

Faking it and Fakery in Malaysia: Prime Minister Najib and Censorship

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, March 31, 2018

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, a figure who served as Prime Minister for 21 years

Fake news has not merely become a business but a designation. It is a way of silencing dissent, and questioning accounts. For the authoritarian, this is not merely a delight, but a necessity. News accounts are deemed the stuff and dreams of the inventive, and those inventors deserve punishment.

Denial becomes a state of mind, and a very convinced one at that. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey [can say](#) with confidence that the casualties of any military action against the Kurds have been exaggerated. US accounts of the bloody surge in Afrin in February made him seethe. “You don’t feel the tiniest discomfort of the massacre of hundreds of children, women and civilians every day in East Ghouta but you express your annoyance at our fight against terrorists. You are spreading fake news.”

In the era of Donald J. Trump, fake news has become the flipside of reality television, its evil nourishing twin. The more real things are, the less tangibly verifiable they are. Before the camera, and as it floats through the news cycle, all accounts shall be mistrusted. Only the powerful shall have meaning.



It has also become a school of inspiration for such figures as Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia. Knowing that his electoral survival might be in the balance, Najib has decided to influence the course of history.

Malaysia’s electoral boundaries have been redrawn along more amenable racial lines to counter the opposition threat. The number of seats featuring opposition tendencies has also been reduced. Wong Chin-Huat of the Penang Institute sees such division of constituencies as significant and more importantly, decisive. “Assuming the voters go back to voting the

same way (they did in the last polls), then [Barisan Nasional] would win eight more seats this time around.”

Najib has also become a convert to the Fake News Doctrine. But he has gone further than Trump, a man he visited with some cheer. On his September visit, the [Washington Post](#) found that another authoritarian had won the US president’s sympathy. (Easily forgotten here is Najib’s own political courtship and flattery of predecessor Barack Obama.) “Not only is Mr. Najib known for imprisoning peaceful opponents, silencing critical media and reversing Malaysia’s progress toward democracy. He also is a subject of the largest foreign kleptocracy investigation ever launched by the US Justice Department.”

Najib’s exploits, along with those of his associates, are said to be the stuff of unbelievable proportion. The [charges from DOJ investigators](#) centre on the diversion of \$4.5 billion from a Malaysian government investment fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad, for personal purposes. (Ever there lies confusion between public monies and government ownership) A tidy sum of \$730 million is said to have ended up in the prime minister’s own accounts.

In the United States alone, investigators have pursued a range of assets, from a Picasso painting given to the actor Leonardo DiCaprio, a necklace belonging to Najib’s wife valued at \$27.3 million, and the rights to a few Hollywood movies. To this can be added real estate. Truly, a beast with tentacles.

Given such a state of affairs, the censors were bound to get busy. Najib’s cabinet has been particularly preoccupied with a proposed law that would criminalise the peddling of fake news. This stands to reason, as those who use that accusation prefer to shout down opponents rather than convince them. In Najib’s case the cause is more sinister, the move of the censor who determines, accordingly, what is authentic and what is not.

Serious consequences duly follow: the imposition of 10-year jail terms for creating, offering, circulating, printing or publishing fake news, and punishment for the publishing outlets. A fine of \$128 million is also thrown in for good measure.

As for [the definition](#), it is tinged with an autocrat’s idiosyncrasies. Fake news would be “any news, information, data and reports which are wholly or partly false, whether in the form of features, visuals or audio recordings or in any other form capable of suggesting words or ideas.” As news must, at any point in time, be necessarily prone to adjustment and alteration (is anything ever totally authentic?) the forces of anti-bogus conviction will be busy.

[Examples](#) proffered by the Anti Fake News Bill show an unmistakable slant. One speaks of the fabrication of “information by stating in an article published in his blog that Z, a well-known businessman has obtained a business contract by offering bribes.” In that case, the person “is guilty of an offence under this section.”



This is merely one part of the complex puzzle. Najib is facing a veteran of the Malaysian political system, the cunning, seemingly indestructible Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad (image left), a figure who served as Prime Minister for 21 years before stepping down in 2003.

The consequence of Najib's squalid manoeuvres against both the electoral system and that of keeping the press shackled may well bring some immediate rewards. But whether it be constituents within Malaysia keen for a decent rinse of politics, or DOJ investigators keen on getting their man, Najib is finding matters in politics a touch tight.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge and lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Binoy Kampmark is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia Pacific Research

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