes and later illegal satellite dishes were under control after the measure was implemented. However, it was not without consequences for the authority. In both instances, foreign programs increased drastically due to the launch of the new television network or service. Although many of these foreign programs are heavily censored under the VHSC rulings since 1990s, the fact remains that they are an important component for local television networks in term of programming. With cheaper price tags and higher production values, the increase of foreign programs on Malaysian television, whether on terrestrial or satellite television, seriously undermined the government's effort to have 80 percent local content on national television by the year 2000.

The Issue of “Double Standards”

In 1996, with the amendment of the Broadcasting Act, satellite television station ASTRO was introduced to the country. However, the license for ASTRO was not issued by the Ministry of Information but by the newly formed Ministry of Multimedia. Two years later, to incorporate another communication technology –the Internet– that is challenging the authority, another law was passed: The Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. Under the new act, licenses for all private television networks, including TV-*Tiga*, NTV7 and ASTRO, were issued by the new ministry. The Ministry of Information no longer has the kind of direct control it once enjoyed. However, its ability to set the boundary for television content remains intact. Through working closely with the Censorship Board, holding regular meetings with the television networks’ executives and being the controller of RTM, it was able to ensure that local production, in particular drama production, stayed within the boundaries set by the guidelines.

However, this scenario puts the local drama television producers in an awkward position. On one hand, they have to beware of the constraints to avoid getting into trouble with the authority; on the other hand they have to compete against foreign programs which have comparatively fewer creative constraints (although they were heavily censored by the Censorship Board). Although the Censorship Board denied that there are double standards in dealing with foreign and local programs, the fact is the differences are there. With the claims that foreign programs were portraying foreign values and scenarios, many programs or stories that were clear violations of the guidelines were passed. Take the *Tahyul* policy for instance. While local producers were not allowed to touch on this kind of story, foreign programs, such as *Xena*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *Angel*,

Charm and Sabrina: the Teenage Witch, were seen on national television. Such double standards, both handicapped the local drama producers' ability to create and compete and undermined the credibility of the government in general, the Censorship Board in particular.

With the constraints set on local drama producers, the goal of turning Malaysia into a regional broadcast center to compete against Hong Kong did not come true. Few locally produced programs were able to venture into the international market. The Malaysian television industry remains import-oriented rather than export-oriented. Although the industry's productions had increased drastically since 1991, its contents were too localized and uninteresting to travel overseas.

With the local production industry under their control, the authorities, namely the Information Ministry and Censorship Board, continued to battle foreign invasion via new communication technologies. In the late 1990s, illegal VCDs and DVDs have replaced illegal video cassettes as Malaysian alternative sources of entertainment. To counter the problem the Censorship Act was amended to allow the authority to prosecute the illegal vendors of VCDs and DVDs, while about the same time the Internet has emerged as Malaysian alternative source of information. The raid of Malaysiakini simply showed that the authority is facing another round of challenges that emerge whenever there is a new communication technology introduced to the world, such as the video cassette in the 1980s and satellite television in the 1990s.

While this chapter concentrates on describing the challenges and constraints at the social institutional level facing Malaysian media practitioners in general and drama television producers in particular, these are only parts of the story. Another level of

challenges and constraints that the drama television producer has to face are the demands and requests from the media organization, namely television network.

CHAPTER 5

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS ON DRAMA CONTENT

Thumbs down on censorship and local program! A resounding hooray for the X-Files, and three cheers for SeaQuest DSV and National Geographic Explorer! Out with Pop Kuiz and Sinaran, and in with Beverly Hill 90210 and Melrose Place! (“Tuning in to teen,” 1995).

These were some of the opinions and feelings that a group of three *New Straits Times*’ journalists, Alina Ranee, Alina Rastam and Chow Ee-Tan, gathered after interviewing 200 teenagers in 1995 on Malaysian television programs. When asked specifically of their impressions on locally produced programs, 13 of these teenagers said the programs were well done, 25 gave positive feedback, 26 thought that the products were average and 128 of the respondents sighed with negative comments. Out of the 128 negative respondents, 48 described locally produced programs as “condescending/an insult to the intelligence/simplistic.” Other comments and quotes included:

. . . poor quality, copy cat, lousy and weak plots or storyline, poor acting, boring, stupid, needing a lot of improvement and not well produced.

. . . predictable, artificial, biased, over-dramatic, lousy and simplistic; condescending, sometimes they make me want to throw out [sic]; very poor quality and underestimating Malaysian viewers’ mentality; bordering on amateurish but getting there; some are good but some

are just plain stupid; I think they are better than last time; most of them are condescending but some are commendable; well-produced for Malaysians (“Tuning in to teen,” 1995).

The “Tuned-In Teens” survey was probably not a scientific one. As it noted in the report, 76 percent of the respondents were females and certainly did not reflect the actual make up of the teenagers at the time, but the responses from the participants were revealing. Due to the predictable and simplistic storyline of local drama television, many Malaysians have been more in favor of the imported programs than those that were locally produced. A few years before the informal “Tuned-In Teens” survey, Georgette Wang, a communication professor from Taiwan’s Chengchhi University, did a study to examine several countries’ ratio of local and foreign production among their top 20 programs respectively. Seven countries participated in the study and the result found that “Malaysia was the only country whose television viewers preferred imported programs to locally produced ones” (“Malaysians prefer foreign TV,” 1993). While all the top 20 programs on Hong Kong TV and 90 percent of Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and South Korea television were produced locally, Malaysia had only 40 percent of the top 20 shows that were locally produced (“Satellites and the enemy within,” 1993). Almost a decade later, this situation did not seem to have improved. At a career forum entitled *The Direction for Film and Broadcasting Students in Malaysia* organized by students of Malaysia National University (UKM) in 2002, one participant pointed out:

. . . TV stations are still struggling to get its *[sic]* audiences to watch local programs. If people refuse to watch home grown fare, fulfilling the stipulated 80% local content requirement in terrestrial TV thus serves little purpose” (“Screen Prospects,” 2002).

What happened to Malaysian locally produced drama television? While the neighboring countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines were able to attract their own populations to tune in for local favor, what were the factors that made Malaysian programs so unattractive to the people of Malaysia? To answer these questions, one needs to look at not only the kinds of social constraint and foreign competition, the local drama television producers have been facing, which were discussed in the last chapter, but also the challenges or rather the hurdles they have to overcome at the organizational level, namely the television network, in order to get the programs on air. This chapter seeks to discuss this aspect of drama television production in Malaysia. The chapter has been divided into two sections. The first goes back in time to look at the early development of the Malaysian drama television industry when Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) was the only broadcasting network. Particular attention will be focused on the events that shaped the practice of local drama television production. The second section looks at the commissioning process of drama television programming in the terrestrial television networks, particularly the government television, as well as the additional considerations posted by the commissioning editors on behalf of the authority. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion on how the government television

network, although not as popular as the private network, is able to exert influence on the local drama television industry.

RTM Monopoly: Its Drama Television Program and Practices

On January 7, 1998, *The New Straits Times*' journalist Zainal Alam Kadir wrote a story entitled *Wok, a Caring and Understanding Boss*. The article was to commemorate Aziz Wok, whose many titles included being the first Malaysian Malay drama television producer. The drama program titled *Tetamu Malam* (Night Guest) starred Norzah and aired on November 13 1964 (Said Halim Said Nong, 1988, p. 86), almost 11 months after television was launched in Malaysia. Ahmad Merican, one of the pioneers in Malaysian television industry, commented on his friend Aziz Wok's contribution:

To me, Aziz Wok must be remembered as one of the drama-making pioneers in Malaysia, and one of the important figures who was responsible in introducing Malay dramas to the electronic media ("Aziz Wok," 1998).

After *Tetamu Malam*, Aziz Wok went on to produce early television dramas such as *Membilang Bintang* (Counting Star), *Bendahara Seri Maharaja* (The Glory Prime Minister), and *Memburu Balan Sabit* (Hunting the Crescent Stone) which were also aired in 1964. He continued to produce drama television until 1973 when he was transferred to the Television Entertainment United. He latter moved up the Ministry of Information's management ladder and became the Head of RTM foreign service (1980-1982), Director of Filem Negara (1982-1985), Deputy Director of RTM (1985-1986), Director of IPTAR (1986-1988) and retired as RTM Sabah's director of RTM in 1991.

Canadian Advisers and the First Batch of Producers

The first Malaysian television network, which was called *Talivishen Malaysia* (Television Malaysia) at the time, was launched by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman on December 28, 1963. In its formative years from 1963 to 1969, the television network operated in *Jalan Ampang* (Ampang Road) with only two small studios, “one for news and another for small live presentations” (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 130). As the videotape recorder had not yet been introduced, most locally produced programs were live productions, a production format that is particularly challenging for its producer. It was in this environment of limited resources and high expectations for their performance that the first batch of Malaysian television producers learned and struggled to create programs, in particular drama television programs. To ensure that the new television broadcasting service catered to the needs of its racially and religiously diverse public, as a member of the British Commonwealth countries the Malaysian government sought help from the Canadian experts under the Colombo Plan. One reason for seeking Canadian help, according to Karthigesu (1990), was because Canada and Malaysia shared many similarities, including “both had population that spoke a diverse number of languages; in the case of Canada, English, French, Italian, German and others; in the case of Malaysia, Malay, Chinese, Tamil, English and others” (p. 94).

Indeed the pioneer group of eight television producers came from different ethnic backgrounds: Abdullah Mohamed, Syed Alwi, Hashim Amir Hamzah and Ahmad Merican were Malays, Tan Gek Seam and Long Hin Boon were Chinese, James Masang and Richard Job were “other” (within the Malaysian context). All of them except Richard

Job were formerly from Radio Malaysia and all were under 40 years of age at the time (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 130-131). The Canadian advisers said of these producers:

We have found them to be hard working and dedicated. Each is willing to take on the heavy responsibility which must be distributed and each delights in running his own show. In spite of the newness of this most demanding of all communication media, it has been highly rewarding to those of us from the outside to look in and see our Malaysian colleagues mastering so well the complicated techniques. It has been also fascinating for us, Canadians, coming from what is described as a bicultural country, to watch Malay, Chinese, Indian and other talent adapting itself so smoothly – with precious little rehearsal at that – to the double problem of sight-and-sound live performing (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 132).

The Beginning of Locally Produced Drama Series

It was under such a multiracial environment that the first locally produced drama television series, *Empat Sekawan* (Four Friends) was born in 1964. It is important to note that the series was not in Malay but in Chinese dialects. The series was originally a popular radio play aired on Radio Malaysia. When the newly established television network decided to transform the radio play into a television drama series, former radio-turned-television producer Long Hin Boon was given the responsibility. His former

colleague recalled how the first Malaysian drama television series program was produced:

At the time, we basically transformed a garage into our small little television studio, which Long Hin Boon was very proud of it. With that we can telecast live, you know, and can even have snow scene in it.

. . . .

When it first started off, there were no such thing as “session”; it was just one episode after another. Every time there was script coming to us, we just do it. After awhile we kind of get used to it, kind of give it a little continuity in term of story and looked for those scripts that could produce thirteen episodes of story using the same characters. One session was thirteen episodes, that was the longest that we went, probably because of budget (Personal communication, July 2, 2001).

Empat Sekawan was unique to the Malaysian Chinese. For a long period of time, from 1964 to the early 1980s, it was the only locally produced drama program for the Chinese audience, in addition to the imported movies from Hong Kong. It was first scheduled on Thursday at 9:45 pm. In the 1970s, the 30-minute program was moved to Tuesday at 8:30 pm and repeated at 3:45 pm on Thursday. The stories of *Empat Sekawan* varied but in general they were social dramas surrounding four characters each of whom spoke a distinctly different Chinese dialect. Some were inspired by social events while

some were adopted from literature but there was always a message to tell or a lesson to teach. As one veteran producer pointed out that many of the earliest producers were teachers before they decided to join the radio or television network.

Although *Empat Sekawan* was the first Malaysian drama television series, the Malay drama producers did not wait long to pick up the trend. In 1965, other than making episodic drama programs, the first 14 episodes of the Malay drama series *Keluarga Tompel* (Scarred Family) produced by Hashim Amir Hamzah were aired. Subsequently, in 1966, the same producer came out with another 13-episode series titled *Telatah Mak Mah* (Auntie's Behavior). Unlike the Chinese drama *Empat Sekawan*, which used virtually the same cast and social setting for more than 20 years, the Malay drama ventured in different directions. The difference could be attributed partly to the fact that the Malay drama unit was given more resources and manpower as it has been perceived as part of the efforts to promote the national language.

The Impact of the May 13, 1969 Communal Riot

On October 17, 1969, Television Malaysia moved from the *Jalan Ampang* studio to its current complex in *Angkasapuri* (City in Space). Compare to its earlier facilities, the new television complex was immensely better equipped. With “four television studios (the largest was 80 feet by 60 feet). . . eight videotape recorders, four 16mm telecine chains, two 35mm telecine chains, five 16mm magnetic film reproducers, ten camera chains, three studio transmitter links. . . two subtitling units, [and] two mobile units with three cameras each” (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 205), it was considered to be one of the best-equipped television networks in Southeast Asia at the time. A month after Television Malaysia moved to its new complex, in November, 1969, the Prime Minister Tunku

Abdul Rahman launched the nation's second television channel, TV2. For the Malaysian television industry, the year 1969 was a turning point; however, it was not the additional equipment, facilities and service that made it significant. It was the communal riot of May 13 that made the year 1969 of such historical importance for the nation in general, its television industry in particular.

As part of the television industry, Malaysian drama television production was also greatly impacted by the event. Prior to the riot, due to "the bargain" made by UMNO, MCA and MIC, the Alliance government was confident that communal tension between Malay and non-Malay was under control. Such confidence led the government to be fairly relaxed with the television network and allowed it to operate "with a bare minimum of controls on its content" (Lowe & Kamin, 1979, p. 5). The communal riot of May 13, 1969 changed all that. The newly established national ideology, *Rukunegara*, has become the most important guiding principle for all productions including drama television programs. In addition, a series of subject matters, such as the special position of Malays, the citizenship rules and policy of non-Malay, or the sovereignty of Rulers, have also become "sensitive issues" that are not to be discussed in the public forum, especially not on television.

After the communal riot, a committee was set up by the National Operation Council (NOC) to study the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The committee recommended that the television network should integrate with the radio networks to form the Department of Broadcasting, which was later known as Radio Television Malaysia, under the charge of the Ministry of Information. In addition, the committee recommended that the Minister should tighten his control over the various departments

(including RTM), reduced decision-making powers of the department heads and centralized administrative matters (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 202). These recommendations were implemented by the Minister of Information and Broadcasting (which was later renamed the Ministry of Information) Ghazali Shafie who took office in 1971. As a civil servant, a Malay nationalist and one of the authors who recommended that the Ministry should be reorganized and the powers of the various departments should be centralized in the hand of the Ministry (Karthigesu, 1990, pp. 243-4), Ghazali Shafie was deemed by the UMNO dominant *Barisan Nasional* government as the best person for the job.

Under Shafie centralized control, government policies, but more importantly UMNO agendas, were reflected in RTM programming. To support the government language policy, under which *Bahasa Malaysia* as the language to unite people from different races in the land, TV 1 was designated as a *Bahasa Malaysia* dominated channel (with some English programs) while the airtime of TV 2 was shared among *Bahasa Malaysia*, English, Chinese and Tamil programs. In addition, to ensure that RTM programming would echo government policies at different times of the year, Shafie introduced the so-called “programming calendar.” Karthigesu (1990) described the practice as follow:

“The broadcasting year” (much like a financial year) would begin on 1st September and would culminate on 31st August, which is the Malaysian National Day. All annual celebrations, as well as special days declared by government, such as Women’s Day, Labor Day, Teachers’ Day etc., would be taken into account and programs would

be generated on the declared themes. It was an arrangement to set an agenda for broadcasting to anticipate and promote government activities to the fullest (p. 246).

It was under such an organizational climate that Malaysian drama television began its tradition of incorporating government agendas into its storylines. Karthigesu (1990) pointed out while Shafie encouraged writers to bring in fresh themes to TV, he also ensured that the content “incorporate elements of nation-building, such as the *Rukunegara*, New Economic Policy, family planning etc. in their storyline” (p. 219). As the director of the first mass communication program in Malaysia, John Lent (1976) also observed that:

The government is making a genuine effort to discover local TV dramatists, as evidenced by the increase from five Malaysian-made TV dramas in 1971 to more than eighty the following year. Writers are told to emphasize thrift, self-reliance and self-improvement in their plots. If the Minister of Information doesn't like a script, he or his deputy will rewrite it. Censorship is heavy and every drama must be approved by a review board.

Critics say that “blatant propaganda” has stifled any spark of art or wit in these teleplays. Situation comedies contain strong messages condemning gambling, ill treatment of servants and hypocrisy. Birth control is

exalted, along with rural life, religion and technology (p. 54).

The government effort to turn drama television into “blatant propaganda” apparently did not set well with the local writers, many of whom “complained that such themes as expected by the department, fired with nation-building zeal, lacked the spontaneity of real life” (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 219). These criticisms, however, did not deter the Information Ministry’s efforts in promoting the themes they deemed important for the nation. In 1973, the Information Minister, with the help of Television Malaysia’s playwright Zain Mahmud, involved himself in scriptwriting and provided a script for TV drama entitled *Angin* (Rumour), which was aired on May 27, 1973. The story “dealt with rumor-mongering which almost destroyed the livelihood of a Chinese and a Malay family and then saved by a timely suggestion by an Indian” (Karthigesu, 1990, p. 220). The Minister’s effort amused neither the audience nor the critics but as Karthigesu (1990) pointed out “it did set a ‘goodwill’” [*Muhibah*] theme as a model for writers to follow” (p. 220).

Muhibah and Bahasa Malaysia on Drama Television

Following the Information Minister’s efforts, the *Muhibah* theme has been one of the important considerations for Malaysian drama television’s content. At the television network level the harmonic relation among the different ethnic groups is highlighted and such relationships are shown to resolve the problem at hand. This is a theme that television producers of today are encouraged to include in their storyline when it is appropriate; with such a theme, a project stands a better chance of being accepted, especially by the government network. However, when it was first introduced, *Muhibah*

was a required element for drama programs, especially for the non-Malay dramas, regardless of its appropriateness. In addition, as *Bahasa Malaysia* had been deemed the language to unite all races after the communal riot of May 13, 1969, all non-Malay programs have since been requested to present the program title as well as credits in the national language. The first casualty of such rulings was the only locally produced Chinese television drama *Empat Sekawan*.

In the 1970s, the Malaysian Chinese audience who watched *Empat Sekawan* often experienced some awkward moments. The flow of the program would often go like this: The four characters in the show would encounter a problem or situation which they needed to overcome. As the story unfolded, the characters would interact with their counterparts, each using the Chinese dialect with which they were most comfortable -- Cantonese, Hokkien, Cansiese, and Hugka. Then, at some point in the 30-minute show, a non-Chinese character, either an Indian or a Malay, casts as a clinic nurse, a restaurant waiter or a passerby, would appear for no apparent reason, prompting everyone in the show to start speaking *Bahasa Malaysia*. Once the non-Chinese left the scene, the program would switch back to its multi-Chinese-dialects mode and the story would continue. Such appearance of the non-Chinese often puzzled the show's Chinese audience. In an interview with the local Chinese newspaper *Nanyang Shang Pao* veteran producer Teh Ching Chiang recalled:

The appearances of our friends from other ethnic groups in the show were to fulfill the requirements set by the authority and had nothing to do with the drama. At the time, the kind of funny thing that often happened was that

the script was finalized, the program was in the middle of the shoot and then it hit the scriptwriter that he needed to fulfill the requirement. He would then hurry to a corner of the studio and come out with a line or two of dialogues for the non-Chinese talents to be included in the show (“Local drama production,” 2001).

RTM producers at the time were often annoyed by these rulings, as one producer pointed out:

After May 13, the language of broadcast had a great impact [on our production]. Take Chinese program for example. [In the earlier period] when we came out with the story, there was no requirement to add on the racial harmony theme. [With the introduction of such ruling] it just messes up the whole story. In your story, you must have the appearance of a Malay or an Indian. Of course in our daily life, different ethnic groups always mixed with each other, so the appearance of them on the show was okay, but their appearance must come naturally. For instance, you have the different characters speaking Mandarin and Cantonese, then with the appearance of this one person, suddenly everyone speak the national language, just to show patriotism. The idea of racial harmony just sandwich into the story like that. This later development made it difficult

for production and the scriptwriter also found it problematic.

....

[So] for the past few decades, all RTM drama always have this unnecessary side-plot, just to show that all the ethnic groups work closely together, whether this side-plot is needed or not, you are required to put one in it.

....

At the time, we had a few university graduates who wrote and supplied scripts for us. There was this one guy, who studied sociology, was telling story from a sociological point of view, which was very good. But in the middle of the writing you just have to put in something that was irrelevant to the whole story, it kind of spoiled the flow of the story. Can't help it, even to the day when the [in house] Chinese television drama program close shop, at the time it was called the Rainbow Theater [in 1980s], we still need to put in such plot (personal communication with a former RTM network executive, July 27, 2001).

The policy of highlighting the *Muhibah* theme as well as championing the national language, although well-intended, made it particularly awkward for the non-Malay drama production. The sudden shift from Chinese dialects to *Bahasa Malaysia* with a dialogue that was irrelevant to the storyline, made it too obvious for any Malaysian

Chinese not to notice the unwarranted interruption. However, the authority has determined that such action was necessary as the objective of Television Malaysia has always been to emphasize education rather than entertainment. Especially in a time such as the 1970s, a period not long after the May 13, 1969 incident, giving up an opportunity to deliver important messages on behalf of the government just so the audience could have a better television drama experience was unthinkable for the authority, particularly the Ministry of Information.

The Beginning of Cross-Language Production

It was around this period that the television network started the practice of rotating the producers into doing different genres or languages. Unlike in the previous era, producer's areas of work were language-oriented: the Chinese producer produced Chinese programs while the Malay producer produced Malay programs. In the 1970s, such practice no longer applied. One Chinese producer was told, "We no longer have a Chinese department; [from now on] you do all types of programs. But because you know Chinese, you will do some works that are relevant to it" (personal communication with a former RTM network executive, July 27, 2001). According to him, it had been an open secret that the government had neither the intention nor incentive to further develop the Chinese drama production on Television Malaysia, which explains why for more than 20 years, from 1964 to the early 1980s, there was only one half hour of locally produced Chinese drama programming per week on Malaysian television. The implementation of the rotating system starting in the 1970s meant that non-Malay producers were required to work on Malay production. This did not pose too much of a problem for the non-Malay producers, as they were expected to have a good command of *Bahasa Malaysia* in

order to join the network. For the Malay producers, however, as their understanding and command of Chinese or Tamil was minimal, such rotation hindered their ability to create quality productions. Such shortcomings apparently did not bother the authority. As RTM monopolized the only television channels – TV1 and TV2 – in Malaysia at the time, the quality of the program was not a major concern, exercising the will of the authority, however, was. Such thinking about production quality giving way to the authority's political considerations appears to be another “tradition” that emerged in the 1970s, a tradition that survived long after RTM had lost its television monopoly in the mid-1980s.

The Notion of “Sensitivities” and the Practice of “Double Banking”

In the period from the May 13, 1969 riot till the 1980s, while Chinese locally produced programming maintained its airtime of 30 minutes a week, Malay drama production had increased rapidly. In his study of Malaysian Malay drama television from 1964 to 1983, Said Halim Said Nong (1988) listed the drama programs that were aired during this period. Starting off with only four Malay drama productions in 1964, the number had increased to 40 in 1972. In the subsequent years, RTM had maintained an average of 35 Malay drama television programs per year until 1983 (p. 193-236). With these productions, many rules were introduced by the network and implemented by the in-house producer. Lowe and Kamin (1979) pointed out that these rules can be divided into two broad categories: Written rules and unwritten rules. Written rules were those referenced to *Rukunegara*, other government policies or *arahan* (directives) coming from the authority. The unwritten rules, on the other hand, usually were conveyed verbally. The term “sensitivities” has commonly been used to describe these written and unwritten

rules as well as the reasons why such decisions have been made. Lowe and Jaafar's definition of this term is the most comprehensive:

“Sensitivities” refers to the need for all programs to have paid consideration to racial objections. The same applies to religious objectives. To be sensitive can also mean to be alert to the need for all programs to conform to and to be consistent with all government policies. It encompasses the need to depoliticize controversial issues and not arouse or reinforce or be a model for, pressures against the government. Not excluded are the personal likes and dislikes of the people at the higher end of the organizational pyramid of the department. Finally “sensitivities” refers also to all the decision rules themselves (Lowe and Kamin, 1979, p. 8).

As Kamin, one of the two researchers, was the Controller of Television Program in Radio Television Malaysia at the time of this study, their definition of “sensitivities,” though sounded vague, revealed the RTM civil servants' mindset towards the content of local broadcasting media. Other than the obvious taboo issues, such as race, religion, language and Malay rights that could be linked to the May 13, 1969 riot, the preferences of the Administration must also be taken seriously. A former civil servant pointed out:

From time to time there would be instructions coming down [from the top management]. You [must] understand that we were in a governmental organization, so everything

that we did [we] must follow [government] policy. So from time to time if there was a change of people [such as the Minister] or policy, we must be aware of [it], [we] must be very sensitive about it. Before other people sense it, we must already sense it (personal communication with a former RTM network executive, July 2, 2001).

To ensure that its producers understood these “sensitivities,” majority of which have not been documented, RTM requires that they undergo a transition period called “double banking.” “Double banking” is a practice that the network uses to train a newly hired producer or a producer who has been transferred to a different department and is unfamiliar with the specific genre. During the period of “double banking,” a junior producer would be attached to a seasoned producer for a period of three to six months to acquire the know-how for producing a particular genre of television program, including the creative constraints to which the producer must adhere. As one producer pointed out “double banking” provided the opportunity for seasoned producer to educate a new producer on “things that need to be considered very carefully or things that should not be considered at all” (personal communication with a RTM network executive, June 29, 2001).

The concerns with “sensitivities” and the practice of “double banking” are conventions that were started off in a period when RTM monopolized the broadcasting industry. These conventions have been applied not only to drama television production but also to other forms of television programs. However, it is in drama production that

these conventions or, more accurately, constraints become factors that seriously hinder the local drama producer's ability to effectively present a story.

Dominance of Foreign Programs

From the late-1980s and for the whole of the 1990s, one common complaint from the critics and government alike tended to be that private television was too concerned with profit and less concerned with its social responsibility. Such accusations often accompanied comments that private networks relied too much on foreign programs, which portrayed too much violence, sex and horror, in order to compete for advertising revenue. While these claims were true to a certain extent, the fact remains that foreign programs have always played an important role, at least in terms of the quantity of program, in Malaysian television, not only in the 1980s and 1990s but since the beginning in 1963. This was particularly true in drama television. In 1976 Lent made the following observation:

Of the 89 series titles for a single month on both channels, 69 were from the U.S., nine from Great Britain, four each from Hong Kong and India and one each from Australia, France and Indonesia (p. 54).

The Ministry of Information's attempt to increase local productions, however, were unable to fill the airtime for the two government television channels: TV1 and TV2. Looking at the ratio of local and foreign programs for the two decades from 1964 to 1984 with a-five year interval, Karthigesu (1990) found that about 50 percent of airtime was filled by foreign programs (see table 5.1).

Table 5.1

*RTM Imported Programs (Predominantly English)**With Five Year Interval*

Year	Percent
1964	48.1
1969	55.0
1974	48.6
1979	49.1
1984	48.2

Note. Figures from *Two Decades of Growth and Development of Television Malaysia and an Assessment of Its Role in Nation-Building* by Ranggasamy Karthigesu.

A study by Grenfell (1979) also found that between 1974 and 1975, only three out of the 12 most popular programs were “Malaysian productions.” Other than Malay drama, the other two programs, *Bintang RTM* and *Bijak Bistari*, were variety and game shows respectively (pp. 143-144). Seven of the top 12 programs were either feature films or drama programs. Although the author did not point out the origin of the Malay film, which ranked first on the list, it is assumed that it was imported from Indonesia as Malaysian filmmakers at the time were still struggling to revive the industry (Lent, 1994, p. 193). While locally produced Malay drama managed to rank sixth in terms of popularity, the dominance of foreign programs was obvious in this list, in particular the non-Malay programs: *Planet of the Apes* (English motion picture), Chinese film, Indian film and *Hawaii Five-O* (English television series).

Such a high ratio of foreign programs, in particular American television, had prompted certain concerns from the society. In 1982, a consumer group, the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), conducted a survey on television violence and pointed out that “the Malaysian viewer was exposed each day to an average of four killings, 24 guns, 14 gunshots and 38 physical blows” (“American TV violence,” 1982). The study particularly cited out American cartoons such as *Popeye*, *Superman* and *Mickey and Donald* as the “major offenders in TV violence, averaging one violent act every 20 seconds” (“American TV Violence,” 1982). Apparently the trouble that Malaysian government has with foreign programs did not emerge after the introduction of private network TV-*Tiga*; it has a much earlier history than that, in a time when the government channels monopolized the television landscape.

Table 5.2

*Audience Size, Network, and Language of Television**Malaysia's Twelve Most Popular Programs: 1974-1975*

Rank order	Title	No. of Views (‘000)	Network	Language
1	Malay Film	1,170	One	Bahasa Malaysia
2	<i>Planet of the Apes</i>	830	One	English
3	Chinese Film	740	Two	Chinese
4	Wrestling	720	One	English
5	<i>Bintang RTM</i>	690	One	Bahasa Malaysia
6	Malay Drama	640	One	Bahasa Malaysia
7	<i>Hawaii Five-O</i>	620	One	English
8	Indian Film	490	Two	Indian
9	<i>Mannix</i>	480	One	English
10	<i>Bijak Bistari</i>	470	One	Bahasa Malaysia
11	Chinese Film/Indian Film ^a	460	Two	Chinese/Indian
12	<i>Naasa</i>	460	One	Bahasa Malaysia

Note. Switch On: Switch Off: Mass Media Audiences in Malaysia p. 143

^a Chinese and Indian film shown alternately over six weeks.

Summary: The Legacy of the RTM Monopoly Era

Many rules and trends that were set or laid down in the 1970s, right after the May 13, 1969 riot, continue to influence today's Malaysian television industry. Championing the use of *Bahasa Malaysia*, advocating the theme of *Muhibah*, following the "programming calendar" laid down by the administration, to paying particular attention to "sensitivities" within the society, conventions established during this period, continue to influence current practices. Terms such as "sensitivities" and *Muhibah* are still commonly used among the practitioners, especially between the independent producer and network's commissioning editor. For the RTM staff, "double banking" is still a common practice. It has not only served the function of training the newly employed but, more importantly, it has indoctrinated the current batch of television commissioning editors, including those who have left RTM and joined the private television networks. It has led them to safeguard against content deemed inappropriate by the authority. As a result, being aware of the Administration's preferences became an important part of production culture in the Malaysian drama television industry. As one independent producer pointed out one must always be aware of the leader's "aspirations" in order for a proposed project to have a higher probability of being accepted.

However, as time passed, some of the rules that emerged during this period became vague and open to interpretation by the authority. After the communal riot, to prevent the Malaysian Chinese from pledging their loyalty to China instead of Malaysia, Cantonese opera was banned from television. This ruling, however, was interpreted in the 1990s by the Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat to mean a ban on all foreign costume drama on Malaysian television ("Chinese Judge, Malaysian Judgment," 1995).

Such interpretation prompted the Ministry of Information to ban the Taiwanese television series *Judge Pao* and stirred a controversy within the Chinese community as well as a dispute within the *Barisan Nasional* leadership. As a result, the Prime Minister directed the Information Minister to revise the rule and to lift the ban on *Judge Pao* (see Chapter 4 for further discussion of this controversy).

The monopoly of RTM ended in 1984, when TV-*Tiga* emerged as an alternative to the government-owned network. However, as the private network was unable to produce its own drama programs and had to depend heavily on foreign imports, its contribution for and influence over the local drama television production industry was minimal. However, Mahathir's privatization policy, implemented after he came into power in 1981, did have an impact on the local television production industry. To echo Mahathir's call for privatization, the Ministry of Information decided to let RTM outsource some of its programs, including drama, games and entertainment programs, to the local production houses. Between 1984 and 1985, RTM began to get in touch with some of the local independent production houses to find a better way for both parties to work together. In 1986, Minister of Information Rais Yatim announced that "the time has come for Malaysian film producers to produce more local films for Radio and Television Malaysian (RTM) to meet the objective of forging a national culture. He further added that "the mini [*sic*] has allocated about one million US dollars this year for the acquisition of privately produced dramas for screening over RTM" ("Malaysian film producers," 1986). At about the same time, RTM staff, in particular in-house producers, were encouraged by the management to interact with local independent production houses. One former RTM producer noted:

Along with Sum-swi production house, there was this company called King Holding [both production houses emerged in the mid-1980s and were major local program suppliers for RTM in the early days]. At the time, we were still producing drama program [in house]. Then, one day we were invited to King Holding to attend this special effect [workshop] by people they got from Hong Kong: A one week workshop. At that time, we began to sense that drama programs were about to be outsourced to outside [production houses] (personal communication with an independent producer, July 02, 2001).

In 1987, the first privatized musical variety show, entitled *Ada Sering*, was aired on RTM. A year later, the Information Minister officially announced that RTM “will privatize all its local programs except the news and public affairs series” (“RTM to privatize,” 1988). The local drama television industry had entered into a new era, but the concerns about its content, particularly what should or should not be included in local drama television programming, remain the same. More importantly, the practice of administrative centralized control by the Ministry and the notion that local media should work for the government, ideas that were introduced by Information Minister Ghazali Shafie in the early 1970s, continue to work in the new era.

Drama Commissioning Process and Its Considerations

On December 11, 2001, during the Parliament session, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced that as of November of that year, the Film Censorship Board had

“screened 1,003 local films, of which 83.5 percent were approved with no cuts, 11.5 percent with cuts, 1.7 percent banned and 3.3 percent rejected as a result of technical problems” (“Film censorship based on,” 2001). The Deputy Home Minister Chor Chee Heung was pleased to announce in the Parliament that “most local films pass through the Film Censorship Board without a single cut, a sign that local producers strictly follow the Home Ministry censorship guideline” (“Film censorship based on,” 2001). Since an average of slightly more than ten motion pictures were produced during the past decade (see Table 5.3), the majority of these local films were either television drama or television movies. Looking only at this statistic, the Deputy Minister’s assessment of “local producers strictly following the Home Ministry censorship guideline” seemed accurate; however such result did not take into account that before these projects were sent to the Censorship Board they had already gone through several stages of scrutiny by the television network’s commissioning editors. If this is taken into consideration, the Deputy Minister should be surprised that 11.5 percent of the projects still required cuts and 1.7 percent of them were banned.

On different occasions, both Minister of Information Khalil Yaakob (“RTM “No” to dramas,” 2000) and the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs (“Parliament report,” 2001) had pointed out that for programs to be aired on national television they must have gone through dual censorship: one by the Censorship Board and the other by the “internal panel” from the television networks. It is commonly known among the local independent producers that the network (or media organizational) level of censorship is embedded in its commissioning process. As long as local production houses want to supply programs for the television network, private or government-owned, they cannot avoid censorship

Table 5-3

Production of Local Feature Films Mean for Cinema 1991-2000

Year	Production
1991	15
1992	14
1993	11
1994	10
1995	15
1996	16
1997	9
1998	11
1999	7
2000	7

Note. Figures from Statistic and Information, Ministry of Information 2001, p. 185.

exercised by the network executives. Network internal censorship is equally stringent to that of the Censorship Board and its process is definitely lengthier. This is particularly true for the government-owned network RTM. In the following section this study attempts to outline this commissioning process. Particular focus is on, but not limited to, the RTM commissioning process for drama television programs. Due to the scope of this study, ASTRO, the satellite television network's commissioning process, is not included here, although it has also commissioned drama projects to the independent production houses.

RTM as a Major Buyer for Locally Produced Drama Programs

For many drama television producers making programs for RTM is not an option but a necessity. Since the Ministry of Information started to privatize RTM drama programs and outsourced projects to independent production houses in the late-1980s, the government network has become the major source of income for many local independent production houses. Having two terrestrial television channels with a per-day airtime average of 17.5 hours for TV1 and 13 hours for TV2 to fill, in addition to the government aim to push for 80 percent local content by 2000, RTM's demand for privatized programs is great. As of the year 2000, RTM has aired 1,482 hours of locally produced drama, sitcoms and telemovies in Malay, Chinese and Tamil languages on TV1 and TV2 (see Table 5-4). This made it the biggest buyer of locally produced drama programs in Malaysia.

With this buying power and the kind of affiliation the network has with the Ministry of Information, RTM's influence on the local television industry is tremendous although it might not be the most popular network in the country. The practices that

RTM's commissioning editor carried out, in terms of what content should or should not be allowed to be shown on television, even though is not faithfully followed by private networks, it is closely monitored. Furthermore, as RTM is the first television network in Malaysia, some former as well as current staff members of the private networks had started their careers in the government network. This early affiliation with RTM inevitably shaped their practice and viewpoint of television production, which they carried forward to their new working environments. All these factors make RTM a good starting point to study the commissioning process, which also serves as the first round of censorship, in Malaysian terrestrial television networks.

In 2000, with a total of 1,482 hours of locally produced drama program aired on RTM, for both TV1 and TV2, about 63 percent (936 hours) were Malay drama, slightly more than 33 percent (494 hours) were Chinese drama and around four percent (52 hours) were Tamil drama. Clearly, the majority of Malaysian local drama television production was made for the Malay-speaking community, which in theory refers to the whole Malaysian population regardless of race as *Bahasa Malaysia* is the national language, but in reality the majority of its audience is Malay. However, this does not mean that these drama programs, which include television drama, telemovies and sitcoms, can be produced only by ethnic Malay. The network in general does not make the connection between the language of the program and the ethnicity of the producer. In fact, there were many instances where the government networks commissioned Chinese producers to produce Malay drama and vice versa. This seems to be a continuation of RTM's practice in the pre-privatization era where in-house producers, regardless of race, were to take part

Table 5-4

Local Private Production Aired Over TV1 and TV2 by Category in Year 2000

Network	Program Category	Language	Duration	No. of Episodes	Total Hours
1	Drama	Malay	30'	1040	520
1	Sitcom	Malay	60'	208	104
1	Telemovie	Malay	30'	52	26
2	Drama	Malay	60'	260	260
2	Sitcom	Malay	30'	52	26
2	Drama	Chinese	30'	52	26
2	Drama	Chinese	60'	468	468
2	Drama	Tamil	30'	104	52

Note. Figures from Statistics and Information, Ministry of Information 2001, pp. 42-43.

in other language productions to nurture mutual understanding among different ethnic groups.

Qualifications Required and Their Background

As long as a producer and his affiliated production house meet three specific requirements and successfully register as an RTM program provider on a list maintained by the Ministry of Information, he would be qualified to deal with the Film Supply Division (*Bahagian Bekalan Filem*) and given the opportunity to submit program proposals to compete for airtime on the government channels. To echo the government's call for more "transparency," the government network has listed the specific qualifications on its official website. Three specific documents are required in order for a production house to be considered as a potential supplier by the Information Ministry: Two copies of the company profile with the latest audited financial statement, a Finance Certificate (*Sijil Kerwangan*) from the Ministry of Finance, and a video production license acquired from FINAS.

While the company profile and the latest audited financial statement ensure that the company intending to provide programs for RTM is a legitimate and able entity, the Finance Certificate proves that the production house has registered with the Finance Ministry's Government Procurement Management Division to provide services for the government sector. On March, 14, 1996, in a dispute with the Finance Ministry and some local production houses, the Ministry of Information Secretary-General Zawawi Mahmuddin emphasized that "RTM only bought programs which were registered with the Finance Ministry" ("Awarding of contracts," 1996).

The third document required by RTM and probably the one most pertinent to the drama television industry, is a Production of Video (PV) license issued by FINAS. To apply for such license, an applicant needs to submit the following: (a) documented proof that it is a private limited company with a pay-up capital of RM50, 000, and (b) detailed information about the company, including the members of its board of directors and shareholder background. After the application is vetted, an interview would be set between a panel of FINAS' officials and the applicant to determine the latter's "seriousness" as well as the company's expertise in being part of the industry. Such practice was implemented in 1997, and FINAS has been taking the matter of issuing production license very seriously ever since.

The requirements of private limited company status, detailed information about the company and an interview with the production house's board of directors, were measures implemented to ensure that "producers will not be issued licenses simply because they have money to invest; expertise will definitely be a compulsory criteria" ("Who'll get MetroVision," 1997). More specifically, this practice was put in place to prevent certain malpractices which emerged in the later part of the 1990s. One questionable practice specifically cited was the setting up of an "Ali-Baba" company to acquire a production license with *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) status and to produce programs for the government network. One interviewee pointed out:

[At the time] there were a lot of responses and complains
[against] Ali-baba companies. [These are the] shell
companies set up by people, but the people names appear
[on the board of director] are not the people who are

[actually] running the production. There are other people behind it running the production company. So these [are the] things to check [during the interview with the applicant, to see] who are the actual people who are doing it (personal communication with a media observer, December, 12, 2001).

The government network has a quota for programs produced by *Bumiputera* companies which must be completely controlled by Malaysians with *Bumiputera* status. In the mid-1990s these so-called “Ali-baba” companies, referring to a company owned by *Bumiputera* in name but in fact controlled and operated by non-Malays, would obtain licenses from FINAS and airtime from RTM then pass the project to the non-Malays to do the actual production. This was one of the side effects caused by the New Economy Policy (NEP) implemented after the May 13, 1969 riot and the National Development Policy (NDP) introduced in the 1990s by which the government sought to encourage *Bumiputera* to take part in the nation’s economic activities. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had criticized such practice on several occasions. On July 29, 2002, speaking on the topic of “New Malay Dilemma” to an audience at the Harvard Club of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, he specifically pointed out such unintended outcome:

In business, the vast majority [of Malay] regarded the opportunities given them as something to be exploited for the quickest return.

Very early on, they sold off their opportunities in order to become sleeping partners in an arrangement known

cynically as “Ali Baba,” in which Ali merely obtains the licenses, permits, shares or contracts, and immediately sells these off to non-Malays, mainly Chinese.

They learn nothing about business and become even less capable of doing business and earning an income from their activities.

They become mere sleeping partners and, at times, not even that. Having sold, they no longer have anything to do with the business. They would go to the government for more licenses, permits, shares, etc.

Admittedly, a few of them were serious, and some of them succeeded. But the majority contributed nothing to the NEP target. The NEP quota of 30 percent would have been achieved long ago had all the shares, licenses, contracts etc been used by the Malays fully (“Malaysian Prime Minister’,” 2002).

Apparently the local television production industry, which enjoyed a boom time in the 1990s, was not immune to such practices. The strategy FINAS used, as a production license granting agency, to counter such abuse of national policy was to have a thorough check of the applicants for the production of video licenses.

The license for Production of Video is renewable annually. According to its records, FINAS issued between 294 and 386 such licenses yearly between 1996 and 2000. In general, each year there were fewer than 20 new licenses issued (13 in 1998 and

18 in 2000). The majority of the applicants were renewal licensees. The purpose of licensing is to keep track of the industry's activities. However, it could also be used to take action "against parties found guilty of misconduct" ("Set a standard," 1996). While most production houses acquire PV licenses to qualify to produce programs for the government network as well as to echo the Ministry of Information's call to be registered with FINAS, it is commonly known that private networks are not stringent about such qualifications.

With these documents in place, the Ministry of Information would assess the qualifications of the applicant and register qualifying applicants on a list maintained by the Film Supply Division. In 2001, while there were about 300 PV licenses issued by FINAS, officially only 54 production houses supplied programs for RTM ("Specialization concept for," 2001). While the required documents for application are clearly stated on the RTM website and available to interested production houses, the Ministry's criteria for selecting successful applicants are less clear. However, since production houses at this point have yet to invest time and resources in making programs for RTM, the Ministry's decision as to which production houses should get onto the list is rarely questioned. At this stage, the Ministry of Information merely filters out the unwarranted or unqualified producers in the industry.

Table 5-5

*Issuance of Production of Video Licenses**For the period 1996 – 2000 (January-August)*

Year	Production of Video (PV) License ^a
1996	364
1997	386
1998	320
1999	330
2000	294

Note: Figures compiled from Film Guide Malaysia 2001, p. 69, and Statistic and Information, Ministry of Information 2001, p. 179.

^a PV license is renewed annually.

Once registered, these independent producers are eligible to send program proposals to the government-owned television network. From the time a proposal is made to the time the final product is produced and aired, a producer could face some serious challenges, which sometimes turn into controversies. These challenges emerges at the different phases of the interaction between RTM's network executives and independent producers. They are chronologically outlined as follows:

- (a) Allocation of Airtime,
- (b) Negotiating for drama content,
- (c) Begin production after issuing the letter of intent,
- (d) Completion of project and awaiting payment.

For the remainder of this section, this study seeks to highlight some of the issues encountered by the Malaysian drama television industry in the 1990s. These issues are addressed and organized in accordance with the chronological phases of interactions between RTM network executives and independent producers.

Commissioning Process I: Allocation of Airtime and the issue of Favoritism

The first stage of the commissioning process at RTM is the allocation of airtime. After going through a proposal sent by a registered production house, the network decides the hours of airtime to allocate for that specific program. RTM's decision on this matter has a direct impact on the company financial-well being for independent producers. Therefore, over the years, allocation of airtime has been the center of dispute between RTM and production houses. In particular, the Information Ministry's decision to award a large amount of airtime to certain production companies prompted heavy

criticism from the independent production houses and local media critics (mainly from English and Malay presses) in the mid-1990s.

Accusations of RTM Favoritism

In January, 1998, the *New Straits Times*, an English newspaper closely associated with the UMNO ruling party, published an article by Suraya Al-Attas who criticized the television networks in general and RTM in particular. Touching upon the challenges faced by many television producers after the 1997 Asian economic crisis, including the issue of “unfair distribution” of airtime, the writer highlighted the concerns of several television producers:

What is most frustrating, she [television producer Habsah Hassan] adds, is that while her company, Serangkai Filem Sdn Bhd, is “suffering,” fellow producers would come up to her and say they’re been given a few slots by some stations.

“Certain production companies are happily monopolizing airtime. It’s not healthy for the industry.”

Habsah’s frustration is understandable. There is clearly unfair distribution of slots to production houses.

Take TV1, for instance. Try watching the channel for just a week and more often than not, you’ll find names like Home Video Distribution (HVD), Wayang Tinggi and Eurofine popping up at the end credits.

That these three production companies have long-term contracts with RTM is apparently no secret in the industry. But even then, most producers are not asking for the impossible from RTM. They do not expect the station to give them hundreds of hours a year, only that they get a fair opportunity.

Says Mohamed Jusoh, Keris Motion executive chairman: “What we’d like to see, especially in RTM, is a fair distribution of slots. And if the station is cutting back, which is understandable given the current economic situation, they should stop buying from other companies, too.

“It’s very frustrating to see certain companies still enjoying the business just because they’ve signed a long-term contract

“Sure, everyone has to be prudent right now, but what we’d really like to see is an equal cut for everybody (“Give all producers equal chance,” 1998).

Accusations of RTM of favoring certain companies, including those that were mentioned in the article, was not surprising. However, it was unusual that these producers would openly voiced their unpleasant experiences with RTM in a national newspaper. As one veteran producer pointed out, “You cannot go to argue with [the] bureaucracy. The culture [of this industry] is [that] if you go [against the] bureaucracy, they will [say]

‘nothing, for you’ [for the coming year]” (personal communication with an independent television producer, July 01, 2001). One reason these producers (comprised mainly of *Bumiputera*) dared to openly criticize the authority was because their companies were in serious financial difficulty due to RTM cut-backs in ordering for privatized programs during the 1997 economic downturn. While these production houses were struggling to survive, a few companies continued to enjoy patronage from the government-owned network. Feeling that they had nothing to lose since their companies were not awarded airtime from RTM and hoping that such open criticism would attract the attention of the higher authority, namely the Cabinet, these producers decided to expose a long existing problem within the industry.

One company that was constantly being linked to RTM’s favoritism was Home Video Distribution (HVD). Started off as a vendor of foreign-produced programs (“Sebastian’s head with HVD,” 2000) and to provide technical support (“Movie maker of distinction,” 1996) to RTM and TV-*Tiga* in 1980s, HVD emerged as a major player in the 1990s when it began to produce local programs catering to RTM’s demands. HVD produced its first Chinese drama in 1990. By August 1, 1992 when TV2 introduced a local Cantonese drama slot called *Twin Happiness* on Saturday and Sunday from 10:30 to 11:30 pm, the production house had secured four drama serials in this particular slot for the rest of the year (“New local Chinese drama,” 1992). In 1992, the company also ventured into Malay drama and by 1997 had produced 2, 000 hours of drama serials and tele-movie annually (“Career options in,” 1997), many of which were for the two government television networks. While many independent producers struggled to have a few programs a year accepted by RTM, secure with a long term contact “HVD sent its

programs by cartloads.” According to some independent producers and RTM network executives the favorable treatment of HVD was because of the “good relations” between the then Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat and the production house. The relationship was so good that at one point in the 1990s, an HVD billboard was displayed on the main building of *Angkasapuri* where the Minister’s office was located. This had prompted some RTM network executives to cynically name it the *HVD Building* instead of *Wisma TV (Television Building)*. Such a relationship caused bitterness among the independent producers, especially in late 1997 during the nations economic downturn when RTM cut its budget for locally produced programs, but continued to buy large quantities of programs from HVD. This prompted Seri Bintang to state what was on the minds of many independent producers:

There are a few production houses that have been given long-term contracts to supply serials spanning over three years and these contracts still have about two more years to go. We hope they will also be made to share the burden of this austerity drive (“Shrinking the pool,” 1997).

In the whole of the 1990s, suspicions of favoritism constantly surrounded RTM’s decision on the allocation of airtime. To avoid such accusations, as early as 1991 the Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat had suggested that RTM should look into the possibility of involving an “independent film buyers” to handle such matters. He said, “At the moment, RTM handles [sic] all these arrangements, leaving itself wide open to criticisms ranging from late payment to favoritism” (“RTM to have,” 1991). However, the Ministry of Information did not follow up on its Minister’s suggestion and the use of

an independent film buyer never materialized. After the new Minister of Information Khalil Yaakob came into office in May, 1999 (“I’ve no comments, says Mohamed Rahmat,” 1999), a new measure to counter the issue was introduced in 2001.

Tendering System and Its Challenges

In October of 2001, RTM introduced a tendering system for production houses to compete for airtime based on their track records as well as the quality of their proposals. The deputy Information Minister Khalid Yunus stated that “Besides giving more opportunities to truly qualified producers, the system also aimed to ensure a higher standard and quality of programs aired by RTM” (“RTM introduces tender system,” 2001). Two years earlier, right after the new Minister came into power, the Ministry had already set the stage for such an endeavor. In September, 1999, Information Ministry Secretary General Zawawi Mahmuddin had suggested that producers should “specialize in what they do best rather than try to be Jack of all trades.” He said, “There is stiff competition in the production business, thus it would be better if producers stick to doing programs which they are good at” (“Be consistent,” 1999). In May 2001, five months before the implementation of the tendering system, deputy Information Minister Khalid Yunus, after attending a ceremony to commence a drama production, told reporters that RTM “will introduce [a] specialization concept for its film suppliers where capable companies will be asked to produce certain films only” (“Specialization concept for,” 2001). He further pointed out that “too many companies were currently involved in the same thing such as drama production.” The tendering system introduced five months later was the embodiment of the “specialization concept.” Under the new system, RTM invited tenders for 107 titles of programs. These titles were categorized by combinations of

length, language, and genre of program, such as 30-minute English sitcom, 60-minute Chinese drama and 90-minute Malay telemovie. This new measure, however, was deemed “not practical” by some of the practitioners. Raja Alawiah Idris, managing director of Bright Network, pointed out, “From the business aspect, it is not practical for me to confine my productions to dramas, sitcoms or magazine. I believe in variety and giving the best to the programs which we do for RTM (“Be consistent,” 1999). Although his comment was made two years before RTM actually implemented the system, Raja Alawiah Idris’ position was echoed by his counterparts in the industry. The majority of the television producers who compete for the tender did not confine themselves to one category. Such practice was deemed too risky by the production houses, comparable to putting all the eggs in one basket.

The new system also brought home a couple of new problems. To ensure transparency in the evaluation process, in particular to prevent favoritism which has long haunted the government network, producers were asked to send in two packages of materials for evaluation: One containing the production houses’ information and the other the program’s proposal including treatment, casting and budgeting (or quotations, from the tender system point of view) information. As most production houses tendered for more than one program, RTM ended up with mountains of documents stacked in its offices waiting to be vetted long after the tender was closed. To continue their daily routine while at the same time evaluating the tenders posed a major problem for many RTM already overworked staff members. It was unclear at the time how RTM managed to award its airtime to the participating production houses under such circumstance. However, *The Star*’s columnist Seri Bintang discussion of RTM’s tendering system a

year after it was implemented to provide some feasible answer to that question as well as some other problems that came with the new system:

I did some probing and found out that apparently the panel involved in approving tenders consisted of people who have no knowledge of the business. They were not RTM officials who would have known better. Thinking that their obligation was to save the government money, they had given tenders to those who gave very low quotations.

This is where knowledge on the economy of the business is crucial. The decision makers should be people who know what is a reasonable quotation, which means they have to know the production costs and allow a profit margin for the tenderer. A tenderer with an impossibly low quotation cannot be expected to deliver a world class program.

Producers were to be blamed as well. In an effort to undercut one other, they were actually digging a pit to throw themselves in. These producers either ended up losing money because they had to top up the production budget or they just failed to deliver.

The panel also showed its naivety [*sic*] by splitting the award of a tender for big episodic programs to different producers. For example, a 52-episode series were [*sic*] split

up and tendered out to two producers (at different prices at that!) (“Falling short,” 2002).

While the Ministry’s intention of being transparent in the matter of allocating airtime is clear, the new system appeared to be less than desired. At least from Seri Bintang’s point of view, the decision made was not according to professional merits but based on civil servants’ intention to cut costs for the government. Such consideration prompts independent producers to cut production costs drastically, which results in compromising the quality of the program in order to secure airtime from RTM. The new Information Minister with all his good intentions appeared to solve a problem by introducing a new one.

From a political standpoint, the Minister has made the right move toward being impartial in terms of airtime allocation and exempted himself from accusations of favoritism which haunted his predecessor. From an industry’s point of view, however, the tender system forces production houses to cut costs regardless of how it might affect the quality of its products. Such a move, while serving well for the Minister’s aspirations, unfortunately filters out production houses that sought to produce quality programs within a reasonable budget. In a society where the decision was often made by the officeholder at the highest level who has little understanding of the media industry – in this case the Information Minister Khalil Yaakob, a career politician since graduation from the University of Malaya in 1962 who served as Chief Minister for the state of Pahang from 1986 to 1999 before joining the Ministry – the political considerations tend to outweigh the concerns for quality programming.

Although the Information Minister is able to exempt himself from favoritism's claims, his Ministry continues to suffer from this criticism. One producer has complained that the tendering system is not favoritism-proof. There was talk among television producers that during the tender evaluation meeting for awarding airtime, a certain high-ranking official within the Ministry sent in a list of production houses to be given patronage. Such a request apparently was difficult for the members of tender evaluation committee to ignore. For Malaysian media practitioners such a story is not surprising. Some independent producers have claimed that favoritism has become part of the RTM organizational culture, regardless of who is in overall charge of the Ministry. One television producer even rationalized such wrongdoing by saying that it is human nature for people in power to favor their cronies, as long as such practice does not drive qualified television producers out of business. Favoritism or cronyism is part of the industrial culture that practitioners simply have to live with (personal communication with an independent producer, December 26, 2001).

While the government network struggled with the problem of airtime allocation, the private network seemed to be exempt from such problems. As private television networks, TV-*Tiga* and NTV-7 were free to commission projects to whomever they saw fit; any favoritism towards certain production houses was not perceived as unethical behavior by the practitioners and the press: TV-*Tiga* has often commissioned its Saturday evening drama slot to one of its subsidiary companies, Grand Brilliance Sdn Bhd (GBSB), while NTV7 has always been in favor of the production house Ten-on-Ten. Such discrepancy between private and government-owned networks is understandable. After all, private networks are financially independent from the state; their revenues

come mainly from advertising. RTM, on the other hand, is a public-funded media organization – although its channels do run advertisements – so the public has the rights to expect that the funds are properly used. In addition, it is commonly believed among the media practitioners that RTM, as a government-owned media organization, has the responsibility to nurture the local television industry. Awarding the airtime appropriately and professionally is the first step in that direction. When such obligation is unfulfilled in conjunction with a government official abusing his authority for personal or political gains (such as returning favor to people who had supported his political campaign), it tends to upset the television practitioners. However, in Malaysian society in general, in RTM in particular, decisions made by the higher authority are not to be questioned openly. As for the independent television producers, maintaining a good relationship with the network, at least not to be “blacklisted” by the authority, is paramount. As a result, “unfair distribution of airtime” is always a major concern for independent television producers but is seldom brought into public scrutiny.

Commissioning Process II: Negotiating for Drama Content and Concerns from Authority

Once airtimes are awarded to a production house, a series of meetings would take place at RTM between the production house and the government network to negotiate the actual content of the drama program. Prior the first meeting RTM’s Film Supply Unit’s Private Program Procurement Committee (commonly known as *Swasta*) would deliver the program’s proposal, including its title, theme, concept and treatment, to the RTM network executives in charge of supervising the project. In the case of drama production, there is a panel of five. Out of these five, at least three are senior producers who have relevant experience in the area of drama production. In addition, these five panelists are

from four different divisions within the network to ensure that all aspects of concern are discussed and resolved during the series of meetings. Depending on where the drama program would eventually be aired, one panelist is from either TV1 or TV2. His/her concern is to ensure that the requirements for the respective channel are fulfilled as TV 1 and TV 2 each is targeted at a different demographic. One panelist is from the Drama Unit whose main function is to supervise the artistic aspect of the program. One panelist is from the Research and Development Unit whose main concern is to incorporate government policies or messages into the drama program. Finally, two members from *Swasta* also attend the meeting. Their function is to record the minutes of the discussion, which also serves as part of the terms for the program procurement and as a liaison between the production house and the network executives. At all times, at least three of the five RTM panelists must attend the meeting with the production house staff, which comprises the producer, director and scriptwriter. At the end of the meeting, the producer is to sign and acknowledge the minutes taken, which outline the specific requirements that he must oblige. One participant recalled the experience of such endeavor:

Whatever is discussed is always being written down. Everything! So that there is no escape. And then everything, whatever the discussion, they will be somebody, some sort of a secretary, that is why we need to have two from the requisition [*Swasta*]. One will actively participate, the other will just [be there] to jot down every thing. So everything whatever the discussion we do not type it but as we discuss there and then, we write out in

black and white. At the end of it, we will ask the producer to look through everything that jotted down and he will have to sign [and acknowledge the agreement] (Personal communication with a RTM network executive, June 30, 2001).

The meetings between the RTM network executives and the production house usually take place in one of the conference rooms located at RTM's *Wisma TV* (Television Building). It is the only time and place that both parties could meet and discuss the project. Any interaction between the two parties outside of the meeting place must be done in writing through *Swasta*. According to an RTM network executive this is to prevent direct contact between the production house staff and the panelists, and thus to forestall any accusations, of favoritism, faultfinding or bribery (commonly known as coffee money), from the production house as well as from their colleagues. Apparently, the rumor of favoritism has prompted the network, as well as many of its staff, to take extra precautions against any such accusation.

The meeting between RTM network executives and production house staff is done either in English or *Bahasa Malaysia* regardless of the language of the program under discussion. The meeting covers everything from casting to storyline to budgeting, but the most important aspect of the discussion is to ensure that the program adheres to RTM's internal censorship guidelines. The majority of these guidelines are in line with those outlined by the Censorship Board which were discussed in the previous chapter. The remaining guidelines are drawn from two sources: first the experience that RTM network executives have as civil servants and television producers within the

government-owned network; secondly the aspiration of the “people higher up” at the time.

Collective Experiences as References for Dos and Don'ts

The past experience within their own agency and with other social institutions, particularly the Censorship Board, of RTM network executives serving as panelist for drama program procurement often served as additional reference for deciding what should and should not appear in locally produced drama television programs. In the early 1980s, Lowe and Kamin (1979) used the term “inventory of decision rules” to describe RTM’s written and unwritten guidelines that “form the sum total of the organization’s knowledge as to what is acceptable or not acceptable for transmission” (p. 8). The written rules in general are easier to grasp. They come in the form of government documents, such as *Rukunegara*, Censorship guidelines or directives from high-ranking officials. Although these documents are sometimes vague and open to interpretation, at least they are tangible (Please refer to the previous chapter for a more comprehensive discussion of the written decision rules). The unwritten rules, by comparison, are much more intangible, yet they play a greater role in shaping the content of current RTM drama television programming. Lowe and Kamin (1979) aptly described these unwritten rules:

For the most part these rules are stored in the memories of the producers and their heads of departments. One can safely assume that most of these rules are not meant to be applied with equal force all the time. Although this might not have been the intention, in effect this is what happens with rules. As far as is known there have been few written

rules which were lifted officially. So, apart from the attrition of a bad collective memory, most of the rules are continuously applied through self-censorship. Films that have been postponed indefinitely have not been directed to be shown again although the original object that caused the postponement no longer holds in the present situation (p. 23).

Two decades after Lowe and Kamin completed their study, it appears that unwritten rules still rule the scene. When asked if there were any documents that recorded these mandates, one serious RTM network executive pointed out that such rules would be impossible to document as there are too many of them. In addition, some of them might change due to the context of the story or the timing of the production, which would make it even more difficult to put in writing.

The Theme of Muhibah Continues

Muhibah, a theme introduced by Ghazali Shafie when he was the Information Minister in the 1970s, continues to play an important role in contemporary Malaysian drama television. During the negotiating phase with the RTM network executives, production houses are often encouraged to adopt such themes. As one executive pointed out:

Whatever that we do, [*Muhibah*] is part and parcel. Even our writers, our directors, our producers whenever they do programs, we keep reminding them. But there are some stories, which [if] you put in, it would not blend. If it does

not blend we do not put [it in]. I mean it depends. If it is not logical, just for the sake of [including] it, then we don't, but then we control the storyline (personal communication with a RTM network executive).

Such emphasis on *Muhibah* appears to be the Malaysian television industry's way to address racial relationships in the country. For Malaysians, the communal riot of May 13, 1969, is an important and integrated part of the national collective memory. However, it is also a social and political taboo which is not to be discussed in public forums -- a ban that was imposed by the *Barisan Nasional* government. This constraint over media content of the May 13, 1969 communal riot in particular and racial matters in general, has made network executives – both in government and in privately own networks – extremely nervous in handling subject matter that is related to racial relationships in Malaysia. Under such circumstances, showing goodwill (*Muhibah*) among different racial groups, seems to be an easy way to address the racially pluralistic nature of the society while at the same time to avoid touching on the so-called sensitive issues. As a result, *Muhibah* became the prominent if not the only way to construct racial relationships in Malaysian drama television. Take the TV1 local police drama program *Gerak Khas* (Special Force) for instance. Malay, Chinese and Indian police officers worked closely to combat crime in the country, which in reality rarely happened since police officers are predominantly Malay. The same goes for the TV 2 local Cantonese drama *Yes Family*, which continues the *Empat Sekawan* tradition of having Malay or Indian talent appear on the show just to show racial integration among the different ethnic groups. Such tendency is not limited to programs on RTM. Popular programs on private

networks, such as TV-*Tiga*'s English sitcoms *Kopitian* (Coffee Shop) and *Getting Together* as well as NTV-7's Malay sitcom *Spanar Jaya* (The Street of Spanner), all had such an embedded theme.

Past Production Experience as a Guide for In House Censorship

Other than *Muhibah*, the inclusion of which is constantly being encouraged to be included for drama programming, there are also plenty of prohibited subject matters. The RTM network executives learned these taboos through years of experience interacting with the authority, receiving instruction from their supervisors and being criticized by the public through the press when they served as in-house producers in the network's earlier years. These experiences became the referent points for these network executives to decide "what is acceptable or not acceptable for transmission" during the discussion with the production houses. One network executive pointed out that she learned her lesson when she directed and produced a drama that showed on the small screen a teenager sniffing glue, a script and program which were approved by her peers as well as her supervisor. She recalled how her drama stirred a controversy within the nation at the time:

The Education Department complained, they said that their boys [had] started sniffing glue. As a result of the program, [there were] complaints everywhere. The Parliament [also had a] big, huge [response]. So . . . after that we cannot do any more [stories] on drugs or anything [like that]. Glue sniffing, if you were to do it, we have to send the script for

special approval by certain people. . . That is how it started.

That is my experience. . . .

That is why now, based on that experience, whatever I do, when we are discussing a program [with the production house]. . . I always remember my experience. Everything went smooth, everybody loved the drama. It was nice, but then it backfired (Personal communication with a RTM network executive).

It is unlikely that the experience of this RTM network executive is an isolated one. While the majority of her colleagues might not have had her misfortune of being caught in the middle of a major controversy, they probably had their share of lessons. In addition, the interactions among colleagues within RTM also help to share and buildup the references for censorship at the organizational level.

The Aspirations of “the people higher up”

In addition to using their collective memories – after all there are three senior RTM network executives who are experienced television producers – as references to decide what should or should not be included in a drama program, the aspirations of the political leaders make up the other part of what is acceptable for the government television network. Understanding what “the people higher up” want is an important part of Malaysian civil servants’ collective psyche. RTM network executives usually learn of these “aspirations” through two means: First through internal circulars or directives, and secondly through observing policymakers, in particular speeches in the public forum of the Minister of Information and the Prime Minister.

RTM's Circular and Directive as Guideline

In December, 2001, during a conversation with this researcher, a television producer, who has occasionally supplied programs for the government television network and befriended some of the RTM staffs, reported that an internal “circular” at the time was circulating among the RTM network executives to inform them that a “certain shade of green” and a particular type of headdress (*kopiah*) for male Muslims had been banned by the network in all programs. The television producer pointed out that the rationale for such a ban is that the authority feared that showing that “certain shade of green” and the *kopiah* on national television might remind the audience of the opposition party, PAS. The PAS party flag uses the “certain shade of green” and its male politicians often wear the *kopiah*. The television producer added that “it is really silly and embarrassing,” as a Malaysian, to tell a foreigner (this researcher) about this ban, however, such a story indeed illustrates the mentality of the authority in RTM (Personal communication with an independent producer, December 26, 2001).

This circular, silly or otherwise, that informs the RTM network executives of what is to be excluded on the government network usually comes unsigned. However, it is commonly known that this anonymous yet authoritative document is issued by the “people higher up” in the Ministry of Information. In addition to the circular, a directive is also used to update the RTM staff on materials that are deemed undesirable. Lowe and Kamin (1979) noted the function of the “directive” within the context of RTM as follows:

Directives which are issued are passed on to producers orally and without attributing them to any source. Such anonymity allows influence to be exercised over the

producers without having to take responsibility for the decision. Anonymity also avoids the needs to give reasons. It would be enough to refer to some authority “higher up”. Such anonymity avoids having to reply to arguments from producers. This obviates the need to provide logic or reasons to support the directives (p. 23).

One such directive was issued in 2001. According to an RTM network executive, it was to assist the ruling *Barisan Nasional* government, in a discrete manner, to “win the heart of the *rakyat* (citizens) in the 2004’s election through all forms of programming, including drama and sitcom, by showing that the Malaysians are happy with the government” (personal communication with a RTM network executive, June 2001).

These directives very often are issued at the internal meetings of RTM. Over the years, the Ministry of Information in general and RTM in particular, has put in place a series of internal meetings to ensure that the intention of *Barisan Nasional* is effectively delivered through the chain of command to every civil servant in RTM. These meetings usually are scheduled after the Cabinet meeting so that all levels of the network’s employees would be notified of the latest information within a reasonably short period of time, so that an “informed decision” could be made accordingly.

The post-Cabinet meeting, the first of this internal chain is normally held on Wednesday afternoon, right after the weekly Cabinet meeting chaired by the Prime Minister. This post-Cabinet meeting is chaired by the Minister of Information and attended by all the director generals and their deputies who head the respective departments, including the Department of Broadcasting (RTM), National Film

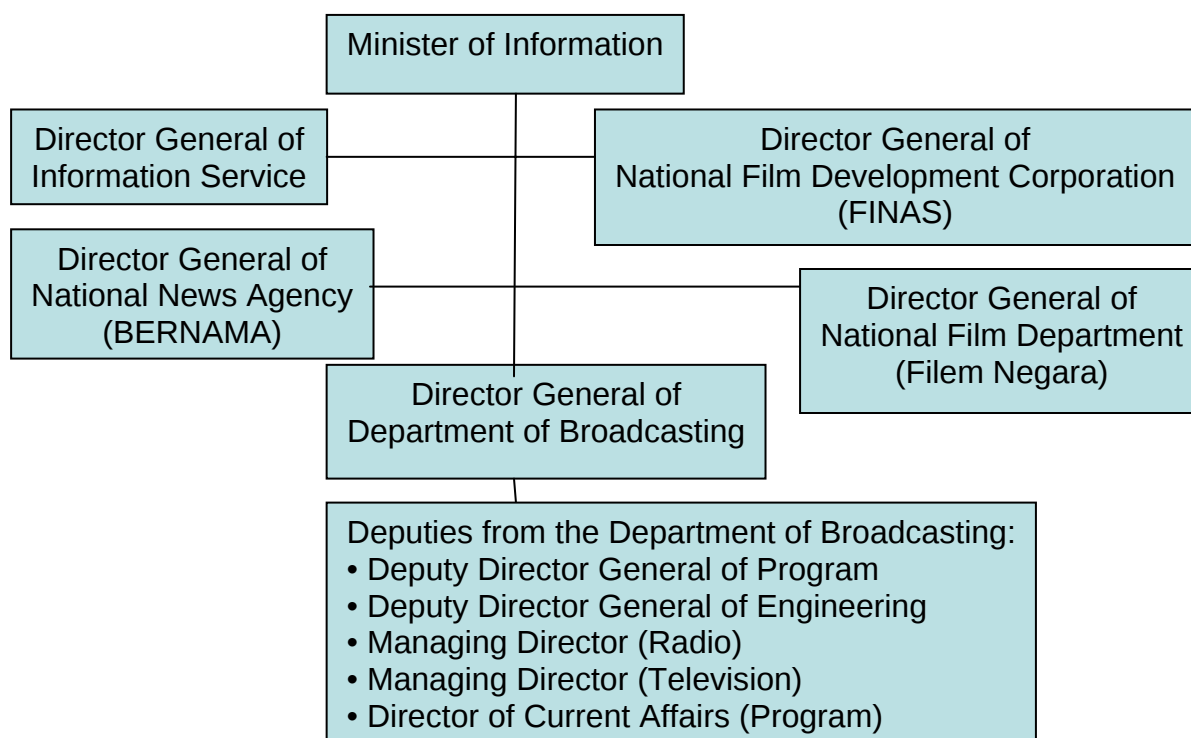
Department (Filem Negara), National Film Development Corporation (FINAS), National News Agency (BERNAMA), and Department of Information Service (see figure 5-1). It is through this meeting that “whatever the directives from the Prime Minister would be [are] conveyed to these Director Generals” (Personal communication with a RTM network executive, June 5, 2002).

The day after the post-Cabinet meeting, usually on a Thursday, a directorate-level meeting would be held within the Department of Broadcasting (RTM). The meeting is chaired by the Director General himself and attended by all the directors (or managing directors) of the respective agencies, including the managing director of Television Malaysia (see figure 5-2). The managing director of Television Malaysia would then chair the executive-level meeting on Friday with the respective unit controllers (see figure 5-3). The routine of this weekly executive meeting on one hand is for the controllers to update the Managing Director on the activities within the units and on the other hand is to inform him of the “directives from upstairs.” The respective controllers would then return to their units and relay the directive to their subordinates, either through a unit-level meeting or individually. As one RTM network executive pointed out, if the government deemed it necessary to instill certain messages into programs to be aired on the government television network, this would be the most common way of doing it (although occasionally the Minister might pass down a directive without waiting for the weekly routine if he thought the situation warranted it). Through this routine verbal directives are given to all the RTM network executives, including the panelists who scrutinize the independent producers’ drama projects. With the panelists from different units (Drama, Research and Development, Network and *Swasta*) all being

Table 5-6

Routine Route to Deliver Directives from Cabinet to RTM's Network Executives

Day of week	Level of meeting
Wednesday morning	Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister
Wednesday afternoon	Post-Cabinet meeting chaired by Information Minister
Thursday	Directorate-level meeting chaired by Director General RTM
Friday	Executive-level meeting chaired by Managing Director TV

*Figure 5-1: Attendees at the Post-Cabinet meeting.*

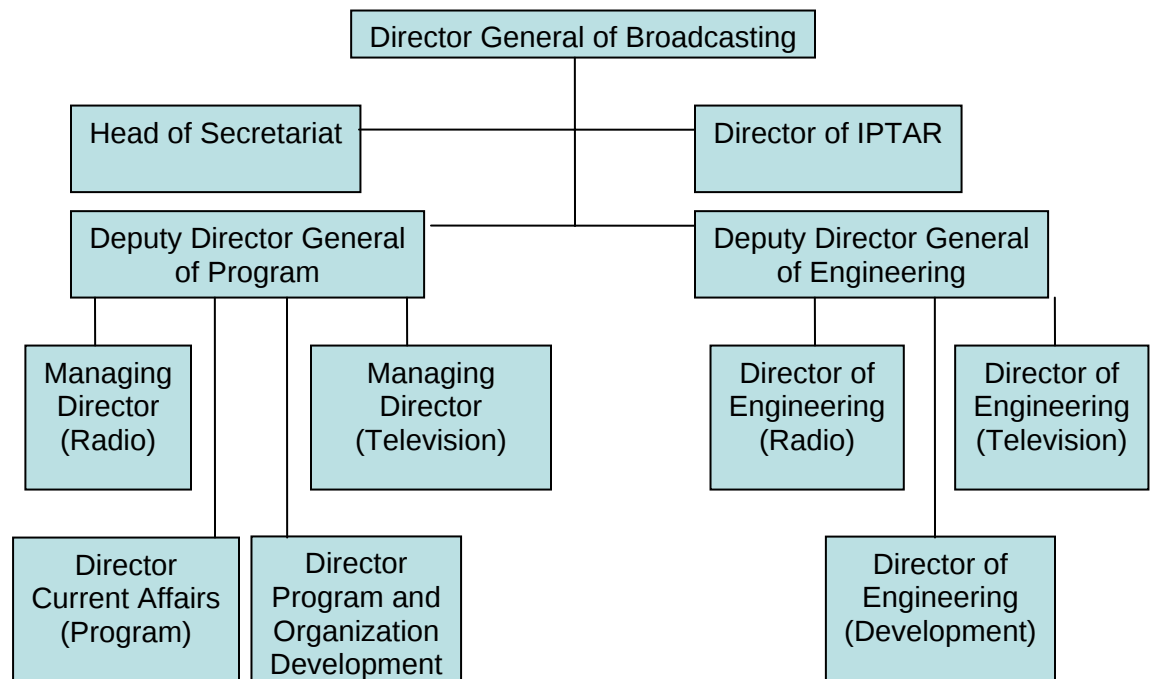


Figure 5.2: Attendees at the Department of Broadcasting Directorate-level meeting.

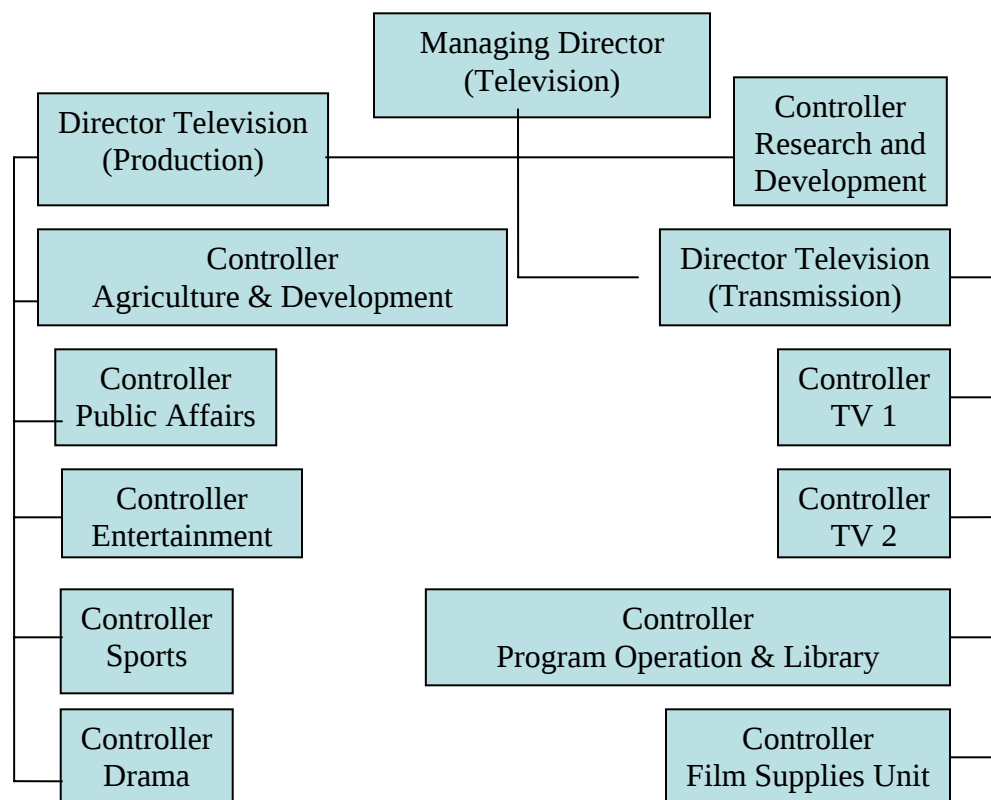


Figure 5.3: Attendees at Television Malaysia's Executive-level meeting

informed of the directive, it is unlikely that upcoming programs could ignore the aspirations of the political leader.

Closely Observing Policymakers' Aspirations

In addition to informing them by directive, the authority also expects the civil servants to be observant and understand the need of the government at the time. Being sensitive to the policymakers' aspirations is an unwritten but important part of an RTM network executive's job description. Newspaper coverage on current affairs, especially on domestic issues relating to government policies, became a crucial means to tap into such sensitivity, one of them pointed out:

Whatever [is] happening I had to read the newspapers, I had to be alert of what the cabinet wants. I had to be alert you know what the other TV channels across the world are saying about Malaysia. [Once] I had these inputs, [but sometime] I had no time to read all the newspapers, so the paper cutting is given to me. I had to be alert to of the situation. Whatever things [that are] about our policy, our government policy, that is [part of] my job. So they [the producers] can have [those messages included in] the stories (Personal communication with a RTM network executive, June 30, 2001).

A former colleague of his echoed the same understanding that television practitioners in general and RTM staff in particular, must be "alert to what the cabinet wants":

You must sense that you are in a government institution; everything we do [we] must follow the policy. Therefore, from time to time, change of policy or change of people [policymaker such as the Minister of Information], we must be aware of it, must be very sensitive [to this kind of thing]. . . . Whatever the government policy, it is best that you are in sync with it, through drama or anything. For instance, for a period of time, we must include *Muhibah* [or racial] unity, that kind of thing, so the theme [of the story] must somehow relate to that. . . other time is the government's Seven Year Plan, so you must find a theme that goes along with that. After all, we are a government organization (Personal communication with a former RTM network executive, July 2, 2001).

In fact, at the official opening of TV-*Tiga*'s operation center in 1996, the Prime Minister himself openly adjured television practitioners to be sensitive to what the government wanted. He said that "although the current level of censorship conducted by television networks generally meet the Government's requirement, they are sometimes lacking in sensitivity towards the problems faced by the Government." He further illustrated his point:

For example, while we discourage illegal racing, there was a film glorifying such activity in other countries. The staff assigned to vet and censor the films should be aware of

efforts taken by the Government, particularly in nation-building” (“Broadcast stations to vet,” 1996).

During the process of approving an independent drama producer’s project, RTM network executives have to ensure that the program meets many requirements. Some are written, but many are not. One of the unwritten rules, deemed so essential that it needs no justification from the authority, is to ensure that whatever content is on air does not put the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* government in a bad light. Such mentality makes it virtually impossible to address social issues in local drama television. As a political force in power for more than four decades, the authority tends to see any depiction of social problems on screen as criticism of the Administration. To avoid being interpreted as badmouthing the government, many producers learned that the best way to ensure “safe passage” through the network executives is to produce one of the two relatively-trouble-free genres: love story or family drama. In fact Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad himself has urged local television producers to produce more “family-oriented programs” and stated, “It will be better to show family dramas, series on development and other such shows” (“More family-oriented shows,” 1991).

As these genres focus mainly on interpersonal relationships between love ones or relationships within a family, its problems are deemed as wrongdoing or shortcomings of the individuals within the story. Other genres such as police or political drama run the risk of being interpreted as attacking authority if the story is not “handled” properly. Another incentive for independent producers as well as RTM network executives to produce love stories or family drama is that the government’s policy or a political leader’s aspiration could easily be incorporated into the storyline without placing it in the

larger context of society. For instance, at one point, an independent producer was asked to look into occupations that are listed in the Labor Department's document but are unfamiliar to the general public and he incorporated the information into the storyline (personal communication with a network executive, June 30, 2001). Such effort later was used to introduce new industries through the drama program.

The function of the RTM panelists apparently was to safeguard the interest of country in name but of the ruling party in fact. The system in place has ensured that regardless of the panelists' personal viewpoints, the *Barisan Nasional* government's sentiment prevails. Also, as the largest buyer in the Malaysian drama television industry, the RTM network putatively interact with independent drama producers negotiations but in fact does not. As one RTM plainly pointed, out independent drama producers could bring forth their story, but "we will change it, channel it to suit the requisition of the station and the needs of the country (Personal communication with a RTM network executive, June 30, 2001).

Commissioning Process III: Problems after Issuing the Letter of Intent

Once the script and matters such as casting and budget are agreed upon by both RTM and the independent producer, a letter of intent would be issued by RTM's *Swasta*. An independent producer would be able to use this document to apply for a loan from a financial institution. However, many independent producers have pointed out that most of the banks in Malaysia consider television production a high risk enterprise and therefore are unwilling to issue loans for such projects. To help the independent producer and to boost the broadcasting industry, in 1996 the Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat announced that the government has set up a RM 50 million fund that is

supervised by the Malaysia Development Bank (*Bank Pembangunan Malaysia*). Independent producers could apply for loans to produce television drama or motion pictures. However, such benefit applies only to *Bumiputera* producers and production houses (“RM 50m fund for *Bumiputeras*,” 1996). As for the non-*Bumiputera* producer, the authority seemed to assume that such aid is unnecessary.

The letter of intent from *Swasta*, however, merely reflects the intention of the government networks at the time but by no means it is a guarantee to the independent producer that RTM would eventually purchase the product. Hence, as far as a television producer is concerned, from the point when the letter of intent is issued till the network accepts and airs the program, there is always a possibility that his investment might not see a return. One apparent hurdle is the Censorship Board. Although RTM network executives during the process of approving the script have been taking the Censorship Board guidelines into consideration, there is no telling what the final outcome might be. Sometime even RTM network executives “don’t understand” the Censorship Board’s decisions. However, since it is a government television network, its executives have to ensure that the Censorship Board’s decision is adhered to. This often means the producer has to bear the consequences, regardless of the fact that the drama program had been scrutinized and approved by RTM. In addition to the Censorship Board, there were also instances when the government network rejected the end product, which had been approved earlier, based on other grounds. In the 1990s, one of the potential problems that often got a producer off guard at this stage of dealing with RTM, had less to do with the content of the drama program and more with the personal life of the actor or actress who took part in the project.

Zarina Zainuddin, a Malay movie and television actress performed as the leading character in four movies and 20 television dramas in 1992, suddenly became a major problem for the producers for whom she worked. In October 1992, nude pictures of Zarina Zainuddin were sold in the black market of Kuala Lumpur: Twelve ringgits each for color photographs and 30 cents for photocopies. Subsequently, all her projects were banned by RTM following the directive issued by the Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat. Due to the ban, it was estimated that the various producers faced the loss of RM 2 million ("Mum's behind me," 1992). The Information Minister voiced his reasoning for the ban and pointed out, "My directive is simple. Artistes who fail to reflect the moral values of the East will face disciplinary action" ("I ordered RTM ban," 1992).

The actress later lodged a police report and claimed that those nude photographs were taken five years earlier, when she was "young and eager for stardom" ("Nude photos of," 1992). She also pointed out that the man who took the photograph tried to blackmail her. The incident prompted her to say, "I was the victim of someone who spoke sweet words to me. I had worked hard to make something of myself as an actress. But the pictures have taken all that from me" ("Mum's behind me," 1992). However, her cry for understanding did not win any sympathy from the Information Minister. In the following years, she sent several appeals to the Information Ministry, without success. An official from the Ministry simply said, "We have to set an example to prevent other aspiring starlets from doing the same" ("Flaunt your assets," 1993). Unfortunately, the drama programs that cast Zarina as the leading lady ended up as collateral damage under the Minister's wrath against the actress.

The case of Zarina was not an isolated one. In 1995, films and television dramas directed by Nasir Jani faced the same fate. The Malay film director's series of "rowdy behaviors" had caused some concern from the authority. They include assaults against two photojournalists, uttering four-letter words on TV-*Tiga*, and wearing a T-shirt "bearing a derogatory remark against the Prime Minister" during the court hearing ("KL bans controversial," 1995). From 1996 to 2001, 15 artists were banned by the Ministry of Information because of behaviors such as alleged *khalwat* (close proximity between a man and a woman who are not married to each other), indecent statements, drunkenness and drug addiction ("Information Ministry imposes ban," 2001). For an independent producer who works hard to adhere to RTM's demands, the artists' misbehaviors could easily serve as a catalyst to shut the drama program out of the government television network completely.

Once a producer completes the drama production – adhering to all of RTM's requests and without running into any unthinkable scenarios – two VHS copies of the program are to be sent for final assessment: one to the Censorship Board and the other to RTM. Recommendations – pass, pass with cut or ban – again are given and the independent producer rarely argue against these decisions. After all the necessary adjustments, the final print would be sent for technical assessment and scheduled for transmission. However, the producer's struggle is yet to be over. Getting the payment from the television networks also is a major problem independent producers have to face.

*Commissioning Process IV: Completion of Project, Awaiting Payment and
Other Related Issues.*

In March, 1996, the local drama television industry was stunned by a call by Film Directors' Association Malaysia for the government to look into the issue of unfair distribution of airtime on the government television network. The allegation came a week after a meeting among the Deputy Finance Minister Affifuddin Omar, representatives from television professional's organizations (including Film Producers' Association, Film Directors' Association), and senior officers from HVD. The meeting apparently was held because the Deputy Finance Minister had "received a report which stated that *bumiputera* film suppliers only received 11 percent of contracts while HVD, which is a non-*bumiputera* company, was granted 46 percent of the pie" ("Favoritism charge against RTM," 1996). To make things worse, *Keris Motion*, a rival *bumiputera*-owned production consortium forwarded statistics to the Deputy Finance Minister stating that HVD had been "receiving payments amounting to RM40, million within a year from RTM when, in fact, it was supposed to get only about RM5.97 million a year from the station" ("Favoritism charge against RTM," 1996). The move to involve the Ministry of Finance in the matter of RTM's favoritism might seem unusual but the accusers apparently knew how the system worked. While it was within rights of the Ministry of Information to award airtime, as a government television network the payment was released by the Ministry of Finance. By pointing out that a non-*bumiputera* had been allocated "46 percent of the pie" while *bumiputera* companies had only 11 percent (contrary to the government stipulated 60 percent *bumiputera* and 40 non-*bumiputera*

ratio) these *bumiputera* companies successfully involved the Ministry of Finance in this matter.

The Ministry of Finance's involvement, however, introduced a new challenge for the producers, an outcome probably unexpected by these *bumiputera* companies. To ensure that the government network rectified the problem, the Ministry ceased to release payment for programs that were already aired by RTM. Columnist Siri Bintang described the consequence, "As a result, all program suppliers, non-*bumis* and *bumis* alike, are feeling the pinch as hundreds of thousands of ringgit are indefinitely stuck. If the situation persists, producers will be badly affected as they surely need to replenish their working capital ("Shrinking the pool of players," 1997).

Beyond the concern of the Ministry of Finance, which serves as an agent to enforce the 60-40 quota, the matter of late payment is another problem that independent producers constantly face. Many said that it is not uncommon for their production houses have to wait as long as six months to a year after the program is aired to get paid. However, this phenomenon is not unique to the television industry. On July 4, 2001, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi openly requested "government agencies to ensure prompt payments to contractors and suppliers of government projects" ("Pay contractors on time," 2001). The late-payment problem for the private networks' – especially TV-*Tiga* – according to many producers, appears to be even more severe. For a period of time, when TV-*Tiga* ran into financial difficulty, it was unable to make payments, but it continued to commission programs from the independent production houses. According to some, TV-*Tiga*'s debt to the independent production houses was in

the millions, which at one point prompted a lawsuit against the private television network.

Summary

Drama programs produced by Malaysian independent producers, approved by RTM and LPF, are products that are of great concerns to the authority. The concern over social taboos – big and small – has in general, made television drama too predictable. The entertainment factor of drama programs although considered, as there is always a network executive from the Drama Unit, often takes a back seat. Entertainment would never be emphasized at the risk of offending any “sensitivities.” Such overwhelming concern over social taboos has created drama programs which many Malaysians, especially teenagers, considered predicable, artificial, biased, simplistic and condescending (“Tuning in to teen,” 1995). It is unlikely that RTM network executives sitting on the panel know little about the art of storytelling and entertainment. After all, many of them had years of experience as producer-directors before RTM drama programming was turned over to the private sector. However, in a position where the role of a civil servant overpowers the capacity of a creative mind, these network executives’ hands are tied. They are unlikely to push for creative boundaries in a significant and meaningful manner, particularly when under the supervision of an authority that is extra cautious about potential ramifications from different sectors of the society.

Aside from social taboos, the concerns from the “people higher up” also play an important role in the decision-making process. While some of these decisions are made to echo the Cabinet’s call to better the society, some are for the self-interest of particular individuals in power. The television industry is not exempt from cronyism and

corruption. Favoritism from the “people upstairs” means that the middle management level RTM network executives have to, at some point, “close one eye” on the allocation of airtime to particular production houses. In many instances they are careless of the production quality of the program, as long as its content stays within the boundary of those constraints. Again, non-professional considerations overwhelm the professional ones.

While the main thrust of this chapter is to outline the in-house censors’ mentality and commissioning process of the government network, it is important to point out that the private television networks share similar attributions. Although by comparison, the private networks, TV-*Tiga*, NTV-7 and ASTRO, are slightly more lenient, they are under the same constraints set by the Ministry of Information and Ministry of Home Affairs’ Censorship Board. The Minister of Information regularly meets with the private networks’ top management officers to ensure that all the television networks are equally aware of the authority’s concern at the time. Hence, it is not unusual to see NTV-7’s *Spanar Jaya* (Spanner Street) and TV-*Tiga*’s *Kopitiam* (Coffee Shop) echo the theme of *Muhibah*. The rules apply to all networks, regardless whether government- or private-owned. For the so called local “independent” producer, the content of the program he supposedly creates is not so “independent” after all.

CHAPTER 6

THE *BARISAN NASIONAL*'S 4Cs MODEL OF CONTROL, THE CONSEQUENCES & ITS FUTURE

Previous chapters have outlined the different levels of constraints that challenge Malaysian drama television practitioners. In this chapter, the researcher focuses specifically on the imbalance of power relationships between media staff and the *Barisan Nasional* regime. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first discusses the control rationalized and exercised by Malaysia's authoritarian government. The second part addresses some of the phenomena prompted, intentionally or unintentionally, by this model of control. In part three, the researcher highlights social and political transformations currently underway in Malaysia which may change its television industry.

The 4Cs Model of Control: Justifications for Constraints and Modes of Control

An analysis of the Malaysian drama television industry would not be complete without consideration of the nature of the nation's authoritarian political leadership. Previous studies (Williams, 1962; Merrill & Lowenstein, 1971; Jakubowicz, 1990; Hachten, 1996) have established that under an authoritarian system, media practitioners are more inclined to play a subservient role. Commenting on the relationship between media practitioners and political power in such regimes, Hachten (1996) specifically pointed out that:

[Media practitioners] exercise a good deal of self-censorship, but never know for sure just how far they can go without triggering official disfavor and intervention.

They must support the status quo and neither advocate change, criticize the nation's leadership nor give offense to the dominant moral or political values" (p. 16).

The unequal power relationship between an authoritarian regime and media practitioners is frequently justified by political leadership as a necessary means for society to preserve economic prosperity, social harmony and political stability. Previous studies (Williams, 1962; Merrill & Lowenstein, 1971; Jakubowicz, 1990; Hachten, 1996) have acknowledged this "basic principle of authoritarianism" (Hachten, 1996, p. 15). That media practitioners play a subservient role, either willingly or unwillingly, for the sake of preserving "public peace and order" deserves further examination. Examination of the way the *Barisan Nasional* government attempts to manage content of television drama can illuminate the relationship between media and the authoritarian regime in Malaysia.

The *Barisan Nasional* government's means of managing the content of local drama television can be summed up by the concept of "the 4Cs," which stand for Crisis-aversion, Compromise-prone, Centralized-controlled and Cronyism, and they represent the key justifications or modes of control that the *Barisan Nasional* coalition employs to co-opt media workers into internalizing authoritarian content policies. Although the Malaysian government does not clearly spell it out, formal rules and statements made by high-ranking government officials clearly indicate that these four factors play an important role in shaping the mindset of Malaysian television practitioners. The 4Cs can be subdivided into two groups. The first two—Crisis-aversion and Compromise-prone—are the justifications frequently cited by the *Barisan Nasional* government (and accepted

by media practitioners) for the need to constrain media content, especially in television. The second two—Centralized-controlled and Cronyism—are the modes of control that the government employs to manage the television industry.

Justification for Constraints: Crisis-aversion and Compromise-prone

“Malaysia is a difficult place to govern.” This how a local drama television producer explained the many written and unwritten constraints imposed upon the media industry by government. This statement assumes that the stability and harmony of Malaysian society can be harmed by problematic issues presented in the media. These issues, if not handled with care, could turn into political or social crises that might harm the Malaysian “way of life”. This view is dominant among local media professionals.

The *Barisan Nasional* government is responsible for this widespread belief. The “scariness” of social conflict is continuously stressed by officials. The coalition government argues that in a racially and religiously pluralistic society, Malaysians’ willingness to make sacrifices (or rather concessions) is the only way to maintain social harmony. Conflicts between *Bumiputera* (sons/daughters of the soil) and non-*Bumiputera*, as exemplified by the communal riot of May 13, 1969, are often portrayed as the outcome of previous generations’ unwillingness to make compromises. On the other hand, achievements, such as the bargain reached among UMNO, MCA and MIC that led to the nation’s independence on August 1, 1957, are often attributed to Malaysians’ willingness to make concessions for the greater good of the society. It should be noted that compromise is expected only of the people, not of government and political leaders. Using this dichotomy of “compromise or crisis” to interpret past achievements and failures, the government nurtured a culture that embraces social constraints. Media

staff, as a result, are conditioned to select and present stories in a limiting and predictable manner. The relationship between Malaysia's government and media practitioners—basically one of imposing limits and adjusting to those limits—can be viewed through the frame of this “justification of constraints.”

The “justification for constraints” is made up of two components: crisis-aversion and compromise-prone. Each of these components is an interpretation (although not an exact phrasing) of the ruling coalition's justification of its authoritative practices. To support its crisis-aversion tendencies, Malaysia is presented as a society constantly challenged by potential crises from within and without. As Malaysians are taught to be averse to these crises, it is necessary in the name of the common good for the government to take extreme measures. To be compromise-prone is the government's answer to counter problems of crisis. In addition, officials argue that compromise is an Asian virtue that Malaysians hold dear. An uncompromising or confrontational way of dealing with problems is seen as un-Malaysian. Together, the crisis-aversion and compromise-prone rationales are used by the government as explanations for its authoritarian rule.

Functions of the “Justification for Constraints”

The “justification for constraints” serves two apparent functions. First, it validates the *Barisan Nasional* government's mobilization of civil servants, in particular the gatekeepers of RTM and the National Censorship Board. Often describing their work as merely exercising the will of the government, civil servants play a crucial role in controlling the Malaysian media industry. It is through the civil servants that the government is able to initiate rules, written as well as unwritten, that inhibit the creativity of local television drama producers. However, it would not be in the *Barisan Nasional*

government's best interest for civil servants to perceive themselves or to be seen by the general public as working for the ruling coalition in suppressing the media. The suppressive acts have to be interpreted by civil servants and projected to the public as serving the common good of the society. The justification for constraints fulfills this specific function. It enables the government to mobilize the civil servants with moral authority.

The second function of the "justification for constraints" is to warrant the practice of self-censorship among media workers. As stated earlier, the gatekeeping process of Malaysian drama television production encourages the practice of self-censorship. "Playing safe," a euphemism for self-censorship, is the most effective strategy to cope with the many vaguely defined guidelines. Although "playing safe" results from Malaysian authority's stringent control, the coalition government wants the practice to be invisible. Self-censorship is presented as a practice that media staff members voluntarily follow out of their social conscience. Of course, media practitioners do exercise self-censorship, but more for reasons of getting past the gatekeepers than for social good.

After years of using these justifications to mobilize civil servants to impose constraints and to rationalize self-censorship in the media, crisis-aversion and compromise-prone explanations have been successfully positioned as part of Malaysian social consciousness. Producers rarely challenge the constraints partly because they are fearful of being labeled troublemakers, but mainly because they have internalized this way of thinking. It should be noted that media workers are not alone in this matter; most Malaysians accept this rationalization, too. The historical background of this deserves some attention.

Racial Politics and the “Justification for Constraints”

Many Malaysians accept the need for government-imposed media constraints on racial matters. This view emerged in the aftermath of the communal riot of May 13, 1969. In the post-riot era, racial conflict certainly was not an imaginary crisis, but a concern shared by everyone. Today, after more than 30 years, with so much effort invested and so many sacrifices made to engender racial harmony, the “justification for constraints” continues to be used by the *Barisan Nasional* “to keep the masses cowed and subservient” (“(Re)building Democracy,” 2003). The government maintains that the nation continues to be haunted by the potential for racial crisis. On November 3, 2003, in his maiden speech to Parliament as Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi warned that “issues that inflame religious, racial, and cultural sentiments should not be sensationalized while attempts to undermine national security must be dealt with firmly” (“Pak Lah Pledges,” 2003). The new Prime Minister’s warnings were nothing new; he was merely repeating the rhetoric of his predecessors: Tun Abdul Razak, Hussein Onn and Mahathir Mohamad. The question, then, is why does the relationship between different communal groups continue to be so fragile after all these years?

To answer this question, one must look first at the political landscape of Malaysia. Unlike the opposition parties, *Barisan Nasional* is the only political grouping in Malaysia that has successfully housed member-parties from different communal groups. In the 1999 election, several communal-based opposition parties sought to replicate the *Barisan Nasional* formula. Under the leadership of PAS (*Parti Islam SeMalaysia*, Islamic Party of Malaysia), the diverse factions of DAP (Democratic Action Party), KeADIL (*Parti Keadilan Nasional*, National Justice Party) and PRM (*Parti Ra’ayat Malaysia*, Malaysia

People's Party) formed the *Barisan Alternatif* (The Alternative Front) coalition. It aimed to appeal to different racial groups "in the manner of the *Barisan Nasional*" (Leifer, 2001, pp. 70). This attempt to challenge the *Barisan Nasional* coalition, using its own formula, boosted the support only of Malay-based PAS but not the Chinese-based DAP. While PAS increased its parliamentary seats from seven to 27 and gained legislative control of the state of Terengganu, DAP managed to capture only 10 out of 193 parliamentary seats and its leader, Lim Kit Siang, lost his Parliamentary seat.

The failure of the *Barisan Alternatif* in the 1999 election shows how *Barisan Nasional* used the notions of crisis-aversion and compromise-prone to maintain its political hegemony. During the election, through mainstream media and other political campaign mechanisms, the *Barisan Nasional* coalition constantly warned that supporting the PAS-led *Barisan Alternatif* would undermine the non-*Bumiputera* way of life. It would particularly put at risk religious freedom, and inevitably provoke communal friction. This would, it maintained, destabilize society and this could destroy the country's economy. For the "New (middle class) Malays" who emerged in the 1980s as a result of the New Economy Policy and other pro-*Bumiputera* policies, a crisis of such magnitude would be detrimental to their newly accumulated wealth. Engendering such paranoia over another May 13, 1969-style incident benefits the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* coalition greatly.

The viability of the *Barisan Nasional* depends, to a large extent, upon the racial nature of Malaysian politics. Consequently, it does not aim to resolve racial problems permanently; it merely seeks to manage and exploit them. So at times of political necessity, the coalition projects racial matters as crises that only the *Barisan Nasional* can

handle appropriately. Race, therefore, is maintained as an ultra-sensitive issue 30 years after the May 13 riots.

Foreign Programs and the “Justification for Constraints”

In 1991, the Ministry of Information introduced two policies that have had a great impact on the television industry. It first introduced the VHSC (violence, horror, sex and counter-culture) guidelines as part of its censorship criteria, starting on February 22 of that year. Secondly, it announced that local television networks were to increase their locally produced programs up to 80 percent by the year 2000. It is important to note that the government has always wanted to increase local content on Malaysian television; the 80 percent local content policy merely reiterates the authority’s intention all along. More importantly, the aim of these policies was to cut the amount of foreign, particularly Western, programs shown on television. Authorities believed that programs imported from Western countries, especially the United States, tended to emphasize elements of violence, horror, sex and counter-cultures (such as punk rock, heavy metal music and homosexual themes) that were considered offensive to Malaysian and Malay-Muslim traditions. With the view that Malaysians, particularly the younger generation, might be influenced by these foreign cultures, authorities chose to limit the amount of foreign programs on national television.

That foreign television programs, particularly those from the United States, are filled with corrupt values has been a consistent critique by Malaysian political officials. Foreign programs have always posed a dilemma for the ruling government. On one hand, they are needed by networks to fill airtime. On the other, they are perceived by

conservative political leaders as agents of moral decline. This dilemma was exaggerated by the Prime Minister's implementation of privatization and Islamization policies.

The launch of private television services— TV-*Tiga* in 1984, ASTRO in 1997 and NTV-7 in 1998—resulted from Mahathir's privatization policies. His initial aim was partly to make the local television industry more efficient and responsive to the demands of Malaysian society. He wished in particular to channel the attention of Malaysians from foreign programs to local productions. However, as the local television production sector was unable to supply the demand for the new services, foreign programs were relied upon to fill expanded airtime. This prompted the conservative sector of society, particularly religious leaders of the influential Malay-Muslim community, to question the government's decision to privatize the television industry. Since the Malay-Muslim community was a core constituency of UMNO and the source of Mahathir's 1980s Islamization policy, their concerns had to be addressed. On the other hand, as the *Barisan Nasional* coalition had business interests in private television, a complete ban of foreign programs was unlikely.

To resolve this contradiction, the *Barisan Nasional* government first allowed the importation of foreign programs to satisfy demands of the television industry and then imposed stringent censorship criteria, including VHSC guidelines, in response to Malay-Muslim complaints. Politically, the implementation of the VHSC guidelines allowed the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* coalition to assert that government does indeed champion Islamic values. However, the result was a demonizing of foreign television programming.

Interestingly, authorities described the influx of foreign programs to fill local television schedules (which they had permitted) as a form of colonialism and as media

imperialism. In January, 2003, when Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi spoke to the members of the Censorship Board, he specifically argued that “outsiders”—the West, particularly the United States—used “arts as a license” to launch new forms of colonialism against Malaysian ethics and culture. He asserted therefore that the Censorship Board should be considered part of national security “to counter idealism and ideologies which are absorbed through arts and other forms of entertainment” (“Outsiders Now Using Arts,” 2003). Badawi’s comment is typical of many by government officials. By saying that there is a “special agenda” on the part of foreign media “to change the social and cultural precepts” of Malaysian society (“Outsiders Now Using Arts,” 2003), the government has advanced an impression of a moral crisis inspired by Malaysia’s former colonizer and its co-conspirators. The fact that the government and the local television networks are also responsible for importing these foreign programs is conveniently ignored.

Modes of Control: Centralized-controlled and Cronyism

The *Barisan Nasional* government generally uses two modes of control to ensure that its authoritative measures are not violated by local media. First, it centralized regulatory control through two agencies: the Ministry of Information and the National Censorship Board. Secondly, it uses cronies to dominate the private television networks. While the former is a mode of control exercised by the government at the regulatory level, the latter is an informal but systematic practice to ensure that only media practitioners who are affiliated with or supportive of *Barisan Nasional* are awarded the franchises for local television networks.

The *Barisan Nasional* government's concern over the influence of drama television shows that it accepts that mass media have a direct impact on their audiences. This concept of mass media resembles the "Magic Bullet Theory" introduced in the 1920s (Baran and Davis, 2003, p. 77) but has long been discarded by communication scholars. However, it continues to be a notion widely held by authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world. This perception of media's effects helps explain why the government finds it necessary to maintain a tight grip on the media industry.

Formal Mode of Control: Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Information

The dos and don'ts of Malaysian media content are determined largely by two government agencies: The Ministry of Information and the National Censorship Board. The function of the Ministry of Information is to steer the direction of media content to fit government policies and the ruling coalition's political agendas. In this regard, the role of Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM)—one of the departments under the Ministry—is to showcase the kind of television content preferred by the regime. In contrast, the National Censorship Board, an agency under the Ministry of Home Affairs, has the function of filtering out materials that are judged inappropriate. These two agencies work hand in hand—the Ministry of Information providing general direction on the kinds of contents preferred and the National Censorship Board eliminating undesirable material.

The inter-ministerial cooperation between the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Information ensures that the kind of program content put on the air is responsive to the demands of the regime. This is particularly true for RTM. It schedules a series of internal meetings (a post-cabinet meeting chaired by the Information Minister on Wednesday afternoon, a directorate-level meeting on Thursday, and an executive-level

meeting on Friday) after the Cabinet's Wednesday morning meeting to disseminate information on the Cabinet's requests. For the private television networks, the programs shown on RTM channels provide a glimpse of the kinds of programs favored by the regime. For independent television producers—regardless of whether they are providing programs for the government or private networks—knowing the government's preferences is vital to success. By these means private television networks and independent producers are guided to production of programs compatible with the political leaders' agendas.

There are other clues to government preferences. Several newspapers, including the English newspapers *The News Straits Time* and *The Star* and the Malay newspaper *The Utusan Malaysia*—the ownership of which is controlled by the member parties of the *Barisan Nasional*—also serve as regime mouthpieces. For many in the media, these *Barisan Nasional* or government-affiliated media organizations provide “valuable” guidance on content. Public speeches by the Prime Minister and his cabinet members are highlighted by these media outlets as they relay informal directives to the private sector.

Informal Mode of Control: Cronyism and Private Media Ownership

In addition to using the state apparatuses, the *Barisan Nasional* government also depends upon cronies to ensure that local television producers do not undermine its authority. Cronyism is practiced at two levels. At the higher level, the UMNO-led coalition openly awards licenses for operating private television networks to its affiliated business enterprises or to entrepreneurs who have close ties with high-ranking cabinet members. At the lower level, the government grants RTM's projects to production houses which patronize the regime in one way or another. While the former type of cronyism is

performed collectively and openly by the government, the latter is an illegal act practiced by middle- and high -ranking officials within the Ministry of Information.

Cronyism in Malaysian television began in the early 1980s and continued into the 1990s. At the beginning of the Mahathir Administration in 1981, the Prime Minister decided to launch TV-*Tiga* to combat the proliferation of videos in Malaysia. This provided an occasion for a group of enterprises and individuals closely associated with the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* coalition to assume control of the private television network. In the 1990s, the same cronyism pattern prevailed when the government granted licenses for operation of Metrovision, Mega TV, ASTRO and NTV-7.

Informal Mode of Control: Cronyism, Favoritism and Sub-contracting

The practice of lower-level cronyism grew in the mid-1980s when RTM, under the instruction of then Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat, invited independent production houses to provide programs for the two government-owned networks. The policy of outsourcing drama and entertainment programs to local production houses was part of the Information Minister's efforts to show support of Mahathir's privatization policy. As a result of this new policy, independent Malaysian television production houses emerged in the 1980s. In the 1990s, these firms enjoyed a boom as the minister required increased local content on Malaysian television. The ability to outsource programs to private production houses undoubtedly benefited both the government network and the private sector, but it also provided an opportunity for the *Barisan Nasional* regime to strengthen its political interests.

One common complaint about RTM's allocation of airtime is that the network tends to award contracts on the basis of political connections rather than professional

capabilities. While the government does not officially endorse this practice, it is commonly understood among the television practitioners that there are substantial advantages to maintaining good relationships with officials of the *Barisan Nasional* regime. To establish or maintain such relationships, television practitioners are more than happy to offer favors to government officials who have the authority to approve projects proposed by private production houses. These favors range from providing free (or below-market rate) audiovisual facilities for functions held by *Barisan Nasional* officials to sponsoring events that promote the coalition's political agendas. In return for favors, RTM allocates airtime to these production houses.

This has had negative consequences. Some well-connected companies that were awarded airtime were not actually equipped to produce television programs. To overcome the problem, these companies then sub-contracted their projects to other television production houses. Some producers acknowledged that the practice of sub-contracting was commonplace in the 1990s. By getting a contract from the government network and then handing it off to another production house at less cost, these well-connected companies were able to make a considerable profit with little effort. However, this practice was detrimental to local television production. As the well-connected company skimmed the profit by perhaps one-quarter or one-third, sub-contractors were frequently left with too-thin margins. Naturally, production houses were forced to cut corners in order to create programs.

Although well aware of the practice, RTM does not officially condone sub-contracting. As a result, sub-contractors are not allowed to take credit of their own work. To avoid being "exposed" for engaging in unsanctioned activities, sub-contracting

producers tended to be doubly cautious about programs they produced, exercising especially stringent self-censorship. By accepting these projects, sub-contractors hoped to build good relationships with intermediary companies and with officials who awarded the projects. They hoped eventually to establish their own separate, mutually beneficial connections with the appropriate government officials.

The 4Cs—Crisis-aversion, Compromise-prone, Centralized-controlled and Cronyism—are important notions for understanding Malaysian television. The historical, social and political background of Malaysia provides justification for the regime to constrain media practitioners. These restrictions are projected as compromises that media practitioners have to make in order to maintain social stability and racial harmony. Through the Ministry of Information and the National Censorship Board, the regime is able to filter out television content that diverges from government policy. By awarding licenses for private television enterprises and RTM projects to its cronies the *Barisan Nasional* government is able to prevent “disobedient” practitioners from continuing to produce programs for Malaysian television.

Some Observations On Media Industry Under Authoritarian rules

The authoritarian nature of the *Barisan Nasional* regime does more than force television producers into submission. In the following sections, the researcher offers his observations on three specific phenomena that are derived from this power relationship.

The Contradictions and Political Functions of the Muhibah Theme

In the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, at the insistence of the Ministry of Information, *muhibah* (feeling of friendship and love) was imposed on local drama television, particularly in non-*Bumiputera* productions. Most television practitioners

thought of the *muhibah* requirement as a nuisance; they had to deliberately insert a plot that did not flow with the story. As a result, the *muhibah* evolved into mere ritual. Today, the *Barisan Nasional* government still prefers local drama television producers to make programs imbued with the *muhibah* theme. Although this theme is no longer expressed in the ritualistic manner of an earlier era, nurturing racial harmony continues to be projected as an important subject matter.

The *Barisan Nasional* government's hypocrisy on racial issues is the reason that the *muhibah* theme cannot be presented in a way that it should. The fact that the regime disadvantages non-*Bumiputeras* by implementing a series of pro-*Bumiputera* policies – in particular economic and education policies – makes it unlikely to truly address the issues dividing communities. However, as a coalition that claims to represent the interests of different communal groups, it has to project itself as promoting “good will” between *Bumiputera* and non- *Bumiputera*. Therefore, it encourages local drama television producers to highlight harmony in Malaysia's multiracial society on the one hand, and ban discussion of delicate racial issues on the other. Prohibitions on discussion of such issues seem to imply that there are irreconcilable differences among Malaysia's communities which time cannot heal.

The government's ban against public discussion of racial issues makes one wonder why it continues to promote the theme of *muhibah* on national television. Drama with the *muhibah* theme does not, in fact, nurture understanding between different ethnic groups. Instead it shows Malaysia's public that the government is “trying” to improve the relationship between *Bumiputra* and non-*Bumiputera*. However, this artificial portrayal

serves only to remind Malaysians of the fragility of their racial relationship rather than to improve on it.

Stories with a patently false sense of the Malaysian reality only underscore the lack of resolution of racial tensions that have worried citizens since 1969. The contradiction in these television programs between *muhibah* and everyday experience surely makes Malaysians even more racially conscious, and hence the stories sustain social polarization. The implied threat is an advantage to *Barisan Nasional*, however, as it helps to justify its heavy-handed approach to governance. It reminds viewers that without the regime's firm hand, Malaysia might slip into chaos once again.

The Function of Censorship Apparatuses and Guidelines

Although many television practitioners have pointed out that knowing what the government wants is important for producing drama programs for national television, many are not knowledgeable about official censorship guidelines issued by the Ministry of Information. This is significant.

There are two reasons why many television producers are not mindful of official censorship guidelines. First, producers know from experience that guidelines do not matter. Actions against program content and producers occur seemingly at the whim of officials – they can ignore established rules when it is convenient, and they can reinterpret existing rules in distorted ways to force producers to create the desired kind of content. Second, the cues for what is acceptable and what is not are fed regularly to Malaysians by their semi-official media, such as the *New Straits Times*, and others. Political leaders are daily featured in newspaper stories wherein they deliver instruction to the public on issues of concern. These hints are picked up by media professionals who

utilize them in their practice of self-censorship. The ambiguity of the whole process enforces a need for conservative treatment on any subject that might arouse the ire of officials.

Even though the censorship guidelines issued by the Ministry of Information do not really matter much to the drama television practitioners, they serve another purpose. They can be used to inform the public that the government is safeguarding content of national television. In this the ministry positions itself on the moral high ground. One example is the introduction of the VHSC guidelines to woo the support of the Malay-Muslim community in the mid-1990s. In short, the censorship guidelines are targeted mainly at the general public rather than media workers.

Although television practitioners are not too concerned over the guidelines issued by authorities, they need to maintain a good relationship with the government. The *Barisan Nasional* regime has mechanisms in place to ensure that media practitioners do not step out of line. Knowing the process of getting past these censorship apparatuses is more crucial than comprehending the censorship guidelines. For the censorship process, in essence, is the routine used to intimidate television practitioners, so to ultimately coerce them into absolute compliance.

Television Producer as Collaborator for the Regime

While some media producers might have been forced into compliance, there are many who willingly agree with parameters set out by the government. For authorities, this attitude is crucial, for it legitimizes rules imposed by the regime. To encourage such attitudes, producers with a “good track record” for understanding the government difficulties and demands are often exempted from having to get their scripts approved by

network executives before they commence production. For them, only the final product needs to be sent for evaluation. Granting exemptions to these producers sends a message to the rest of the television industry of the attributes authorities prefer. It encourages television practitioners to work hard to gain the trust of the establishment.

For Malaysian television practitioners gaining the trust of authorities is paramount. The other option is unthinkable as they would be put out of business. With the television networks monopolized by the ruling political coalition, the producer in an authoritarian system has little power against the system. Television producers who “step over the boundary” may receive such punishments as major re-editing of finished programs, loss of airtime, banning of the project or even blacklisting of the producer. These punishments could easily shut down the production house and render the producer jobless. Most television practitioners have little choice but to work for the establishment rather than against it. In this way, the Malaysian government has been successful in co-opting the local drama television industry.

For a producer who has attained the trust of authorities, supporting the existing system is in his or her best interest. Even though many of them might have complained about the system’s rigidity, and ridiculed it, they nevertheless are part of it. They are the ones who ensure that the will of the regime is visualized on the small screen. As a result of their concession to please the authority, the Malaysian television industry is bound to produce mediocre drama programs. Consequently, Malaysian television practitioners should not be seen merely as victims, they should also be understood as willing collaborators in exercising the will of the *Barisan Nasional*.

Future of Malaysian Drama Television Industry

With the *Barisan Nasional* regime having such powerful controls over the television industry, one wonders if Malaysian drama television practitioners will ever have the opportunity to address subject matter that is beyond boundaries set out by the government. On the one hand, the constraints imposed by the *Barisan Nasional* regime have been internalized for more than 30 years. Less than cynical media staff members see these restrictions as conventions they must uphold in order to preserve the Malaysian way of life. More importantly, this perspective is constantly reinforced by state entities such as the National Censorship Board and Ministry of Information.

On the other hand, there are transformations that have taken place in Malaysia in recent years which might change the drama television industry in the near future. These are worth mentioning. First, it is the changing racial composition. In 2001, research revealed that minorities in Malaysia are dwindling (“Malaysia Census Shows,” 2001). In 1957, when the nation first gained its independence, almost 40 percent of the population was Malaysian-Chinese. More than 40 years later, this group has shrunk to 26 percent. If the current trend of late marriages and lower matrimonial rates among Chinese continues, it is predicted that by 2020, Chinese will comprise only 15 percent of the country’s population (“Malaysian-Chinese Population,” 2002). As race is a key ingredient for *Barisan Nasional* politics, this transformation could render the regime’s strategies of crisis-aversion and compromise-prone irrelevant.

Secondly, it is a generational transformation. The generation that witnessed the incident of May 13, 1969 is now in its 50s. The younger generation, who are more technological savvy – hence are more exposed to and informed by the outside world – is

relatively less concerned about the tension between *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera*. Their concern seems to focus more on the government's efficiency, transparency and integrity. Their attention could prompt questioning of the regime overwhelming control, direct as well as indirect, over the media industry.

Last but not least, it is the transformation of political leadership. In November, 2003, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi succeeded Mahathir Mohamad as Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister. Perceived to be a collectivist, a consensus builder and a leader with a "soft nature," many political analysts anticipate his political agenda to be drastically different from that of his predecessor. In January, 2004, his pledge to combat corruption, especially to stop "closed-door negotiations between private firms and government officials for public projects" ("Abdullah's Open Bid," 2004) prompted hope that there will be greater transparency and accountability under the Abdullah administration.

Under a regime in which the Cabinet in general and the Prime Minister in particular micro-managed many matters at a lower level, the political transformation from Mahathir Mohamad to Abdullah Badawi is crucial. If the new administration allows a growth of professionalism and a reduction in the coercion of television producers, many of the ills in the system can correct themselves. This, together with the shift in racial balance and the arrival of a new generation with fresh ideas, may permit dramatic changes in the practice of creativity in the media. In this future, the aspirations of all races in Malaysia can be accommodated and properly reflected in broadcasting programs.

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APPENDIX A: CENSORSHIP ASPECTS DEFINED UNDER THE FILM CENSORSHIP GUIDELINES

Ideological and Political Aspects

- Unconforming to the nation's ideology and the principles of the Rukunegara
- Broadcasting materials of origin from a communist country or having no diplomatic ties, unless with PERMISSION
- Communist propaganda
- Scene or dialogue degrading democracy
- Scene depicting the act of violence and aggression as the victor over law and order and not democratic.
- Degrading a sovereign government or an act of jester/tarnishing the image of a country.

Religious Aspect

The following matters are not allowed:-

- Touching the virtues of Islam
- Going against the faith, rules and teaching of Islam
- Going against the belief of the 'mazhab-mazhab Muktabar'; to disregard the authority of the 4 Mazhab and the belief of the 'Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah'.
- Going against the religious (jumhur) opinions of the majority of the religious leaders (ulama)
- Having some forms of 'Khurafat' elements such as worshipping the beach, cemetery and 'keramat'.
- Triggering restlessness and doubtfulness in within the public
- To against historical facts

- Writing down of the verses of the AI-Quran in other forms of writing other than the Arabic language.
- To question the authority of the religious leaders (ulama) as to the origin of the religious law (hukum ulama) that is the AI-Quran. Hadis, Ijmak and Qias.
- Believing that the "Guru" can give direction (syafaat) in the life after death (akhirat), to repent one's sin with the use of money
- Asking help. from the 'guru'/other persons or elements to reach God as in such films that are related to Islam
- To claim oneself or their 'guru' as the Prophet (Qamam) Mahadi
- Believing that the 'deaths' can give help when their names are summoned
- Believing that certain people do not die and will be reborn as special human beings
- Believing the existence of reincarnation
- To simply claim that other Muslims are infidel (kafir)
- To doubt the muslim law (fatwa) and authority of the Nation; Islamic Affairs Council (Majlis Kebangsaan bagi Hal Ehwal Agama Islam) and State Fatwa Unit (Fatwa Negeri-Negeri).
- To look down and disregard the authority and self-respect of the Muktabar Religious Leaders (Ulama-ulama Muktabar) in particular the Mufti
- Making use of the issues that can disunite the Islamic people in this country.
- To openly declare leaving the Islamic religion
- Scenes with elements of "syirik" that can tarnish the faith in Islam such as:
 - Aggressive practice of 'zikir' in darkness
 - Believing the reincarnation of other soul in the body of dead person

- film related to Islam and acted by Muslims
- Proud, boastful and proclaiming oneself as apostle (wali).

Social-cultural Aspect

- Social and Cultural values:
 - Going against the country's *Rukunegara* and the Government Policy
 - A wild way of life/ without the proper guidance
 - Fantasy
 - Elements of sex/excessive violence
 - Religious element
 - Ghost that is eerie
 - Going against the policy of a caring society
- Racial:-
 - The supremacy of one's race over another
 - Instigation that disrupt public peace
 - The distinction of one's race
 - High regard for one's race at the expense of another race
- Sex
 - Actions/movements and dialogues that lead toward sexual relationship
 - Sexual act
 - Lesbianism/homosexual/transvestite
 - The level/condition not allowed:
 - Body exposure that is erotic
 - Kisses that are erotic

- Hugging and groping
- Expressing one's love intimately
- Lewd signs and movements as well as uttering of obscene words
- Sexual act

Etiquette and Moral Aspects

Scenes that cannot be shown:

- Crime:
 - Teaching/ encouraging criminal delinquency
 - Giving the Impression that crime is profitable
 - Showing criminal as the victor
 - The authority supporting crime and not taking any legal action against it
- Violence
 - Causing Injury, pain and demolition of property
 - Violence for the sake of violence
 - Revenge
 - Dangerous weapon for the purpose of abuse
 - Show of extreme violence
- Scenes that need to be censored:
 - Showing the life of criminals who live in luxury derived from extortion, violence cruelty and fights and no legal action taken against them
 - Extreme violence and bloodshed scene shown repeatedly
 - Mass killing by means of shooting, bombing, stabbing, slashing and burning
 - Duel/fight that is extremely dangerous

- Special effect for short distance scene
- Extreme torturing of animals
- Horror
 - Scary/eerie scene
 - Extremely repulsive
 - Torturing scene focused at short distance
- Exception
 - True war films with historical values

Ban on Sex Films

- Films with element of sex or sex as its theme
- Incest
- Lewd sex film

BUT sex film for educational purpose is allowed with the conditions:

- NOT showing the secret parts of either man or woman
- NOT showing the scene of animals mating.

APPENDIX B: Film, Television Series and Advertisement Banned in Malaysia 2002

Title	Language	Reasons for ban				
The Hong Kong Happy Man II	Cantonese	Portrayal of immorality	drug abuse		sexual act	
Teenage Caveman	English	Profanity	drug abuse		promiscuity among young people	
Silent Trigger: Part 1 and 2	English	Portraying militancy	drug abuse	unbridled sexual acts	vulgarity	Extreme violence
Almost Famous	English	Alcoholism	drug abuse	Promiscuity	Portraying youth participation in free sex	
Migratory	Mandarin/English	Glorifying Western culture	drug abuse	Belittling demure, well-behave and submissive Easter women		portraying promiscuity
Payback	English	justifying criminal act and behavior		extreme violence		
Jaydev	Hindi	portraying senseless murder	police corruption	extreme violence	abuse of power	police seen cohorting with criminals
My Wife is gangster	Mandarin	portraying the activities of underworld figure	glorifying the female leader as a warrior		Sacrileging holy places	extreme violence and cruelty'
Yngwie Malmsteej: Play loud	English	Sporting long hair and mop tops	Man wearing earrings and bangles		Playing black metal music	
Surieyan	Tamil	portraying politicians cohorting with terrorists	Overthrowing a legitimately elected government			extreme violence
My Little Eye	English	Portray criminals as being free from persecution	Painting police as being evil			
Company	Hindi	Showing criminals begetting wealth	painting politicians in a negative light		depicting police as evil	projecting violence and cruel acts
Revelation	English	Insulting Christianity	Portraying human cloning			
Tumbal Alam Ghaib	Indonesian	Supernatural elements	praying to spirits		Practice of black magic	
Pengantin Iblis	Indonesian	Supernatural elements	praying to spirits		Practice of black magic	
Tumbal Kalung Setan	Indonesian	Supernatural elements	praying to spirits		Practice of black magic	
Roh Dari Kegelapan	Indonesian	Supernatural elements	praying to spirits		Practice of black magic	
Bayang-Bayang Iblis	Indonesian	Supernatural elements	praying to spirits		Practice of black magic	

Title	Language	Reasons for ban			
The believer	English	racial propaganda	projecting one race as superior to another		Religious controversy
Oji: The Section Chief, Episode 101-104	English	portraying misguided beliefs			promoting black metal culture
Crash 1 and 2	English	Sex as its theme	promoting lesbianism and homosexuality		
Friends (Year 8, Episode 11)	English	Portraying casual sex	promiscuity amongst youth	pregnancy outside of the institution of marriage	prostitution
Rowdy Dharbak	Tamil	portraying gangsters	roaming free	projecting police as weak and ineffectual	extreme violence
Petualang Tak Kenal Menyerah	Indonesian	Projecting crime begets wealth and richness		unrepentant criminals	extreme violence and sex
Incubus: Are you in	English	portraying free interaction between the sexes in unruly and erotic manner		vulgarity	Woman wearing bikinis which may incite lust among men
Wonder Seven	Cantonese	Extreme violence			
Dendam	Arabian	Portraying evil and vengeful acts			
MSW 2	Hungarian	portraying extreme sexual acts and pornography			
The man behind the Millennium	English	portraying the likeness of Muslim prophets which goes against the teachings of Islam			
Goyang Maut Mini Pelet	Indonesian	Portrays scantily clad female singers and transvestites on stage and raunchy dance numbers that may arouse may viewers			
Going Back	English	Profanity			
The Story of Jesus: The Ultimate Goal	English	portraying the likeness of Muslim prophets			
The Secret Files of The Spy Dogs: Episode 12	English	Questioning the sanctity and holiness of Islam			
Child play 2	English	Violence and murder			
Beringin. Episode 16	Malay	portraying behavior that is against the teaching of Islam			
True Love: Episode 1	Mandarin	Project the unhealthy and immoral culture in a school			
No 1	Tamil	Extreme violence against women			