

The Politics and Impact of International Media Agenda-Setting on Nation Imaging: The Case of Malaysia's 1MDB Financial Scandal

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Abstract

Following the eruption of the graft scandal swirling around 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, Malaysia's national image has been severely damaged. While the capacity of media's agenda-setting in constructing the national image of a country and shaping public's perception towards it has been widely recognized; there is little attention on the forces behind the creation of media agenda. This research paper, by adopting a power framework, aims to empirically explore the power relations between international news media and key sources of power within the international system, putting forward the argument that the latter functions as the main force driving the formation of media agenda. By comparing the international media coverage on the 1MDB scandal by two media agencies, namely the *Wall Street Journal* of the United States and the *Straits Times* of Singapore, this research paper focuses on the interfaces between the two news media organisations and their sources of power, illustrating the posture professed by the media in dealings with the prevailing power structure. The different approaches taken and treatment given to the 1MDB's controversial graft allegations by the two media agencies are regarded as the manifestation of the intricate and complex interaction between the two intersecting systems within the established international power structure.

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1 Introduction

The capacities and impact of the media have long been acknowledged due to its ubiquity. The media's saturation and pervasiveness are even further magnified alongside the rapid development and advancement of the technology of communication in the current information era. Being a well-established institution, the media plays its role as both the instrument of the establishment, as well as the agent for change (Gilboa 2008). These roles are not necessarily adversarial, though the tension is inevitable. In the field of international relations, the media walks a tightrope between preserving the established international power structure and generating change, ideally for the betterment of the world.

One of the attributions of the media in international relations is the construction of a nation's image. The media portrays, represents, and disseminates the image of a country – be it the preferred image intentionally constructed by the state or the image perceived by others – in the international sphere (Ebo 1997). There is no doubt that national image matters greatly in international relations. It serves as an asset to both politics and economics when the construction of a national image is orchestrated effectively and is positively regarded. Within the context of globalisation, a favourable national image can be utilised as a ticket to participate in global affairs and to integrate with global markets, ultimately enhancing the status and influence of a country on the world stage (Anholt 2008; Boulding 1958; Kunczik 1997).

While every nation possesses the basic capacity to construct its national image internally through the support of domestic media, which includes media control and propaganda, not every nation can wield an international media

advantage and exert influence in shaping a complementary national image to gain a better position in the international sphere (Ebo 1997). This research paper premises that such privilege is not merely based on the superiority in communication technology per se, but is inherently hinged on the international power structure to a significant degree. To probe deeper, the international coverage on the 1MDB scandal that looms over Malaysia and its prime minister will be analysed. The analysis will be integrated into a power balance framework, aiming to pinpoint how the structure of world politics affects the media's approach in covering the issue. Also, this research paper examines how Malaysia's national image has been shaped or altered by the international media and how it fits into the established international power structure, which can be understood as international hierarchy.

This research paper will first review the substantial gains in scholarly knowledge on researches regarding the media, national image and international power structure, attempting to blend the variegated facets of these disparate subjects. It will then carefully synthesise the literature into a coherent framework to explain the media's agenda setting and its power relations with involved sources on the international stage, which leads to different forms of its representation of one's national image. The goal is to comb through the complex set of interrelationships to shed light on the dynamics of power relations in the field of international relations through the lens of the strategic actor – the media.

In the next chapter, this research paper will sketch Malaysia's national image under the administration of the sixth and current Prime Minister Najib Razak and introduce his scandalous pet project – the state investment fund 1MDB. Being a relatively smaller economy with a population of 31.7 million that rarely gains attention on the global stage, Malaysia is, without exception, concerned of its national image. This is primarily because the country's

commercial and geo-strategic matters all share a basis in national image. On the one hand, Malaysia has considerably relied on foreign direct investment (FDI) to support its economic development, where it is the fifth largest recipient of FDI inflows in the world (UNCTAD 2015). On the other hand, being a member within the international system and in particular, a leading nation in Southeast Asian regional affairs in the United States' Pivot to Asia, as well as a comprehensive strategic partner of China, Malaysia's position in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia vis-a-vis the two major powers in the region, has underlined the significance in managing its national image. This is precisely the reason why Malaysia is a case worth probing.

Before going further into a content analysis of the international reportages on the 1MDB's financial scandal, the approach taken by the domestic media in covering the scandal will be discussed as a foundation of comparison with the foreign media's reportages. Perhaps, the power relations between the media and the government – the major power center – in Malaysia can serve as a microcosm of the broader context engaging international media and other sources of power within the international arena.

Through the analysis of the international coverage on Malaysia's 1MDB scandal, this research paper suggests that although media agenda may be varied from one media organisation to another, the media is ultimately firm within the established status quo's camp and functions in accordance to the fundamental power structure and values. This claim is in line with the argument made by critical theorists that the media is, to a significant degree, dependent on the power centers, and the relationship between the two is, at best, symbiotic. (Cohen 1963; Reese 1991; Chomsky 1997)

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This research paper sets its foundation on critical theory. First, agenda-setting theory will be applied throughout the entire discussion and analysis. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory (1972) has been widely embraced by researchers, given that it has set the groundwork for probing the relationships between media, power sources and the public. There are basically two levels of agenda setting: the "first-level" of agenda-setting concerns mainly the relative salience or perceived importance of issues or subjects; whereas the "second-level" of agenda-setting places its emphasis on the attributes of issues, which highlights the valence or tones expressed in the discussion of a certain subject (Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs and Reynolds 2009; Weaver 2007). This basic framework will be adopted for the content analysis in Chapter 4 to examine how media agenda-setting plays its role in making the scandal of 1MDB a world-class "drama", seizing the world's attention.

In addition to the critical approach to communication theory, this research will also employ theory of power as an organising theme for reviewing agenda-setting and its way of constructing and shaping a nation's image. A power framework helps organise complex interrelationships and focuses the attention on the power structure and relations between the media and the source power. In fact, setting the media agenda is itself an exercise in power, as different power centers strive to push forward each agenda in ways favorable to their interests (Reese 1991; 2001). The Marxist approach to power – which generally views the most significant power as ultimately lying in society's economic formations – will also be referred to, given that the current international order is inextricably tied to and entrenched in the interests of the powerful (Murdock and Golding 1979; Garnham 1979).

Furthermore, national image is undeniably an integral component of a

national's global power position (Ebo 1997). When viewed in the light of the power theory, it is a form of soft power that stems from its culture, political values and foreign policy, and has the capability in shaping others' preferences (Nye 2004; Potter 2009). Thus, the critical approach to the concept of power is useful to further demystifying the underlying politics and vested interests behind media agenda-setting and the portrayals of a scandal-hit country.

1.2 Methodology

The *Wall Street Journal* (<http://www.wsj.com/asia>) and *Straits Times* (<http://www.straitstimes.com/global>) were selected as the two primary empirical sources in this research. Articles and commentaries from the websites will be referred to and utilised not merely for illustrating a contextual landscape, but essentially to provide a set of data for further analysis. The rationale for choosing these two international media agencies is to compare or juxtapose the reportage of Malaysian matters from the perspectives of media based within different political systems – the “liberal West” on one hand, and the Asian perspective on the other. Furthermore, a vast literature on media agenda-setting, national image, and the international power structure will be relied on as secondary sources to serve as stepping stones in establishing a concrete argument.

This research paper begins with a quantitative assessment of media coverage to observe and calculate the tone and focal entity of the articles reported. Numerical data is necessary to evaluate the salience and valence of international media coverage on Malaysia in the preliminary stage of this study. More precisely, the present study adopts the Pew Research Center (PEJ) News Coverage and Index methodology to analyse the hard data collected from the WSJ's and ST's coverage on the scandal of the 1MDB. The unit of analysis for

this study are articles vis-a-vis of reportage. Each report was coded for its tone via the use of semantics to measure whether it is positive, neutral, or negative. In order for a report to be coded as either “positive” or “negative,” the positive comments have to outpace the negative ones in a 1.5 to 1 ratio or vice versa. Moreover, the headline, and the first three paragraphs or first four sentences must also be in utterly positive or negative tone. Any article where the ratio of positive to negative comments was less than 1.5 to 1 would be considered a “neutral” report.

The resulting data was then put into an organised form for further analysis and interpretation in order to vindicate the hypotheses proposed. A qualitative approach helps to develop an in-depth and contextual-oriented analysis of media reportage of the issues surrounding Malaysian 1MDB. In this section, the processes involved in media agenda would be emphasised on instead of the “text” of news media content. In Ettema et al.’s words as quoted by Reese (1991), such approach is “more attuned to how symbols are produced than to what they mean and more attuned to industrial and organisational context than to the text itself.” The second part of this paragraph is a little bit confusing, could you make it clearer?

1.3 Research Outline

This research is divided into five chapters. The second chapter is a literature review on the media’s agenda-setting, national image, and international power structure, outlining and justifying the definitions of the key concepts that underpin the entire discussion.

The third chapter establishes Malaysia’s national image under Najib’s 1Malaysia and its transformation agenda. This chapter attempts to sketch the background and context of the perception of Malaysia within the international

arena. It also constitutes a detailed introduction to 1MDB, pointing out its controversies ever since its inception. This is then followed by an examination of how the domestic mainstream media and the new online media covered such sensational news.

The fourth chapter builds on the work of the previous chapter and consists of original research of the international coverage on the scandal. It features the fundamental work of the hypothesis, aiming to unfold the correlation between media agenda-setting and the power structure and relations within the international arena. The hypothesis assumes that the agenda set by different media organisations may vary from one another, but it eventually serves to preserve and further the existing values and order. Moreover, it also suggests that the media depicts and shapes another country's national image in a way enabling it to fit into the status quo.

The final chapter summarises the arguments and findings of the research. It also suggests possible future academic works by incorporating an interdisciplinary approach to generate a wider range of theoretical perspective in explicating the media's agenda-setting in the realm of international relations and media diplomacy.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Media in the International system

Media has long been accorded a vital role in constructing and disseminating country images. Lippmann (1922) in his path-breaking and prescient book *Public Opinions* shed light on the impact of the media on the formation of public perceptions, arguing that people are inclined to frame a picture inside their minds through the media's portrayal even before seeing or experiencing the external world. Hence, the media is deemed to be the leading source from which public opinion is formed (Malek 1997). Cohen (1963) – another vanguard of media role identification – enunciated how most people gather their impressions of other countries and societies from the media. In Galtung and Ruge's words, media agencies are the "first rate competitors for the number one position as international former" (1965, 65). Essentially, it is almost indisputable that the media can be regarded as the most significant platform for people to access the world beyond their immediate environment (Taylor 1992, 3). They are at the forefront in contributing to people's understanding – or even misunderstanding – of other countries (McKelly and Izcaray 1986, 546; Kunczik 1997).

Despite a plethora of literature that acknowledged and recognised the media's capacity in shaping public opinion and constructing the image of various societies; the present study does not want to make faulty assumptions about the media's role in foreign affairs in the international stage based on studies of the media's effects on individuals at a domestic level. There are a few scholars who have particularly highlighted the distinction between the

media's participation in domestic politics and in the field of foreign relations. The political pressure put on the media is different in the realm of domestic politics and foreign affairs (Graber 1997). Additionally, the process in which the media involved in international politics differs from their participation in domestic issues, considering the public are generally more acquainted to and have better understanding of domestic issues compared to foreign issues (Paletz and Entman 1981, 231).

McCombs and Shaw's agenda setting theory is the most cited political communication theory for the examination of the media's role in influencing audiences' opinion and perception. It has been widely adopted as a possible approach to study the relationship between the media and foreign relations. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004), for example, expanded the influence of the media to the broader context of the international stage, wherein the focus was on foreign nations instead of individuals in the news. Through conducting a national poll and content analysis, they investigated how media agenda affects public opinion on international events and foreign countries. Such an approach has also been adopted by Zhang and Meadows III (2012) to explore the relationship between media coverage, public opinion and presidential agenda. All these researches have subsequently pointed to the conclusion that there is a positive and strong correlation between salience in news reportage and perceived importance of foreign countries. Furthermore, the tone or prevalence of the media coverage has a direct effect on the public's perception of the other country. Particularly, they highlighted that the impact of negative tone in news coverage tends to be more prominent than positive coverage with regards to foreign affairs.

These studies – built on the premise that the media are active actors in taking initiative at agenda-setting, framing and priming – have justified that the media possesses the capability to sway audience perception of foreign

nation states and issues (Weaver 2006; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). The projection of such influential structuring impacts on public perceptions, in Reese (1991)'s words, is a forward-looking stance of the media's agenda-setting. He argues that there are two ways of looking at media agenda – forward and backward. Most of the studies in the field of media sociology merely demonstrates the forward-looking stance in examining the agenda of issues or events found in the news media, whereas the backward-looking – where focus is on the powerful influences behind the formation of issue priorities – is unfortunately, often overlooked and yet to be adequately represented in literature.

To fill in the gap, this research paper intends to look backward at the origins of media agenda, highlighting the prevailing forces behind the media's agenda-setting. Reese's "Setting the Media's Agenda: A Power Balance Perspective" (1991) has analysed in detail, different forms of power relations between the media and other possible sources of power, whether within the news media industry itself or with other institutions, which can be categorised into individual, organisational and institutional levels. His study lends useful insights allowing us to delve deeper into agenda-setting metaphors through scrutinising the power plays behind the scene. This is even more intriguing when the media organisations are set against the backdrop of international politics within a broader context of world's stage.

Fundamentally, it is crucial to bear in mind that power is a series of dynamic and ever changing relationships as opposed to innate and static ones (Reese 1991; 2001). When there are other active and influential actors involved in the process of setting media agenda, the media is, no longer an all-powerful contributor that directs and defines reality through its reporting and construction of information (Reese and Ballinger 2001). Cohen (1963) in his pioneering study *The Press and Foreign Policy* noted that one of the major

roles played by the media is to participate in the international affairs alongside the government by either supporting, questioning or even criticising the decisions made by the policy-making elites. This has highlighted the interaction between media and the established powerful institution, indicating the significance of the power relations between the two. Cohen then described media-government relationship as symbiotic, with the news organisations as the “handmaidens” of government in the foreign policy process. Other scholars like Tuchman (1987), Hallin (1987; 2004) and Mancini (2004) noted that the news media act to corroborate the government’s decision; while Chang (1993, 7) has further pushed such relationship into another end of the spectrum, describing the media as “no more than a pawn in the political game played by the powerful political authority”.

In such circumstances, the traditional “watchdog” role of the media – which refers to the notion of vigilant media monitoring authority and the exposing of governmental malpractices or abuses (Coronel 2010) – is no longer applicable in this context. In contrast, the ‘guard-dog’ metaphor in the repertoire of the media as proposed by Donohua, Tichenor and Olien (1995) could illuminate this matter. The guard-dog role is characterised by its deference to works towards supporting the established powerful and authority structure, or in other words, the status quo. Taking the guard-dog metaphor one step further, one notes the ‘lapdog’ media, which is more commonly known as “propagandist”. Chomsky and Herman (1988) were in agreement with this extreme, asserting that the media acts as a part of a “propaganda model” as they are completely submissive to a powerful group without considering their role as the Fourth Estate. Further removed from the media’s deference to authority, the ‘lapdog’ media merely serves to frame issues in accordance to the views of the authority in the existing system. Such media’s passivity is believed to be closely associated with the manipulation of media by the power

elite as they decide on how news is written (Trattner 1982). Chomsky and Herman even argued that the ultimate “brains” behind the scene are in fact money and power, wherein news is filtered to meet the interest of the elite who possess both.

Perhaps, there is a middle ground – wherein the media is neither an adversary nor servant to the power elite. Being a well-developed social institution, the media themselves, especially the mainstream international media, could be a part of the elite. In Akhavan-Majid and Wolf (1991)’s studies wherein they proposed an “elite power group” model to explain the functions of the mass media in the United States, they argued that the media is not only interlocked with, but are fundamentally integrated into the elite power circles. They pointed out that the growing concentration of media ownership and conglomeration, as well as the media’s mastery over government policy, have reflected the overriding influence of the media elite. Their conclusion of the media as power elites has, once again, vindicated the media’s commitment to the status quo.

Against the backdrop of the international system, the status quo as referred to in this research paper is both structural and ideological. In general, the status quo is the existing international order that the international community has been painstakingly preserving, either through diplomatic practices, peacekeeping initiatives, international mediation or negotiation (Richmond 2002).

Structurally, while the international system has always been assumed as a realm of anarchy by the realists, Lake (2005) proposed an alternative view of international hierarchy, wherein there is a “relational conception of authority” within international spheres to provide a stable order. He argued that this form of authority emerged as part of an equilibrium between great powers and smaller states, and even between great powers and large and important

countries (Lake 2005). The concepts of spheres-of-influences, protectorates or even the long-forgotten empire in diplomatic discourse have reflected the hierarchical relationships among states within the global system, challenging the assumption that relations between states are completely anarchic. In fact, observing the great powers including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Russia since the end of Cold War, the United States is the only state that is still situated at the top of the hierarchy and whose influence reaches beyond a wide range of states across the globe (Lake 2005). In this research paper, international hierarchy will be used interchangeably with international power structure.

Ideologically, the world today is, to a great extent, dominated by the U.S.-led liberal international order, wherein values of liberal democracy, economic openness, security cooperation and multilateralism has prevailed for decades (Ikenberry 2017). The U.S. primarily holds a stronghold as the world superpower – though it is disputable if it will remain the sole one considering the rise of China – to provide leadership, public goods and vitally, to preserve the status quo. This research paper adheres to this view that there is a definite existence of a widely accepted international order and norms, which has been crafted and established in the years following World War II (Ikenberry 2017).

Based on the foundations laid by the literature discussed above, this research paper hopes to comprehensively examine how the international power structure affects the power relations between international media and power sources that will ultimately have political consequences on a middle power state like Malaysia, wherein the scandal-hit 1MDB and beleaguered prime minister have seemingly gained prominence over its national image.

2.2 National image and Malaysia in the eyes of others

The first part of the literature review has extensively discussed the nature and the role of the media on the international stage; the second part will focus on the media's coverage on international affairs and issues providing an overview of how the media's reportage constructs, shapes and influences a country's national image.

To begin with, the formation of a national image is a two-way process comprising of a "self-image" as well as the image forged in the eyes of "others". It is not solely a state construction, but is also based on media portrayals, policy speeches or even the country's products and services could be regarded as all forms of manifestation of a nation's image (Tang and Li, 2010). A national image comprises of the blurring boundaries of political, economic, and cultural images. Since a national image is a multifaceted concept, it is crucial to clarify at the forefront that the "national image" in this study refers primarily to the projected images, which is predominantly the media representation of national image from a political economic perspective. Therefore, it should not be obfuscated with the perceived image embedded in individuals' cognitive system (Lipmann 1922; Boulding 1958; Kunczik 1997; Wang 2008) or nation branding (Anholt 2008; Gudjonsson 2005; Fan 2006).

In this way, national image can be defined as whether the representation of a certain country in the news media coverage appears to be positive or negative (Hanan 2006, 8). The semantics used by the media – comprising words, phrase, metaphors, sentences, adjectives and so forth – which either give the impression of being supportive or against that country's government policies on an array of local and international matters, hugely determines the image of the country (Hanan 2006, 151). Nonetheless, not all countries receive consistent and equal coverage from international media – usually small

peripheral nations tend to be ignored. This also explains why most of the prior researches barely examine the national image of those relatively smaller countries; most are still struggling in the process of nation branding to build themselves a defined national image. Research merely emphasises the national images of foreign nations which are perceived as actual or potential rivals of the U.S, such as China and Russia (Zhang and Meadows III 2012; Saleem 2007; Feklyunina 2009; Xie and Page 2013; Wang 2003).

Being a small country, the available research on Malaysia's national image or nation brand is unsurprisingly scarce; if there was any relevant, it revolves around national identity formation, particularly in the post-colonial period. While the studies focusing purely on Malaysia's national image remain largely unexplored, scholarly works on Malaysia's top leader's profile offers a preview of how Malaysia is generally regarded in the eyes of others outside the country.

Most of the relevant and pertinent works concentrate on the administration of the 4th Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, given that he is thus far the longest-serving holder of that office for a remarkable 22 years from 1981 to 2003. During his tenure as Prime Minister, which was more than half of Malaysia's modern history, Mahathir has elevated the visibility of this country on the world stage, to 'put Malaysia on the map' (Quelch and Jocz 2005). Malaysia has been recognised as one of the Tiger Cub Economies with its vibrant economic growth and striking poverty reduction under Mahathir's administration (Mauzy and Milne 1999). The extensive construction of glittering buildings and structures like the Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and the city of Putrajaya, just to name a few, are amongst the hallmarks or showpieces for the progress that Malaysia has made in those years. His famous catchphrase – '*Malaysia Boleh*' (Malaysia Can) and his visionary aspirations of *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020) has, once, been

optimistically viewed as Malaysia's en-route to becoming a "fully developed country". Though Mahathir is no less a controversial political figure, he has incontrovertibly raised Malaysia's profile on the world stage. In Quayle's words, he was a 'brander's dream' in certain ways (2016, 145) as he efficaciously enhanced Malaysia's image abroad, often through a 'branding route' (Chin and Dosch 2015).

Juxtaposed, shortly after Mahathir's retirement and his successor Abdullah Badawi took over the office, Malaysia gradually loosened its position at the forefront to have an assertive voice in regional and international affairs (Welsh 2005; Liow 2008). Indeed, it was challenging for his successors to draw a renewed national image traction, if not completely shackling off the national image implanted by Mahathir.

As for the current Prime Minister Najib Razak, ever since his 2009 swearing-in to succeed Abdullah Badawi, Malaysia has unprecedentedly made the international headlines several times. Unfortunately, most of these reports were discouraging. In 2014, two fatal aviation accidents – the mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 and the tragic MH17 crash after being shot down in Ukraine – placed this small country into the limelight and its capability in handling a crisis was tested. What is more, the top leader of Malaysia is himself scandal-ridden and embroiled in a billion-dollar scandal over his pet sovereign-investment company, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). All these events signaled Malaysia's national image is in disarray under the leadership of a self-proclaimed reformist (Shah 2010).

Therefore, the following chapters of this research paper will illuminate Malaysia's national image through the reportages of international media amidst the inauspicious and distressing 1MDB scandal –dubbed as the world's biggest financial scandal. Crucially, this paper opines that the portrayals of Malaysia's national image by the international media reflected an intriguing

state of affairs behind the media's agenda-setting that should be thoroughly analysed.

3 Malaysia's image, Media and 1MDB

This chapter briefly introduces the national image of Malaysia under Najib's administration and the impact that the 1MDB corruption allegations had on it. It then examines the local reportage of the 1MDB financial scandal swirling around Najib Razak and his inner circle, shedding light on how local mainstream media's agenda setting plays down its significance in public interest, while the alternative online news media were repressed to cover the issue.

3.1 The national image of 1Malaysia

Since Najib Razak – the son of Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak – took over the Prime Minister Office in 2009, he sought to project himself as a reformist and a moderate globalist, determined to strengthen Malaysia's young democracy and to advocate peaceful co-existence in the global discourse of islamophobia. Though he was once a scandal-ridden Deputy Prime Minister facing corruption allegation over the \$1.2 billion purchase of two Franco-Spanish Scorpene submarines and murder allegations over the death of a Mongolian woman, Altantuya Shaariibuu, who was blown up by his two bodyguards using C-4 explosives; he was widely accepted within international circles (Quah 2015).

To redefine Malaysia's national image under his administration and more importantly, to build himself a legacy, Najib ambitiously introduced the grand concept of 1Malaysia (Ahmad and Idid 2017). 1Malaysia – like other slogans or manifestos introduced by the ethnocratic regimes that aim to build a

one-nation state – emphasises on the importance of national unity amongst Malaysia’s multiracial and multicultural population. This idea has been made ubiquitous in Malaysia – from a slew of billboards and banners on pedestrian bridges, flyovers and buildings, to various 1Malaysia brand’s products and services such as train tickets and supermarkets. The intensively popularised visual advertisements of the 1Malaysia logo aims to encourage the Malaysian people to understand the concept of 1Malaysia and the importance of unity in diversity, ultimately instilling in the society the attitude of acceptance and tolerance.

Apart from the construction and dissemination of the image of 1Malaysia in the country, Najib and his officials also employed a global communications consultancy – APCO Worldwide – for the 1Malaysia campaign overseas. According to a ministerial reply in 2010, the Malaysian government spent at least RM23 million on the campaign, and this amount did not include other 1Malaysia initiatives such as 1Malaysia surveys, 1Malaysia websites and so forth into account yet.

Nonetheless, the saturation of the 1Malaysia logo and slogan has been dismissed by many as a shallow manifesto without substance. It has been regarded as a mere political rhetoric without policy agenda to actualise and achieve its objectives (Sam and Magnier 2010). Moreover, as Najib used it as a campaign slogan, 1Malaysia has adversely turned out to be divisive instead of unifying (Welsh 2010). In fact, it has triggered apprehension amongst the multi-racial populations, making no significant contribution to genuinely reduce racial disparity. Ethnic Malays, who make up 53 per cent of the entire population, feared that their privileged status as Bumiputra would be threatened under such an inclusive approach, while non-Malays perceived it as a political gimmick and a tactic to win their support.

The branding of 1Malaysia failed to achieve its objectives. It neither

united the nation through a people-centric approach as espoused by its tagline “People first, performance now”, nor achieved the underlying agenda of the ruling party in strengthening its grip on power and maintaining the status quo of the current leadership (Ahmad and Idid 2017). The results of the 13th general election had, to a great extent, vindicated that 1Malaysia is not greeted with applause. *Barisan Nasional* (BN) under the leadership of Najib experienced a tight contest against the loose coalition of Pakatan Rakyat and unprecedentedly lost its popular vote and failed to garner a two-thirds majority, despite retaining a majority of parliamentary seats.

Even worse, with a sumptuous amount of investment poured in to advertise Malaysia in its new brand of 1Malaysia, the international society, however, knows its name not through the positive initiatives but by the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal.

3.2 Malaysian image dogged by 1MDB

1MDB is an agency established alongside Najib’s ambitious Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) under the umbrella of 1Malaysia. The strategic development company set up by Najib in 2009 as a part of his aspiring mega projects to spearhead sustainable economic development initiatives, with the focus to encourage the growth of Malaysia by forging strategic global partnerships and promoting foreign direct investments (1MDB official website 2014). Unfortunately, 1MDB began to attract negative attention by late 2014, especially at the international level. The state-owned investment company has inadvertently spurred criminal and regulatory inquiries that have cast an unflattering spotlight on its financial deal-making, election spending and political patronage under the prime minister. To date, the debilitating saga continues unabated.

At the forefront, 1MDB is politically underpinned. Its origins can be traced to the Terengganu Investment Authority (TIA), which was a sovereign wealth fund conceptualised in 2008 to ensure and safeguard the economic interest, particularly of oil royalty in Terengganu – a state located in the east coast of the peninsular Malaysia (Aliman 2015). It was the idea of the Sultan of Terengganu and his advisers to establish TIA, following their dissatisfaction over the unaccountable utilisation of oil royalty amounting to more than RM1 billion per annum by the then Minister of Terengganu, Datuk Idris Jusoh and UMNO-led federal government agencies. In March 2009, Najib Razak, who was the then deputy Prime Minister, announced the formation of TIA. To kickstart its operation, TIA raised a RM5 billion federal government-guaranteed bond, which was claimed to be part of the “settlement” of the unaccounted-for oil royalty (Shanmugam 2009).

Then, within a few months following the raising of the funds, the federal government took over the entity, putting it under the Ministry of Finance, chaired by the Prime Minister himself. It was then renamed as 1MDB. Unknown to many, it has stealthily become a state investment vehicle instead of a sovereign wealth fund that it was intended to be. Unlike sovereign wealth funds that are directly funded by the government and invests on its behalf, 1MDB independently raises and invests its own capital, yet its investment decisions are driven by the interest of national economy (Gunasegaram 2014a). Crucially, the design of the financial structure of 1MDB was an exception for Malaysian government-linked companies (Chiou and Chandran 2016). It was fundamentally built on raising debt through making excessive loans with high interests to acquire overpriced assets such as land and power generation plants, with some of the property being allotted to it at nominal prices by the government. For instance, 1MDB issued two \$1.75 billion bonds to purchase power assets from Tanjong Energy and Genting Group (Peel and

Vasagar 2016). Such an operating model that is based on low capitalisation and enormous borrowings is undoubtedly unsustainable, and this is the reason why it is constantly thrust into the spotlight and has become a target of criticism.

Within five years since its inception, it has accumulated at least RM42 billion (\$11 billion) in debt and the snowball continues to roll (Ramakrishnan 2015). Considering that the Malaysian government has incurred budget deficits over the years, where the federal government's expenditures exceeds its income, 1MDB is inherently a liability to the country.

The former Opposition Leader, Anwar Ibrahim and the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohamad were amongst the critics verbally critical and have questioned the credentials of 1MDB from the very beginning of its inception, even before the scandals erupted. Anwar has been raising the alarm regarding the 1MDB fund in Parliament since 2009. In September 2010, Anwar warned that 1MDB might end up being "the mother of all dubious deals" and should instead be renamed as "1Malaysia's Debt of Billions" with the potential to sink Malaysia (Wong 2010). Mahathir was also in line with his one-time deputy turned adversary, criticising the management of Najib's brainchild and warning against the troublesome business entity to the country.

By late 2014, an independent local online portal *Kinibiz* began to raise awareness of the management of 1MDB. It published an intriguing piece of report that detailed ten questions associated with 1MDB, covering matters including the company's loans and paper profits (Gunasegaram 2014b). Later on, the London-based whistle-blower site *Sarawak Report* revealed detailed evidence and analyses of the 1MDB saga that has spread across the globe, and crucially pointed to the hundreds of millions of dollars from 1MDB that were transferred into the prime minister's personal account. Another local best-selling business weekly, *The Edge* also covered on the details of the

alleged 1MDB fund flows.

Meanwhile, the scandal seized the attention of the international media and a considerable volume of negative press coverage on the plundered 1MDB emerged. From *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *Economist*, *Bloomberg*, *CNBC*, *Reuters*, *Guardian*, *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *South China Morning Post*, *Aljazeera*, to *Strait Times*, just to name a few, Malaysia and Prime Minister Najib Razak has been placed under the microscope. The impact of such reports can hardly be undermined within the international society. The next chapter will probe deeper into this aspect extensively.

3.3 Inadequate coverage on 1MDB in the local media

Despite of the deepening crisis and wide coverage in international media, the Malaysian mainstream media seems to be unenthusiastic at keeping the public informed with the latest development of the controversial debt-ridden state development agency. Such unusual silence is not unprecedented in Malaysia. For instance, the local mainstream press hardly performed its role in informing the public of the events surrounding the most sustained protest movement calling for free and fair election in Malaysia, namely Bersih. They were generally muted on how many had turned up in the rally of Bersih 2.0, Bersih 3.0, Bersih 4.0 and Bersih 5.0, deliberately obtuse on the strong support Bersih garnered. Some of the mainstream press like *Utusan Malaysia* distorted facts of the event by shedding negative light on it, blaming the protestors for obstructing peace.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that while the 1MDB's financial scandal has merited the world's attention, it has yet to hit the headlines of Malaysian mainstream media. At a domestic level, especially in rural areas of the country,

the warnings raised almost went unheeded. Even when the United States' Department of Justice (DoJ) shocked the world with its move to file a civil lawsuit against 1MDB-linked assets, local mainstream newspapers largely ignored the matter. All Malay and English newspapers did not report on the largest kleptocracy case in their print versions, although the online portals of some of them did carry newswire reports on the initial US DoJ announcement and the follow-up statements by 1MDB and UMNO ministers on the matter. These articles were published in the World or Business section but not under the national Malaysian news segment which would have garnered greater scrutiny by readers. Such an arrangement was unreasonable given its significance and relevance as a topic of legitimate public interest (Free Malaysia Today, 21 July 2016). Moreover, the statements and comments from the opposition party leaders in response to the DoJ's action were totally ignored in the mainstream media.

Such circumstance is not unexplainable. Most of Malaysia's mainstream media, both broadcast and print, are either controlled by the government or belong to owners whom are closely affiliated with the ruling coalition (Wang 2001). The authorities have been adopting a carrot and stick approach to tame the traditional media industry. On one hand, the ruling party wields wide-ranging laws and licensing regime to put the mainstream media on a tight leash. These include the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) and Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 that limits and constraints media content, not to mention the Official Secrets Act 1972, Sediton Act 1948 and Defamation Act 1957 that are also regularly imposed on media practitioners. On the other hand, the pro-government media agencies can often benefit from pandering to the government's agenda. Due to such circumstances, Malaysian mainstream media tends to practise self-censorship, especially in regards to sensitive political content. Therefore, negative news about the government are

likely to be filtered on the mainstream media. Even the former Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin admitted that widespread blackout, biased reporting and censorship are “norms” and “traditions” in Malaysia when it comes to news that are critical towards the ruling government (Free Malaysia Today 2016).

In this case, it is conspicuous that while the media plays a central role in communicating to the public, they can also divert attention away from particular events, if not entirely muffling or concealing them. While conventional agenda-setting emphasises on the capability of the media in carrying the salience of issues on their news agenda to lead and shape the public debate; nonetheless, in the case of 1MDB, its salience has been dismissed as unimportant to local Malaysians.

Intriguingly, there is a huge gap between the mainstream media and the online news portals. While the pro-government mainstream media is unwilling to cover stories critical to the authorities; the online publishers tend to keep a vigilant eye on the government and are more vocal in reporting controversial issues. The privileged role of the traditional mainstream media as the sole gatekeeper of news in public communication has been challenged with the emergence of new media, although the latter typically have smaller audiences. The new media acts like a loophole in keeping the public informed on matters of public importance such as the embattled 1MDB.

A relatively freer space online can be considered as an attribution of the former Prime Minister Mahathir, who mooted the idea of turning Malaysia into a global IT hub and building an Asian Silicone Valley when Malaysia became the first Southeast Asian country to offer internet access, and pledged that there would be no censorship of the internet (Rodan 2005). Hence, online media in Malaysia enjoyed the privilege of no censorship.

However, as the online news portals like *Sarawak Report*, *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysia Insider* continue to raise questions and reveal alleged serious

wrongdoing in the state-owned development firm, the government starts to reign in the online space, imposing intensified pressure on local web based media to keep them silent. On 19 July 2015, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) blocked the website of *Sarawak Report*, claiming that it breached the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, having leaked documents containing “indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass any person” (Reuters 2016). Thus far, the website remains blocked inside Malaysia.

In February 2016, another round of clampdowns on local online media took place with the MCMC blocking access to *The Malaysian Insider* under the same laws. *The Malaysian Insider* then abruptly closed its editorial operation in less-than-a-month-time after its news site were banned by the media regulator. It is worth mentioning that the portal is owned by The Edge Media, which also had its publishing permits of *The Edge Weekly* and *The Edge Financial Daily* suspended for three months in July 2015 over its reporting on 1MDB that were allegedly “prejudicial or likely to be prejudicial to public order, security or likely to alarm public opinion or is likely to be prejudicial to public and national interest”. The suspension was lifted in September after an order by the Malaysian High Court (Reuters 2016).

As a result, Malaysians witnessed a deterioration of press freedom. According to 2016 World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Malaysia is currently ranked 146 out of 180 countries with a worsening press freedom score of 46.57. From the blocking of news portals and blogging platforms such as *Sarawak Report*, *The Malaysian Insider* and *Asia Sentinel*, intimidation and lawsuits against media such as *Malaysiakini*, to the warrants issued for the arrest of London-based *Sarawak Report* editor, Clare-Rewcastle Brown, as well as the arrest and deportation of two foreign journalists from *Australian Broadcasting Company*, have all contributed to the

declining score. The Asia Pacific chief of RSF, Benjamin Ismail, remarked that the series of clampdown on local media was Najib's "personal war" against the media which are critical of him and his government (Malaysiakini, 20 April 2016).

As a semi-democratic authoritarian state, the declining media freedom is certainly not surprising, though it more or less tainted Najib's transformation agenda that claimed to strengthen the real exercise of democracy. Furthermore, safeguarding Malaysia's national reputation as a young democracy was never a priority for the government, especially when the top leader's political position has become increasingly rocked by the corruption scandal. In fact, it is noticeable that the series of intimidation against local media was to contain the fallout of the 1MDB saga thus defending the ruling party's power and interest, rather than the country's image. Ironically, all these actions were taken in the name of defending national reputation.

3.4 Summary

Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1Malaysia and transformation agenda were supposedly welcomed on the international stage, touted as his determination to fostering and achieving a mature democratic country. Nonetheless, the slogan that reverberated across Malaysia remained as mere political rhetoric and worse off, it was trampled under the weight of the modern world's largest financial scandal and the involvement of the prime minister himself – named as 'Malaysia Official 1' by DoJ – in the renowned 1MDB scandal.

The fact that the snowballing graft scandal has yet to hit the headlines of mainstream media in Malaysia has indicated the heavy-handed interference from the government. The top-down repressions on press freedom through overt media censorship – though different from the backward-looking stance

on media's agenda-setting – has nonetheless highlighted on the power relations between the media and power centers. Essentially, it shows that the exertion of power from the authorities aiming to safeguard the interest of the ruling elites and to entrench the status quo is very much a reality.

4 A Power Perspective on the News Agenda and Malaysia's National Image

This chapter is a content analysis of two news media websites; designed to track differences in tone and focal entity, if any, of their news coverage relating to Malaysia's 1MDB scandal. It aims to thoroughly analyse the intrinsic relationship between international politics and agenda-setting; thereby testing the central hypothesis of this research: that international media's agenda-setting contributes to the depiction and shaping of a country's national image according to the interest of the major power centres.

While the Malaysian government has cracked down on the reporting of the 1MDB scandal by blocking access to several online news portals and targeting local media groups and journalists, it is a starkly different situation for foreign media based outside Malaysia. These media agencies have followed closely on the development of the alleged multibillion-dollar fraud of 1MDB, revealing its money trail and the implications of this exposé has affected the Southeast Asia's third largest economy.

The *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* is amongst the international press that has been consistently covering the controversial 1MDB issue. Its "masterful reporting that exposed corruption at the highest level of a fragile democracy" earned its team of journalists a nomination for the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in the category of International Reporting. The *WSJ* team, led by Tom Wright and Bradley Hope, spent six months investigating the intricate swindle linked to Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak and have since published a series of high profiled articles. A total of 10 articles were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and although the *WSJ* did not win the Pulitzer, its reports had an enormous impact

on Malaysia's national image.

The *Straits Times (ST)* based in Singapore is another press that has been generating prominent coverage on the scandal-plagued 1MDB. More than a thousand of related articles have been published on the news page of *ST* from 2014 to 2016, and its massive coverage has aroused great concern from the Singaporean society. The keyword 1MDB was searched 60,000 times within the first half of 2015 in Singapore compared to 8,000 times for the whole of 2014 (The Finance 2015). Statistics also show that Singapore was the second country that has paid close attention to the scandal after Malaysia during the peak coverage period in the first wave of exposé in July 2015.¹

To systematically assess and analyse the reports from both news sites, a total of 96 news reportages from *WSJ* and *ST* (48 reportages from each) were compared in a two-step process: first, a micro level analysis is conducted to describe the tone and focal entity of the reportages. Secondly, a macro level analysis is used to generate a possible theoretical argument to explain the diverse treatments of the same issue by different media agencies.

A search through *WSJ* archives within the period of January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2016 yielded a total of 48 results. Since *ST*'s archives yield over a thousand 1MDB-related news, including reports printed from multiple media agencies such as *Reuters*, *Bloomberg* and Malaysia's newspaper, *The Star*, 48 reports were chosen randomly based on the dates of the 48 *WSJ*'s publications. The reprinted reports were also filtered so that the analysis would be as accurate as possible. This was done to ensure a fair and consistent comparison.

¹ To date, the latest data shown in *Google Trends* indicates that Singapore has topped the list of the countries that showed the most interest on 1MDB issue.

4.1 International media's coverage on 1MDB controversy: Results

Table 1: Proportion of 1MDB scandal articles by tone

TONE	WSJ	ST
Positive	0	0
Neutral	23	39
Negative	25	9
Total articles	48	48

Table 2: Proportion of 1MDB scandal articles by focal entity

FOCAL ENTITY		WSJ	ST
1MDB		11	17
Najib Razak		17	8
Other institutions	Attorney General of Malaysia	5	3
	Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC)	3	2
	Goldman Sachs	6	8
	Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS)	-	9
	Red Granite Pictures	3	2
	Others	3	3
Other individuals	Jho Low	4	5
	Riza Aziz	2	2
	Leonardo DiCaprio	2	1
	Others	2	7

Note: Some articles have more than one focal entity

The analyses reveal conspicuous differences between *WSJ* and *ST*'s articles across tone (*Table 1*). Given that the theme of all the publications revolve around the financial scandal, there are no positive reports. Most of the reportages were neutral in tone, which were bland and primarily focused on the facts regarding the operations of 1MDB, including its debts or its dealings with other financial institutions. Negative articles were more likely to be an opinion piece with substantially more keywords with negative connotations such as "shocked", "critical", "powerful", "ironic", "doubtful". The results show that *ST* was less critical in its coverage compared to *WSJ* with only 9 articles that were unfavourable while 25 out of 48 articles from *WSJ* were written in a negative light.

Another intriguing find, as demonstrated in *Table 2*, was that *WSJ* emphasised the involvement of the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak rather than the state-owned investment entity. Being the chairman of 1MDB's advisory board, Najib Razak was under the spotlight following his linkage with the alleged misappropriation of 1MDB's fund, in which more than \$1 billion was funnelled from said wealth fund and deposited into his personal account. His name was addressed in 12 article's titles. *ST*, on the other hand, appeared to downplay Najib's involvement in 1MDB's misconduct and its coverage of the Malaysian Prime Minister's graft allegation are mostly stenography. For example:

1MDB Report Proves Claims Not True: Najib

Najib Hits back at Critics of 1MDB

No Sign of Najib Weakening despite 1MDB Humiliation

While *WSJ*'s reports contain more pointed and harder-hitting information, *ST*'s reportages were seemingly accustomed to "shave off the edges" of Najib-related allegations, especially in headlines and initial paragraphs. The

latter focused more on 1MDB-related fund flows and its dubious dealings with financial institutions instead of the implications of the 1MDB's spillover upon Najib's political life.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 WSJ's agenda-setting and beyond: International power structure at play

WSJ was and continues to be at the frontline of reporting the unending series of 1MDB's scandal that erupted in the developing country of Malaysia. There is a special coverage on the scandal on its website under the section of 'Malaysia Controversy'.

Due to *WSJ*'s prominences within the global mediascape, this study focuses on its involvement as one of the main subjects of study. It is a significant elite or prestige media firm in America, owned by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation via acquisition of Dow Jones & Company, that enjoys both national and international status, reputation and circulations (Patrick 2013). Essentially, it wields considerable influence on administrative and political elites as it is closely affiliated with the traditional centers of political and economic power (Chomsky 1997; Patrick 2013). Apart from setting the standards of journalistic style and aspiration, *WSJ* influences other news media's agendas to a large degree. Graber (1997) uses the terms "generative media" and "pace setting media" to describe elite press like *WSJ* as they have the capacity to cover news and events at the centralised sources of power to a far greater extent and depth than is possible for other smaller news agencies, therefore setting a framework for others to follow (Best and Radcliff 2005).

In fact, as *WSJ* pioneered the coverage on the 1MDB scandal, major regional and international media have also begun to follow and cover this issue. A general observation across the English-language international media reveals a similar pattern in their coverage of the troubled 1MDB issues in terms of their contents and style. Their perspectives and slants were also highly homogeneous. Subsequently, the redundancy and standardisation of news contents has made Malaysia's state development fund 1MDB and its Prime Minister Najib prominent on the media agenda in a cycle of peaking coverage.

This situation is in line with media agenda-setting, in which selected stories are magnified and received extensive coverage with noticeable homogeneity across media within a particular period of time, contributing to the issue salience (Merriam and Makower 1988; Reese 1991). The 1MDB scandal, that could be hidden from wide knowledge as an underlying issue in Malaysia would have remained dormant in the international mediascape had it not been highlighted and prioritised amongst other agendas, regaling it as the largest financial scandal in modern history. Its kleptocracy is now a regrettable hallmark of Malaysia. This leads to the question of why Malaysia's 1MDB graft scandal stood out amongst other issues to gain lavish attention from *WSJ* when the news media's capacity in covering all events from all corners of the world is unlimited.

To answer this, this research paper first examines the power relations between the media and sources at an institutional level. First, from the perspective of critical theory, media organisations, especially elite media, are closely associated with power centers; both working together towards preserving and entrenching the status quo. In Dreier's studies (1982), he identified the interlocks between media firms and power centers – not only the government and political parties, but also Fortune 500 corporations and elite universities. The interconnections between them has rendered the media far

more instrumental for the political-social managerial elites to communicate and disseminate their views rather than autonomously monitoring or scrutinising the dominant class for the ordinary people (Danhoff 1979; Patrick 2013). Situated in the inner circle of the power structure, elite media are not antagonistic or adversarial to the powerful; on the contrary, there are present evidences of convergent interests and coordination (Dreier 1982) between the two. Their relationship can be described, at best, as symbiotic – wherein both parties retain their own power base within a context of shared values for long term benefits (Reese 1991). In this vein, the prevailing institutional forces are one of the major players, if not the sole one, behind the scene to dominate media agenda paradigm and priorities.

In the case of Malaysia's scandalous 1MDB saga, the agenda-setting of *WSJ* has, to a great extent, reflected America's concern over its relation with Malaysia, given Malaysia's political significance in its "Pivot to Asia". Malaysia has never been a formal U.S. ally, but it is one of Washington's key partners in the War on Terror since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. Today, Malaysia continues to cement itself as an important ally to the U.S in the ongoing war on the Islamic State (Parameswaran 2015). The current Najib administration has also made a more concerted effort to strengthen Putrajaya's ties with Washington on multiple fronts, including enhancing their long-standing military cooperation through conducting more joint exercise and high-level defense consultations, as well as joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA)'s negotiations² (Kuik 2015). Moreover, the former U.S. President Barak Obama's official visit to Malaysia in April 2014 has marked another significant milestone of U.S.-Malaysia relations as he is the first American president to visit a

² Malaysia, together with 11 other countries finally inked Obama's proposed TPPA on 4 February 2016 in Auckland. However, latest development has it that newly elected President Donald Trump is pulling the U.S. out of the trade deal.

Muslim-majority country in nearly five decades after President Lyndon Johnson's visit in October 1966.

In news media culture, the political significance of a country, together with political affinity and socio-cultural mutuality increases the newsworthiness of that country or geographical region (Galtung 1971; Peterson 1979; Ostgaard 1965). According to Ebo (1992), some obscure and ordinarily politically insignificant countries such as Chad, Angola, Grenada, Philippines and Panama might even suddenly gain extensive coverage from Western media when they become crisis centers that could threaten Western political interest. In spite of its size, Malaysia, is not irrelevant within the international system. Located in the heart of Southeast Asia, the strategic position of Malaysia serves as the most ideal and logical central node for any global major power, when allowed, to further exert its power and influence. Therefore, Malaysia's multi-billion-dollar graft scandal is a valid reason for WSJ's focus, resulting in the outpouring of massive media resources and lavish attention allocated on the subject.

Nonetheless, many analysts lamented the soured relationship between U.S. and Malaysia since the 1MDB scandal was aroused. Indeed, WSJ's negative reportages on the top politician and the state development fund have triggered disapproval from the Malaysian government. Apart from vehemently denying any wrongdoing, the Prime Minister Office also released a statement to condemn WSJ as a "willing vehicle for certain political actors who are seeking to damage the Prime Minister and Malaysia for personal gain" (Jenkins 2016), and simply dismissing the reportages it as a "political sabotage" (ABC News, 28 July 2015). The tension between the two countries was further intensified after high-profile legal and regulatory pressures being applied by U.S. authorities, including the lawsuits filed by the Department of Justice (DOJ) in connection with the 1MDB probe.

From the perspective of international relations, such political tension is, manageable and temporary. In fact, Malaysia's relations with the United States have long been characterised by enduring ambivalence; while U.S.-Malaysia trade and investment cooperation has been developed in leaps and bounds over the years, the political friction remains unresolved on several occasions (Kuik 2012; 2015). These challenges, however, have eventually been mitigated through redirected focus on common national interest for cooperation (Oh and Han 2016). For example, U.S.-Malaysia relations was particularly awkward under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who had a reputation for his anti-Western and anti-Washington rhetoric. Moreover, the *Asian Wall Street Journal (AWSJ)*³ has a record of reporting on the Malaysian scandal during Mahathir's era in 1980s, which was the Malaysian government's clandestine plan to buy off tin to support sagging tin prices between mid-1981 and early 1982 (Wain 2009, 152). In response to the negative coverage of AWSJ, Mahathir – who also happens to be the fiercest critic of Najib in the 1MDB issue – banned the press from Malaysia for three months and expelled two of its correspondents in 1986. He claimed that the *AWSJ* was directing 'a sustained campaign to sabotage the Malaysian economy' (McCourt 1986, 8). He also pointed out that the international press tended to publish "scurrilous" articles of Malaysia whenever there were international meetings, with the intention to undermine Malaysia's foreign investment and eventually blowing a deal on its economic development (Saabin 1988). An anonymous article published in the *New Straits Times* alleged that the *AWSJ* was under the control of "Zionists" attempting to undermine Malaysia because of the government's stance in supporting the Palestine Liberation Organisation (Zainuddin 1986). Such allegation could

³ The *AWSJ*, the Asian edition of *WSJ* began with four Asian partners – the *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), *Nohon Keiza Shimibun* (Japan), the *New Straits Times* (Malaysia), and the *Straits Times* (Singapore) in December 1975.

hardly be justified; it nevertheless, indirectly shed light on how the international power structure – such as the system polarity and alliance politics – might influence media’s agenda-setting.

Being an elite media that is well-versed on the media’s role in the conduct of international affairs, *WSJ*’s assiduous and consistent coverage on the global kleptocratic 1MDB scandal, though stirring tensions and pushing Malaysia’s relations away from U.S.; serves a greater purpose. In the bid to defend its reputation of being a “journalistic jewel” that aspires to objectivity, *WSJ* aims to uphold democratic principles and liberal values that have long been championed by the United States. As proclaimed by the Attorney General of the Department of Justice, Loretta E. Lynch, “the American financial system will not be allowed to be used as a conduit of corruption” (Department of Justice 2016). Such announcement sent a clear and strong signal to assert America’s global leadership in preserving the integrity of the established international system.

In addition, by taking into consideration of the changing dynamics of the international relations and development, this research paper opines that the timing of the exposure of the corruption scandal initiated by *WSJ* was strategic when viewed in light of Malaysia’s blossoming ties with China. According to data from the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), China is Malaysia’s largest trading partner since 2009 whilst Malaysia is China’s largest trading partner in the ASEAN region. In recent years, China has been vigorously involved in mega projects in Malaysia. These efforts comprised of the ongoing developments in the multi-billion ringgit Iskandar Malaysia zone and Forest City in Johor Bahru, the construction of a deep-water terminal in the RM4 billion Kuantan Port’s expansion project, a deep-sea port as part of the RM43 billion Melaka Gateway project, a RM55 billion double-track rail project known as the East Coast Railway Line, and a mixed-use development project

on four man-made islands on the Johor Straits (Ting 2017). While the flurry of huge investments has yet to propel China to becoming Malaysia's largest foreign investor, regardless of claims by certain economists (Chew 2016); Beijing's growing investments have raised skepticism and concern in both domestic and international opinion regarding the opening of the floodgates for China's influence on Malaysia, as well as the entire Southeast Asia region.

Controversially, China made two investments specifically linked to 1MDB: first, the Chinese state-owned company – China General Nuclear Power Corp acquired 1MDB's Edra Global Energy Berhad on November 2015 with a total of RM9.83 billion; second, China Railway Construction Corp invested RM7.41 billion to purchase a substantial equity stake in 1MDB's property project known as Bandar Malaysia in a 40:60 venture with Malaysian Iskandar Waterfront Holdings Berhad (IWH) (Parameswaran 2016). In this case, China positioned itself as the "saviour" to the scandal-hit state fund 1MDB, and in particular, to the embattled Prime Minister Najib, helping to ease his concern over the firm's mounting debt and ultimately extending his political life. Intriguingly, these "investment" came in after the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang promised to help Malaysia overcome its economic problems during his official visit to Kuala Lumpur in November 2015 (Ho 2015) after the first wave of *WSJ*'s exposure on the 1MDB scandal which was dubbed as "Malaysia's Watergate" (Ho 2015).

China's political support to the troubled state-controlled development firm and its advisor was not without reward. In November 2016, Najib declared the procurement of four Chinese military naval vessels, marking Malaysia's first military deal with China to affirm their closer security ties (Savic 2016).

Malaysia's earnest participation in China's highly ambitious initiative – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (initially known as "One Belt, One Road" or OBOR initiative) has caused the United States to raise an eyebrow. Mooted by President Xi Jinping in 2013, BRI aims to spur regional connectivity through

building roads, railways, bridges, and even energy infrastructure, manufacturing zones, leisure and tourism areas in an unprecedented gigantic scope and scale (Hsu 2017). There are two main components under the BRI banner: first, the overland Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) to revive the ancient Silk Road from China to Western Europe across the Eurasian plains and; second, the sea-based Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to trace a maritime route linking China to Africa and beyond through Southeast Asia (Albert 2017; Habib and Faulknor 2017). The grand vision envisaged by the BRI to knit together continental Asia and Europe, linking China to 110 countries around the world is a breath-taking economic, military and geopolitical strategy.

When viewed from a realist perspective, it is a threat to the existing international order led by the U.S. as it can potentially open a window for China to take over leadership and thus breaking down American political prowess, which is already under duress. Simultaneously, China's tightening authoritarian regime and its insensitivity to human rights violations, which is its biggest obstacle to building itself a positive national image, might no longer deter other countries from engaging with it. Although this research paper does not intend to paint the international system and foreign relations in the light of a zero-sum competition; it is nevertheless crucial to bear in mind that Malaysia's recent tilt towards China has generally been perceived as a loss to U.S. who is still vying for its influence in the Asia Pacific and Southeast Asia to strengthen its global superpower status.

In short, under WSJ's wide coverage on the 1MDB scandal, Malaysia has been portrayed as a fragile democracy under the administrations of Prime Minister Najib, whose international reputation is tarnished and legitimacy to lead the country is constantly being questioned due to his allegedly involvement in the unprecedented long-running global kleptocratic scandal. As the scandalous top politician increasingly pursues tightening ties with China,

acting as its strategic ally in the Southeast Asia, Najib seems inclined to align with Beijing (Chandran 2016). Malaysia has even deliberately stayed silent on the Mainland's aggressive expansion in the disputed South China Sea (World Politics Review, 21 December 2016) . Such rapprochement is regarded as a delicate trade-off between Malaysia and China for the latter's "kindness" and "generosity" in saving Najib from being ousted out, as well as his brainchild 1MDB from insolvency. While it is still too early to draw a conclusion that Malaysia's foreign policy is pivoting away from its long-standing key partner, the United States into China's embrace, Malaysia's recent perceptible skew in favour of China has undoubtedly elevated the degree of uncertainty in regional stability, and hence underlining the possibility of a refashioned international power structure.

4.2.2 *ST's* agenda-setting and beyond: The survival and prosperity of the regime

The *Straits Times* is Singapore's national daily published by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). It belongs to Temasek Holdings, which is closely affiliated with the ruling People Action Party (PAP), whose Board of Directors are appointed by the Ministry of Finance (Tortajada and Pobre 2011). Similar to how *WSJ* is a prestige press that is close to the sources of power; *ST* is, too, linked to the power centers in Singapore as media market ownership in Singapore is often described as monopolistic. However, the difference is that *ST* has always been perceived as a "government mouthpiece" of the country. *ST* is ranked 151st out of 180 countries in 2017 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.

This research paper argues that the different approach taken by *ST* from *WSJ* in terms of their perspective and slant is again supportive of the

hypothesis that different media firms use their own political narratives to preserve the status quo. As *WSJ* attempts to safeguard the international order that has been built on the premise of democratic liberal values by exposing the global kleptocratic scandal that can undermine the integrity of the established international system; *ST*, on the other hand, strives towards maintaining the stability of Malaysia-Singapore relations, as well as its own regime sustainability.

Singapore has an intricate and interdependent relationship with Malaysia. Being the closest neighbour, both countries bear a resemblance in terms of their geography, historical heritage and culture. Singapore and Malaysia, together with then independent Sabah and Sarawak were once united as the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 before Singapore gained its independence in 1965. In Foreign Minister of Singapore, K. Shanmugam's words, Malaysia and Singapore are "linked by an umbilical cord" (Straits Times, 31 July 2015).

Given the geographic proximity and political-economic linkages, Singapore has always followed developments in Malaysia closely. *ST*'s extensive coverage on Malaysia's troubled 1MDB issues was therefore no surprise. Not to mention, the embezzlement scandal that embroiled its neighbouring country also dealt a blow at Singapore's reputation as the world's third best financial center, primarily due to lapses at several financial institutions and banks in the city in relation to 1MDB-related fund flows. The involvement of Singapore's largest bank, DBS Group Holdings Ltd., Switzerland's Falcon Bank, BSI and UBS's Singapore Branch, as well as Standard Chartered Bank's Singapore branch in processing massive transactions for 1MDB and thus breaching money-laundering regulations have caused Singapore reputational damage. Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) Managing Director Ravi Menon admitted that the 1MDB case has exposed the weaknesses of the current regime globally (Chanjaroen 2017). In particular, it

has revealed the deficiencies in Singapore's banking system given that multiple transactions in several Singapore's banks took place under the radar of the money-laundering unit that claimed to be strict and dedicated.

Before any action was taken by the Singaporean authorities, Mahathir Mohamad – the old rival of the late Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew – who happens to be the most vocal critic of Najib in the 1MDB scandal, criticised Singapore's reluctance to take strict action. He questioned the island state's ineffectiveness in pinpointing the protagonists involved in the alleged money-laundering hence putting Singapore's status as a financial centre at risk (Financial Times, 1 August 2016).

In the face of growing international efforts to probe into the global kleptocratic scandal, Singapore's Commercial Affairs Department (CAD) and MAS showed its dedication to meet the standard of a clean and trusted financial center by launching a probe to investigate the possible offences relating to 1MDB. Consequently, banks found guilty were closed and sanctions were imposed. BSI's status as a merchant bank was withdrawn by MAS and fined \$13.3 million. UBS and DBS were ordered to pay a sum of \$1.3 million and \$1 million in fines respectively for breaching anti-money laundering rules. The Singapore branches of Standard Chartered bank and Coutts & Co were fined S\$5.2 million and S\$2.4 million respectively. Another Swiss bank, Falcon, has also been shut down in Singapore. Furthermore, Singapore prosecutors jailed three former Singaporean BSI bankers connected to the 1MDB saga for money laundering, cheating and forgery, just to name a few amongst other charges. The former branch manager of Swiss Bank Falcon, Jens Sturzenegger became the first foreigner charged in Singapore. Overall, Singapore imposed a total of S\$29.1 million in financial penalties on eight banks and its state court convicted five people over offences linked to the 1MDB scandal. These moves were said to send a strong "deterrent" signal to the financial institutions and

bankers holding them responsible and liable (Chanjaroen 2017).

Singapore's position within the international stage as a global financial hub provided a framework for the country's largest circulating press in covering the 1MDB scandal – focusing primarily on 1MDB's money trail, as well as emphasising its efforts at safeguarding the integrity of the global financial system. While it adopted the MAS's approach by "naming and shaming" the involved financial institutions and bankers, it did not give the same treatment to the key figure in the world's biggest financial scandal – the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib.

This research paper argues that such circumstance has, once again, vindicated that media's agenda-setting works towards keeping the current regime intact. In general, Singapore shares a similar political regime with Malaysia that may best be described as electoral authoritarian or a "hybrid" regime; in which elements of democracy such as regularly-held elections are present but with limited civil liberties more reminiscent of an authoritarian system (Weiss 2014). Within such stifling political environment, the media industry in Singapore is highly regulated through wide-ranging restrictions. The stringent legislation and policy that claims to protect public interests is criticised to be in favour of strengthening and reinforcing the government's power and authority (Human Rights Watch 2010). The extensive media regulations paired with a monopolistic ownership contributes to a pro-government tendency.

In this light, the prudently crafted reportages on the embattled 1MDB and the relatively gentle treatment given its advisor Najib by ST is not to defend the national image of Singapore's neighbouring Malaysia but to ensure its own regime stability. In an interview that took place on 31 July 2015, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong commented on the 1MDB political crisis unfolding in Malaysia, saying

“...when something happens in Malaysia, we watch very carefully and are very concerned how it affects us. We have very good relations with Malaysia, I personally have very good relations with Prime Minister Najib (Razak), so we hope that Malaysia will remain stable, that we will be able to have a Government there which we can do business with and cooperate with, as we have been doing the last few years... When something happens which could cause either a political upset or social or security worries, I think we have to watch very carefully.” (Straits Times, 31 July 2015)

His remarks have underscored his concern of the possible spill-over effects that might threaten the stability of Singapore amidst the heightened controversy.

Moreover, ST’s approach on the 1MDB scandal was also aimed to avoid stoking discontent amongst people in the island state towards its authority as witnessed in Malaysia. In fact, Singapore feared the downfall of Malaysia’s ruling coalition BN that has dominated Malaysian politics since independence from the British in 1957, in the closest general election in 2013. The opposition’s victory was expected to heighten agitation within the society across the region to seek for regime change, thus rendering a rippling effect or even a backlash on the long-standing one-party regimes, like the one in Singapore (Grant 2013). Though the most anticipated “Malaysian spring” has yet to be realised, the Singaporean ruling party would not allow its grip in the most prosperous and efficient island state in Asia to be shaken off.

Economically, Malaysia is amongst Singapore’s top trading partners and top three destinations for Singapore’s direct investment. The recent signing of the Memorandum (MOU) on the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High Speed Railway (HSR) – a strategic project that aims to facilitate seamless travel between two capital cities – has further increased economic interdependence between the

two countries. This project will not only enhance Singapore's business connectivity with Malaysia but also the world beyond, further boosting its economic standing as a trading hub. Politically, the sealed bilateral deal has signified a closer and warmer Singapore-Malaysia relation. Some political observers even described the relations between the two neighbouring countries under the leadership of Lee Hsien Loong and Najib Razak as the best-ever in their history (Han 2016). Such intimacy is, however, a double-edged sword; while it connects both countries closer together, any political instability in either Malaysia or Singapore is deemed to have adverse consequence on the other. The government of Singapore has the insight to maintain this ambivalent engagement and hence as a gesture of goodwill, published less pointed and less fiery coverage on the 1MDB scandal.

4.3 Summary

To sum up, one might argue that it is inherently unfair to juxtapose *WSJ's* reportage with the *ST's* as the latter has often been criticised for functioning as propaganda for an authoritarian regime that values little of free speech and free press, while the former has won the Pulitzer Prize – journalism's highest honor – several times and is considered as one of the world's best press in raising the importance of freedom of knowledge and speech (Leohardt 2017). This research paper opines otherwise: the closeness of these press to their respective key centers of power have provided a solid foundation to the present analysis in unveiling the subtle yet indispensable factor that sets the media agenda.

Setting the media agenda encompasses different power-relations; and as the case study of the 1MDB scandal's media coverage has illustrated, the prevailing power-relations between the two-intersecting system of media and

power sources are not given or inherently static but are sophisticatedly adjusting to each other to achieve a state of equilibrium (Reese 2001). *WSJ*'s reportages have underlined the United States' concern over Malaysia's tightening relationship forged by the Prime Minister Najib with the fast-rising China, especially when the latter has gradually taken over leadership at certain fronts. Whilst *ST*'s coverage on the 1MDB controversy is, structured by its status of a global financial hub, as well as its intimate linkage with Malaysia, whether geographically, economically or historically. Above all, the findings have vindicated that the power centers have, to a considerable degree, affected the media's agenda-setting.

5 Conclusion

Over the last two years, Malaysia's national image, as well as its economy and markets have been rattled by the unprecedented long-running financial scam revolving around the prime minister of Malaysia and his brainchild 1MDB. The case has been probed by at least eight countries and covered by 53 international media across the globe; the extensive attention stirred aversion towards Malaysia both externally and internally, provoking ripples of instability.

Instead of focusing on the implications of the international coverage on the national image of a mid-level developing country, this research paper has attempted to pinpoint the factors that influence and even dominate the media's agenda paradigm through a critical approach of agenda-setting theory. By juxtaposing the coverage of *WSJ* and *ST* on the global kleptocratic scandal of 1MDB, this research paper argues that mainstream international media craft their reportages to depict the national image of a mid-level country like Malaysia – that has a vaguely defined national image – in a way so as to support the status quo, as well as to be in line with each nation's personal interest.

This research paper has reviewed the extensive gains in scholarly knowledge in the area of the media's agenda-setting, international power system, and national image. These disparate yet interrelated subjects are then integrated into a framework based on the concept of power – after all, the act of setting the media agenda, as well as constructing national image, are themselves an exercise in power (Reese 1991). Rather than continuing to focus on the implications of the media's agenda-setting on the perceptions of a country's national image through a forward-looking stance, this research paper

adopted a backward-looking approach to elevate the underlying power within the media industry to a broader context of a hierarchical international power system. By doing so, this research has gained an insight into the institutional power relations between the media and its sources of power – whether political, economical or social – and how this relationship ultimately translates into the media’s agenda to influence the public’s perception.

The reports on Malaysia’s 1MDB kleptocratic controversy by *WSJ* and *ST* have vindicated that the media agenda is not monolithic but varies according to the interest of different media firms. While a number of scholars believe that the homogeneity of media agenda – as a result of intermedia influences, especially as influenced by the elite media like *WSJ* or wire services when covering high-profile stories like that one of the modern world’s largest financial scandal (Graber 1997; Damhoff 1979) – reflects the forces acting on the formation of media agenda; this research paper demonstrated there is diverse indicators in power terms. The different slants, tone and focal points adopted by *WSJ* and *ST* illustrated the different power roles being played out behind the scenes to serve different purposes and in meeting different needs or interests of the power sources. Furthermore, the results have also signified different forms of power exerted to influence and determine the media agenda. *WSJ*’s media agenda is more value- or ideological-based, considering that it operates within a dominantly democratic pluralist model of society, and thus more critical towards corruption (Reese 1991). On the contrary, Singapore’s *ST* has demonstrated a more concentrated top-down control of the media agenda by the government, where the media agenda is clearly an expression to further the power of the authoritarian regime (Parenti 1986).

Finally, this research aspires to contribute to a heterogeneous academic work on agenda-setting incorporating an interdisciplinary approach leading to a wide range of theoretical perspective. It hopes to demonstrate that power as

a dynamic force, simultaneously played out within the media industry as well as in the wider context of international system. Crucially, the constantly changing power-relations between media and varying power centers might have underpinned the construction of 'reality' that might not be any closer to the 'truth', hence undermining the regional stability and prosperity. Suggested further academic work include an examination into the media coverage on other issues in the Southeast Asia region, such as the South China Sea disputes, to comprehensively explore and explicate the role of media either in preserving or challenging the international power structure. Such a study is aimed to complement the role of media in foreign affairs, contributing to the processes of foreign-policy decision making.

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