



WE, the undersigned civil society organisations, condemn the irresponsible “Utusan Malaysia” reporting over an alleged call from Christian pastors to change Malaysia's "official religion" to Christianity.

On 7 May 2011, “Utusan Malaysia” published a front-page story "Kristian Agama Rasmi?" that relied on ‘information’ provided by the blogs, "Bigdog" and "Marahku", without verifying it, nor identifying their authors. The blogs themselves did not state how the ‘information’ was obtained - i.e., directly heard at the meeting where Penang politician Jeff Ooi was present, or from secondary sources who were there.

Utusan's unsubstantiated report irresponsible; endangers interfaith relations

Written by straits-mongrel

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“Utusan Malaysia” also did not offer an explanation for not naming these sources. The use of anonymous sources - usually, in consideration of the sources’ safety - must be publicly justified.

Notwithstanding this, “Utusan Malaysia” chose to run this as a front-page report, no less, and in so doing, gave the unverified story the credibility it did not deserve.

Further, the front-page story only quoted Ooi denying the allegation that he had sponsored the meeting. The subjects of the allegation itself - the pastors who allegedly made this call - were not interviewed. The Christian meeting's organisers, which included the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF), had already denied the allegations of such a call being made in a statement published in the online media. “Utusan Malaysia” did not refer to this statement at all, nor was there any indication that any attempts were made to seek clarification from the pastors, NECF or any other Christian organisations.

The denial was only reported on 9 May and even then, “Utusan Malaysia” continued to seek responses to the issue, from the prime minister, defence minister and home minister. Najib Razak called for "calm", Zahid Hamidi called for political parties not to politicise religious issue, Hishammuddin Hussein said if the allegations are true, this is very "serious", and PAS Selangor

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Youth said if the allegations were true, people should remember Islam's status in the Federal Constitution as the religion of the federation. These comments give further undue gravitas to the 'discourse' arising from what was a non-issue to begin with.

The fact that "Utusan Malaysia" is continuing to spin more stories from a completely unverified report implies mischief on their part, since there is a danger of various communities reacting further and inflaming an essentially emotive issue. Already, there are at least seven police reports lodged in response to what was mere rumour.

Accuracy and verification are an integral part of journalism. Sources must be named as a measure of accountability on the part of both sources and journalists, and to allow readers to judge for themselves whether the information provided is true.

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In passing off unverified information as fact and failing to quote the pastors against whom accusations were being made, "Utusan Malaysia" has failed these basic principles of journalism. Not reporting NECF's side of the story was not only unethical and irresponsible but also deliberately misleading.

We call on journalists and civil society to speak up and reject unethical practices which cast journalism in a bad light and bring further erosion of public trust of the mainstream media. We must hold "Utusan Malaysia" accountable for these flagrant violations of media ethics.

Centre for Independent Journalism

Charter2000-Aliran

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1 Muted Malaysia

Writers' Alliance for Media Independence

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CIJ is a non-profit organisation that aspires for a society that is democratic, just and free, where all peoples will enjoy free media and the freedom to express, seek and impart information.
cijmalaysia.org

Charter2000-Aliran is a group of Malaysian individuals and organisations committed to striving for media freedom in Malaysia through the promotion of a media charter to raise public awareness.

WAMI is a group of writers for the Chinese media in Malaysia, which aims to defend and promote media independence for freer public discussion and wider democratic space. It was formed by about 90 writers who quit writing for the mainstream Chinese media in May 2001 in protest over the coerced takeover of the non-partisan Nanyang Press by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a ruling coalition member party.

1 Muted Malaysia is a citizens' initiative in response to the shrinking public space for expression as evidenced by series of book bans, sackings and arrests involving writers, media practitioners and artists.

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