

Propaganda Techniques Used in Right-Wing Malaysian Politics

Phua Kai Lit, PhD FLMI

Malaysian society is plagued by relatively strong right-wing (clerico-fascist) race supremacist and religion supremacist political parties. Here are some ways to recognise and analyse the propaganda techniques they use to generate political support and maintain political power.

Name-Calling

One of the oldest propaganda techniques is to demean or dehumanise others by calling them names. Example: calling Dr Mahathir Mohamed “old man”, to take advantage of the ageism found in Malaysian society. Example: calling Malaysians of certain minority ethnic groups “pendatang” (immigrants) although the targets of their name-calling have been in this country for generations and generations.

False Equivalence

To deflect attention from major dubious or major illegal activity, a target is chosen and the target’s minor infraction is blown up (exaggerated) and compared with the major dubious activity being defended. Example: the former Chief Minister of Penang’s (from the DAP) purchase of a house at low price is compared, as an act of “corruption”, to the former Prime Minister’s (from BN) 1MDB scandal involving billions of Malaysian *ringgit*.

Assertion

This term means to present something strongly as a fact, even if it is patently false. Example: the claim that there are major efforts to “Christianise” Muslims in Malaysia, although there is no evidence of this.

Testimonials

This refers to the propaganda technique of associating one’s actions with another famous or well-liked person (thus implying endorsement/approval from the latter). Thus, in Malaysia, the right-wing political parties often assert that they have the approval/support from royalty for their political positions or actions. Example: claiming that they have the approval of the King.

Pinpointing the enemy

Here, one specific person or group is presented as the enemy and continuously villainised. Example: the leader of a Malaysian political party heavily supported by a major ethnic minority is picked on and the political party which he heads (actually a multi-ethnic, social democratic party) is accused of being race “chauvinist”.

Plain Folks

Political right-wingers, even kleptocratic ones, almost always present themselves as being plain folks and “for the people” (i.e. right-wing populism) in that they are defenders of the ordinary folks, whilst simultaneously attacking out-groups and scapegoating them, such as ethnic minorities, religious minorities, immigrants, foreign workers and so on. Example: here in Malaysia, we have right-wingers who claim to fight for “race, religion, royalty” and language.

Simplification/stereotyping

This refers to the propaganda technique of turning a complex situation into a “good versus evil” one. Example: religious right-wingers in Malaysia paint themselves as being virtuous, and are fighting against “infidels”.

Card-stacking/selective omission

Here, contrary information is omitted in order to present a one-sided and very negative view of political opponents. Example: Information on how ethnic minority reformists and, especially leftists, in Malaysia are sympathetic to the plight of the poor from the majority ethnic group (and support some form of affirmative action in order to reduce economic inequalities between ethnic groups) is totally omitted from right-wing propaganda.

Transfer

Bad/negative feelings are transferred from social group X to social group Y. Example: traditional feelings of suspicion toward a social group such as Christians is transferred to the ethnic group Y who make up most of the Christians in Malaysia.

Bandwagon

This refers to the propaganda message “Our side is winning, join us! Why bother to support the other – losing – side?” Example: the main right-wing Chinese-based political party in Malaysia has always used this message to discourage support for centrist or moderate left-wing Chinese-based political parties. The former claim that supporting them would ensure representation of minority ethnic group interests at the federal government level.

Glittering generalities

This refers to the use of empty or vacuous slogans for political propaganda. Example: slogans such as “Malaysia, Truly Asia”, “1Malaysia”, “Endless Possibilities” and so on. What do they actually mean?