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Framing Democracy: Visual Narratives in News Reporting on Malaysia's By-Election

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the role of photojournalism in shaping election narratives, focusing on the national news agency Bernama's coverage of the Nenggiri by-election held on August 17, 2024. With the rapid advancement of digital technology and the extensive influence of visual media, modern photojournalism plays a crucial role in news reporting by conveying complex information and shaping public perception. Despite challenges related to ethical concerns and evolving media dynamics, photojournalism remains a significant component of contemporary journalism. This research employs a quantitative content analysis approach to examine 131 photographs from Bernama Images taken between August 3rd and August 17, 2024. The analysis applies the media framing theory by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) to categorise these images based on five key themes, such as responsibility, human interest, morals, conflict, economic consequences, and political dynamics and evaluates how these visual narratives impact public understanding of the by-election. The findings reveal that Bernama's imagery strategically emphasizes specific aspects of the election, influencing voter perceptions and engagement. The research also addresses the ethical considerations of visual framing, highlighting the importance of maintaining journalistic integrity in an era of rapid digital dissemination. This study contributes to the understanding of photojournalism's role in electoral coverage, emphasising how visual representation influences public opinion and emphasising the need for ethical standards in media practices. By analysing Bernama's coverage, the study offers insights into the evolving landscape of photojournalism and its impact on political narratives in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary photojournalism remains central to political communication during elections where images shape public interpretation of political actors, events and power relations. Visual framing in electoral

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reporting does not merely record reality but it constructs political meaning and influences how citizens perceive democratic processes. Studies have shown that emotionally charged and symbolically curated political images can shape public attitudes and voting preferences, signalling the importance of visual cues in democratic participation (Nguyen & Lee, 2023). In Malaysia, where media institutions are embedded within historically centralised information structures, the visual portrayal of elections becomes even more significant for shaping informed citizenship and public trust.

However, research on Malaysian election communication has been dominated by textual framing and social media discourse analyses with comparatively limited attention to quantitative or systematic analysis of visual framing. However, research on Malaysian election communication has been dominated by textual framing and social media discourse analyses, while visual dimensions of political communication remain comparatively underexplored. While international scholarship has demonstrated that images can emphasise candidate traits, legitimacy, and political momentum (Zhang & Zhang, 2024), empirical examination of how Malaysian news photography constructs political narratives remains limited. Existing discussions often highlight the importance of images in influencing voters, but they rarely provide systematic visual framing analysis or consider how such imagery shapes political perception, media ethics, and democratic engagement in the Malaysian context. Existing discussions tend to describe the importance of images rather than critically assessing the framing devices and their implications for political perception, media ethics and democratic engagement.

Bernama, as Malaysia's national news agency provides a strategic site for examining visual political communication. Its content is widely circulated across mainstream and digital platforms and it is perceived as less commercially partisan compared to privately owned news organisations. Consequently, the agency's visual choices hold substantial influence in shaping shared political memory and legitimising electoral narratives (Patel & Kumar, 2024). Yet, the mechanisms through which Bernama's electoral images frame political actors and events remain under-examined, in relation to how visual selection and composition may reinforce or challenge dominant political narratives.

This study addresses the limitations of research on visual political communication in Malaysia by examining how national news agency frames its photojournalistic coverage during general elections. It identifies the main visual frames used in Bernama's election images and explains how these visuals shape public understanding of leadership, legitimacy and citizen participation in the democratic process. By analysing the symbolic elements and representational patterns in these images, the study shows how photojournalism can influence perceptions of political actors and voter engagement. The research also considers the implications of these visual framing practices for democratic communication and media ethics in a context where state-linked media organisations play a central role in shaping political narratives. Overall, the study contributes to discussions on media transparency, political representation, and the ethical responsibilities of national news agencies in the digital era (Fahmy, Bock, & Wanta, 2014; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Tapsell, 2018; Wong & Chan, 2024; Tan & Ho, 2024).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a study by Perlmutter and Miller (2021), photojournalism serves as more than just a supplement to news articles; it actively shapes the way people interpret news. The power of images in news reporting lies in their ability to convey complex information quickly and evoke strong emotional responses. This instantaneous impact is particularly crucial in the fast-paced digital age, where readers often browse articles but spend more time engaging with visual content.

The rise of digital platforms has also changed how photojournalists work. As Gillmor (2022) discusses, the democratisation of image-sharing technology allows both professional and amateur photojournalists to contribute to the news cycle. This has broadened the scope of photojournalism, enabling real-time reporting from conflict zones, protests, and other critical events around the globe. However, it also raises ethical concerns, including issues of image manipulation, verification, and the responsibility of journalists to ensure accuracy. Moreover, the immediacy and shareability of images on

digital platforms have altered the traditional role of photojournalists. According to Zelizer (2023), photojournalists now have to navigate the challenges of working in an environment where their work is shared widely, often stripped of context and sometimes reappropriated to fit particular narratives. This shift emphasizes the importance of ethical guidelines and editorial oversight in ensuring that images are used responsibly and contribute to informed public discourse.

The influence of photojournalism extends beyond merely illustrating news stories. As noted by Hariman and Lucaites (2022), iconic images such as those of humanitarian crises, political protests, or significant cultural moments can drive social change. These images do not just document events; they help shape public memory and influence how societies understand key historical moments. In this context, photojournalism becomes a form of visual activism, where the camera is used to bear witness to injustice, highlight human suffering, or celebrate collective achievements. Modern photojournalism plays an important role in contemporary news reporting, driven by technological advancements and the power of images to convey meaning and shape public perception. While it faces challenges in the digital era, including ethical concerns and the changing dynamics of media consumption, its influence on journalism and society remains profound.

2.1 Media Framing

Media framing in photojournalism plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and understanding of news events. The concept of framing refers to the way media outlets construct and present news stories to highlight certain aspects while downplaying others, thereby influencing how audiences interpret information (Entman, 1993). Recent scholarly work emphasises the impact of framing on photojournalism, illustrating how images are not merely neutral representations but are infused with meanings shaped by editorial choices. According to Goffman (2021), frames in photojournalism help structure our understanding by focusing attention on specific elements of a story while neglecting others. This selective emphasis can significantly influence public opinion and behaviour.

A recent study by Carpenter and McGowan (2022) explores how visual framing in photojournalism affects audience perceptions of social issues. Their research reveals that the way images are framed through composition, subject matter, and context can alter viewers' emotional responses and opinions about events. For instance, photographs depicting protestors as either peaceful or violent can shape how the public views the legitimacy of their cause (Carpenter & McGowan, 2022). Editorial decisions in framing also affect the representation of different groups within photojournalism. As highlighted by Choi and Lee (2023), media outlets often frame images to align with specific narratives, which can perpetuate stereotypes or reinforce existing biases. Their study shows how framing practices can either challenge or uphold power structures by selecting images that fit particular agendas or ideological perspectives (Choi & Lee, 2023).

The rise of digital platforms has intensified the role of framing in photojournalism. According to Hsu and Yung (2024), the immediacy of digital media allows for the rapid dissemination of images, but it also raises concerns about how quickly and effectively images can be framed to fit evolving narratives. Their research emphasises the challenges faced by photojournalists in maintaining ethical standards while navigating the pressures of digital media environments (Hsu & Yung, 2024). The ethical dimensions of framing in photojournalism are increasingly important as media landscapes become more complex. As noted by Karan (2023), ethical framing involves making deliberate choices about how images are presented and ensuring that these choices do not distort reality or manipulate public perception unfairly. The study emphasises the need for transparency and accountability in the framing process to maintain public trust and journalistic integrity (Karan, 2023).

Media framing in photojournalism is a powerful tool that shapes how news stories are perceived and understood. Recent research highlights the complex relationship between visual representation, editorial choices, and digital media dynamics, underscoring the importance of ethical considerations in framing practices.

2.2 Photojournalism in Election Campaign Coverage

Photojournalism has played an essential role in shaping public perceptions of the Malaysian elections by offering visual narratives that complement textual reports. The integration of photojournalism into election coverage provides audiences with immediate, emotional insights into the political process, candidate personalities, and the public's response to electoral events. Recent studies highlight the significance of photojournalism in framing electoral narratives. As Lee and Ng (2023) discuss, images of political rallies, voting processes, and candidate interactions often evoke stronger emotional responses and can influence public opinion more effectively than text alone. Their research emphasises how impactful imagery, such as photographs capturing voter enthusiasm or candidate controversies, can influence voter perceptions and engagement (Lee & Ng, 2023).

Photojournalism's role in Malaysian election coverage extends to providing visual context that enriches campaign narratives. According to Ahmad and Tan (2023), photographs of campaign events, debates, and grassroots activities offer a tangible connection to the electoral process, making the abstract aspects of political campaigning more accessible and relatable to the public. Their study notes that effective use of visual storytelling can enhance the transparency and immediacy of electoral reporting (Ahmad & Tan, 2023).

The ethical considerations of photojournalism in elections are also significant. During the 2023 Malaysian General Elections, concerns about bias and manipulation in photographic representation were prevalent. As highlighted by Khor and Ibrahim (2024), the selective framing of images, whether through choice of subjects, timing of publication, or image manipulation, can impact the perceived fairness of election coverage. Their analysis shows the need for photojournalists to adhere to ethical standards to ensure balanced and accurate representations (Khor & Ibrahim, 2024). The role of digital media has transformed how photojournalism is used in election reporting. According to Lau and Lim (2024), social media platforms have amplified the reach and immediacy of electoral images, allowing for real-time updates and rapid dissemination of visual content. This digital shift has also introduced new dynamics in how images are shared, interpreted, and used to influence public opinion. Their study explores how digital platforms both enhance and complicate the role of photojournalism in election coverage (Lau & Lim, 2024).

Examining specific instances from recent Malaysian elections reveals the varied impact of photojournalism. For example, the coverage of the 2023 General Elections showcased how powerful images such as those depicting voter turnout and candidate interactions served to both mobilize support and critique political processes (Tan & Wong, 2023). These images played a crucial role in shaping the public's understanding and response to the elections.

This research investigates the Nenggiri by-election (PRK Nenggiri) that took place on August 17, 2024, following the disqualification of the previous assemblyman. Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate Mohd Azmawi Fikri Abdul Ghani won with a significant majority of 3,352 votes, reclaiming the seat from Perikatan Nasional (PN). Despite the loss, the Kelantan state government accepted the results. The election was significant, shaped by political dynamics and voter sentiment, including a key Orang Asli electorate. The combination of traditional media framing with social media dynamics helps build a candidate's public image. Visual framing in newspapers and interactions on platforms like Twitter influence voter perceptions. Media monitoring allows campaigns to track these perceptions and adapt strategies, accordingly, increasing their chances of success (Ambikapathy & Abdul Hamid, 2020). Media framing highlights specific elements of reality to shape how issues are defined, interpreted, and evaluated (Entman, 1993). Social media monitoring helps researchers observe the use of frames in real time, revealing the public's response to campaign messages. Researchers employed social media monitoring to study how various news frames, such as human interest, responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and conflict frames, were used and received by the public. This ongoing real-time analysis sheds light on how media framing shapes public opinion and voter behaviour, helping campaigns adjust strategies to

better engage with the electorate. By leveraging social media monitoring, researchers support more transparent and responsive political campaigns, contributing to a more vibrant democratic process.

3. METHOD

This study used a quantitative content analysis to examine how Bernama visually framed the Nenggiri by-election. The unit of analysis was the news images that was coded on its own. The images were gathered from Bernama Images using the keyword “PRK Nenggiri,” covering the campaign period from 3 to 17 August 2024. All images available during this timeframe were included resulting in a total of 131 photographs.

The coding followed Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) framing framework which includes five frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. Because this study focused on visual rather than written content, each frame was defined based on observable elements in the image. For example, the responsibility frame was identified when a photograph showed leaders making decisions or engaging in official duties, the conflict frame was noted when opposing groups or visually competitive situations appeared and the morality frame was marked when symbols, gestures or settings conveyed ethical or value-based messages. A coding guide was developed to ensure coders applied these definitions consistently. This process ensured transparency, consistency and systematic interpretation of the visual framing patterns, allowing the study to identify how Bernama visually represented the by-election. The approach follows established practices in visual political communication research (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

Two trained coders independently analysed all images. Prior to full coding, both coders conducted a pilot test on 15 images to refine coding instructions and clarify frame indicators. Inter-coder reliability was tested using Krippendorff’s Alpha, which is suitable for checking agreement between coders who are working with categories. A pilot test was carried out on 15 images (from the total 131) to make sure the coding instructions were clear and could be applied consistently. The result showed a reliability score of $\alpha = .87$, which indicates good and acceptable agreement between the two coders. After the pilot test, any differences in coding were reviewed and discussed together. The coders compared their decisions with the coding guide and agreed on the correct interpretation for each case. Where needed, the coding instructions were clarified to make sure both coders understood the visual indicators in the same way. Once agreement was reached, the coders continued to code the remaining images using the revised guide.

This systematic coding process ensured transparency and consistency in the classification of visual framing patterns, enabling the identification of trends in Bernama’s election-related imagery. The approach aligns with established content analysis standards in visual political communication research (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

4. FINDING & DISCUSSION

The Nenggiri by-election, held on August 17, 2024, witnessed a strong relationship between media, politics and public opinion, with Bernama Images playing an important role in shaping narratives through visual content with a total of 131 images shared related to the Nanggiri by-election. The visual framing of political events, key figures and public responses plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions as photographs of campaign activities, debates and grassroots engagement provide a tangible and relatable connection to the electoral process, making the otherwise abstract dimensions of political campaigning more accessible to audiences (Ahmad & Tan, 2023). This analysis explores the visual data set from Bernama Images, which monitored and disseminated imagery during the election period, focusing on the media’s role in constructing political messages through these images.

Table 1.0 Number and Percentage of Bernama Images during Nenggiri By-Election 2024

Election period	Number of Images	Percentage
Nomination Day	18	13.74%
Campaigning	63	48.09%
Polling Day	50	38.17%

Table 1.0 shows a clear pattern in Bernama Images' visual coverage across the different stages of the election. Nomination day received the least attention, with only 18 images (13.74%), indicating that the early phase of the electoral process was not a priority in the outlet's visual reporting. Coverage increased sharply during the campaigning period, where 63 images (48.09%) were posted, reflecting the media's focus on political rallies, candidate appearances, and voter mobilisation efforts. Polling day coverage remained high, with 50 images (38.17%), showing the significance placed on documenting voter turnout, the voting process, and the atmosphere surrounding the final outcome. The combined high percentages for campaigning and polling day (86.26%) suggest that Bernama placed far greater emphasis on moments of heightened public and political activity, while nomination day was visually underrepresented. This distribution highlights a framing tendency to prioritise dynamic, event-driven coverage over procedural stages of the election.

Table 2.0 Number and Percentage of Bernama Images Sources during Nenggiri By-Election 2024

Source	Number of Images	Percentage
BN	55	42%
PAS	11	8.4%
BN-PAS	5	3.8%
Others	60	45.8%

Bernama's visual framing was strategic, frequently highlighting specific narratives while minimizing others, as illustrated in Table 2.0. The image distribution shows a clear imbalance in coverage between political actors. Barisan Nasional (BN) dominated the visual space with 55 images, making up 42% of the total. In contrast, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) received only 11 images (8.4%), giving them far less visual exposure. A small number of images (5, or 3.8%) featured both BN and PAS together, mostly during nomination events. The remaining 60 images (45.8%) fell into the "Others" category, which included visuals of public voting scenes, campaign things such as flags, and Election Commission activities. This suggests that while almost half of the coverage was neutral or general, the candidate-specific coverage heavily favored BN. Such a pattern reflects a likely framing bias, with BN receiving a significantly stronger media presence compared to PAS. This imbalance can shape audience perceptions by making one political party appear more visible and potentially more favourable, as images of political rallies, voting processes, and candidate interactions often evoke stronger emotional responses and influence public opinion more effectively than text alone (Lee & Ng, 2023).

This disproportionate representation suggests a media framing bias toward BN, which aligns with previous studies on media ownership and political alignment in Malaysia. The Bernama Images choice of imagery can play a significant role in emphasising particular narratives, thereby shaping voter perception. By featuring more images of BN and highlighting specific moments involving their candidate, Mohd Asmawi Fikri Abdul Ghani, Bernama Images potentially contributed to BN's visibility and positive portrayal.

Table 3.0: Number and Percentage of Bernama Images Frames during Nenggiri By-Election 2024

Frame	Number of Images	Percentage
Moral Frame	71	54.22%
Responsibility Frame	43	32.81%
Conflict Frame	7	5.34%
Human Interest Frame	5	3.82%
Economic Frame	5	3.82%

Using Semetko and Valkenburg's (2016) media frame analysis as a reference, Bernama Images leaned heavily on moral framing. Table 3.0 presents the count and percentage of Bernama images categorized by frame during the research period. The data shows that the moral frame dominated Bernama Images' coverage, appearing in 71 images (54.22%). This heavy emphasis indicates a strong focus on portraying political actors in terms of values, integrity, and leadership qualities, often as a way to legitimise certain candidates or parties in the eyes of the public. The responsibility frame was the second most used, with 43 images (32.81%), highlighting civic duties, voter participation, and the role of the Election Commission. This aligns with traditional state media practices that encourage compliance with electoral norms and promote political stability. The remaining frames were far less frequent. The conflict frame appeared in only 7 images (5.34%), showing limited visual focus on political disputes or tensions, suggesting Bernama's preference for controlled and less confrontational narratives. Both the human interest and economic frames were equally low, each with 5 images (3.82%). The human interest frame likely aimed to make candidates appear more relatable through community engagement visuals, while the economic frame connected political campaigns with development promises, particularly targeting specific communities.

Overall, the uneven distribution of frames indicates a deliberate editorial strategy that favoured moral and responsibility narratives over conflict, personal stories, or economic issues. This approach contributed to a stable, positive portrayal of certain political actors while minimising attention to contentious aspects of the election. The analysis of Bernama Images during the Nenggiri by-election demonstrates the influential role of visual media in shaping political narratives. Through selective framing, the media emphasised specific candidates, promoted civic responsibility, and linked the election to themes of human connection and economic stability, while selectively addressing conflicts. Bernama's emphasis on BN's candidate and campaign, combined with carefully curated images of voter duties and community engagement, underscores the media's agenda-setting power during pivotal political moments. Ultimately, the visual content disseminated during the Nenggiri by-election not only documented events but also shaped public perception of the political landscape, reinforcing preferred narratives while sidelining others. As digital media continues to evolve, the influence of imagery in political communication remains a vital area for ongoing research.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the central role of photojournalism in shaping political communication in the context of Malaysian election reporting where visual storytelling has become increasingly influential due to the expansion of digital media platforms. Photojournalism does more than accompany written news; it actively shapes how audiences interpret political events, identities and power relations. Images convey meaning rapidly and evoke emotional responses, making visual framing a powerful tool for influencing public perception. Yet, the growing accessibility of digital image production and distribution also raises ethical concerns regarding accuracy, representation, and editorial responsibility.

The analysis of Bernama's coverage of the Nenggiri by-election revealed a clear predominance of responsibility and moral frames alongside an uneven representation that favoured the Barisan Nasional candidate. By foregrounding narratives of leadership competence, civic duty and political stability and by comparatively downplaying contestation and alternative voices, the visual framing patterns reinforced dominant political narratives. These findings demonstrate how government-linked media can shape citizen understanding of electoral processes through selective visual emphasis. The study contributes to visual political communication research by extending Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) framing typology to a Southeast Asian photojournalistic context and by operationalising frame indicators for visual rather than textual data.

However, the study is limited by its focus on a single government-linked media source and the absence of qualitative triangulation such as newsroom interviews or audience reception studies. Future research should therefore compare visual framing across state and private news organisations and

examine how audiences interpret and respond to electoral imagery within digital environments where content circulation is rapid and participatory.

The political and ethical implications of these findings are significant. When visual framing by a national news agency consistently legitimises especially political actors, while marginalising others, it may narrow the space for pluralistic representation and informed democratic deliberation. In this sense, visual framing does not merely reflect electoral reality but contributes to constructing it. As Malaysia's media ecosystem continues to evolve within a highly visual digital environment, maintaining transparency, editorial accountability and diversity in political imagery is essential for protecting democratic communication and ensuring that visual news remains a space for inclusive public representation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Shafezah Abdul Wahab was responsible for conceptualisation, developing the theoretical framework, writing the original draft and reviewing and editing the manuscript. Mohd Hanif Omar contributed to data collection. Muhammad Hakimi supervised the research process and validated the findings. Amirul Sajadi curated the primary dataset from the Bernama newsroom.

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