Framing Islam-related issues during GE13: An analysis of Malaysian mainstream newspapers

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Abstract: The two major political coalitions in Malaysia are Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR), which are dominated by the Malay-Muslim majority. During the 13th national election, to gain public votes, the government used mainstream newspapers to frame Islam-related issues. This research focuses on the characterisation and information reported about Islam and Muslims during the 13th General Election. Using content analysis, we examine the coverage of such issues by the mainstream newspapers: *Berita Harian, Utusan Malaysia, New Straits Times*, and *The Star*. This analysis aims to provide a holistic review of the scope of the coverage during the period with a focus on how the Malaysian government framed Islam-related issues through the print media in order to gain the Malay votes. A total of 178 news articles were analysed, from which we found that 15 dominant issues were reported in the newspapers during that period. Among the most frequently reported Islam-related issues were *hudud* (prescribed punishments), Islamic state, and *kalimah Allah* (the word "Allah"), which were predominantly covered by the Malay newspapers. In addition, the data indicated that most of the news were inclined towards supporting the ruling coalition, i.e., Barisan Nasional.

Keywords: General Election 13; *hudud*; Islam-related issues; Malaysian newspaper; pro-government.

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Abstrak: Dua parti politik utama di Malaysia, Barisan Nasional (BN) dan Pakatan Rakyat (PR), didominasi oleh kumpulan etnik majoriti iaitu orang Melayu yang beragama Islam. Lantaran itu, Kerajaan menggunakan akhbar arus perdana dalam merangka isu-isu berkaitan Islam, bagi meraih undi pada pilihanraya umum yang ke-13. Kertas kerja ini memfokuskan kepada ciri-ciri dan maklumat berkaitan Islam dan orang Islam yang dilaporkan oleh media ketika pilihanraya umum yang ke-13. Dengan menggunakan analisis isi kandungan sebagai kaedah analisis penyelidikan, penyelidik-penyelidik menganalisis empat akhbar arus perdana: *Berita Harian, Utusan Malaysia, New Straits Times,* dan *The Star*, untuk memahami liputan isu-isu yang dikaji. Analisis ini bertujuan untuk memberikan gambaran menyeluruh tentang skop liputan isu-isu tersebut dengan tumpuan diberikan kepada bagaimana kerajaan menggunakan isu-isu berkaitan Islam untuk meraih undi daripada orang Melayu. Sejumlah 178 artikel berita dianalisis yang mana berita-berita dari empat akhbar arus perdana tersebut melaporkan 15 isu utama. Antara isu-isu utama yang dilaporkan adalah *hudud*, negara Islam dan perkataan Allah yang mana akhbar-akhbar berbahasa Melayu lebih dominan dalam melaporkan isu berkaitannya berbanding dengan akhbar-akhbar berbahasa Inggeris. Selain daripada itu, dapatan juga menunjukkan bahawa berita-berita tersebut menunjukkan sokongan terhadap parti pemerintah, Barisan Nasional.

Kata Kunci: Pilihanraya ke-13; hudud; isu berkaitan dengan Islam; surat khabar Malaysia; penyokong kerajaan.

On May 6, 2013, Barisan Nasional (BN) won 133 parliamentary seats and 275 state seats during the 13th General Election (GE13) (Mohd Shariff, 2013; Oorjitham, 2013). Similar to the results of the 2008 General Election, Malaysian voters in GE13 showed dwindling trust in the country's ruling coalition government, Barisan Nasional or the National Front. For the second time since 2008, BN won with a slim majority and lost the two-thirds majority it required to change the country's constitution (Smeltzer & Lepawsky, 2010). Despite the results of the GE13 being described as a "Chinese Tsunami", in which the majority of seats won by Pakatan Rakyat (PR) were within the areas with significant numbers of Chinese voters, it cannot be denied that the Malays constitute the majority of Malaysian voters. The GE13 marked a new trend in the political scenario in Malaysia. For the first time in the Malaysian election history, the battle between the pro-government (BN) and opposition (PR) political parties were dominated by the Malays. National Front or Barisan Nasional is a

coalition of 13 parties including United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN) to name a few of its component parties (Barisan Nasional, 2013). On the other hand, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) is made up of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR).

Islam-related issues emphasised by the two political parties played a crucial role in influencing the voting decisions among the Malays during GE13. More often than not, politicians and political leaders used the media to frame Islam-related issues to gain votes. Concomitantly, the newspapers play a significant role in influencing people's voting decisions. During an election campaign, Malaysian leaders, particularly political leaders, use the media, including newspaper, for publicity purposes and to update the voters about their activities. To maintain a place in the media, the politicians and political parties should "stick to certain conventions and genre which are needed by the media organisations to give priority to conflicts, power struggles and dramas" (Lee & Safar, 2009). Mun and Li (2011) asserted that the news coverage might influence how people vote for the representatives for the House of Representatives (federal level) and the State Legislative assembly (state level).

For Muslims, news related to Islam is of primary concern as Malaysia has a Muslim majority. As such, the media plays a role in informing the public about any issue related to Islam and Muslims. Similarly, mass media was inclined to attract public attention to these issues when the General Election was approaching. This was an attempt to gain their votes. Drawing on Malaysia as a case study, this study aims at explaining how newspapers framed Islam-related issues during GE13.

Research questions

This study focuses exclusively on the role of the newspapers in portraying Islam-related issues during the Malaysia's 13th General Election. Using the framing analysis, two research questions were posed. Firstly, "What are the dominant Islam-related issues covered by the newspaper during GE13," and secondly, "How do the Malaysian mainstream newspapers cover Islam-related issues?"

The importance of this study manifests itself in its contribution to the existing literature on media framing. Additionally, this study offers a clearer picture of the role of news coverage during the General Election. It offers important insights as to how the Malaysian government uses Islam-related news in the newspaper to garner electoral support. The research outcomes would generate a better insight into the role of the news media in elections, specifically for the local context as it analyses local dailies. This would benefit the media, government, researchers and scholars as it could enhance their knowledge in this field and thus serve as a reference.

News coverage and the election

Mass media is considered by many scholars and researchers as having a symbiotic relationship with politics and the political process (Adnan, 2013; Ahmad & Othman, 2014; Idid & Kee, 2012; McNair, 1999; Nain, 2002). In many countries, the mainstream mass media are usually owned or controlled by the ruling parties (Lumsden, 2013). As such, the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia are owned or controlled by several political parties that constitute the ruling coalition (BN) (Mohd Sani, 2010; Rajaratnam, 2009). McNair (1999, p.xi) argues that the advancement of the mass media affects the practice of democratic process:

> The gradual extension since the early nineteenth century of voting rights to wider and wider sections of the population, combined with the emergence of media of mass communication, had fundamentally transformed the nature of political process, for better or worse. No longer could it be assumed that political action derived from the collectively arrived at will of rational, enlightened men (for men they exclusively were, of course) or property and education. Henceforth, the masses would decide, through their exercise of the vote, and the influence of public opinion on the political process.

The role of media in General Elections has increasingly caught the attention of journalists, political leaders, and scholars alike. Media has been portrayed as "providing a watchdog function reporting on government activity, providing analysis of government policy, and uncovering waste and fraud" (Balkir, 2008, p. 199). People will subsequently use this information as a basis to make their choices

when casting their votes. At times, citizens might use this information to hold the government responsible while also seeking to remove an incompetent government. At other times, the media's political narrative is considered propaganda and fails to provide the necessary information.

Politicians use various types of media to gain votes during General Elections. Be it traditional or new media, they are undeniably important vehicles commonly employed by politicians and political leaders to highlight issues that they consider important for the general public. Thus, mass media play an integral part of election campaigns (Mohamed Thaheer, Yaakop, & Sualman, 2013).

Political parties, politicians and political leaders use media for several purposes. They use it to gain votes/supports, scare voters from voting the other parties, denounce other candidates or politicians, denigrate opponents, and promote candidates. Past research on General Elections, particularly on the role of the newspapers, suggests that the media can play an important role in informing and influencing the public's vote (Balkir, Banducci, Soyaltin, & Toker, 2008; Mun & Li, 2011, Prior, 2009). In order to fulfil this purpose, each newspaper tends to portray issues differently depending on its ownership. Essentially, news coverage during the election period helps explain the political choices for voters (Balkir et al., 2008).

The literature asserts that Malaysian media is controlled by the government through ownership ties to the BN. Malaysian election coverage is said to be highly biased towards BN (Lumsden, 2013). In fact, Ahmad and Othman (2014) found a considerable pro-government bias during GE13 in their study of one English-language and two Malay-language newspapers. The issues covered in the three newspapers were more inclined towards BN component parties compared to the PR alliance. They concluded that during the election, the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia maintain their status quo as the ruling party friendly media.

Mohd Shariff (2013) argued that people engage in politics to fight for issues they strongly believe in. The environment, tolls, illegal immigrants, morals, transparency, good governance, and corruption are among issues of common concern in Malaysia. Researchers also found that health and religion are among the top ranking issues that influenced voters in their choice of political candidates during GE13 (Ismail &

Mohd Shariff, 2013). In addition, the issue of *Kalimah Allah* (the word of Allah) had significant influence in directing voting behaviours among political candidates. Nevertheless, much of the research on the role of media during the General Election paid scarce attention to the newspaper's coverage of Islam-related issues. This study aims to fill such gap.

Newspaper framing of the General Election

The framing analysis, which was first introduced by Goffman (1974) and later amended by Entman (1993), is an extension of the agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). It had been widely utilised by scholars and researchers to comprehend news coverage during the times of General Elections (Aalberg, 2011; Schuck, 2010). Both the agenda setting and framing theories have outlined the mechanisms used by the media to ensure certain important issues are highlighted in the public's mind, and the attributes that lead to public salience (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). These two theories complement each other in such a way that both provide an understanding of the formation of public opinion and attitudes towards certain issues which are mainly due to media agenda and the ways in which the agenda are presented (Bantimaroudis, 2007).

However, some scholars tend to disagree that these two theories are identical. Weaver (2007) for instance, argued that agenda setting research is more concerned about what (or which) issues are covered than how such issues are reported and discussed. In agreement with this argument, agenda setting theory is commonly discussed on two levels. The first level of agenda setting emphasises the relative salience (or known as perceived importance) of issues or subjects, whereas the second level examines the relative salience of attributes. The first level is known as priming, whilst the second level is referred to as framing (Weaver, 2007). Thus, this study adopted the framing analysis since our aim was to examine which and how Islam-related issues were covered by newspapers in Malaysia during GE13.

Entman (1993) suggested that frames or framing manifested from a text is able to influence thinking. The concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text and becomes a tool to influence the audience. Framing essentially involves selection and salience, in which only some aspects of perceived reality are selected

and projected in a communicating text to promote a particular view. "One's frame in thought can have a marked impact on one's overall opinion" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 106). For this reason, politicians often use media to influence voters to think about the country's issues along their preferred lines.

Framing is useful in understanding the role of the media in electoral processes and has been significantly used in political communication research. In Malaysia, Mat Yassin, Zanuddin and Jen (2013) used framing theory to explain issues portrayed by political incumbents in social media during GE13. The study examined how the election candidates or their administrators framed issues through their Facebook posts or outside link base. Their study confirmed the significance of this theory in understanding issues covered in the social media. Based on the use of the theory in various research mentioned earlier, we feel that it is appropriate to use framing analysis in the current study.

News portrayed in the media function in such a way that "news workers who deliberately select some stories and exclude others, frame some stories and exclude others, frame and set the news agenda, determine what we see, read and hear" (Fong & Ishak, 2010, p. 11). Most often, stories that appear in the newspapers are a reflection of the people upon whom the news organisations depend for their revenue (Gentzko & Shapiro, 2006). According to Entman (1993), framing essentially involves selection and salience. He further explained:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing analysis elaborates how media determines what information is to be received by the audiences and how the information is represented and portrayed (Fong & Ishak, 2010). News framing is a process in which all the information available in the media are the result of what is deemed significant and newsworthy. In other words, news media can be seen as a result of media bias. The media is utilised as the means to shape the audiences' thoughts regarding certain issues.

Methodology

It is important to note that the selected newspapers are owned, controlled directly and/or indirectly by the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (Anuar, 2002; Hussain, 2008; Rajaratnam, 2009). Two of the analysed newspapers, i.e., *Berita Harian* and *New Straits Times* (inclusive of their weekly editions), are owned by the New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad (NSTP). On the other hand, *The Star* (including *Sunday Star*) is owned by Star Publications (Malaysia) Berhad, and *Utusan Melayu* (including Utusan Mingguan) is owned by Kumpulan Utusan. Based on a report by the Open Society Foundations (2013), UMNO has 49.77% stake in the Utusan Melayu group and two major shareholders (Gabungan Kesturi and Altima) in Media Prima were also linked with UMNO. On the other hand, 42.4% stake in Star Publications (M) Bhd was bought by MCA in 2010 ("MCA buys 42% stake in Star," 2010). The selected newspapers i.e. N*ew Straits Times, Berita Harian, Utusan Malaysia,* and *The Star* are owned by Media Prima, Kumpulan Utusan, and Star Publications (M) Bhd respectively.

Research design

This study was undertaken using the quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is a systematic method to examine the contents of recorded information (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). According to Holsti (1969, p. 14), content analysis generally refers to "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages". Content analysis was used to analyse the data due to its flexibility, as "it can be applied to a wide variety of different kinds of unstructured information" (Bryman, 2008, p. 289). In order to achieve the research objective, the frequently read daily mainstream newspapers, with specific reference to the two Malay language newspapers, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* and the two English language newspapers, *The Star* and *New Straits Times*, were content analysed. News related to Islam and GE13 were selected and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Sample and sampling procedure

The data analysed in this study were news articles and editorials collected from the four mainstream daily newspapers as well as their weekly editions, i.e., *Berita Harian* (inclusive of *Berita Minggu*),

New Straits Times (inclusive of *New Sunday Times*), *The Star* (inclusive of *Sunday Star*) and *Utusan Melayu* (inclusive of *Utusan Mingguan*). The articles collected from the weekly editions were grouped with the daily editions. These newspapers were selected due to their large circulation and readership (Kumpulan Utusan, 2008; New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad (2012); and Star Publications (Malaysia) Berhad, 2012). *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Melayu* are among the leading Malay newspapers whereas *New Straits Times* and *The Star* are the leading English newspapers in Malaysia. In other words, these newspapers are frequently read by the Malaysians and are considered to be among the most important sources of information for many Malaysians.

Operationalisation of variables

Islam-related issues refer to news and non-news covered by the Malaysian media on Islam, with particular reference to Islam as a religion that includes Islamic teachings, Islamic laws, and Muslim character, attitude, behaviour, and actions.

   News slant is the direction of news, either it is "pro", "against" or "balance" towards: 1) government, 2) ruling party, 3) opposition, and 4) Islamic religious group.

   The *sources of news* are the names of the individual(s) or the organisation(s) whose words are being quoted in the article. They are: 1) PAS, 2) DAP, 3) BN, 4) Islamic Group, 5) UMNO, 6) PKR, 7) Reader's opinion, 8) MCA, 9) SAPP, 10) Government, 11) PGRM, 12) PR, 13) Perkasa, 14) NGO (non-ethnic), and 15) Non-Islamic group.

Data collection

A systematic study of the role of the newspapers in GE13 was undertaken over a period of 17 days. Our analysis was based on the Islam-related news that appeared on the printed version of the four mainstream newspapers from the nomination day, April 20 until May 6, 2013 (one day after the results were released). The news selected were from the newspapers that were published from the nomination day until the voting day. The news that was selected were based on what were thought to influence voters' decisions. Based on this selection of data, issues that were covered during this period were analysed.

Data analysis

In this study, the focus was on the characteristics and information of Islam-related issues as well as dominant themes that appeared in the selected news or feature articles. Therefore, it is important to note that the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other newspapers in Malaysia. Thus, our findings are exclusively applicable to the newspapers analysed in the current study only.

With the selection of the newspapers and data collection period scheduled, two coders who were proficient in Malay and English and familiar with the issues under study were engaged to perform the content analysis. The two coders had been trained on the procedures of content analysis including identification of related news items and unit of analysis. In the coding process, the coders were provided with a code book for reference. They were asked to record their analysis of the related news in a coding sheet. The selection of Islam-related issues is based on all news related to Islam during the GE13 period. Coding of the Islam-related issues were based on the categories developed by the media and election research cluster team from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) led by Syed Arabi Idid. Nevertheless, new issues that emerged from the data were also added into the category.

The news were coded into 15 categories: *ajaran sesat/ fahaman wahabiah* (deviated teachings), *kefahaman Islam* (Islamic understanding), *pendidikan agama* (religious education), *hukum halal dan haram* (permissible and forbidden issues in Islamic laws)*, hudud* (prescribed punishments which the Qur'an or Sunnah have determined for a handful of offences), *murtad* (apostasy), *kafir mengkafir* (attributions of disbelief to a Muslim), *kalimah Allah* (the word Allah), *sekolah pondok/madrasah* (traditional religious school), *toleransi agama* (religious tolerance), *negara Islam* (Islamic state), *sumpah laknat* (a retributive oath under syari'ah laws), *politik dari sudut agama* (politics from the Islamic perspective), *guna Islam untuk kepentingan dunia* (use Islam for worldly interests), and *jihad* (holy war), and *fitnah* (defamation). In total, there were 178 articles regarding the issues covered by *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times* and *The Star*. The number of articles according to newspapers is presented in Table 1. This study focuses on the terms, labels or concepts used by the selected newspapers such as *hudud*, Islamic state and *kalimah Allah*.

Table 1: Number of Islam-related issues

Newspaper	No. of Articles
Utusan Malaysia	77
Berita Harian	51
New Straits Times	16
The Star	34
Total	**178**

Findings of the Study

The present study amassed a total of 178 news and feature articles on Islam-related issues. The majority of the articles came from the Malay newspapers, i.e., *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian*. The higher figure for *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* was correlated with their dominant Malay-Muslim readership. Therefore, Islam-related issues which were expected to affect them directly were thought to be of significance to the readers. This is because the coverage of the Islamic issues was considered an important strategy to influence voting decisions among the Muslim voters. It is important to note that the selected newspapers are owned by media organisations that are viewed as having good relationships with the ruling party. These newspapers, especially *Utusan Malaysia* (inclusive of its weekly edition), are often labelled as the government media or spokespersons. Due to the link between the newspapers and certain political parties, it was assumed that the news framing would be influenced by the type of relationship between them.

The discussion of the findings is organised according to the three most dominant themes, from the most dominant to the least dominant. The data analysis indicated that the three most dominant themes were:

1. *Hudud* (prescribed punishments which the Qur'an or *Sunnah* have determined for a handful of offences)
2. *Negara Islam* (Islamic state)
3. *Kalimah Allah* (the word "Allah")

Coverage of Islamic-related issues

The data analysis revealed that the *hudud* issue was highly covered in the selected newspapers (n=82), followed by the issue on Islamic state (n=18), *kalimah Allah* (n=16), and apostasy (n=13). In addition, it was also found that different newspapers viewed the importance of these issues differently. Of all the issues, the *hudud* news had the highest coverage by *Utusan Malaysia* (n=27), followed by *Berita Harian* (n=25), *The Star* (n=22), and *New Straits Times* (n=8). The Malay newspapers (n=52) gave more coverage on this issue than the English language newspapers (n=30) (Table 2). This highlights the significance of *hudud* in influencing the voters' decisions. In the context of a multi-religious Malaysian society, a negatively framed *hudud* could cause the voters to reject the Islamic party, i.e., PAS, and end up choosing BN. In the same vein, a negatively framed *hudud* could also cause discomfort and anger among non-Muslim Malaysians.

Table 2: Coverage of Islam-related issues according to newspapers

Islam-related Issues	*Utusan Malaysia* (n)	*Berita Harian* (n)	*The Star* (n)	*New Straits Times* (n)	**Total**
Hudud	27	25	22	8	82
Islamic state	11	4	1	2	18
Kalimah (word) Allah	10	2	4	0	16
Apostasy	5	6	1	1	13
Retributive oath under the *Shariʻah*	6	3	1	0	10
Use Islam for worldly interests	3	5	1	1	10
Politics from Islamic perspective	3	2	1	1	7
Islamic understanding	3	1	0	1	5
Religious toleration	2	0	3	0	5
Deviated teachings	3	0	0	1	4
Jihad	1	2	0	0	3
Religious education	1	0	0	1	2
Attribution of disbelief to a Muslim	1	0	0	0	1
Traditional religious school	1	0	0	0	1
Defamation	0	1	0	0	1
Total	**77**	**51**	**34**	**16**	**178**

The issue of Islamic state (a very important agenda in PAS's manifesto to transform Malaysia into an Islamic state) also received high coverage by the Malay language newspapers *Utusan Malaysia* (n=11) and *Berita Harian* (n=4). There were divided views among Malaysians, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, on the issue of whether Malaysia is an Islamic state or otherwise. As for the biggest party in the ruling coalition (UMNO), Malaysia is already regarded as an Islamic state. Thus, PAS's agenda is considered irrelevant. However, PAS did not share the same view and considered Malaysia a Muslim dominant country that applies Islamic teachings in certain aspects only. The absence of *hudud* was one of the reasons, according to PAS, why Malaysia cannot be categorised or deserved to be called an Islamic state. Depending on the type of framing used by the newspapers, it can be strongly argued that the issue of Islamic state could significantly affect Malaysians' voting decisions.

The analysis also showed the significance of the *kalimah* (word) *Allah* issue (whether it can be used by non-Muslims especially for the usage in the Bible) among the Malaysian voters. This issue was significantly covered by *Utusan Malaysia* (n=10). On the other hand, it did not receive as much coverage by *The Star* (n=4) and *Berita Harian* (n=2). The *New Straits Times* did not even report on this issue. This could be partly due to ownership factor since both *Berita Harian* and the *New Straits Times* are owned by New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad. In a multi-religious Malaysian society, religious issues, including the word *Allah*, are seen as a sensitive issue that could potentially cause social division. Therefore, the coverage of this issue could be seen as a significant factor for both Muslim and non-Muslim voters when they finally cast their votes. The results also revealed that other issues such as apostasy, *sumpah laknat* (retributive oath under *Shari'ah* law), and religious tolerance were also covered by the selected newspapers but they were not seen to be as prominent as the three aforementioned issues.

News slant of Islam-related issues

The crosstab analysis of the news coverage (Table 3) revealed that the majority of coverage of Islam-related issues was set against opposition political parties (52.0%). This was apparent in all newspapers: *Utusan Malaysia* (74.0%), *Berita Harian* (72.0%), *The Star* (76.0%) and *New*

Straits Times (56.3%). The reporting of the news can be categorised as a negative framing likely to contribute towards fostering public hatred of the opposition parties including PAS, PKR, and DAP.

Table 3: Crosstab between slant of Islam-related news and newspaper

Newspaper slant	Newspaper			
	Utusan Ma-laysia (%)	*Berita Harian (%)*	*The Star (%)*	*New Straits Times (%)*
Government:				
Pro-government	11.7	5.9	0	25
Against government	3.9	0	0	0
Balance	2.6	0	0	0
Ruling Party:				
Pro-ruling party	0	7.8	0	0
Against ruling party	0	0	5.8	0
Balance	1.3	2	11.8	0
Opposition Party:				
Pro-opposition	2.6	9.8	5.9	12.5
Against opposition	74.0	72.5	76.5	56.2
Balance	0	2	0	0
Islamic Religious Group:				
Pro-Islamic religious group	2.6	0	0	6.3
Against Islamic religious group	1.3	0	0	0
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

In terms of news slant, the data analysis showed that the majority of the articles were against the opposition political party and it was apparent in all the selected newspapers: *Utusan Malaysia* (74%), *Berita Harian* (72.5%), *The Star* (76.5%) and *New Straits Times* (56.2%). In addition, the crosstab analysis indicated that the articles were also inclined towards supporting the government (pro-government). Among the four newspapers, the *New Straits Times* (25.0%) was the most pro-government in its approach, followed by *Utusan Malaysia* (11.7%) and *Berita Harian* (5.9%). Despite beings owned by MCA, no news slant in *The Star* was reported as pro-government. Therefore,

that it is not surprising to observe that the news slant were inclined towards supporting the government and against the opposition political parties as the selected newspapers are either owned or controlled by the government.

Source of news

There were similarities and differences among the four newspapers in terms of source (Table 4). The data analysis showed that the references for the news sources for all the newspapers based on the highest percentage were PAS (86.7%) and DAP (86.3%). Utusan Malaysia (16.9%) and New Straits Times (31.3%) referred to PAS as the main source in their reporting of Islam-related news. The Star (44.1%), on the other hand, used DAP as the main source covered in their news.

Table 4: Source of news according to newspaper

Source of news	UM (%)	BH (%)	TStar (%)	NST (%)	Total (%)
PAS	16.9	12.0	26.5	31.3	86.7
DAP	11.7	18.0	44.1	12.5	86.3
BN	13.0	9.8	0	25.0	47.8
Islamic Group	16.9	0	0	12.5	29.4
UMNO	5.2	9.8	0	6.3	21.3
PKR	2.6	3.9	5.9	0	12.4
Reader's opinion	3.9	0	0	6.3	10.4
MCA	0	0	0	6.3	6.3
SAPP	0	0	2.9	0	2.9
Government	0	2.0	0	0	2.0
PGRM	0	2.0	0	0	2.0
PR	1.3	0	0	0	1.3
Perkasa	1.3	0	0	0	1.3
NGO (non-ethnic)	1.3	0	0	0	1.3
Non-Islamic group	1.3	0	0	0	1.3

Dominant Islam-related issues

The dominant Islam-related issues covered from the nomination day until the polling day of GE13 were examined. Approximately, half of

the articles in the four newspapers during the coding period concerned *hudud* (n=82). This was followed by the issue of the Islamic state (n=18). The third dominant issue covered by the newspapers was *kalimah Allah* (word of Allah) (n=16). It is significant to note that these selected newspapers are known to have good relationship with or links to the ruling party. Thus, it could safely be assumed that the news framing would be influenced by the type of relationship that exist between the newspapers and the ruling party. This section of the analysis concentrates on the three most dominant Islam-related issues frequently covered by the selected newspapers, namely:

1. *Hudud* (prescribed punishments which the Qur'an or Sunnah have determined for a handful of offences)
2. *Negara Islam* (Islamic state)
3. *Kalimah Allah* (the word "Allah")

Hudud: It is evident from the data analysis that the most dominant Islam-related issue with the highest percentage covered by the selected newspapers, especially in the Malay newspapers, was *hudud*. A negative connotation of PAS' *hudud* was a good reason for the frequent coverage of this issue. This was apparent in the following excerpt:

> PAS President, Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, has always wanted to extend the implementation of *hudud*-law to non-Muslims, said Johor DAP deputy chairman, Norman Fernandez ("GE13," 2013).

In many occasions, PAS' *hudud* was framed as a negative concept that did not suit the context of modern multi-religious Malaysian society, leaving no room for religious freedom and tolerance. This was clearly expressed by a member of the MCA party as published by *The Star*:

> Malaysians accept the twin affirmations that Islam is the country's official religion and that individuals are free to practice the religion of their choice, said MCA Young Professional Bureau Chief, Datuk Chua Tee Yong. Therefore, *hudud* law is not suitable for Malaysia because of the country's multi-racial nature ("Hudud not suitable for Malaysia," 2013).

In most articles, *hudud* was mentioned merely as a harsh Islamic concept, without any conceptualisations or explanations of its

meaning. The fear among Muslims and non-Muslims of the perceived harsh nature of *hudud* and the possibility of *hudud* to be implemented on the non-Muslims were drummed up by these newspapers. At the same time, the newspapers tried to portray that there were significant discrepancies among the opposition parties with regards to the *hudud* issue. This disagreement or rift indicated that the Pakatan Rakyat was not a united and competent political party and if elected could lead to political instability and harm the present racial harmony in Malaysia. This was clearly reflected in the following quotation:

> DAP national chairman, Karpal Singh, yesterday asked de facto PKR leader, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, to declare his stand on *hudud*, a thorny issue that has further divided the disparate opposition bloc. PAS made it clear that it might be forced to walk away from the bloc if DAP refused to accept its *hudud* agenda (Looi Sue-Chern, 2013).

Islamic state: Another Islam-related issue extensively reported by the newspapers was the Islamic state. There was an ongoing debate on whether Malaysia, as a dominant Muslim country wherein Islam is constitutionally recognised as the official religion of the Federation, is an Islamic state or otherwise. Despite the fact that secular civil laws are dominantly used in any legal matters, except for marriage and inheritance, some Malaysians regard this country as an Islamic country. On the other hand, turning Malaysia into an Islamic state or country has been an on-going struggle for PAS and its supporters and is seen as an ultimate goal. More often than not, the newspapers focused on PAS' Islamic state agenda, which was viewed as backward and underdeveloped as reflected in the following quotation:

> PAS grassroots leaders have given a ringing endorsement to the Islamist party's leadership in pushing for an ***Islamic state*** to be set up ... The grassroots have spent time, energy and money in support of PAS's struggle for the setting up of an ***Islamic state***... Abu Kassim, an influential Kedah PAS leader, said, it was clear that "standing under our banner means DAP is accepting what we stand for" (Sira Habibu, 2013).

Kalimah Allah (the word *"Allah"):* This study also found that the issue "*Kalimah Allah*" was reported frequently by the selected

newspaper, especially the Malay newspapers. In recent years, there has been a fierce debate between Muslims and Christians pertaining to the "*Kalimah Allah*". For the Muslims, the use of "*Kalimah Allah*" by the Christians would create confusion. Muslim political leaders tried to show to the Muslim voters that they were the true guardian of Islamic teachings in Malaysia. This was clearly shown in the following excerpt:

> A professor has questioned the DAP for its real motive in not using its rocket symbol when the Register of Societies and Election Commission did not bar it.... "Are they trying to keep their rocket symbol out of sight, in order not to remind Muslim voters of the '*Kalimah Allah*' controversy?" (Tan Sin Chow, Winnie Yeoh, & Yee Xiang Yun, 2013).

Newspapers' tone and framing

Another interesting finding was the similarity in terms of tone and framing by the selected newspapers. This is understandable due to several factors such as ownership of the media organisations, the type of relationships between the media proprietors and Barisan Nasional, and the news sources. For instance, *Berita Harian* and *New Straits Times* are owned by New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad (NSTP), and NSTP has a very good relationship with the ruling party, BN. On the other hand, *The Star* is owned by the MCA, one of BN component parties. Thus, there is a high tendency for these newspapers to employ a similar tone and framing in their news writing. The following news excerpts from *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia*, clearly illustrate this:

> A video of former political aide, Saiful Bukhari Azlan in Mecca carrying out a *sumpah laknat* in connection with his sodomy claim was shown for the first time to the media. This followed the retraction on Tuesday by his father … he had "*repented*" and "*wanted to return to the path of truth*". (Shagar, 2013).

> Bapa Mohd. Saiful Bukhari…yang mengakui mahu '*kembali ke pangkal jalan*' menarik balik kenyataan beliau sebelum ini (The father of Mohd Saiful Bukhari … admitted that he *wanted to return to the path of truth* and retracted his statement) … (Abu Bakar, 2013).

The findings of the study indicated that the tone and frame employed by the selected newspapers were in favour of BN, which suggested that the underlying intention was to persuade Malaysians to vote for BN.

Language dominance

Based on our analysis, the study found that most of the Islam-related issues were reported by the Malay newspapers, i.e., *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* compared to the English newspapers. One of the explanations for this was that those issues are very important and significant to Malay Muslim voters. The way the issues were framed in the newspapers would influence their voting decision. Rationally, the Malay newspapers, which are owned by the Muslim Malays who support UMNO, would want to maintain the BN-led government.

Conclusion

Generally, newspapers play a very significant role in covering news or publishing information during election times. This study found that the mainstream newspapers displayed a form of coverage that communicated a certain shared perspective through their frame, particularly on Islam-related issues. In the context of Malaysia's 13th General Election, this study recognises that the mainstream newspapers, i.e., *Berita Harian, New Straits Times, The Star*, and *Utusan Malaysia* emphasised certain Islam-related issues that might influence voters' decision. The finding of this study supported Entman (1993) and Chong and Druckman (2007) who suggested that framing essentially involves selection and salience, in which only some aspects of perceived reality are selected and projected in a communicating text to promote a particular view. For this reason, politicians mainly use the mainstream media, especially the Malay-language newspapers, to influence mainly Malay voters to think about the country's issues along with the Islam-related issues.

Considering that these newspapers are owned or controlled directly or indirectly by Barisan Nasional, the coverage of Islam-related news and how the news was framed were significantly influenced by these factors. These findings are also fairly similar to recent studies by Ahmad and Othman (2014) and Lumsden (2013). The data indicated that Islam-related issues were reported more by the Malay newspapers and that the news were framed as pro-government. Among the most frequently

reported Islam-related issues were *hudud*, Islamic state, and *kalimah Allah*. In addition, the data also indicated that most of the news were inclined towards supporting the ruling coalition, i.e., Barisan Nasional (BN). The frequent coverage of these issues is seen as a strategy used by the political parties to gain votes in the GE13.

Acknowledgement

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