

The Hindraf Saga: Media and Citizenship in Malaysia

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Abstract

In the early part of 2008, a major political upset was pulled off in the Southeast Asian nation of Malaysia when the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front), lost its long-held parliamentary majority after the general elections. Given the astonishingly high profile of political bloggers and relatively well established alternative online new sites within the nation, it was not surprising that many new media proponents saw the result as a major triumph of the medium. Through a brief account of the Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force) saga and the socio-political dissent nursed, in part, through new media in contemporary Malaysia, this paper seeks to lend context to the events that precede and surround the election as an example of the relationship between media and citizenship in praxis. In so doing it argues that the political turnaround, if indeed it proves to be, cannot be considered the consequence of new media alone. Rather, that to comprehensively assess the implications of new media for citizenship is to take into account the specific histories, conditions and actions (or lack of) of the various social actors involved.

Keywords

citizenship, Hindraf, Hindu Rights Action Force, Tamil, Malaysia, new media, Youtube, VCD, Indian

Introduction

The 12th General Election of Malaysia was held on 8 March 2008 and proved to be a political milestone for two reasons. Firstly, it was the first election since Malaysia gained independence where the dominant coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), failed to return to a two-thirds majority in parliament (Gatsiounis, 2008). Secondly, it was the first

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occasion where the “impact” of new media on public opinion was publicly rued by then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Najib Tun Razak² (Govt to Focus on Internet Media”, 2008). The admission by both the Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, and his deputy that the failure to engage new media was a contributing factor to the election losses of the ruling coalition (Moten, 2009, p. 39; Habib, 2008) speaks directly to the view, expressed by some (Hon, 2008), that digital and social media have altered the nature of politics (and media citizenship) in Malaysia. This paper sets out to investigate these claims and suggests that though new media has afforded the proliferation and dissemination of non-mainstream political views in Malaysia, the astounding election results were not achieved on the strengths of new media alone. Rather, what occurred was the cumulative effect of the tensions inherent in the makeup of Malaysian society, the largely state-controlled mainstream media (P. Leong & Yap, 2007; Nain, 2000) and the state’s ambiguous attitude towards new media. Through a brief recount and examination of the events surrounding the rise, popularisation and criminalisation of Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force), I analyse the Hindraf saga as an instance of (new) media citizenship in praxis within the nation of Malaysia. I argue that to successfully assess the implication of new media for citizenship is to take into account the specific circumstances, conditions, histories and actions of the various social actors involved.

Hindraf in Malaysia

Sited centrally within Southeast Asia and comprising of two geographical areas (West and East Malaysia), Malaysia has a population of 24.3 million, separated into four major demographic categories: the *Bumiputeras*,³ Chinese, Indian⁴ and Others.⁵ Religion and race are almost inextricably joined in Malaysian imaginary for a number of historical reasons. Chief among these is the manner in which this ethno-religious tie is written into the Constitution of Malaysia through its definition of a “Malay” person as “a person who professes the religion of Islam”, “habitually speaks the Malay language” and “conforms to Malay custom” (“Constitution of Malaysia: Part I - The States, Religion and Law of the Federation”, 1957). One consequence of this definition is the identification of all ethnic Malays as followers of Islam. However, rather more damaging to social cohesion in Malaysia

² As part of the fallout over Barisan Nasional’s dismal showing at the 2008 General Election, Abdullah Badawi resigned and his place as Prime Minister taken over by Najib Razak since 3 April 2009 (Hunt, 2009).

³ The term Bumiputera was introduced in 1963 to denote those who are considered sons of the soil. While the majority of Bumiputeras are Malays, the category does include Other Bumiputeras like the Orang Asli in West Malaysia and the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak (Saw, 2007, pp. 68-69).

⁴ The Indians in Sarawak do not fall into this category and are instead included within that of Others (Saw, 2007, p. 69).

⁵ This is not, of course, to accept such categorisations as natural but rather always as constructed.

has been the corresponding divisive practice of categorising the entire population from Malays to non-Malays along similar ethno-religious communal lines.

This double bind between religion and race has been cemented in the decades following independence by efforts to address economic disparity within the populace through affirmative action. The keystone of these efforts is the New Economic Policy⁶ (NEP), wherein preferences ranging from higher education quotas, public service employment and business permits are extended to *Bumiputeras* only (Heng, 1997, p. 262). Together, these arguably well-intentioned measures (set up by the British during their rule of Malay(si)a) created a divisive chasm based on race and religion that entrenched inter-ethnic bargaining as the norm and substantially skewed the tenor of Malaysian society. The ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* itself, is a case in point, being an alliance formed from the co-option of the various political parties representing the main ethnic groups in Malaysia (Moten, 2009, p. 25). With the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) representing the majority Malays,⁷ the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) championing Chinese concerns and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) serving the Indians, parties within the alliance look chiefly to safeguard the narrow interests of their separate constituencies.

Broadly speaking, Malaysian Indians do not enjoy a high socio-economic status and form a very small minority within Malaysia. For example, only a miniscule 1.5% of the nation's shares in the local bourse is owned by Malaysian Indians, yet Malaysian Chinese hold a 40% share and *Bumiputeras* slightly above 18% ("Ownership of Share Capital", 2005). The Malaysian Indian population, which comprises just 7.5% (1.8 million) of the Malaysian citizen population (Saw, 2007, p. 70), is heterogeneous consisting of a multitude of language, ethnic and religious groups. Historically, however, approximately 80% of who emigrated from the Indian sub-continent to Malaysia as indentured and unassisted free labour were Hindu and speakers of Tamil (Arasaratnam, 1970, pp. xii, 15, 162) and the same proportions (84%) apply today (Saw, 2007, p. 79). Hence, it is the Tamil-speaking Hindus who form the bulk of the Malaysian Indian populace. Their non-*Bumiputera* status, paltry numbers and lack of economic power place many Hindus in a poor position for the inter-ethnic bargaining endemic within Malaysian politics. However, in recent times, Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force) has been trying to gain some recognition (and legitimacy) for Malaysian Indians

⁶ The NEP was established in 1970 in response to the 13 May 1969 race riots during which inter-racial tensions over economic disparities were the major cause of strife. Amongst other measures, it stipulated that every business in Malaysia must have 30% Bumiputera ownership; that there be a quota of tertiary education places reserved for Bumiputeras and that they also be similarly favoured in the civil service (Heng, 1997, p. 262).

⁷ UMNO is the largest political party in Malaysia and majority partner of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, UMNO Youth is its youth wing (Gomez, 2007).

within the Malaysian imaginary through its rather more specific claim. Notably, this is recognition beyond that ascribed to the long co-opted Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

An alliance of 30 Hindu non-government organisations, Hindraf was formed in early 2006 in reaction to the Malaysian High Court's ruling that it had no jurisdiction in the case of Everest mountaineer and ex-soldier, M. Moorthy's burial. The Court's decision that it was unable to override the country's Islamic courts in matters of religious conversion ("Religious tussle" over Everest hero's burial", 2005) meant that Moorthy, a born and bred Hindu, was buried as a Muslim because of claims he had converted to Islam prior to death ("Hindu Widow Loses Last Rites Tug of War", 2005; "Muslim Burial for Malaysian hero", 2005). While the ruling was a defining moment for Hindraf, the grievances of the Malaysian Hindu community had already been amassing round the issue of temple demolitions. For example, between 2006 and 2007, a number of Hindu temples were demolished as illegal structures constructed without the required permits ("Continuing Story: Destruction of Hindu Temples in Malaysia (International)", 2006).⁸

The governmental destruction of Hindu temples in Malaysia attracted much international notoriety due in some part to characterisations of it as a deprivation and/or violation of religious freedom ("Hindu Group Protests 'Temple Cleansing' in Malaysia", 2006). For although Islam is, according to Article 3 of Malaysia's Constitution, "the religion of the Federation", it is also written in the same constitution that "other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation" ("Constitution of Malaysia: Part I - The States, Religion and Law of the Federation", 1957). Painted as a breach of constitutional rights, the demolition of Hindu temples caused sufficient concern for British parliamentarians to demand that their government intervene on behalf of the protestors ("British MPs to Malaysia: leave Ethnic Indians Alone", 2007). The Indian national government also cautiously expressed its concerns at the use of force on "people of Indian origin living abroad" of whom mother India remains "deeply solicitous" (Veelloor, 2007) but their concerns were met with the request that they refrain from interference in Malaysian domestic politics beyond their unsolicited "expression of solidarity" ("Malaysia Hits Back, Tells India Not to Interfere", 2007; Rahman, 2007). At the same time, various authority figures and members of the ruling government in Malaysia also chided Hindraf for appealing to foreigners on domestic affairs ("Hindraf Asked to Fight Cause in the Country", 2007; "Hindraf Seeking Foreign Support a Naive Move - Dr Chua" 2007).

⁸ Notwithstanding their religious significance, many of these temples originated as makeshift shrines erected by indentured Indian labourers during British colonial times (Arasaratnam, 1970, p. 162) and are noteworthy historical examples of folk religion.

Interestingly, among Hindraf's responses to these demolitions were the production and free distribution of 50,000 Video CDs⁹ documenting one such temple demolition to Hindu followers in February 2007 (Manivannan, 2007; Raj, 2007). This same footage¹⁰ was subsequently divided into parts and uploaded onto the Internet (truthbetoldSir, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f) for a potentially global audience. In doing so, Hindraf adroitly employed both new and mainstream media in a "two-step flow process of communication" (Wasserman, 2007, p. 123), which studies of South African social movements argue to be an effective way for civil society organisations to recognise and ameliorate the very different material circumstances faced by their constituents (Wasserman, 2007, p. 118). This is especially vital in environments where inequitable access to technologies prevail.

On 25 November 2007, Hindraf escalated the scale of its operations to mobilise disenfranchised Malaysian Indians to open protest on the streets of the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The professed intention of the march was to hand a petition with 100,000 signatures to the British monarch, via the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. Hindraf's claim was that as descendants of the Indians indentured as labourers during colonial rule its members were owed US\$4 trillion in compensation from the British government (Zappei, 2007). Nonetheless, for most contemporary Malaysian Indians, their chief complaint is the unremitting poverty of many of those descended from these ex-plantation workers (MacDonald, 2007). Statistics suggest that there are some grounds for their grievance as Malaysian Indians make up no less than 29.5 per cent of those between 15 and 64 years who work in manufacturing (Saw, 2007, p. 149). A full quarter of the Indian population continues to be employed as "plant and machine operators and assemblers" (Saw, 2007, p. 153), thereby occupying the lower end of the socio-economic ladder in Malaysia.¹¹

Hindraf's call to mobilisation attracted a crowd of 10,000 (Brant, 2007), making it only the second mass protest to disturb Malaysia in the last decade.¹² The overwhelming response indicated a readiness for participation and dissent on the part of a largely acquiescent people.

⁹ Video Compact Discs (VCDs) are the precursor audio-visual technology to Compact Discs and popular in many parts of Southeast Asia. It is still widely used in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

¹⁰ Much of this footage originated with <http://www.malaysiakini.tv>, the online news and video portal.

¹¹ Although the state argues that a falling poverty rate and the second highest average monthly income of Indian households in Malaysia—the average Malaysian Indian household income was RM 3,457 in 2004, while that of the Bumiputera household was RM 2,711 and that of the Chinese, RM 4,437—show that Indians in Malaysia enjoy a comfortable lifestyle (Kam, 2007), anecdotal evidence suggests that part of the reason lies in the over-representation of Malaysian Indians in the legal and medical professions.

¹² An earlier rally dubbed the Bersih (Clean) Rally was held on 10 November 2007 to protest against irregularities in recent elections and to demand electoral reform (Adams, 2007).

It alarmed the government who were especially disquieted that the state's attempt to pre-empt the protest rally with a court order was openly defied by so many (Soon, 2007). Many calls to calm down were made by those invested in the status quo. For example, state-controlled mainstream media was dominated by reports warning of the dire negative economic impact of such a rally (Darshni, 2007; "Govt to Seek Compensation from Hindraf", 2007; "Hindraf Rally Disrupts Business, Tourism Activities", 2007; "Illegal Assembly will Harm National Economy, says IGP", 2007; "Police Disperse Illegal Gathering, Roads Reopened", 2007). Along with assurances that the interests of the Malaysian Indian community were being looked after by the state ("Development Programmes Included for Indian Community - Samy Vellu", 2007), the fears of the Hindu Tamil community have also been derided as grossly overblown ("Shocked by 'Apartheid' Report", 2007).

Amidst reports of civil disobedience carried by the national media, all manner of videos, photographs and blog entries were widely circulated on the Internet. News coverage such as that by the English arm of the Arabic broadcaster Aljazeera (MacDonald, 2007) and Singapore-based Channel News Asia (ChannelNewsAsia, 2007) were uploaded onto the Internet as freely accessible videos to a global audience, together with myriad amateur materials produced by citizen journalists and activists present at the rally (Danesh, 2007; Sani, 2007; Tan, 2007). For example, dramatic still shots and video footage of Gandhi-like, passive resistant protestors sitting cross-legged as riot police aimed water cannons and tear gas at them, were juxtaposed against images of defiant groups grasping the Malaysian flag ("The Hindraf 25 November March", 2007; "Hindraf Demo in KL [Image]"; "In Pictures: Malaysia protests [Image]", 2007).

Nevertheless, Hindraf has met with its share of criticism, from its obvious opponents as well as wider Malaysian society. Perhaps the most salient is that directed at Hindraf's deliberate exclusion of the non-Hindu Indians in Malaysia, by virtue of its choice of self-labelling as the Hindu Rights Action Force. Many Christian, Muslim and Buddhist Indians, not to mention atheists and agnostics feel excluded from Hindraf's heavily religious framing of their cause (Kavilan, 2007). This omission has not escaped the establishment's attention, and it has seized on Hindraf's actions as a non/mis-representation of the Malaysian Indian community ("The Group Calling Itself the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) is Unqualified...", 2007). The other criticism levelled at Hindraf concerns the trope of victim-hood it has employed, which its detractors argue diminish the impact of its cause even as it perpetuates the colonial racial stereotypes. A related though no less pertinent lament is that the plight of the disadvantaged has been couched in an exclusivist vocabulary replete with religious and racial overtones that only perpetuate the racial division "codified" since Malaysia's independence (Sani, 2007). In

the eyes of its critics, Hindraf's reiteration of ethnic communal divisions in the tone of its appeal to British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown is cause for pause (Attan, 2007; Gunaselan, 2007).

Allegations were advanced very early on by Malaysia's Inspector-General of Police (IGP) that Hindraf was an organisation with terrorist connections with intentions to incite ethnic unrest (Charles & Sagayam, 2007; S.-I. Lee, 2007). With the trauma of the 1969, 13 May racial riots never far beneath the surface of Malaysian imaginary, any similar threat is always received with great trepidation (Kua, 2009). This occasion proved to be no exception as the allegations finally culminated in October 2008 in a ban on Hindraf in Malaysia as an illegal organisation with terrorist connections ("Hindraf 'Detrimental to Peace and Security'", 2008; "Group Akin to Secret Society", 2008). Five of Hindraf's leaders were arrested under the oppressive Internal Security Act (ISA)¹³ but subsequently released after months in detention (Teoh, 2009).

Global Media Citizenship

The relationship between media, nationalism and practice of citizenship is well established in the literature (Anderson, 1991; Mercer, 1992) and new literature continues to elaborate the point (Mihelj, Bajt, & Pankov, 2009; Yoshimi, 2003). Broadly phrased, it argues that the structures, production and consumption of media are both the product and precondition for the nation and citizenship. While theorists may differ on whether the influence media exerts on citizens is malignant, benign or otherwise, few deny its power to sway. On face value, then, it is possible to read the wide-ranging, international media attention the continuing Hindraf saga has earned as proof that digital media, though not entirely on its own, has changed the nature of media citizenship. For it is through the employment of new and mainstream media to appropriate the tropes of constitutional rights, freedoms, post-colonialism, diaspora and transnationalism that Hindraf has appealed successfully not just to the sprawling Hindu diaspora but also to the wider trans- and inter-national community. From being an ethnic minority with puny resources and little ability to engage and mobilise its own members via mass media, Hindraf members have, through the deployment of skilful media pastiches, politicised and aired their grievances, winning over sectors of both the national and international community to their cause.

¹³ The Internal Security Act, allows the police in Malaysia to detain individuals "without evidence or warrant" based on grounds that there is a belief that they have acted, are about or likely to act in a manner that would threaten the nation's security ("Malaysia: the Internal Security Act (ISA)", 2007).

As such, the alliance that is Hindraf has shifted the boundaries within which the fate and prosperity of Malaysian Hindus matter appreciably beyond the locality of the Malaysian nation-state, opening up multiple sites for citizen participation. Not only have new actors and agents been admitted into the fray (Barnett, 2003, p. 7), space has also been created for hitherto “marginalized voices and oppositional groups” (Wasserman, 2007, p. 111). A case in point is Hindraf’s trillion-dollar claim for reparation from the British. Although a dramatic exaggeration, the attempt to present the petition has succeeded in carving out a position of some strength from which its constituents can participate in the (intern)national conversation. By reaching back into pre- and colonial history, Hindraf proponents have gained a degree of legitimacy and recognition for their cause previously denied them. Hence, though by no means the result of new media alone, the alliance’s efforts have substantially widened Malaysian Hindus’ terms of reference as a community.

Would it be right, then, to claim Hindraf’s somewhat qualified success as a triumph for pluralism? After all, its efforts appear to have moved the debate of socio-economic inequity within Malaysia beyond the limits of the nation-state and allowed participation from an erstwhile mute constituency. I suggest that pluralism as the proliferation of multiple views in itself is but a short-term goal, a halfway post towards full media citizenship. As the dexterity with “the two-step process of communication” demanded of Hindraf seems to bear out, for new media to play a role in informing, engaging and mobilising the citizenry, the material inequities within constituencies have to be addressed. Yet beyond the material conditions like lack of access to new media are other inequities such as technological, media, socio-political and cultural capital that citizens need recourse to in order to make sense of information. “Extended understanding”, as Silverstone (2007, p. 47) points out, does not always follow “extended reach”. Without adequate resources, physical and otherwise, to respond with, citizens are no better off with more information than less. This does not, however, mean a sophisticated polity to be a necessary precondition for direct democracy to succeed. Rather, that the crucial intermediary tasks of processing and filtering information fulfilled by media practitioners and political parties alike (Agre, 2002, p. 312) are not to be dismissed as so much political manoeuvring to be taken on lightly by citizens themselves. All human social groupings from political parties to citizen coalitions are capable of lending bias to information. There is, in essence, no greater or lesser guarantee that information garnered from new media is any more truthful or right than that issued by mainstream media, even if more immediate, intimate and closer to the grassroots. Keeping sight of this caveat must remain fundamental to all those who wish to practise new media citizenship.

In assessing the success or failure of any new media citizenship, then, it is necessary to take the state of material as well as socio-cultural conditions of constituencies into account. Towards this end it is important to know that Malaysians have been gradually exposed to the power of and compulsion towards new media. Through the efforts of independent subscription news websites like Malaysiakini.com, operational since 1999 (“About Us”, 1999) and the rising influence and popularity of bloggers like Raja Petra Kamarudin and blogger-turned-politician, Jeff Ooi (<http://www.jeffooi.com>), new media has been gaining prominence within the Malaysian imaginary. For example, as editor of independent Malaysian news portal, *Malaysia Today*, Raja Petra Kamarudin has gained sufficient notoriety with his views for the state to detain him on two separate occasions under the infamous Internal Security Act (Baker, 2002; “Malaysia Blogger to be Released”, 2008).

On their part, though the state and the ruling politicians in Malaysia were “very complacent” with regards to the usage of new media as a political tool prior to the 2008 election (Barak, 2008), this no longer seems the case. Not only have members of the current and past political elite like Khairy Jamaluddin (www.rembau.net.my) and Mohamad Mahathir started their own blogs (“Former Prime Minister Mahathir Starts Blog”, 2008), more recent by-elections such as the one at Kuala Terengganu have seen mainstream newspaper *New Straits Times* attempt to break through to the blogosphere with a multi-author blog titled, *Bloggng Kuala Terengganu* (“Bloggng Kuala Terengganu”, 2009). It seems that while the political incumbents of Malaysia were slow to recognise the potential of new media in 2008, they are well on their way to rectifying their error. The next general election due in 2013 might well see the political contest move onto new media with a vengeance.

Finally, while the climate of dissent and defiance fostered, in part, by the Hindraf Rally was instrumental to the outcome of the 2008 election in Malaysia, it was never solely responsible for the surprise result. Given that an independent post-election poll demonstrated only 12.9% turned to the Internet for information during the election (*Peninsular Malaysia Voter Opinion Poll: Perspective on Issues, the Economy, Leadership and Voting Intentions*, 2008), it is equally apparent that online activism alone could not have provided sufficient impetus for these attitudinal changes. The context in which the string of events related so far was equally vital to the results of Malaysia’s 12th General Election. For the above-mentioned events could only have taken place in the Malaysia of that period. A different socio-political and media context, say for example, the neighbouring state of Singapore, might well have seen very different consequences develop for Hindraf. The situation in Malaysia is unique, partially due to the inconsistencies of the regulatory frameworks within which new media and mainstream media are governed within the nation. Specifically, though the state and its proxies exert

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considerable control over the content of mainstream media (Nain, 2000), new media is rendered somewhat exempt due to the promise to leave the Internet in Malaysia free of censorship. A promise made by a government eager to attract international firms to its Multimedia Super Corridor technological development policy implemented in 1996, a censorship-free Internet is now enacted as 'Cyberlaw' in Malaysia (S. Leong, 2008). Although this does not mean that new media practitioners have license to do as they will in Malaysia. As the arrests of Hindraf's leaders demonstrate (Kabilan, 2007), non-censorship is not the equivalent of online impunity. Nonetheless, in contrast to the Singapore state's comprehensive regulatory grip on all forms of media content from print and film to audio, digital and otherwise (Media Development Authority, 2001; *Films Act: Chapter 107*, 2002; T. Lee, 2004), political expression and correspondingly, civil society in Malaysia is comparatively liberal.

All these differences exist despite the many similarities in origins and makeup between the Malaysia and Singapore, both of which were former British Settlements and even, very briefly, one country (SarDesai, 2003, pp. 100-110, 299-300). Verification, indeed, of Miller and Slater's claim that "the Internet is only ever "a meaningful phenomenon" in reference to a specific contexts (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 1). In the end, it is perhaps more accurate to understand the Hindraf saga as a moment where a growing media, cultural and digital sophistication coincided with the gathering of political dissent and agency amongst Malaysians. This same momentum has seen Malaysia's current Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, accede to demands that he step down to make way for his deputy, Najib Tun Razak, to take office in March of 2009. It has also succeeded in winning a pledge from Razak himself to aid the minorities in Malaysia upon his takeover (Jackson, 2008).

Agre (2002, p. 316) notes that generally the Internet is an ideal environment for issue politics wherein temporary coalitions coalesce dynamically around specific issues. Temporary coalitions are not new phenomena but with new media "the competitive imperative" to create (and I might add, disband) such alliances quickly are greater (ibid). Connolly describes this as "micropolitical activity initiated from numerous sites" and uses the notion of "majority assemblages" to encapsulate what he regards as a positive step towards pluralism (2005, p. 9). nevertheless, I think we do well to remember that though Hindraf's efforts have succeeded in animating some of the citizenry (Inglis, 2000), they have also managed to alienate others. The risk of multiple polarisations along a crazed mosaic of fault lines is a major drawback of ad hoc liaisons and micropolitics *ala* Connolly that needs to be addressed if the notion of pluralistic media citizenship is to be fully realised. This is all the more so when the polity itself is already entrenched in deeply scored ethno-religious communal lines. As one astute

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observer of Malaysian politics comments, the continued survival of Hindraf as a “credible mass movement”, despite its banned status, hinges on its ability to articulate wider, more inclusive causes and win the support of a broader spectrum of Malaysians (Yeoh, 2009).

Conclusion

Silverstone (2007, p. 31) argues in *Media and Morality* that the mediapolis should be viewed as a moral space. This, according to him, is because it is increasingly to the media that we look to for the “resources for judgement, for cognitive, aesthetic and moral judgement, in our confrontation with the world, both that of face-to-face and that of mediated experience” (p. 44). Though Silverstone writes of media in general, the recent contrasting treatments meted out to the Rohingyas, a Burmese Muslim minority, by the neighbouring states of Thailand and Malaysia lend veracity to his assertion. Abused and denied the rights of citizenship by their own government, Rohingyas were initially denied refuge when they reached Thai waters (“Thailand's Deadly Treatment of Migrants”; Tharoor, 2009). In comparison, although many of those who made it to Malaysian territory were detained and deported as illegal immigrants, the more fortunate ones were settled from there into a third country by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as refugees (“Burma Migrants in Malaysia Blaze”, 2008). However, following media coverage of Thailand's inhospitable treatment of the stateless Rohingya, their plight gained much-needed publicity (Head, 2009a, 2009b). Indeed, evidence suggests that the weight of international scrutiny, opinion and pressure engendered within the mediapolis caused the Thai government to reconsider their want of care and compassion towards the Rohingyas (Ahuja, 2009). In this way, media exposure seems to have persuaded the Thai state that how they act when confronted with the likes of the Rohingyas does reflect substantially on their image as a nation within the international community. It is actions and responses such as these that confirm most emphatically that our obligations and responsibilities as citizens are much “wider than the media's representation of the world” and must stretch, ultimately, to embrace the entirety of “the world which the media represent” (Silverstone, 2007, p. 135).

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