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PRINT NATIONALISM AND BOOK CONTROL: PUBLISHING, CENSORSHIP, AND NATION-BUILDING IN POSTCOLONIAL MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the instrumental role of publishing regulation and censorship in the Malaysian state's nation-building project during the formative postcolonial period from 1948 to 1977. While existing scholarship has extensively addressed ethnic policy and education reform, the bureaucratic mechanisms through which print control functioned as a tool of ideological consolidation remain underexplored. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of 55 declassified government documents – including censorship reports, publication records, and internal ministerial correspondence from the Malaysian National Archives – the study demonstrates that publishing regulation operated as a systematic form of ideological governance rather than a series of ad hoc security measures. The findings reveal a dual strategy in which the state actively promoted Malay linguistic nationalism while simultaneously restricting non-Malay and ideologically dissident publications, with Chinese-language materials frequently framed as threats to national security. Conceptually, the article advances the notion of print nationalism as a state-mediated ideological practice enacted through language prioritization, administrative control, and censorship. By grounding theoretical debates in archival evidence, the study contributes a critical perspective on the intersection of print, power, and nation-building in postcolonial Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS: Print nationalism; censorship; publishing regulation; nation-building; postcolonial Malaysia; archival research.

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between censorship, language, and nation-building occupies a central position in postcolonial studies, yet the concrete mechanisms through which states regulate print culture to construct national identity often remain obscured within bureaucratic and archival domains. In post-independence Malaysia—a society marked by deep ethnic, linguistic, and cultural pluralism—the task of forging a unified national identity posed significant political and ideological challenges. As Benedict Anderson (1991) famously argued, nations are “imagined communities” sustained through shared narratives circulated via print. In the Malaysian case, however, the formation of such an imagined community was not left to the dynamics of print capitalism alone, but was actively shaped through state intervention in publishing, censorship, and language policy.

Following independence, the Malaysian state inherited a sophisticated system of information control from the British colonial administration. Rather than dismantling these structures, postcolonial elites adapted and expanded them to serve new ideological purposes. During the Cold War era, concerns over communism, racial harmony, and internal security frequently converged, producing a political environment in which cultural expression and linguistic diversity were closely surveilled (Harper, 1999). Publishing and censorship thus emerged as critical instruments not only for maintaining political stability, but also for defining the symbolic boundaries of national belonging.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined Malaysia’s ethnic relations, language policy, and education system (Gill, 2005; Shamsul, 2004), comparatively little attention has been paid to the **state’s bureaucratic regulation of publishing** as a deliberate nation-building strategy. Studies of censorship in Southeast Asia often focus on legal frameworks or high-profile bans, leaving the everyday administrative logic of print control underexplored (Rodan, 2004). This article addresses that gap by shifting attention from public-facing policy discourse to the internal workings of the censorship apparatus, drawing on declassified government documents housed in the Malaysian National Archives.

In this study, *print nationalism* is conceptualized as a **state-mediated ideological practice**, enacted through publishing regulation, censorship decisions, and the prioritization of languages within the print sphere. Unlike classical formulations of print nationalism that emphasize market-driven print

capitalism (Anderson, 1991), the Malaysian case demonstrates how the state actively intervened in the production and circulation of printed materials to shape national consciousness. Publishing policies were not merely administrative mechanisms, but instruments of ideological statecraft designed to promote Malay linguistic nationalism while marginalizing alternative cultural and political expressions.

Empirically, this article focuses on archival materials from the **formative postcolonial period between 1948 and 1977**, encompassing the Malayan Emergency, early independence, and the consolidation of state power following the 1969 racial riots. This period represents the empirical core of a broader longitudinal doctoral study examining publishing, censorship, and nation-building in Malaysia from 1962 to 2024. By analysing internal ministerial correspondence, censorship reports, and publication records, this article provides an archival perspective on how print regulation functioned as a tool of ideological governance in a multi-ethnic postcolonial society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on nationalism has long emphasized the role of print in the formation of national consciousness. Anderson’s (1991) concept of *imagined communities* highlights how print media enabled dispersed populations to imagine themselves as part of a shared political community. However, much of this literature assumes a relatively autonomous print sphere shaped by market dynamics. In postcolonial contexts, where states inherited colonial information infrastructures and faced persistent concerns over political stability and social cohesion, the relationship between print and nationalism has often diverged from this classical model.

Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the assumption of a neutral or market-driven print sphere, emphasizing the role of the state in shaping media and cultural production (Freedman, 2022; Flew & Waisbord, 2021). These studies argue that print operates as a contested political space in which national narratives are actively produced, regulated, and constrained. In multi-ethnic societies such as Malaysia, where nation-building unfolded alongside enduring linguistic and cultural divisions, the regulation of print became a central mechanism through which the state sought to balance unity, control, and ideological legitimacy.

Language policy constitutes a crucial dimension of this process. Postcolonial scholars have shown how linguistic hierarchies often reproduce colonial power relations under new national frameworks (Phillipson,

1992; Chatterjee, 1993). In Malaysia, the elevation of Bahasa Melayu as the national language was presented as a unifying project, yet its implementation was deeply political and uneven across social and cultural domains (Gill, 2005; Shamsul, 2004). More recent studies emphasize that language policy is embedded within institutional practices that regulate access to publishing, education, and public discourse, rather than functioning solely at the level of symbolic identity (Wee, 2021; Kumarasingham, 2020).

Censorship scholarship further illuminates how states manage cultural expression in postcolonial settings. Rather than viewing censorship as an exceptional or purely repressive act, critical perspectives conceptualize it as a routine instrument of governance that operates through legal frameworks, administrative procedures, and bureaucratic discretion (Foucault, 1980; Rodan, 2004). Althusser's (1971) notion of ideological state apparatuses provides a useful lens for understanding how publishing regulation functions not only through prohibition, but through the normalization of particular narratives and values. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony complements this perspective by highlighting how consent is cultivated through cultural and ideological practices embedded in everyday institutions.

Despite extensive scholarship on nationalism, language policy, and censorship in Malaysia, relatively little attention has been paid to **publishing regulation as an integrated ideological practice**. Existing studies tend to focus on education policy, mass media, or high-profile censorship cases, leaving the internal administrative logic of publishing control largely unexplored. Recent work on cultural governance underscores the importance of examining how states manage cultural industries to stabilize political authority and national identity (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Freedman, 2022). However, empirical analyses grounded in archival evidence remain scarce.

By drawing on government archival documents, this study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing *print nationalism* as a state-mediated ideological practice that operates at the intersection of publishing regulation, language policy, and censorship. In doing so, it extends existing theories of nationalism and media governance into the underexplored terrain of postcolonial publishing institutions, offering an archival perspective on how nation-building is enacted through everyday bureaucratic practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in archival analysis to examine how publishing regulation and censorship functioned as instruments of nation-building in postcolonial Malaysia. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on ideology, bureaucratic practice, and meaning making, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. By analysing internal government documents, the study foregrounds the administrative rationalities and institutional logics through which print culture was regulated and national identity was articulated.

The primary data set consists of **55 archival government documents** drawn from the Malaysian National Archives, including censorship reports, ministerial correspondence, internal memoranda, and publication records related to book licensing and control. These documents were selected through **purposive sampling**, focusing on materials that directly addressed publishing regulation, language use, censorship decisions, and ideological justification. Rather than seeking representativeness in a statistical sense, the sample was designed to capture recurring patterns, policy rationales, and institutional practices across key political moments. This approach is consistent with qualitative research traditions that privilege analytical depth and contextual interpretation over numerical generalization (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis focuses on the **formative postcolonial period between 1948 and 1977**, encompassing the Malayan Emergency, early independence, and the consolidation of state authority following the 1969 racial riots. This period represents the empirical core of a broader longitudinal doctoral study examining Malaysian publishing and nation-building from 1962 to 2024. Concentrating on this archival phase allows for close examination of how early regulatory frameworks and censorship practices established enduring ideological patterns that shaped later developments.

Data were analysed using qualitative content and thematic analysis, combining inductive and theoretically informed coding strategies. Documents were coded for references to language hierarchy, censorship rationales, ideological framing, and institutional authority. Analytical categories were refined iteratively to identify how publishing control operated as a form of ideological governance. This process enabled the identification of both explicit policy objectives and implicit assumptions embedded within bureaucratic discourse, aligning

with approaches that view archives as active sites of power rather than neutral repositories (Stoler, 2009; Prior, 2011).

Ethical considerations were addressed using publicly accessible archival materials and anonymization of sensitive institutional references where appropriate. The study does not seek to attribute intent to individual officials but rather to analyse institutional practices and discursive patterns within the state apparatus. By triangulating multiple document types and situating them within their historical context, the methodology strengthens the credibility and interpretive robustness of the findings (Flick, 2018).

4. FINDINGS

The qualitative content analysis of 55 archival government documents from the period 1948–1977 reveals a systematic and politically motivated approach to the regulation of print media in postcolonial Malaysia. Rather than operating through isolated or ad hoc censorship decisions, print regulation emerged as a coordinated bureaucratic practice closely tied to the state’s nation-building agenda. Across the archival record, regulatory interventions were shaped by concerns over ideological conformity, political stability, and the management of ethnic and linguistic diversity.

One of the most salient findings is the presence of a **clear linguistic hierarchy** within state publishing practices. English dominated bureaucratic communication, appearing in more than 70 per cent of the documents analysed. Although the use of Malay increased after the formation of Malaysia in 1963, English remained the primary language of official correspondence and ideological articulation. This pattern suggests a significant disjunction between public commitments to Malay linguistic nationalism and the slower, uneven transformation of institutional practice. Chinese and Tamil were markedly underrepresented in official documentation, reflecting their marginal positioning

within the state’s administrative and ideological frameworks of nationhood.

Censorship practices further illustrate the strategic and selective nature of print control. Contrary to assumptions that censorship disproportionately targeted non-Malay languages, English-language publications were subject to the highest frequency of regulatory action, followed by Chinese and Malay materials. This pattern indicates that state intervention was driven less by language alone than by perceived ideological threat. English-language texts associated with leftist, socialist, or anti-colonial ideas were frequently categorised as “communist” and treated as direct challenges to political authority. As a result, such materials were more likely to be subjected to outright bans.

At the same time, censorship strategies varied according to linguistic and political considerations. Chinese-language publications were more commonly subjected to preventive measures that restricted circulation without imposing formal bans. This differentiated approach suggests a dual regulatory logic: one aimed at suppressing specific ideological threats, and another focused on managing the cultural and political influence of the Chinese-speaking population. Malay-language publications, by contrast, were generally framed as vehicles of national unity and ideological consolidation and were less frequently subjected to severe regulatory intervention.

Table 1 summarizes the frequency of censorship actions across languages. While numerical distribution provides a useful overview, its analytical significance lies in revealing how censorship functioned as an instrument of ideological governance rather than as a neutral linguistic policy. Higher frequencies of regulatory action corresponded to publications perceived as ideologically misaligned with state objectives, reinforcing the interpretation of print control as a mechanism for delimiting acceptable national discourse.

Table 1: Frequency of Censorship Actions by Language

Language	Frequency of Censorship Actions
English	35
Chinese	22
Malay	15
Tamil	5

The archival material also demonstrates how language was mobilized in the construction of national identity. Discourses of “national unity,” “loyalty,” and “harmony” were overwhelmingly associated with Malay-language publications and state-sponsored campaigns. In contrast, Chinese- and Tamil-language materials were largely absent from this symbolic repertoire of nationhood. This linguistic privileging reflects a broader strategy through which the state sought to normalize a Malay-centric vision of national identity while marginalizing alternative cultural narratives.

Patterns of censorship intensity further reveal a strong correlation with periods of political crisis. Regulatory activity intensified during the Malayan Emergency, the formation of Malaysia, and most notably following the 1969 racial riots. These spikes indicate that censorship functioned as a **reactive and stabilizing instrument**, deployed to reassert ideological coherence and political authority during moments of heightened uncertainty.

Finally, the findings highlight the **institutional centralization of print control**. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Information emerged as the principal actors in censorship decisions, underscoring the extent to which publishing regulation was framed as a matter of national security. The close involvement of these security-oriented ministries illustrates the fusion of ideological governance and state security that characterized postcolonial Malaysian approaches to print regulation.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a nuanced account of how the Malaysian state mobilized print culture as a form of ideological statecraft during the formative postcolonial period. The archival evidence demonstrates that publishing regulation and censorship were not episodic or reactive measures, but elements of a systematic and sustained strategy to shape the symbolic boundaries of nationhood. Interpreted through the lenses of print nationalism, hegemony, and ideological state apparatuses, these findings reveal how state power operated through the routine governance of language, knowledge, and cultural expression.

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its re-evaluation of censorship practices. The disproportionate regulation of English-language publications – particularly those associated with leftist or anti-colonial ideas – challenges the assumption that postcolonial

censorship in Malaysia was directed primarily at non-Malay linguistic communities. Instead, the findings point to a dual logic of control in which the state sought simultaneously to contain ideological influences associated with transnational leftist movements and to manage internal ethnic pluralism. English occupied an ambivalent position: indispensable for administration, diplomacy, and economic engagement, yet viewed as a conduit for ideological currents perceived as threatening to political stability. This ambivalence reflects a broader postcolonial dilemma in which inherited colonial languages remained central to governance while also generating profound anxieties about ideological vulnerability.

The differentiated treatment of Chinese-language publications further illustrates the calibrated nature of print regulation. Rather than relying predominantly on outright bans, the state more often employed preventive measures that limited circulation while avoiding overt repression. This strategy suggests an approach oriented toward containment rather than elimination, reflecting the political sensitivity surrounding the Chinese-speaking population’s cultural and economic influence. Such practices underscore how censorship functioned not simply as a tool of exclusion, but as a means of managing diversity within a hierarchically ordered national framework.

These patterns complicate classical formulations of print nationalism. Anderson’s (1991) emphasis on the unifying role of print capitalism assumes a relatively open and market-driven print sphere. The Malaysian case demonstrates instead that print nationalism in postcolonial, multi-ethnic societies often emerges through **state-managed differentiation** rather than inclusive dissemination. The promotion of Malay as the primary language of national unity, alongside the marginalization of other linguistic traditions, constituted a deliberate strategy of social engineering. Nationhood was imagined not through equal participation in print culture, but through the normalization of a Malay-centric ideological core around which other identities were positioned as subordinate or peripheral.

Gramsci’s concept of hegemony provides a critical lens for understanding how this process was sustained. The privileging of certain narratives and languages within the publishing sector helped cultivate consent by presenting a particular vision of the nation as natural and legitimate. Importantly, this hegemonic project was embedded in everyday bureaucratic practices

rather than imposed solely through coercive force. Licensing procedures, censorship reviews, and administrative classifications operated as routine mechanisms through which ideological boundaries were reproduced and internalized.

Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatuses further illuminates the institutional foundations of this process. The prominent role of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Information in publishing regulation highlights the fusion of ideological governance and national security concerns. Archival records reveal a bureaucracy acutely aware of the political implications of print media, engaging in detailed scrutiny and inter-agency coordination. These practices exemplify how ideology is reproduced not through explicit indoctrination alone, but through the normalized operations of state institutions.

Taken together, these findings advance an understanding of *print nationalism* as a state-mediated ideological practice rather than a spontaneous cultural phenomenon. By grounding theoretical debates in archival evidence, this study demonstrates how nation-building is enacted through the mundane yet powerful processes of bureaucratic regulation. Publishing emerges not as a peripheral cultural activity, but as a central site through which the postcolonial state negotiated identity, authority, and belonging.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the regulation of print media constituted a central pillar of the Malaysian state's nation-building project during the formative postcolonial period. Drawing on qualitative analysis of archival government documents, the study shows that publishing control was neither incidental nor purely reactive, but embedded within a systematic strategy that combined the promotion of Malay linguistic nationalism with the containment of non-Malay

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and ideologically dissident publications. In doing so, the findings extend existing understandings of print nationalism by illustrating how it may function simultaneously as an instrument of unification and exclusion in multi-ethnic societies.

The Malaysian case underscores the enduring influence of colonial-era structures of information control, which were not dismantled after independence but repurposed to serve new nationalist and security-oriented objectives. Censorship practices reflected a complex intersection of ethnic management, ideological surveillance, and political stabilization, revealing how postcolonial state authority was consolidated through routine bureaucratic governance rather than through overt repression alone. By examining the internal logic of publishing regulation, this study contributes empirical depth to scholarship on postcolonial state formation, ideological control, and cultural governance.

While this article focuses on archival evidence from the early postcolonial period, the patterns identified here form the empirical foundation of a broader longitudinal analysis of Malaysian publishing and nation-building extending beyond this timeframe. As such, the findings offer insights not only into historical practices of print regulation, but also into the institutional legacies that continue to shape cultural governance in Malaysia.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining how writers, publishers, and reading publics responded to and negotiated these regulatory regimes, as well as by situating the Malaysian experience within a comparative framework across postcolonial societies in Asia and Africa. Such work would further illuminate the relationship between print, power, and identity. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that print is never a neutral medium: it is a contested terrain through which states seek to define, regulate, and legitimize the meaning of the nation.

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