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# Power and Public Relations

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## **Issue Management and Policy Justification in Malaysia**

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Issue management scholarship examines organizations as they participate in the public policy process. Research that analyzes the ways in which organizations attempt to define issues, legitimate positions, and lobby for favored policies shows that many organizations take an active role in attempting to shape public policy. Strategic issue management has become an accepted and valued way that individual corporations can use communication to exercise power over the public policy process and achieve particular organizational goals (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Heath, 1988; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003). However, as Ewing (1990) argued, the practice of issue management needs to move from the micro realm of single issues to a more macro realm of social issues and policy management. This chapter takes a macro look at issue management and focuses on the offices of government which, like corporate and nonprofit organizations, have the desire and resources to influence public policy perceptions. (The issue management literature tends to focus on government as a target public, not as a source of issue advocacy.)

The offices of government (local, state, and national figures, both appointed and elected) have environmental needs similar to other types of organizations. Moreover, government officials have agendas and visions about how they want to shape their environments. They also possess the resources required to affect change. Although resources vary on an organization-by-organization basis, government officials at all levels generally have more access to financial resources, the media, public opinion leaders, and political action groups than do regular citizens and most organizations. Indeed, the very close relationship between government officials and the resources available to them to affect change make the discussion of government officers as organizational rhetors in the public policy process a timely endeavor.

This chapter illustrates how governmental officials use strategic communication to legitimate stands on public policy issues. Government rhetors, because of their role as decision makers and influencers over the public policy process, have power that even the leaders of multinational organizations often do not have. This chapter first reviews the issue management literature to show how government has traditionally been viewed as an audience for corporate communications. This view of government as merely a public to be influenced misses the fact that government officials are often the creators of strategic communication to various publics and agents of change themselves. To highlight how government rhetors influence public policy and engage in issue management, this chapter examines four different strategies governments use to define and legitimate their own goals in the court of public opinion: a priori solutions, bifurcation, casuistic stretching, and issue masking. The chapter concludes with a case study showing how political leaders use issue communication to shape public policy and gain public acceptance, and even praise, for controversial policy decisions.

## GOVERNMENT ISSUE COMMUNICATION

Government, as both a source and a receiver of persuasive communication, has always been included in discussions of the public relations process (Cutlip, 1995). However, many scholars have treated noncorporate communicators (government rhetors, nonprofit organizations, etc.) as somehow different from corporate communicators (cf. J. Grunig, 2001; L. Grunig, 1992; Olson, 1971). Consider, for example, how scholars have treated activists and government communicators. As L. Grunig (1992) suggested, "Activism, indeed, represents a major problem for organizations. Hostilities between organizations and pressure groups are commonplace and often lead to a marshaling of public opinion against the organization that may, in turn,

result in government regulation" (p. 522). Activists and government regulators are described as essentially "hostile" to for-profit organizations.

The argument that for-profit organizations possess some special status as communicators is interesting in light of the fact that there are so many nonprofit and government communicators (churches; hospitals; school boards; local, state, and national government representatives; the Humane Society; etc.). From an organizational communication standpoint, nonprofit organizations and government offices are organizations and thus engage in persuasive communication. Government officials and activist communicators must use the broadcast media or other communication channels to get their messages out to stakeholders, as do corporate communicators. Mission/vision statements guide corporate, governmental, and activist communicators alike. Government officials and activists function within hierarchical structures and must adhere to organizational rules and norms just like corporate communicators. They too are constrained by public approval/disapproval. Indeed, in all ways, except for earning a profit, the communication options available to activist, governmental, and for-profit communicators are nearly identical. Beyond these obvious structural similarities, however, governmental policymakers and activist groups actually believe that their organizations have the best interests of the general public at heart.

Indeed, L. Grunig's (1992) suggestion that activist groups are inherently harmful to organizations—because they force organizations to expend resources responding to the interests of a minority of citizens—really misses the mark. As a citizen, I might believe that Merck is only interested in selling more drugs. I might look to the FDA (or some vocal activist group) for regulation of the pharmaceutical industry and protection of my health. Merck, on the other hand, might legitimately see activist groups and the FDA as nuisances for forcing them to expend resources on issue management. How you see an issue depends on where you stand, and it has little to do with whether activists or government communicators are different from corporate communicators. L. Grunig (1992) is correct when she noted, "Without a thorough understanding of adversarial groups, the organization may be at their mercy" (p. 507; cf. J. Grunig, 2001, p. 18). Although L. Grunig was talking about activists, regulators, and the like here, her admonition applies just as accurately to government persuaders. Without a thorough understanding of constituencies (publics/stakeholders), government communication efforts may be headed for failure as well.<sup>1</sup>

### Issue Management Literature

Research on issues management can be found in a wide variety of disciplines. Scholars from such fields as political science, futurism, business management, public policy, communication, public relations, strategic planning,

management information systems, and business ethics have advanced the concept of *issues management*. Mintzberg (1983), a business management professor, viewed government as one of the most important external publics with which an organization must communicate. Mintzberg argued that organizations must always give special consideration to government officials because "they represent the ultimate legislative authority of the society . . . [and] establish the rules—the laws and regulations—within which every organization must function" (p. 44). The management literature clearly identifies government as a public to be researched, monitored, and managed (Mintzberg, 1983). However, the management literature, like much of the public relations scholarship, ignores the fact that government actors (appointed and elected) have agendas and make efforts of their own to manage issues.

The inclusion of government itself in the issue management process is not a new or surprising development. Jones and Chase (1979) are credited with the systematic approach that explained how organizations can legitimize and validate organizational positions on relevant public policy issues. As part of this process, government officials are considered one of the three major targets (along with business and citizens) of communication for strategic management. Jones and Chase (1979) encouraged organizations to "increase efforts to anticipate social change and respond to reasonable public expectations" (p. 11) rather than wait for others to set the public agenda. In Jones and Chase's initial conceptualization of issue management, issues precede government policies and organizations should "react" to events and be ready to proactively guide issues in the direction of favorable outcome. However, no mention of government representatives as organizational communicators who might also attempt to manage issues is found in their groundbreaking essay.

Crable and Vibbert (1985) extended Jones and Chase's (1979) model of issue management and created the "catalytic issue management" model. Crable and Vibbert claimed that organizations could actually create issues and then proactively guide an issue "through its life cycle so that it is resolved in directions favorable to the organization" (pp. 11-12). In this model, organizations may first desire a specific policy and then find or create an issue that calls for (or demands) a predetermined policy. However, Crable and Vibbert (1985) admitted that business, citizens, and government are not coequal publics for organizations; rather, "public policy rests where it has for more than two hundred years—in the halls of government" (p. 4). What Crable and Vibbert failed to mention, however, is that government actors may also catalytically define and guide issues through this public opinion process. Indeed, politicians have been influencing public policy longer than individuals and organizations have. Crable and Vibbert conceded that even in the lower levels of state and local government, the need for

government support for organizational decisions is clear. The offices of government are viewed as a public to be acted on, rather than as agents of change. As noted previously, however, by stepping back from their analysis which focuses on corporations' issue management communication, the efforts of government actors to enact public policy supportive of initiatives is qualitatively the same as an organization exercising its muscle to shape a public policy that serves the organization's ends.

A variety of scholars have expanded on Jones and Chase's (1979) and Crable and Vibbert's (1985) models of issue management to identify theoretical underpinnings (Heath, 1988) for various reasons: to test the value of environmental scanning (Lauzen, 1997), test the relationship between issue management and technology (Ramsey, 1993), clarify the cyclical development of issues and organizational response (Hainsworth, 1990), update its current status as a field of study (Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995; Heath & Cousino, 1990), and place issue management into an international perspective for multinational corporations (Wilson, 1990). These efforts, however, view issue management from the perspective of the corporation. Obviously, where one stands when defining issue management matters. From a pedagogical perspective, the focus of previous scholarship on for-profit organizations is not problematic because organizational communicators need to understand how to influence public policy and manage organizational issues. However, equally important to understanding how to influence government policy is understanding the power that government leaders and bureaucrats are themselves trying to exert when they identify, frame, and enact public policy. Controlling the public agenda is the first step toward controlling policy. This is as true for Time Warner as it is for a Texas politician.

### **Government as a Source of Strategic Communication**

Only a handful of articles exist that discuss government as an organizational rhetor. Nelson (1994) noted that the use of communication for persuasion "is an increasing component of both private and government communication" (p. 225). Ponder (1990) observed that "press offices, under one title or another, have spread throughout the American federal, state, and local governments in the twentieth century" (p. 94) and government has relied on these press offices in shaping supportive public opinion. Lee (2005) recently provided a historical account of how the Office of Government Reports (OGR) was created, institutionalized, and eventually challenged. Indeed, although the Gillette Amendment makes it illegal for the U.S. government to employ public relations practitioners to persuade its citizens, the law is effectively skirted by the use of public information officers and press secretaries. These officials shape public opinion. Public relations efforts by government have a historical place in the public relations literature, and work

by scholars like Primlott (1951), Pearson (1990), and Cutlip (1995) have examined the relationship between democracy and public relations.

So what strategies do governments use when they communicate their agendas to various publics? There are many. On the most basic level, politicians and government officials use the same persuasive strategies that every student of public speaking learns. The four particular strategies discussed in this chapter, however, are far more sophisticated: a priori solutions, casuistic stretching, bifurcation, and issue masking.

## ISSUE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

To understand how issue management communication is used by governmental rhetors we focus on several rhetorical strategies. In everyday parlance, especially in the mass media, the term "rhetoric" is often used pejoratively. As our online dictionary defines it, rhetoric is comprised of "complex or elaborate language that only succeeds in sounding pretentious" (Encarta, 1999). Unfortunately, the mass media approach to defining rhetoric really misses the point. Rhetoric is not empty or pretentious language; it is language that moves people. It persuades and thus allows organizational rhetors to influence. Pretentious language is just that: pretentious, pompous, poorly crafted. But when a nation's leaders draw on entymemes like "famously," "evil doers," or the "war on terror," they do not bore but excite. The strategies that follow are rhetorical in the technical sense of the word. A priori solutions, casuistic stretching, bifurcation, and issue masking are strategic, careful, compelling rhetorical tools that allow organizational rhetors to influence public discussions and policies.

### A Priori Solutions

One strategy for issue definition and policy management is found in the work of political theorist Murray Edelman. Edelman (1988) addressed the situation of issue definition and policy development in his examination of the construction of social realities and the links between problems and solutions. Edelman claimed, "The striking characteristic of the link between political problems and solutions in everyday life is that the solution typically comes first, chronologically and psychologically" (pp. 21-22). Edelman contended that "those who favor a particular course of governmental action are likely to cast about for a widely feared problem to which to attach to it in order to maximize its support" (p. 22). For Edelman, solutions can be created by government officials a priori (or before the fact) and then offered when a convenient problem appears.

An excellent example of using a priori solutions can be found in the rhetoric of President Lyndon Johnson's three speeches associated with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the presidential act that committed the United States to deeper involvement in Vietnam. Chervitz (1978) argued that Johnson's messages actually created an international crisis, although his rhetoric used the attack on destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* as a pretext for the resolution. Johnson used vivid, descriptive language to dramatize the event that ostensibly prompted the resolution:

In all three speeches he used the words "hostile" and "deliberate" repeatedly. For example, in his address to the nation Johnson spoke of "repeated attacks" by "hostile vessels" using "torpedoes." This attack, declared the President was an "act of aggression." (1978, p. 98, source citations omitted)

As Chervitz (1980) later noted, Johnson had become convinced of the need to intervene in Vietnam early in 1964, prepared plans to do so, but did not announce an escalation of U.S. involvement until August 1964 once the events in the Gulf of Tonkin gave him the pretext to do so. The administration used events prompted by our own military's spy missions as a justification or excuse to pursue a desired policy. The solution had been developed before the fact—a priori—before the alleged triggering event took place.

### Casuistic Stretching

A second way that organizations can rhetorically define problems and solutions is through casuistic stretching. *Casuistry* refers to subtle or meticulous reasoning based on interpretations of primary texts. Such argument is typically used by theologians, logicians, critics, and lawyers. Any person or organization is capable of "stretching" a concept in order to redefine—and sometimes control—public dialogue. As Kenneth Burke (1937/1961) explained, casuistic stretching is the practice of "introducing new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to old principles" (p. 229). In other words, casuistic stretching is a rhetorical device used to incorporate a new concept into an already accepted definition or policy. Casuistic stretching creates a new dimension of social understanding when it links terms together to create new concepts. A governmental rhetor can use casuistic stretching to extend public understanding of, and add new meanings to, definitions and policy decisions.

One of the best examples of casuistic stretching was President Ronald Reagan's effort to justify cuts to a number of social programs in the nation's "social safety net." As Zarefsky, Miller-Turzaer, and Turzaer (1984) explained:

Reagan did not specify who were the "truly needy" or what characteristics distinguished true from only apparent need. This omission might have been a wise move, since those with a vested interest in any program would perceive that program as addressed to true need. Thinking it therefore immune from cuts, its supporters might be less inclined to attack the general strategy of cuts, so long as the ox to be gored belonged to someone else. (p. 114)

By modifying the concepts of a "social safety net" and the concept of citizens who are "truly needy" to a "safety net for the truly needy," Reagan was able to substantially decrease funding for the nation's social support programs for disadvantaged children, the elderly, social security recipients, and others (Zarefsky et al., p. 116). By stretching/combining the definition of "needy" to "truly needy," Reagan was able to control the terms of the debate and how the media would cover the issue. Reagan convinced most public health professionals, teachers, and aid workers (until it was too late) that *their* programs were safe. He "stretched" the concept and minimized opposition to his desired policy.

### Bifurcation

Bifurcation, also called *false dichotomy* or *polarization*, is a third way in which a governmental rhetor might persuade others. Strictly speaking, *bifurcation* is a logical fallacy in which a persuader outlines an argument in such a way as to suggest that there is only one of two possibilities—typically diametrically opposed options. Undoubtedly everyone has heard the expression "you are either with us or against us." Such a polar argument is the essence of bifurcation. Bifurcation is used everyday, consciously and unconsciously, by people from all walks of life. More typically, however, bifurcation is used when an individual is trying to persuade another. Bifurcation is also closely linked to Burke's (1966) notion of identification through antithesis, in which symbols are used to induce an audience to align themselves with a speaker based on what that source opposes (e.g., all Americans might be said to be against terrorism after September 11, 2001).

Bifurcation appears to be an argument fallacy that Richard Nixon employed throughout his political career (King & Anderson, 1971). Examples from three of his landmark speeches demonstrate how this strategy is used politically to rally support and quash dissent. In 1952, in a speech deemed by many to have saved his early political career, Nixon delivered the "Checkers" speech to defend his place on the Republican ticket as Dwight Eisenhower's running mate. As part of his defense against that he had used money from a secret campaign "slush" fund, Nixon not only argued his innocence but indirectly linked the Democratic Party and its presidential

nominee with Communism and the rich. One memorable bifurcation is his characterization of his opponent's wife being able to own mink while his own wife, of course, had "a respectable Republican cloth coat" (Hart, 1990, p. 117, citation omitted).

Years later, at the beginning of his presidency, Nixon would again use bifurcation to crystallize public opinion in his favor. Rather than bring troops home from Vietnam during his first year in office, Nixon used his November 3, 1969, message to the nation as an appeal to "decent people" who "pay their taxes" and "care" (King & Anderson, 1971, p. 245). He rhetorically pitted this "great silent majority of Americans" (p. 247) against peace groups, people he painted as "a vocal minority" who were part of a "drug culture," promoted a "new morality," and threatened to make the majority of Americans fearful of becoming "a nation of outsiders" (p. 248). Clearly, bifurcations such as these can be used to rally support and quash dissent.

### Issue Masking

A final way in which a governmental rhetor may create links between problems and solutions is through the strategy of issue masking. Issue masking occurs when a rhetor constructs an issue that is accepted "naively at face value" by the audience (Bennett, Harris, Laskey, Levitch, & Monrad, 1976, p. 110). However, the function of a masking issue is rally to influence the audience's perceptions of another issue that may be more central to the rhetor's situation (Bennett et al., p. 110).

Bennett et al. (1976) suggested that there are different types of images (or public perceptions) in the construction of political issues that create a continuum, ranging from deep to surface images. The surface images provide the "face value" meaning, whereas the deep images provide the rhetorical warrants to resolve another issue(s). For instance, Bennett et al. (1976) showed how President Ford employed both surface and deep images in respect to the amnesty issue. On the surface, the president advocated amnesty for conscientious objectors to the war in Vietnam as an act of national reconciliation and forgiveness. However, the amnesty issue operated on a much deeper level because it provided the rhetorical premises for the Ford administration to later pardon Richard Nixon for his involvement in Watergate. In other words, a surface masking issue paves the way for a later or perhaps alternative deeper issue resolution. On the surface, Vietnam conscientious objectors and former President Nixon have little common. However, the concept of amnesty transcends this surface issue and creates a justification for the pardoning of Nixon on a deeper level—that of reconciliation or redemption. In debate this concept is known as a warrant, or support for actions or arguments to come in the future.

These four rhetorical strategies—a priori solutions, bifurcation, easiness stretching, and issues masking—are ways that government rhetors can participate in the issue management process.<sup>2</sup> However, they are not unique to democratic political institutions, as the case study that follows shows.

## A CASE STUDY OF GOVERNMENT ISSUE AND POLICY COMMUNICATION

In our analysis of the persuasive tactics of the Malaysian ruling party, we demonstrate how each persuasive strategy functions to support governmental persuasive goals and bolster the power base of leaders and public officials. This case study illustrates how specific rhetorical tactics are used to perpetuate governmental agendas and manage public policy issues.

The Malaysian ruling party, the United Malays National Organization, used issues communication to define a problem to the nation's citizens and legitimate a policy solution to a controversial issue. Although, as noted previously, little scholarly attention has focused on government officials as agents of change, several scholars have pointed out (tangentially) how important government leaders and officials are to corporate rhetors—because they shape public policy and have the power to control how rewards and punishments are administered.

### Background

Malaysia, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak merged in 1963 to create the Independent Federation of Malaya. Chinese citizens in Singapore left the federation in 1965 when they felt threatened by Malay dominance of the political system. Even today, ethnic, religious, and economic inequalities continue to divide Malaysian society. The many inequalities contribute to racial tensions between the indigenous Malays who make up 55% of the population, ethnic Chinese who make up 34% of the nation, and Indians who make up 10% of the national population. Most of the tension in Malaysia, however, occurs between Malays and Chinese. Malays are the largest ethnic group, yet fall behind the Chinese in economic development. Ethnic Malays traditionally work in the government or civil service sector, but, after 25 years of government incentive programs, they have had minimal success entering into the private sector.

Ethnic Chinese are the second largest ethnic group within Malaysia. Chinese have lived in Malaysia since British rule began in the 1820s and consider themselves part of Malaysian society (Koon, 1988). The Chinese dom-

inate the business sector of the economy but traditionally have had minimal political power. Government efforts over the last 25 years to provide political opportunities have increased Chinese participation in government; however, Chinese youth continue to gravitate toward the private sector, where as Malay youth continue to seek opportunity in government posts. Uneasy relations continue today. An understanding of contemporary ethnic tensions can be gained by an explanation of the riots of 1969.

The Malaysian government's efforts to ensure peace ended when racial tension intensified between Malays and Chinese in May 1969. At the root of tensions were the successful election results of the ethnic Chinese political party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP). The DAP surprised the ruling Alliance coalition (headed by the United Malays National Organization) and won a large number of political seats in the Parliament (Koon, 1988). Riots occurred in the capital of Kuala Lumpur as the DAP held what was perceived by Malays as "victory processions . . . considered to be provocative, arrogant, and abusive" (Ongkilil, 1985, p. 203). Malays who feared that the Chinese would take over the nation reacted violently to the election celebration. The 1969 riots resulted in the death of hundreds of people and facilitated the implementation of the Internal Security Act (ISA). The ISA was a form of martial law that abridged all political rights and emerged as a tool that the Malaysian government could use when it felt threatened by domestic or international events.

In October 1987, the government once again employed the ISA to end political dissent when an issue surrounding the Chinese language gained national attention. The trouble started when the Malaysian government, pressured by ethnic Malay teachers and professional groups, passed a resolution requiring all administrators in Chinese secondary schools to speak the Malay national language as a prerequisite for promotion. Language in multiracial states is often a sensitive subject and many times becomes a rallying point for ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985). As *The New York Times* reported:

Relations have been steadily deteriorating for a year or two as programs intended to enhance the lives of Malays begin to have some negative effects on other communities. But the immediate crisis was provoked by a Government decision to assign administrators who are not fluent in Mandarin to Chinese language schools. (Crossette, 1987, p. 8)

However, the Chinese language issue and the subsequent tension between the Chinese and Malay communities may have been merely a symptom of another power struggle. In 1990, the government planned to review the Fifth Malaysian Plan (1986-1990). This plan attempted to redistribute business ownership from the Chinese community and opportunity and economic

power to the Malay community. One analysis noted that the Chinese language issue was merely a dress rehearsal for the public upheaval that would occur once the Fifth Malaysian Plan ended and a new strategy would be implemented to further erode the Chinese economic power base in the nation (FBIS, October 20, 1987, p. 20). When students in Chinese-dominated areas continued to boycott schools, Malaysians of all races feared escalation. The government of Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammed blamed the press for heightening racial tensions, and, when the prime minister addressed the issue for the first time on October 21, he "advised all quarters, especially newspapers, to refrain from making and publishing provocative statements to ensure peace and stability in the country" (FBIS, October 21, 1987, p. 18). Public debate, however, continued in the newspapers and within the local mixed-race communities.

### Method

The time period studied in this analysis covers one month preceding and following the 1987 ISA policy decision (October–November 1987). A rhetorical analysis of public communication by the Mahathir government during these 2 months allows an examination of the ways in which the government and opposition attempted to define the issue and solution to both national and international publics. Two issues management perspectives provide a foundation for this case study about the enactment of government power through rhetorical strategies.

The findings presented in this case study are based upon the textual analysis of two sources. First, to see how the Malaysian government was explaining the ISA to local publics, documents from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS, 1987) provide English translations of news stories published in Malaysian newspapers from Malay and Chinese media sources. Second, to better understand how the Malaysian government attempted to communicate its controversial policy decision to international audiences, *The New York Times* and the *London Times* serve as additional sources. This sample includes daily articles, editorials, interviews, and communications from both the Malaysian government and its opposition.

### Finding and Defining the Issue

Chinese political groups defined the language issue not only as the beginning of Malaysian government efforts to "change the character of Chinese language schools" but also an attempt to take ethnic identity away from the Chinese community (FBIS, October 15, 1987, p. 22). Chinese groups called for a student boycott of the schools, and the "issue united 6 million

Chinese" (FBIS, 1987, p. 20). Chinese leaders in the coalition government claimed that the language issue was "taking the country to the edge of a racial volcano" (FBIS, October 21, 1987, p. 18). The Chinese language issue served as one of many catalysts that strained Chinese and Malay relations. Furthermore, Chinese and Malay political groups planned "large rallies" (FBIS, October 28, 1987, p. 11) later that month to show support for their respective positions on the issue and lobby for other important ethnic issues or policies to resolve such issues.

Both the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups defined the issue as central to their own survival. For instance, the youth wing of the United Malays National Organization urged the government not to compromise its stand on the issue and pledged "to defend Malay honor and . . . birthright to rule" (FBIS, October 20, 1987, p. 20). Malay youths planned a "mammoth rally" to "urge the government to stand firm," saying that "Chinese politicians should not interfere with a purely administrative matter" (p. 20). Another Malay organization, the Peninsular Malaysian Malay Teachers Union, supported the youth rally "as an effort to unite and determine the future direction of the Malays," and the organization gave its full support to "returning to the original struggle to maintain the status of Malays in the country" (FBIS, October 19, 1987, p. 21).

The Chinese defined the language issue as an attempt by the Malay-dominated bureaucracy to eliminate Chinese culture. Conversely, Malay groups defined the language issue as part of the nation-building process to have all Malaysian citizens speak the same language. Most importantly, the Malaysian government legitimized the issue by addressing it in national speeches with urgent language. It had the power to define the issue and the solution.

### Defining the Policy

The government offered the ISA as a policy solution to the perceived threat of ethnic conflict. Mahathir defined the policy as an extension of government responsibility for "national peace and security" (FBIS, October 28, 1987, p. 22). The prime minister placed the ISA in the context of his 6-year rule of liberalism, which he claimed had been abused by various factions in the Malaysian population. Prime Minister Mahathir described his responsibility for safeguarding the nation from "irresponsible people," "irresponsible attitudes," and "irresponsible actions."

The government used the 1987 ISA to detain 106 people, although "most were released by fall of 1988, and by January 1989 only two remained imprisoned. In 1989 a national human rights commission was established to investigate human rights abuses resulting from the ISA" (Freedom House, 1990, p. 166). Amnesty International (2003) appealed to the Malaysian government on behalf of the detainees, but applications for writs of habeas cor-

pus were rejected by the Kuala Lumpur High Court in November 1987. Throughout the definition of the policy solution, Prime Minister Mahathir named national development as the major reason for the ISA. The prime minister claimed that the country's peace and stability must be cherished and that "Malaysia's development and economic well-being of its citizens" (sic) depend on peace and stability" (FBIS, October 28, 1987, p. 22). Mahathir offered the ISA as a way to prevent the world recession from promoting "an unstable political situation and racial disturbances" because the "country [could not] afford racial disturbances" (pp. 21-22).

Leading government officials, empowered to deliver the talking points of the government, addressed the issue of economics in their promotion of the ISA as part of the nation-building process. Foreign Minister Dato' Haji Abu Hassan bub Haji Omar claimed that the ISA "maintained national security" and provided for "the sake of tourists and investors" (FBIS, October 30, 1987, p. 15). The information minister, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, reiterated this claim. He defended the actions as a step by the government to "maintain peace and harmony among the races, to ensure the success of its development programs, and a brighter future" (p. 15). Rahmat ended a national press conference on the ISA with the claim that "all quarters must place national interest above everything else" (p. 15).

### **Linkage of National Unity with National Security**

The Malaysian government maintained a united effort to frame the ISA as an extension of its existing nation-building programs and not as a political act to suppress the opposition. Several high-ranking national figures addressed the ISA and supported the action as a beneficial policy for the nation. Prime Minister Mahathir told a group of the nation's newspaper editors that "they would have to understand that liberalism would have to take a back seat to development" (Watts, 1987c, p. 1). However, Mahathir promised that more "discussions [would] be held among community leaders to formulate a program to foster national unity" (FBIS, November 6, 1987). The national chief of police reiterated the claim that the ISA was a policy of nation-building when he said that the ISA was "issued only for the sake of maintaining peace and security in Malaysia" (FBIS, October 29, 1987, p. 21)—in order not to appear racially biased the government arrested several leaders of the ruling party. The police chief attempted to define the ISA as a measure of nation-building when he said, "Looking at it from any angle, the most important issue which must be given attention is national security and stability. National security and stability cannot exist without the stern enforcement of regulations" (FBIS, p. 21).

The deputy prime minister, Ghafar Baba, supported the argument that the government would not "use the ISA to victimize anyone" and claimed

instead that "national security was the main priority" (FBIS, November 9, 1987). Furthermore, Trade Minister Rafidah Aziz attempted to reassure international interests that the Malaysian government was continuing its economic and national development and that action "under the ISA to maintain political and economic stability in the country has further enhanced the confidence of foreign investors" (FBIS, November 2, 1987, p. 33). Minister Aziz bolstered the government's decision to enact the ISA by claiming that "investors are now confident that the Malaysian government [would] not hesitate to act against extremists who threaten the nation's stability" (FBIS, November 1, 1987, p. 33).

The government enacted its power by censoring all national media representatives who disagreed with the policy. In addition to the newspaper closings, the police invoked the ISA to arrest the managing director of Malaysia's third largest independent television station (Watts, 1987a). The strategy of high-ranking official support for the ISA, plus the censoring and intimidation of media outlets, allowed the government to define the ISA as one more part of the overall nation-building process. These nation-building programs promised economic and political rewards to those who followed the party line. Therefore, there was little incentive for Malaysian citizens to disagree with the motives of the ISA.

Reports also showed that opposition leaders within the coalition government openly supported the ISA. For example, S. Samy Vello, president of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) said, "every right thinking Malaysian must support the government's action undertaken to maintain peace and harmony in the nation" (FBIS, October 29, 1987, p. 23). Likewise, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party leader Yusuf Rawa viewed the ISA as "specifically used to maintain security" (p. 23). Finally, even the secretary of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), who opposed the Chinese language legislation, claimed that his party supported "the efforts of the Prime Minister in maintaining solidarity and national stability" (p. 23).

Additionally, editorials that appeared both on television and in the press agreed that the ISA "certainly had a calming effect" (FBIS, October 30, 1987, p. 16) and that "the immediate shock of the 89 arrests so far had begun to give way to a thankfulness" (FBIS, November 3, 1987, p. 32). The government employed its strategy of linking national unity to national security to persuade the Malaysian people to accept its definition of the situation and its subsequent policy solution.

### **Linkage between Riots of 1969 and the Chinese Language Issue**

A second strategy linked the Chinese language issue to the race riots of 1969 and further attempted to persuade audiences that the government acted in

the national interest and in accord with its previous nation-building promises. The rhetoric of "nation building," not the "language issue," was really the use of bifurcation. Symbolically, the "language issue," rioting, and other ideas associated with racial division were all cast in a negative light. Using this strategy, leaders, in the name of nation-building, did not have to justify what they were doing.

Implementation of the ISA followed a week of public insecurity about ethnic conflict after unsubstantiated rumors circulated about ethnic violence in other parts of the nation. Reports claimed that Prime Minister Mahathir's "statement came as nervous citizens began stocking up food or arranged to leave town in anticipation of trouble" (Pillai, 1987, p. 11). On October 28, 1987, Mahathir addressed the Lower House of the Parliament and defined the situation in the nation as a crisis reaching a "dangerous level" and claimed "if such a situation is allowed to go unchecked, it will bring about the destruction of all that we have built together" (FBIS, October 28, 1987, p. 18). Mahathir claimed the potential of ethnic crisis prompted action because the "government cannot wait for riots to break out before they take action"; therefore we must "safeguard the country from the dangerous calamity that we may face" (p. 18). To further compare the Chinese language issue with the race riots of 1969, Mahathir admonished that "we still remember the May 1969 incident and surely there is none among us who would want to cause such a riot" (p. 18). Therefore, he argued that "the crackdown began to avoid an outbreak of racial clashes" and claimed that "if we did not take precautionary measures, here are signs of recurring incidents like those of 1969" (FBIS, November 13, 1987, p. 26; November 18, 1987, p. 34).

The Information Minister, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, attempted to place the ISA into the existing nation-building framework when he reminded both national and international audiences that nation-building is a priority for the government. Rahmat informed newspaper, radio, and television stations that "all programs that could arouse racial sentiments should be replaced with those promoting solidarity and interracial understanding" (FBIS, November 2, 1987, p. 33). Similarly, Mahathir's assistant deputy, Ghafar Baba, commented that the government closed the newspapers because "we do not issue publishing permits for the newspapers to create tension in the country" (FBIS, November 12, 1987, p. 12).

Rhetorically, the Malaysian government consistently defined the Chinese language issue as a crisis. The government selected the situation as an urgent and important matter for action and simultaneously deflected attention away from the stagnant economy and other problems facing the nation. Nation-building was presented positively with the promotion of racial harmony and solidarity. Besides ensuring national stability, the policy also served the political functions of intimidation and, ultimately, silencing the opposition.

## DISCUSSION: ISSUE MANAGEMENT BY THE MAHATHIR GOVERNMENT

Several lessons about issue management and the application of political power in public relations become clear through this analysis. International governments, like organizations, sometimes promote crises and then advocate their policies to resolve the constructed problems. This examination shows that the Malaysian government catalytically managed (Cralle & Vibbert, 1985) the policy of the ISA—it defined the terms of the debate and polarized the choices for all ethnic groups. The a priori selection of the Chinese language issue as an important situation, defining the issue as a crisis, and identifying the ISA as a policy solution allowed the government to achieve several short- and long-term goals. Prime Minister Mahathir not only defined the Chinese language issue as a crisis but also responded to the perceived crisis with a policy that maximized his government's power while it simultaneously minimized the power of his enemies—the press, Chinese politicians, and even dissenters within his own political party (Watts, 1987c).

Crisis promotion can serve an issue masking function with different dividends for the rhetor (Bennett et al., 1976). In Malaysia, the government reaped three benefits. First, it silenced press outlets openly critical of the government. The government described the ISA as a measure to "safeguard democracy in the country" and "reduce ethnic tensions between Malays and ethnic Chinese" ("Malaysia to Issue," 1987, p. A5). The government silenced three national newspapers publishing in the three popular languages that had criticized and questioned the government's actions leading up to the ISA. The only newspapers sold during the implementation of the ISA supported the government program and offered enthusiastic editorials and commentaries in favor of the act. National editorials, entitled "All for the Better" and "National Security Overrides Liberalism," epitomize the way in which progovernment newspapers justified the ISA as part of the nation-building process.

Second, using the ISA, the government intimidated opposition politicians. Opposition groups called the prime minister's actions a reaction not to the rising tensions in the nation but to his failed economic policies. Opponents criticized his vision for Malaysian "industrialization and a gleaming capital full of the chrome and smoked glass symbols of success" (Watts, 1987b, p. 12)—at the price of real national development and unity. One Chinese opposition leader said, "With one fell swoop he has switched attention from all these problems [the crumbling economy] to the ISA detrainments. Now everybody is concentrating on the ISA and ignoring the real problems" (p. 12).

Third, the government reassured international investors that it would protect their interests and provide a stable place for their investments. In

other words, the Malaysian government restored its public image as a profitable and safe place for foreign investment. Mahathir framed the ISA as the result of a "misuse of liberalism" and attempted to shift the blame to opposition groups that "forced the government to act this way" (Watts, 1987d, p. 8). He claimed that "if people insist upon misusing the liberal attitudes of the government and threatening the country with instability, then it's very difficult for us to be as liberal as before" (p. 8). Some analysts believed that it was not the racial tensions that prompted the ISA but the tensions between Mahathir and his own party, the UMNO, that prompted arrests of national politicians. The "Father of Malaysia," Tunku Rahman, claimed that "it's not a question of Chinese against the government but his own party, the UMNO, who are against him" (Watts, 1987e, p. 11). Here we see bifurcation—"us against them," "our policy or chaos"; obviously there were other issues and possibilities that were not raised by government officials. The outcome of the ISA had national as well as political party implications. It solidified the Prime Minister's power at all levels of government.

This study shows that governments can act as issue managers when they employ rhetorical tactics to support issues and policies. By developing a masking issue through the use of casuistic stretching, the government carefully defined the goals of the ISA policy so that it appeared compatible with the traditional definition of national unity. This study also has implications for public relations scholars, students, and practitioners. It shows how commonly used concepts such as "national unity" and "national security" can be used in a variety of ways to accomplish personal and political goals. By tracing how the government stretched these concepts, we can see the true power of language to shape opinion and policy.

Moreover, there is an international dimension to this study. The Mahathir government attempted to persuade both national and international audiences that the policy benefited responsible citizens and international investors. The announcement of the ISA could have resulted in massive civil demonstrations by Malaysians of all ethnic groups if they viewed the act as a violation of their human rights. However, the government carefully framed the issue to portray the ISA as a protection against the people's loss of rights by the activities of extremists. Indeed, "many ordinary Malaysians greeted the Prime Minister's moves with relief" (Watts, 1987e, p. 11)—just as many citizens of the United States embraced the USA Patriot Act after September 11. The definition of the situation as a crisis and the subsequent definition of the ISA as an extension of the nation-building efforts to promote ethnic harmony convinced the Malaysian population that the ISA was not martial law. By casuistically stretching the definition of national unity to include national security and reminding Malaysians of all races of the ethnic riots in 1969, the government remained in power, minimized or eliminated opposition, and reassured the nation as well as international investors that it

placed "national interest above all else" (FBIS, October 29, 1987, p. 21). The government enjoyed several dividends from the ISA policy; therefore, the action could also be viewed as the Mahathir government catalytically managing an issue by placing its interests "above all else."

Overseas, the ISA masked the larger and more central issue of the Mahathir government—its survival as the ruling party. Bennett et al. (1976) claimed that "masking issues" may be designed specifically to affect the resolution of other issues in a political situation" (p. 110). Masking issues by their very nature often serve more than one issue, and a close look at the Mahathir government's discourse supporting the ISA as a part of the nation-building process illustrates the link between the constructed crisis of national unity and the solution of the ISA for more than one issue—language dominance, political control, and international financial concerns.

According to Freedom House (1988), the British rulers of Malaya first instituted the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1960 during the Communist insurgencies. The ISA was an attempt to control internal subversion during colonial rule. The Malaysian government overturned the act and rarely employed its provisions until 1987. The Malaysian government carefully cultivated an image of national unity for both domestic and international audiences to promote social and economic development. However, the ways in which the Malaysian government defined the issue of national unity changed after the Internal Security Act of 1987. More specifically, the government utilized the issue of national unity to mask other issues while it terministically "stretched" its original definition to justify the actions taken under the ISA.

Public relations practitioners, scholars, and students can benefit from understanding how this can happen. Casuistic stretching allowed the government to incorporate a new policy into its nation-building programs as a solution to problems of national unity. The use of national unity as a "masking issue" also created the impression the government was fighting a threat to national unity, when actually it was fighting the political opposition.

In political discourse, Edelman (1988) warned that sometimes the solution is decided on first, and a convenient problem is then identified to justify the desired policy solution. The Internal Security Act in Malaysia exemplifies this type of a priori issue definition and policy development. Additionally, by limiting the terms of debate to polarized options (bifurcation), the government was able to control what was said and the way the issue was discussed. During a time of political crisis, the Malaysian national government used all four of the rhetorical strategies to legitimate its position on a controversial issue.

This chapter has illustrated how government enacts and protects its power through common rhetorical strategies. The Malaysian officials employed aspects of issues communication to achieve their goals.

