

# Chapter 7

## Framing the Tanjung Piai By-Election in Multilingual Malaysian Newspapers



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**Abstract** This chapter analyses how multilingual mainstream Malaysian newspapers reported the Tanjung Piai by-election of November 2019. The Tanjung Piai parliamentary seat became vacant after the death of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) Member of Parliament. Barisan Nasional (BN) held the seat previously but lost it to PH in the 2018 general elections. This by-election was important because it indicated the people's confidence in PH and the Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. This chapter uses framing theory to explain how the media structure their delivery of news, promoting interpretations of events by selecting certain facts. Frames appearing in the media are important when they resonate with the audience's strongly held perceptions. Articles in *Harian Metro*, *Malaysiakini*, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* are analysed to determine the intensity of coverage, the predominant sources, the frames and the valence of the articles towards PH and Mahathir Mohamad. The analysis reveals that BN's resounding victory is a strong indication of the people's disappointment with the government and their efforts at reforms. The voters protested PH with an intention to 'teach it a lesson' by voting for BN's candidate.

**Keywords** Media · Newspapers · By-election · Political communication · Framing

### 7.1 Introduction

The Tanjung Piai by-election on 16 November 2019 was the final blow for the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government as it exposed the growing dissatisfaction of the public with their performance. Nadirah and Ng (2019) stated that it was the fourth electoral loss

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for the PH government in 2019, where the opposition Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate, Dr Wee Jock Seng, won by a whopping 15,086 majority over the PH candidate Karmaine Sardini. They also reported that this constituency has 52,986 voters, of which, 57% are Malay; 42% Chinese; and 1% Indian. This win in a majority Malay area by a BN Chinese candidate indicates the swing by Malay and Chinese voters back to BN. Yang Razali Kassim (2019) highlighted that the results signalled two important explanations: one the BN-Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) unity appeased the Malays, and two the Chinese were angry with the Democratic Action Party (DAP) for failing to deliver their promises to the community. He also explained that the PH loss after the euphoria of the 14th General Election (GE14) pointed to the growing unhappiness with the Mahathir administration over the slow pace of reforms, unfulfilled promises, and non-stop bickering between the PH parties and within Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), PH's largest component party.

The Tanjung Piai by-election was important to PH against a backdrop of growing dissatisfaction among Malaysians who were looking forward to a new Malaysia after 60 years of BN rule. This chapter will analyse how multilingual mainstream Malaysian newspapers framed the Tanjung Piai by-election of November 2019. Such an examination will be useful to ascertain how the media structured their delivery of news, promoting interpretations of events by selecting certain facts. Articles from *Harian Metro*, *Malaysiakini*, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* are analysed using framing analysis to determine the intensity of coverage, the predominant sources, the frames, and the valence of the articles towards PH and Mahathir Mohamad. As the ruling government, the outcome of this election had the greatest impact on them as it determined their survival as a formidable government and their ability to fulfil the aspirations of the millions of Malaysian voters who elected them to power.

The media plays an important role in processing and presenting political discourse. It understands the impact of populism so the frames appearing in the media are significant as they resonate with the audience's strongly held perceptions and indicate grassroots' sentiments. The politicians, in turn, use the media as their mouthpiece to get their news across to the public. Politicians make every effort to win elections and present themselves in the best possible manner to the media. They use language strategies to present and legitimise themselves through positive representation and delegitimise their opponents through negative representation. Legitimation deserves special attention in political discourse because it is used by political leaders and opponents to justify their political agenda to maintain or alter the direction of a country (Reyes, 2011).

## 7.2 14th General Election

GE14 held on 9 May 2018 has been termed the "Mother of all Elections" (Idris, 2018) as it saw Malaysians vote out the previously undefeated Alliance/BN ruling coalition after 62 years of continuous power since independence. BN and its predecessor the Alliance had emerged victorious in every general election since the first general

election that was held in 1955 (2 years before Malaysia gained independence) (Lee, 2020).

GE14 was basically a contest between three coalitions, i.e. BN the largest, oldest and most powerful coalition, which was formed in 1973 with 13 partners; PH which was formed in 2015 with four partners and Gagasan Sejahtera (GS), a coalition of four Islamic parties headed by PAS which was formed in 2016. Many believed that BN would be re-elected to power with a narrow majority for the fourteenth time since the country's independence in 1957 (Hutchinson, 2018). However, for the first time in Malaysia's young political history, Pakatan Harapan or "Coalition of Hope" emerged victorious. The coalition comprised four parties: PKR, DAP, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) (Moniruzzaman & Farzana, 2018). Significantly, this election saw former archenemies Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim joining forces under the PH banner to end BN's 60-year grip on Malaysian politics.

This regime change occurred as a result of growing dissatisfaction and anger towards BN's poor governance and mismanagement of the country's finances, and the most prominent being the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal. BN was also embroiled in a myriad of other financial scandals involving the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), the Council of Trust for the People (Majlis Amanah Rakyat or MARA), and Lembaga Tabung Haji. Ng et al. (2020) highlighted that public confidence in the BN-led government also waned because of the apathy of authorities to arraign any individuals for these scandals. Additionally, they explained that on the backdrop of these corruption scandals, the public were infuriated with the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) on 1 April 2015 and the reduction of various subsidies especially the fuel subsidy which exposed them to a higher cost of living.

### 7.3 PH Government

The PH coalition was voted in on the hope of correcting all the wrong doings of the previous BN government. Malaysians in general looked at post-GE14 as an era of change. However, PH and its loosely formed partners in this coalition shared different ideological paths despite being truly multi-ethnic (Chin, 2020). Bersatu was founded by Mahathir Mohamad and Muhyiddin Yassin, a splinter group from United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), DAP was a Chinese-based multi-ethnic party led by the father/son duo Lim Kit Siang and Lim Guan Eng, PKR was a Malay majority multi-ethnic party led by Anwar Ibrahim, and Amanah was a breakaway party from PAS. On the other side of the aisle, UMNO signed a political pact with PAS called Muafakat Nasional to bounce back from the GE14 loss and garner the divided Malay votes (Izzuddin, 2020). This pact, according to Izzuddin (2020), was able to disrupt the PH government's efforts on reforms by sowing social discontent in the minds of the Malay community through discourse on Malay nationalism and

Islamic conservatism, thus increasing ethno-religious polarisation among the various ethnicities (see Siti Nurnadilla, Chap. 8 and Ang and Kock, Chap. 9).

According to Tan (2020), the Malay acceptance of PH began to collapse within six months of its coming to power after a successful campaign by Muafakat Nasional to portray PH's move to ratify the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and subsequently the Rome Statute, as an attack on Malay interests. Shortly after, right-wing Malay and Islamic groups staged the Malay Dignity Congress (MDC), where the leaders of the four most important Malay majority political parties attended: UMNO, PAS, PKR and Bersatu (Chin, 2020). To add insult to injury, the keynote at MDC was delivered by none other than the new PH Prime Minister, Mahathir himself. Mahathir's presence at MDC indicated that PH or specifically Bersatu condoned the divisive and racist narratives expressed by the speakers at the conference. According to Chin (2020), the right-wing Malay nationalist parties with the strong backing of Muafakat Nasional worked towards bringing down the new government by framing the narratives of mainstream Malay politics as Malay supremacy being under threat. Chin also emphasised that the perception among Malays was that non-Malays had too much influence in the PH government, particularly the Chinese of DAP, as more than half of the Members of Parliament in the PH coalition were non-Malays and 11 of the 28 ministers in the PH federal cabinet were non-Malays. The Malay community was also riled up that prominent government appointments like the Minister of Finance, Chief Justice of Malaysia and the Attorney General's positions were occupied by non-Malays.

The non-Malays on the other hand were disillusioned firstly with PH's decision to abandon their plans to ratify the ICERD and the Rome Statute, and secondly, they saw the MDC and the Prime Minister's presence there as a regressive step towards building Malaysia Baru as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country (Tan, 2019). Chin (2020) affirmed that the PH coalition came together for the sole purpose of bringing down Najib Razak and removing BN from power and had little in common with each other. Bersatu was also trying to increase its base by attracting defectors from UMNO (Jan, 2020; Tan, 2019), so Bersatu was seen as "old Barisan wine in a new Pakatan bottle" (Izzuddin, 2020, p. 103) displaying the same Ketuanan Melayu Islam attitude as UMNO. This led to tensions with the coalition partners and other allies who wanted to promote a non-ethnic style of politics (Chin, 2020). Therefore, PH was a dysfunctional government and found it difficult to work in a cohesive manner with Ministers contradicting each other in public.

Additionally, Malaysia's highly politicised civil service was not used to dealing with different political masters and this added to the frailty of the new coalition (Chin, 2020; Hutchinson, 2018). Yang Razali Kassim (2019) also attributed the power struggle and difficulties in the transition of power faced by PH to the number of inexperienced ministers who were unable to tackle issues relating to the cost of living. The public were no longer interested in listening to the transgressions of the past government but were eager to see reforms to improve the country's quality of governance. Yang Razali Kassim (2019) succinctly described the difficulties faced by PH as the mismatch between expectations and reality in terms of PH's capacity to deliver.

Chin (2020) claimed that Mahathir himself played a crucial role in the destruction of his own administration by backtracking on the succession plan to hand the premiership to Anwar Ibrahim after two years. Chin also said speculation was rife that Mahathir tried to weaken Anwar politically by encouraging the rivalry in PKR between Anwar Ibrahim and Azmin Ali. This public infighting in PKR eroded public confidence in PH's ability to govern the country and bring about the much-needed reforms promised in the election manifesto.

DAP, the most reform-minded party in the coalition, found itself in a difficult position. Chin (2019) highlighted that the Chinese felt frustrated at the slow progress in DAP's commitment to gain recognition for independent Chinese school qualifications (Unified Examination Certificate). Chin explained that DAP was in a tight spot as every reform policy it advocated was immediately branded as "pro-Chinese" and thus "anti-Malay" or "anti-Islam" by Muafakat Nasional. Additionally, Chin said that PH's decision to increase the number of university places set aside for those that came through a one-year pre-university matriculation places to 40,000 from 25,000 did not go well with the non-Malays. He highlighted that the majority of matriculation students are Malays and increasing the number of matriculation places reduced the number of university places for the non-Malays who usually take the high school examination (STPM) route to university.

PH's pro-reform supporters were also demoralised with its slow progress and initiatives like the introduction of khat (Malay-Arabic calligraphy) in the school syllabus (Tan, 2020). To add insult to injury, Lim Guan Eng's decision to withhold RM30 million in funds for Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) and Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TARUC) was another issue that angered the Chinese voters ("TARUC must not be MCA-owned", 2019). Yang Razali Kassim (2019) attributed the wide margin of defeat for PH in the Tanjung Piai by-election to the Chinese voters in the constituency swinging back to the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Chinese party in BN. He contrasted this with GE14 when the Chinese overwhelmingly voted for PH.

## 7.4 Framing News

Frames have significant effects as they not only shape what people think of an issue but also impact how they structure and guide public discourse. As Entman (1993, p. 52) explains:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendations.

Consequently, any group wishing to promote an agenda, frames the pertinent issue in a way that advances its cause. The media in turn serves as conduit for partisan frames developed by politicians and other groups who encourage specific issue positions. For this reason, D'Angelo and Kuypers (2010) highlighted that much

framing research concentrates on the ways politicians, issue advocates, and stakeholders engage journalists and other news professionals to convey to the public their desired meanings of events and issues. They also mentioned that journalists need these sources' frames to create news by adding or merging their own ideas in the process. This embodies Scheufele's (2004) model of framing perspectives which affirmed two frame building sub-processes: firstly, "journalists are audiences for the framing behaviours of other social actors, and secondly, journalists use those framing elements to construct news stories" (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 4).

Lawrence (2010) emphasised that ultimately "events are framed as much by the decisions of journalists and editors as by the intentions of political actors" (p. 265). Journalists draw their ideas and language from various sources, but they construct their own frames for the news. Similarly, Arenas and Jiménez (2018) described the media as "political actors" as it plays a pivotal role by contextualising particular current events rapidly that it elicits reactions in different groups based on their political inclination. Hence, media frames have the power to impact politics because of its persuasive role in communication. The media can complicate issues through positive and negative evaluations of political parties thus legitimising or delegitimising their actions pertaining to an issue. For this purpose, positive and negative representations are made possible in framing political discourse by using legitimisation discursive strategies (Chilton, 2004). Legitimation strategies are applied by the media to present political discourse in preferred positions of self and others. The positive and negative representations can alter the reporting of a single event in a way to publicly legitimise or delegitimise political strategies.

## 7.5 Method

### 7.5.1 Data

The newspapers chosen for this study were *The Star* (English), *Sin Chew Daily* (Mandarin), *Harian Metro* (Malay) and *Malaysiakini* (English). *The Star*, *Sin Chew Daily* and *Harian Metro* were selected as they are mainstream newspapers in Malaysia, and they enjoy the highest circulation within their respective language stream. According to Selva (2010), the 2019 average daily circulation of *The Star*, *Sin Chew Daily* and *Harian Metro* was 175,986, 293,804 and 79,049, respectively.

The MCA, one of the component parties of BN, is a major shareholder of *The Star*. The English newspapers in Malaysia are usually read by the elites and English educated readers, who are mostly concentrated in urban areas. Lent (1990) stated that it is only the readership of English newspapers that could transcend ethnicity in Malaysia. Hence, the author claimed that the English press also serves as an inter-ethnic medium.

*Sin Chew Daily* is owned by a business and media tycoon, Tiong Hiew King. It is circulated throughout Malaysia and neighbouring countries, such as in southern

Thailand, Brunei, Indonesia and northern Kalimantan. It is also published and printed in Indonesia and Cambodia under separate mastheads. It is noteworthy that *Sin Chew* offers extensive coverage on politics, economy, culture and education while being considered as one of the most outspoken mainstream newspapers in Malaysia (Ou, 2009).

*Harian Metro* is owned by Media Prima, which is an investment arm of UMNO. Media Prima is Malaysia's largest media and entertainment conglomerate that owns various media companies. It holds the controlling shares of newspapers like *New Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian* and *Shin Min Daily News*. It also has majority equity interests in television stations like TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9, while owning three radio stations, Fly FM, Hot FM and One FM.

*Malaysiakini* is one of the most successful alternative news sites in Malaysia (Asad, 2020; Kasmani, 2016; Lai & Muthaly, 2019; Murudi & Ting, 2019). It is also the country's first commercial online newspaper and has records average daily hits of approximately 500,000 (Kasim & Sani, 2016). In addition, *Malaysiakini* is said to often set the agenda for other news media (Asad, 2020). Although *Malaysiakini* offers sections in English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, this study only focused on the English section because the other sections contain mainly translations of major stories in English.

The time frame of this study was 1–22 November 2019 as it represented the peak period of the by-election coverage. The nomination day was set on 2 November 2019 with a 14-day campaign period, and the polling day was 16 November 2019. The coverage on the by-election continued for about a week after the polling day with some analysis of the polling results.

The unit of analysis was articles on the by-election, which included straight news, editorials, columns, opinions and letters. The articles were collected via database searches, which were retrieved from the respective newspaper's online archive. The search words used in the study was "Tanjung Piai by-election", which were found within headlines or body text of the articles.

### 7.5.2 Coding Procedures

The news articles were coded to answer these research questions:

RQ1: What was the intensity of coverage published by the newspapers?

RQ2: What were the sources used by the newspapers?

RQ3: What were the news frames used by the newspapers?

RQ4: What was the valence of the news articles published by the newspapers?

The intensity of coverage refers to the importance of news stories (Yarchi et al., 2017). It was studied from two angles: (1) number of news items and (2) type of news items.

There are two possible approaches to content analysing frames in the news: inductive and deductive (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The inductive approach involves



analysing a news story with an open view to reveal the array of possible frames, beginning with very loosely defined pre-conceptions of these themes. This approach can detect the many possible ways in which an issue can be framed, but this method is labour-intensive, often based on small samples, and can be difficult to replicate. A deductive approach involves pre-defining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news. This approach makes it necessary to have a clear idea of the kinds of frames likely to be in the news, because the frames that are not defined a priori may be overlooked. This approach can be replicated easily, can cope with large samples and can easily detect differences in framing between media (e.g. television vs. press) and within media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Similarly, Wimmer and Dominick (2013) stated that there are two ways to establish coding categories for content analysis. The first is known as a priori coding, where the researcher establishes the categories before the data is collected, based on some theoretical or conceptual rationale. The second is called emergent coding, where the researcher establishes categories after a preliminary examination of the data.

This study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach for analysing news sources and news frames. The researchers outlined the following categories after a preliminary examination of the news articles. The categories for sources used in this study were: (1) political parties (either from PH or the opposition), (2) independent candidate, (3) Election Commission of Malaysia, (4) government agencies, (5) police, (6) NGOs and associations, (7) general public and (8) others.

The following are the coding categories for frames developed for this study and their operational definitions. For each article, only the three most dominant frames were recorded.

1. Credentials and future direction of PH: reported contribution and achievement of the PH government; reported reasons mentioned by PH's politicians of why voters should continue to support the coalition; reported the PH government's plan in developing Tanjung Piai, Johor or the country; reported PH leaders' statements about the lessons and reflections they have gained through the failure in the by-election; reported PH leaders' statements about their plan and/or strategy to move forward.
2. Criticism of PH: reported the dissatisfaction or criticism towards the performance of PH and/or its coalition parties; reported dissatisfaction or criticism towards Mahathir Mohamad; reported condemnation of the campaign strategies and tactics (i.e. offering voters money, handouts, vouchers, SIM card for mobile phone, tickets, travel reimbursements, promises of economic benefit, etc.) employed by PH, reported condemnation of empty and/or sweet promises by PH.
3. Political strategies of other competing parties/independent individuals: reported reasons for supporting a particular candidate; reported the collaboration between different political parties; reported promises given by politicians before or after the by-election.
4. Conflict: reported politician's criticism of other competing parties or candidates.



5. Public opinion and commentary: reported expectation of the general public/NGOs/individual author towards the government or the political parties; reported commentary or public opinion towards the by-election/political parties/candidates; reported results of polling.
6. Politicians as individual: reported personal and/or background information about a candidate; reported quotes by individuals who commended the personality/integrity of a candidate; reported the motivation/inspiration of a candidate to compete in the by-election.
7. Others: any other content that did not fit into the above-mentioned frames. They included coverage about preparation for the campaign, nomination or voting day; episodic details of the nomination or voting day; police reports lodged against a particular candidate or party during the campaign, as well as action taken by police; reminders from the Election Commission of Malaysia or police about election rules and regulations; statement from Public Accounts Committee (PAC); politician's dissatisfaction with election rules and regulations, etc.

Valence of the articles refers to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party or institution by its user (Han & Wang, 2015). This study used the categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of attitude expressed towards PH and/or Mahathir. The two most dominant attitude categories were recorded.

1. Supportive of PH and/or Mahathir: conveyed a favourable impression towards PH and/or its coalition parties; conveyed a favourable impression towards Mahathir; highlighted, supported or complimented the policy or performance of PH and/or its coalition parties; contained quotes by individuals who approved the stance of PH and/or Mahathir.
2. Critical of PH and/or Mahathir: conveyed an unfavourable impression towards PH and/or its coalition parties; conveyed an unfavourable impression towards Mahathir; criticised the policy and/or performance of PH; contained quotes by individuals who disapproved the stance of PH and/or Mahathir.
3. Neutral of PH and/or Mahathir: neither favourably nor unfavourably portrayed PH and/or its coalition parties; neither favourably nor unfavourably portrayed Mahathir.

Coding was conducted manually by the three authors. A sample of 10% was selected randomly for re-assessment by a second independent coder, who is a communication graduate. Using Krippendorff's alpha, the inter-coder reliability was  $\geq 0.94$ .

## 7.6 Findings

The differences in intensity of coverage, the predominant sources, frames and valence of the articles reflected the dissimilar depiction of PH and Mahathir Mohamad in the presentation of the newspapers.

**Table 7.1** Number of articles

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
<i>The Star</i>	25	2.82
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	519	58.51
<i>Harian Metro</i>	110	12.40
<i>Malaysiakini</i>	233	26.27
<b>Total</b>	<b>877</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 7.2** Types of articles

Types of articles	<i>The Star</i> (n = 25) %	<i>Sin Chew</i> (n = 519) %	<i>Harian Metro</i> (n = 110) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 233) %
Straight news	88.00	82.85	100.00	82.83
Column articles	4.00	16.18	0	0
Editorials	8.00	0.96	0	0
Letters	0	0	0	3.43
Reader's comments	0	0	0	4.72
Opinions	0	0	0	9.01

### 7.6.1 Intensity of Coverage

A total of 887 articles were collected in this study. *Malaysiakini* contributed 26.27% to the sample, followed by *Sin Chew Daily* (58.51%), *The Star* (2.82%) and *Harian Metro* (12.40%) (Table 7.1).

Most of the articles published in *Sin Chew Daily* were in the form of straight news (82.85%), followed by column articles (16.18%) and editorials (0.96%). *Harian Metro* only published straight news (100%) in its coverage of the by-election, and 22.00% of its news was taken from the Malaysian National News Agency, Bernama. The majority of *The Star* articles were in the form of straight news (88%), followed by editorials (8%) and column articles (4%). *Malaysiakini* in its coverage focussed on straight news (82.83%), followed by opinions (9.01%), reader's comments (4.72%) and letters (3.43%) (Table 7.2).

### 7.6.2 News Sources

*Sin Chew Daily* quoted opposition politicians (42.96%) slightly more than PH leaders (40.19%). It mostly cited sources from the MCA, including the MCA President Wee Ka Siong and the MCA candidate for the by-election Wee Jock Seng. In addition,

**Table 7.3** News sources

News sources	<i>The Star</i> (n = 25) %	<i>Sin Chew</i> (n = 519) %	<i>Harian Metro</i> (n = 110) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 233) %
Pakatan Harapan	9.76	40.19	43.56	36.30
Barisan Nasional	36.59	42.96	10.89	30.05
Independent candidate	0	2.96	6.93	0.96
Election Commission	12.20	3.52	12.87	4.81
Government agencies	4.88	0.37	3.96	2.16
Police	4.88	2.41	10.89	0.72
NGOs and associations	2.43	3.15	0	2.16
General public	26.83	3.89	9.9	18.99
Others	2.43	0.56	0.99	3.85

*Sin Chew Daily* also sourced from leaders of UMNO. For PH sources, *Sin Chew Daily* mostly quoted the leaders from DAP. The most predominant source employed by *Harian Metro* was the leaders of PH (43.56%), and most of them were leaders from Bersatu. The second dominant source used by *Harian Metro* was the Election Commission of Malaysia (12.87%). The opposition leaders and police attributed for 10.89%, respectively, as the third dominant source for *Harian Metro*.

*The Star* in its reporting quoted the opposition the most (39.74%), followed by the general public (26.82%), the Election Commission (12.19%) and only (9.73%) for PH. *The Star* in its reporting of the opposition gave equal coverage to UMNO and MCA with (14.63%), respectively. For PH, Sabah's Warisan Party was the most quoted. The role of the general public was noteworthy in *The Star's* reporting. The top three sources cited by *Malaysiakini* were PH (36.30%), followed by the opposition (30.05%) and the general public (18.99%). Bersatu, DAP and PKR were given the most coverage within PH, while UMNO and MCA dominated the coverage for the opposition. The party leadership and the candidates within PH and the opposition were prominently quoted in its coverage. *Malaysiakini* also gave prominence to the views of the general public who were voters in the constituency (Table 7.3).

### 7.6.3 News Frames

Each of the newspaper had undertaken a different framing approach in reporting the Tanjung Piai by-election. The most salient frame found in *Sin Chew Daily's* coverage of the Tanjung Piai by-election was "Criticism of PH" (31.00%). Most of

**Table 7.4** News frames

Frames	<i>The Star</i> (n = 58) %	<i>Sin Chew</i> (n = 600) %	<i>Harian Metro</i> (n = 111) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 346) %
Credentials and future direction of Pakatan Harapan	7.27	13.17	27.03	16.76
Criticism of Pakatan Harapan	23.64	31.00	1.80	27.46
Political strategies of other competing parties/independent individuals	20.00	14.50	8.11	10.70
Conflict	10.91	11.50	0.90	19.36
Public opinion and commentary	25.45	14.17	3.60	9.25
Politicians as individual	1.82	1.33	2.70	8.67
Others	10.91	14.33	55.86	7.80

the criticism came from MCA leaders, Chinese NGOs and column article writers. The condemnation centres around several issues, namely the failure of DAP in defending Chinese interests; cowardice of DAP to speak up within PH; refusal to subsidise UTAR and TARUC; teaching khat calligraphy (*Jawi*) in vernacular schools; failure in recognising the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC); failure to materialise earlier promises by the PH government; racism of Mahathir; Islamisation; corruption of the PH government during the by-election campaign; bad economy and internal conflicts within PH (Table 7.4).

In an editorial published by *Sin Chew Daily*, it was mentioned that 95% of Chinese voters supported PH in GE14 but they did not receive the same favourable treatment in return (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2 November 2019a). In another editorial, it was mentioned that both PH and BN failed to eradicate racism after GE14. On one hand, Bersatu brought back the topic of *bumiputera* (son of the soil) policy, defended the radical Indian Islamic preacher Zakir Naik and participated in the MDC. On the other hand, UMNO moved towards the right and caused Malay politics to be even more conservative. This implied that the establishment of a two-party system failed to bring about more democracy and equality but generated inequality instead. In addition, the editorial pointed out that PH was afraid to offend Malay voters and hence did not adopt a moderate path. This in turn gave more opportunities to Muafakat Nasional and other radical right-wing parties to fan ethnic issues (*Sin Chew Daily*, 16 November 2019b).

After the Tanjung Piiai by-election, *Sin Chew Daily* published an editorial to analyse the results. It pointed out that strong public grievance led to a shared intention among the voters to “teach PH a lesson”. This triggered the worst by-election result for PH, where it only obtained 26.7% of votes. The editorial mentioned that “nothing is more attractive than to teach PH a lesson and to release the anger of voters”. It

added that there is no such legend as DAP controls the Chinese votes. It explained that the Chinese supported DAP because it has been fighting racism. However, when it became part of the government, DAP failed to materialise what it promised earlier. Consequently, the voters decided to tell DAP that they are watching the government and will not be manipulated (*Sin Chew Daily*, 19 November 2019c). A closer examination of *Sin Chew Daily*'s coverage revealed that the newspaper reported the Tanjung Piai by-election as a rivalry between DAP and MCA for Chinese votes, as well as a competition between Bersatu and UMNO for Malay votes.

In contrast, *Harian Metro* framed the Tanjung Piai by-election in a rather peaceful and harmonised manner. By adopting "Others" frame (55.86%), the newspaper mostly reported episodic information about the preparation for campaign, nomination or voting day; details of the nomination or voting day; and reminders from the Election Commission or police about election rules and regulations. In fact, there were quite a number of articles in *Harian Metro* that portrayed friendliness, tolerance, kindness, forgiveness and other virtues. For example, it was reported that the then Minister of Federal Territories Khalid Abdul Samad, who is in PKR, met his elder brother Shahrir Abdul Samad, who is a leader from UMNO. Nonetheless, it was reported that the difference in political ideology between the two brothers did not affect their sibling love for each other (*Harian Metro*, 2 November 2019a).

In another article, *Harian Metro* reported that the candidate from Bersatu, MCA and Gerakan met each other unexpectedly at a morning market during the campaign. The appearance of the three candidates was welcomed by the locals, and it was reported that the open-mindedness of the people enabled the three candidates and their party members to distribute pamphlets in a peaceful and friendly manner. *Harian Metro* also reported that there was no provocation, but each party had its own unique strength in attracting the voters' attention (*Harian Metro*, 3 November 2019b).

For *The Star*, the most prominent frames were "Public opinion and commentary" (24.13%) and "Criticism of PH" (22.41%). A major part of these frames were criticisms of the PH leadership and its performance post-GE14. Grievances from the Tanjung Piai community were also reflected pertaining to local issues as well as national level politics and decisions made by the senior politicians within their respective party. Several questions were raised about PH maintaining its coalition narrative (*The Star*, 2 November 2019a). Besides this, the "Chinese vote" swing factor was given coverage. Also highlighted under its "Political strategies of other competing parties/independent individuals" (18.96%) were the exemplary performance of Wee Jee Seng in his previous term, as well as how voting BN will benefit the constituents. Several articles were also dedicated to the Election Commission's decision requiring police permit and if this was a fair decision (*The Star*, 13 November 2019b, 2019c). This issue was further highlighted by BERSIH (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) (*The Star*, 14 November 2019d) and finally resolved when the Attorney General intervened to resolve it (*The Star*, 15 November 2019e).

In the column "Along the Watchtower" with the heading "Plenty at stake in Tanjung Piai", the dissatisfaction of the Chinese community towards the PH government was clear. The 15-month rule of PH was questioned, and disappointment was expressed in relation to Mahathir's leadership, laws such as SOSMA, Zakir Naik,

failure to recognise UEC, removal of funding for UTAR/TARUC, khat calligraphy and ICERD (*The Star*, 13 November 2019b, 2019c). Speculation of which party was subservient and how the community's role will be defined in future were also discussed.

The first editorial column in *The Star* focussed on post-election analysis with a focus on Mahathir's leadership and the performance of the PH government. Much of the article was centred on how the voters wanted to teach PH a lesson, as a result of their unfulfilled promises, policies and actions since GE14. A key point to highlight was the statement that Tanjung Piai will go down in record as the worst performance for any ruling coalition in a parliamentary by-election in Malaysia (*The Star*, 18 November 2019f, 2019g). Another salient point was that the Chinese voters accepted that MCA's working relationship with PAS, if it meant to bring down PH.

Another post-election editorial in *The Star* contributed by the editor-in-chief of *Sin Chew Daily* highlighted the staggering results of how PH, the ruling government would continue to lose support. The writer highlighted issues with PH that brought about its downfall while emphasising how MCA was rekindling the support of the Chinese community and was a party to be reckoned with (*The Star*, 18 November 2019f, 2019g).

The most prominent frame used in *Malaysiakini's* coverage was criticism of PH (27.46%). The criticism centred around the PH leadership, its inability to fulfil promises post-GE14, freebies offered by PH, which party dominated the coalition, internal problems between DAP and Bersatu, and the disgruntlement of PKR members against Bersatu. Through its frames, *Malaysiakini* draws attention to the internal problems within PH, specifically the dispute between the Perak Chief Minister and DAP, in which, he expressed that he was fighting a desperate battle alone against DAP factions. Eleven articles were dedicated to this issue from 8 November 2019 to 13 November 2019. This issue was further exacerbated when the Perak PKR chief openly announced that Ahmad Faizal does not deserve to be Chief Minister (*Malaysiakini*, 8 November 2019e, 2019f, 2019g, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j). The continuous display of internal strife was also brought to the fore with Bersatu Youth Chief Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman informing the public that the dispute between the Perak Chief Minister and DAP can be resolved within the PH "family" (*Malaysiakini*, 9 November 2019k). This was reiterated by Lim Kit Siang of DAP (*Malaysiakini*, 8 November 2019e, 2019f, 2019g, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j).

Dissatisfaction within the party machinery also compelled its top leadership to urge all its lawmakers to present a united front for the sake of the coalition, at least until the end of the by-election (*Malaysiakini*, 9 November 2019k). DAP had its fair share of criticism, which was reflected by dissatisfaction among its members regarding the prosecution of one of its lawmakers in the LTTE case, a controversial comic and the disciplinary action against its party central executive member (*Malaysiakini*, 9 November 2019k).

Criticism from the voters and public towards who really controlled PH was reported with Bersatu President Muhyiddin Yassin reiterating that the PH government at the state and central levels is administered jointly and not dominated by a single

party. This was further strengthened by PH secretary-general Saifuddin Abdullah's statement that PH member parties are equal (*Malaysiakini*, 11 November 2019).

In a reader's comment article, a reader mentioned that the conduct of PH in the Tanjung Piai by-election was far worse than UMNO, shamelessly indulging in the same manner of voter rewards that UMNO was previously criticised for. In addition, the reader pointed out that Bersatu, the party with the least seats, calls all the shots, with the other parties meekly wrapped around its little finger (*Malaysiakini*, 19 November 2019t).

Another reader commented that the DAP leaders abandoned their principles and went along with Mahathir's racist, divisive agenda. The reader criticised that after PH won the elections, Mahathir laughed off the election manifesto, saying unrealistic promises were made because they did not think they were going to win GE14 (*Malaysiakini*, 19 November 2019t).

*Malaysiakini* condemned PH's campaign strategies to reclaim lost ground. It was reported that PH pumped almost RM17 million into the Tanjung Piai by-election and most of it before nomination day. In addition, PH was criticised for its involvement in ethnic-based campaigning, something which it had criticised BN for in the past. This included PH's fliers urging voters at the talk attended by Mahathir to "vote Muslim first". Furthermore, many of those who attended Mahathir's talk turned up in PH colours, suggesting that they were partly workers who might not necessarily be voters, but the crowd size appeared to have a psychological effect on the locals (*Malaysiakini*, 15 November 2019p).

Conflict was the second most prominent frame, where criticisms towards competing political parties were reported. The tensions between PH and the opposition were most prominent, while minimal conflicts were reported for the Gerakan and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (BERJASA) candidates. Issues related to the Johor bicycle tragedy (*Malaysiakini*, 8 November 2019e, 2019f, 2019g, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j), frictions between MCA and DAP leadership as well as competing candidates were reported (*Malaysiakini*, 9 November 2019k). *Malaysiakini* highlighted Wee Jeck Seng's incompetence when he served the constituency in the 13th Dewan Rakyat proceedings, where he only engaged in debates 11 times and only spoke for 19 min yearly hence warranting the name "check-in Seng". In addition, Wee Jeck Seng's alleged links to the vehicle entry permit (VEP) were also featured (*Malaysiakini*, 6 November 2019b).

The credentials and future direction of PH were the third most prominent frame. The top leadership, including the Prime Minister Mahathir was seen cajoling the voters to put their trust in PH (*Malaysiakini*, 13 November 2019n). The PH government was framed as a government that is committed in resolving all problems and dissatisfaction faced by all ethnicities in the country. MCA reiterated that Muafakat Nasional was well received by all the component parties, and PAS had shown support to MCA's nominee, which strengthened the future of BN (*Malaysiakini*, 13 November 2019n).

Addressing the lessons and reflections gained through the failure in the Tanjung Piai by-election, DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang said that his party and PH accepted the devastating result, in which, voters spoke not only on behalf of themselves but of the



country and about their frustration and unhappiness at the pace of reforms since the 2018 elections (*Malaysiakini*, 17 November 2019r). In another opinion article, the author wrote that the Tanjung Piai by-election was PH's ninth electoral outing since GE14 and its fourth defeat after Cameron Highlands, Semenyih and Rantau. The author remarked that in the Tanjung Piai by-election, PH was drowned by a wave of protest votes that cut across ethnic lines, with a substantial number of Malays and Chinese shifting towards BN. Notably, Chinese-majority polling districts were abandoning PH at a rate more than double than that of Malay majority polling districts (*Malaysiakini*, 17 November 2019s). In another opinion article, the author wrote how the Tanjung Piai by-election further demonstrated how non-Malay political structures are merely proxies for Malay hegemony, hence indicating his frustration (*Malaysiakini*, 4 November 2019a). In the Yoursay article, the voice of the grassroots was reflected indicating the voters' prerogative in casting support for a candidate that can best represent them. Meanwhile praises were also seen by the public for the deceased assemblyman Dr Md Farid Md Farik, as well as previous assemblyman Wee Jeck Seng (*Malaysiakini*, 11 November 2019l, 2019m).

In addition, former Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak called *Malaysiakini* a "spin expert" when MCA President Wee Ka Siong criticised *Malaysiakini* for taking BN's Tanjung Piai by-election candidate Wee Jeck Seng's Facebook post "out of context". This happened after the online news portal translated Jeck Seng's Chinese-only Facebook post into Bahasa Malaysia, in which he wrote "MCA unites to oppose Jawi and defend Kolej Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Is that playing racial issues?" However, after *Malaysiakini* translated and published his post, he amended it to read "MCA unites to oppose the addition of Jawi khat (calligraphy) in the Bahasa Malaysia curriculum in Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools and to defend Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman. Is that playing racial issues?" *Malaysiakini* reported that neither Najib nor Ka Siong acknowledged that Jeck Seng's post had been edited but the old and amended version can still be viewed as Facebook keeps a record of all edits (*Malaysiakini*, 15 November 2019q).

#### 7.6.4 Valence

*Sin Chew Daily* was rather critical (44.70%) towards PH and Mahathir in its coverage. It is noteworthy that 71.4% of its column articles, and 100% of its editorials carried a critical valence. In contrast, *Harian Metro* adopted a neutral stance (60.00%) in its reporting. The findings reflected that *Sin Chew Daily* mostly condemned PH and Mahathir for not looking into the interest of the Chinese in particular, and the people in general. *Harian Metro* only reported information of Tanjung Piai by-election, and hence, its coverage was neutral.

*The Star* reporting displayed a high percentage of (51.72%) of neutral, followed by critical valence (48.83%). The neutral stand percentage was high as a number of articles covered the Election Commission. Both its columns and editorials were 100% critical of PH by highlighting its frustration towards a government that was

**Table 7.5** Valence in reporting

Valence	<i>The Star</i> (n = 29) %	<i>Sin Chew</i> (n = 519) %	<i>Harian Metro</i> (n = 110) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 247) %
Supportive	3.45	16.96	28.18	14.98
Critical	48.83	44.70	11.82	46.97
Neutral	51.72	38.34	60.00	38.05

indifferent to its voters' needs and its inability to fulfil economic and political pledges. Hence, the reporting implied that the PH government should be taught a lesson for not living up to its electoral promises. *Malaysiakini* was critical in its reporting towards PH (46.97%), followed by neutral (38.05%) and only (14.98%) supportive (Table 7.5).

## 7.7 Conclusion

The newspapers' framing of the Tanjung Piai by-election expressed numerous categories of populist rhetoric. *Sin Chew Daily* was more aligned to BN, and hence, the source it quoted frequently was from MCA and UMNO. It successfully framed the betrayal felt by the Chinese as PH and specifically DAP failed to act on Chinese-centric issues, such as recognising the Unified Examination Certificate, inclusion of khat calligraphy in the primary school syllabus and the holding back of funding for UTAR/TARUC. In addition, the news was framed to highlight the racism of Mahathir, Islamisation, corruption of the PH government during the by-election campaign, stagnant economy and internal conflicts within PH. Chinese voters in Tanjung Piai were widely seen as the kingmakers in this by-election as they make up 42% of voters, so the grim picture painted by *Sin Chew Daily's* news frames may have contributed to PH's dismal performance. Similarly, only 9.73% of the source for the coverage in *The Star* was from PH, and the news were mainly criticisms of PH's bad leadership and its failure to implement promised reforms. *Harian Metro* took the middle ground and was less critical of either party as it was presumed that the large Malay electorate would vote for BN's candidate which was endorsed by Muafakat Nasional. *Malaysiakini*, though PH-friendly, was also critical of PH's leadership and unfulfilled promises.

Generally, the four newspapers though targeted to different ethnic groups, framed PH as a disappointment for being unable to live up to their GE14 election promises but they commended MCA's ability to reconnect with the Chinese constituents. The negative representation of PH in the dailies delegitimised its image as the Coalition of Hope. In contrast, the positive representation of MCA legitimised their candidate Wee Jock Seng as a worthy Member of Parliament for the constituency of Tanjung Piai.

The media frames identified in the newspaper articles revealed that it incorporated many of the categories that previously studied authors (Tan, 2019; Yang Razali Kassim, 2019; Chin, 2020; Izzuddin, 2020) highlighted about PH's failings. The defeat in the Tanjung Piai by-election was a clear indication of the growing frustration towards PH. It marked the beginning of the end for the PH government as less than four months later the PH government collapsed by a coup d'état of sorts that took place between 21 and 24 February 2020.

Finally, the media frames in this research were able to foster understanding of the political climate and create legitimacy for change. This study may be a baseline for future research. The inclusion of analysis of political speeches, as well as interviews with the public, may provide a better understanding of the effects of public opinion and strengthen the findings of this study.

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