Press systems in Asean : an introduction

Mehra, Achal

1989

Mehra, A. (1989). Press systems in Asean : an introduction. In Advanced Editorial Workshop for Senior Women Journalists : Singapore, 8-17 February, 1989. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre.

https://hdl.handle.net/10356/91533

Press Systems In Asean : An Introduction

By

Achal Mehra

Press Systems in Asean: An Introduction

Achal Mehra

Press systems in Western liberal democracies are premised on a particular definition of man and state and their interrelationship. Man is viewed as a rational animal with an inherent dignity and an individual sovereignty to determine his acts and destiny:

> The human person possesses rights because of the very fact that it is a person, a whole, master of itself and of its acts, and which consequently is not merely a means to an end, but an end. . . . [All fundamental rights] are rooted in the vocation of the person (a spiritual and free agent) to the order of absolute values and to a destiny superior in time. . . . Freedom of investigation (speech and press) is a fundamental natural right, for man's very nature is to seek the truth. Freedom to spread ideas which one holds to be true corresponds to an aspiration of nature.[1]

Man enters into society through a social compact that rests on personal autonomy. Governments are merely instruments to promote the right milieu for the maximum development of individual potential, freedom and well being. As one U.S. Supreme Court justice wrote, "Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the state was to make men free to develop their faculties. . . . They believed liberty to be the secret of happiness."[2]

Freedom of speech and of the press serve an instrumental function in this arrangement as they are "deemed essential to the discovery and spread of truth, for

only by the endless testing of debate could error be exposed, truth emerge, and men enjoy the opportunities for human progress."[3] Or, to recall the more stirring words of John Milton:

> And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing--prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worst in a free and open encounter.[4]

Freedom of speech and of the press in the marketplace of ideas are at the core of a democratic polity:

> [The founders] valued liberty both as an end and as a means. They believed liberty to be the secret of happiness and courage to be the secret of liberty. They believed that freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth; that without free speech and assembly discussion would be futile; that with them, discussion affords ordinarily adequate protection against the dissemination of noxious doctrine; that the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people; that public discussion is a public duty; and that this should be a fundamental principle of the American government. They recognised the risks to which all human institutions are subject. But they knew that order cannot be secured merely through fear of punishment for its infraction; that it is hazardous to discourage thought, hope and imagination; that fear breeds repression; that repression breeds hate; that hate menaces stable government; that the path of safety lies in the opportunity to discuss freely supposed grievances and proposed remedies; and that the fitting remedy for evil counsels is good ones. Believing in the power of reason as applied through public discussion, they eschewed silence coerced by law--the argument of force in its worst form. Recognizing the occassional tyrannies of governing majorities, they amended the Constitution so that free speech and assembly should be guaranteed.[5]

Freedom of expression is part of a compact in which people participate in their self-government through public discourse. This process of self-government through free expression is designed to serve the common welfare by giving "to every voting member of the body politic the fullest possible participation in the understanding of those problems with which the citizens of a self-governing society must deal."[6] Indeed, the U.S. Supreme Court has said that "[The historical background suggests] a profound national commitment to the principle that debate of public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide open . . . to assure unfettered interchange of ideas for

bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people."[7]

More recently, Western scholars have argued that freedom of the press is designed to supplement the three traditional branches of government, an argument vigorously advanced by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart: "[The] primary purpose of the constitutional guarantee of a free press was . . . to create a fourth institution outside the Government as an additional check on the three official branches."[8]

Defense of freedom of the press is thus premised on it being an intrinsic human right as well as on its utilitarian function in enhancing the discovery of truth, the process of self-government and in checking abuse of authority.

Epistemological Distinctions

The Western liberal worldview of man, society and the societal arrangements, including the role of the press, is not universally shared. Unlike the individualistic, democratic, egalitarian and liberal tradition of Western political theory, some societies value their consensual and communal traditions with their emphasis on duties and obligations to the collective and social harmony. They reject the notion of man as purely a rational animal or as an end in himself. Participants at a Consultation on Press Systems in Asean, organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center (AMIC) and the Directorate General of Press and Graphics, Republic of Indonesia (DEPPEN), in Jakarta in August 1988, asserted in their final report that the philosophy of the regional press systems is premised on an understanding "of holistic man, both rational and emotional [and] of man in his cultural context, rooted in his understanding of community, authority, and religion or spiritual belief."[9]

The implications of this are perhaps most strikingly illustrated by the Indonesian paper in this volume. Indonesia, Dr. Edward Janner Sinaga explains, has

very deliberately shaped its social, political and cultural institutions within the framework of an indigenous philosophy --Pancasila. In contrast with the atomistic and individualistic character of Western liberal man, Dr. Sinaga argues, Pancasila stresses the consensual and holistic character of its society. Pancasila society disapproves of individualism and individual rights, the starting point of Western liberal political theory.

It consequently rejects the notion of an uninhibited and robust press that undertakes vehement, caustic and unpleasant attacks on government and public officials -- the *sine qua non* of Western press theory. Instead, the press is viewed as a partner in national development, within the framework of Pancasila.

Pancasila philosophy with its stress on religious beliefs, humanism, national unity, consensual democracy, and social justice has proven that it can unify its hetrogenous population of 175 million people spread over nearly 17,500 islands, Dr. Sinaga says.

Indonesia is not the only country in Asean to search in its cultural roots for a national ideology, although it is the only one to embody the ideology into its Constitution, thereby giving it legal muscle. Malaysia likewise has dallied with a national ideology, called Rukunegara. According to Dr. Syed Arabi Idid, Rukunegara stresses national unity, democracy, social equity, progressive thought and traditional culture. Even in the Philippines, which adopted all the trappings of liberal democracy in its 1986 Constitution, there are yearnings for an indigeneous philosophy. And most recently, there is a raging national debate in Singapore on a national ideology or a statement of core values, which the government proposes to outline in a framework of principles, with a stress on family, consensus and national unity .

Perhaps the widest social consensus on these questions prevails in Brunei, a country with a population of only 226,000. Although Brunei resumed independence only in 1984, its traditional culture has sustained its authenticity. According to Mr.

Zainal Tinggal, people are more absorbed with local affairs than state ones; as an oil-exporting economy, the country enjoys the highest standard of living in the region; the society is well-knit and social harmony is deeply cherished. In any event, sensational news is hard to find; social events and development are consequently the main staple of the press. The country has only one private newspaper (a weekly), two government publications (a weekly and a monthly), no news agency and fewer than 30 journalists, most with the government's Department of Information and Broadcasting.

Mr. Tinggal believes that these social and cultural factors shape the press system more in Brunei than any political arrangements. Despite the many sweeping laws regulating the press, no newspaper has been closed down, no journalist arrested, and very few foreign publications or journalists barred. It is not necessary; it is widely understood and accepted that the press has a role in molding the country into a Malay, Moslem Monarchy.

The Doctrinal Distinctions

If Dr. Sinaga takes issue with the epistemological foundations of Western liberal theory, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad repudiates the doctrinal tenets of libertarian press theory, whose embracement by "wide-eyed" Third World media practioners he scorns because of their inability "to break the shackles of psychological and intellectual neo-colonialism."

Evidence is, Dr. Mahathir asserts, that man is as much an irrational creature as a rational one and it is absurd to argue that he spends much time in a relentless search for truth; history demonstrates that the whole truth is sometimes harmful and must not always be told; an adverserial press may be justified against tyrannical governments, but it is not relevant to good government; the media do not monopolise virtue and are not immune from corruption; not every individual has the opportunity to participate in the marketplace of ideas because of lack of ability, resources or

access; just as absolute power can corrupt, so too can absolute freedom; the erroneous assumption of societal stability in developing societies that are precariously poised on a razor's edge is hazardous.

Dr. Mahathir rejects the authoritarian and communist models of the press for their failure to distinguish between the good of the state and the government, or the society and its leaders. In these systems, wisdom becomes the monopoly of a few and power becomes the determinant of truth. The result is the stifling of innovation and diversity.

His prescription is for a socially responsible press, in which the rights of the individual and of society are delicately balanced by a democratically elected government. The media must act responsibly and criticise without malice or prejudice. They must consciously limit the exercise of their rights so as not to endanger democracy and they must act with the same humility that they demand of those in power:

> Just as they are right in saying that a government has no monopoly on constructiveness and wisdom, the media must recognise that they too have no monopoly on constructiveness and wisdom. Just as the public servant must be prepared to accept criticism, so too must the media be prepared to accept criticism. Just as the government is not above the law, the media too are not above the law. . . . Just as the media are not to be made subservient to the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, in the same way and to the same extent the executive, the legislative and the judiciary are not to be made subservient to the media. Just as the government cannot be allowed to have the freedom to do exactly as it pleases in society, so too the media cannot be allowed to do exactly as they please in society.

Within that framework, Dr. Mahathir advocates the "greatest freedom [for the media] consonant with the vital interests of society." In Indonesia under the New Order established since 1966, according to Dr. Sinaga, the press is wedded to the concept of social responsibility, which views the press as free and responsible. The balance between the two is drawn by all parties, i.e. government, society and media, through what Dr. Sinaga calls a system of "positive interaction" via the vehicle of a

press council, which has members from all three segments.

At the Consultation , the participants related the degree of press freedom in the countries of the region to the "peculiar geographical, racial, cultural, political and economic circumstances of each country."

Universalism v. Social Context

Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew does not dispute the relevance or validity of the Western model for Western societies. Indeed he recognises the importance of the U.S. model as representing the ultimate in terms of media freedoms and prerogatives. But he questions the applicability of the U.S. model as a universal one. The role of the press in other societies can differ, growing from their different historical experiences, political systems, national tempraments and social realities. "When the marketplace contest of ideas has been practiced in newly independent nations, it has ended in less than happy results," Mr. Lee says. He points to India and Sri Lanka as two illustrative examples of how the media can "sow confusion and dissension" instead of building "enlightenment and consensus" by propounding "divergent and incompatible policies, mobilising sectional constituencies and arousing emotions."

Singaporeans, Mr. Lee says, are "chary, even suspicious, of any paper crusading for causes or policies which people feel should be left to those who are openly in the political arena."

Mr. Lee's argument is butressed by the authors of the Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean papers who deplore the many ways their press has in the past aroused the volatile, emotional sentiments of their multi-racial populace, resulting in riots and bloodshed. According to Dr. Idid, newspapers in Malaysia historically developed to advance the competing ethnic claims of their racial groups and to some degree continue to reflect the aspirations, hopes and fears of their linguistic group.

The creation of the national news agency Bernama has helped foster a national identity among the very parochial Malaysian media, but their readership continues to be segregated by racial groupings. Malaysia, therefore, places a very high priority on the integrative function of the mass media because of the fragile racial relations, according to Dr. Idid.

In fact, almost all Asean countries are very sensitive about press coverage of touchy ethnic, religious, racial and inter-group conflicts. In Singapore, Mr. Basskaran Nair says, the demands of social cohesion at any cost and the anxiety not to repeat its experience with communalism and communism are very fundamental realities within whose framework the press in that country must operate.

Regional Experiments with Liberal Press Theory

Among the six Asean countries, the Philippines and Thailand have opted for the Western liberal model of the press, with its concomitant stress on press freedom and the role of the press as a watchdog and inquisitor of government.

Thailand is the only country in the region not to have experienced colonization and has maintained its independence for 700 years. Western liberal philosophy was absorbed by Thai journalists during the country's early experiments with democracy. Indeed, Pira Chirasopone tells us, the Code of Ethics of the Press Association of Thailand exhorts its members that "Promotion and maintenance of freedom of the press shall be the most important task of every member."

Nonetheless, Thai journalists see press freedom as a gradually evolving process and not necessarily growing in tandem with political democracy. "When the government advanced democracy," Chirasapone concludes, "it frequently eroded freedoms of the press." He even quotes a veteran editor as saying that the period before the coming of the age of democracy was the freest for the press.

The Philippine press' embracement of Western liberal theory under President

Corizon Aquino stems from the 120 years of control by first the Spanish and American colonial governments, then the Japanese occupation forces and finally the Marcos dictatorship. These authoritarian spells were broken only sporadically by brief interludes of freedom. The repressive controls gave rise to a strong underground press and protest journalism that assisted in the downfall of President Marcos in 1986. The media coverage of abuses of Marcos regime, to quote Mrs. Corizon Aquino, became the "icons of our revolution."

With that background, it is not surprising that the press sees its responsibility as a public fiduciary and as a watchdog of government. But, although the Philippine press may have adopted many of the trappings of its American counterpart, its conviction comes from years of experience of repression, giving several concepts distinctively Filipino nuances, Dr. Doreen Fernandez asserts. For instance, unlike its Western counterpart, in its role as a critic, check and conscience of government, the Filipino press does not see itself as an adversary (unless the government is abusive), but as its partner in the democratic experiment. The Filipino press also very willingly accepts its role as an ally of government in education, providing information on current issues, history and development, disseminating culture and cultural values and social interpretation, according to Dr. Fernandez. Likewise, Dr. Idid says, Malaysian newspapers have willingly participated in national campaigns on national unity, national culture, promoting use of Bahasa Malaysia, etc.

As rapidly developing international economies, all the Asean countries have a stake in promoting a free flow of information. According to Mr. Nair, Singapore, which has had the greatest conflict with the international media in recent years, nonetheless has the third largest community of foreign correspondents in Asia. In addition, nearly 3,700 foreign publications circulate in the country.

Yet, if there is one common thread among the Asean countries' experimentations with a liberal press, it is how the press invited governmental and societal wrath by

its irresponsibility, licentiousness, corruption, commercialism, partisanship, and sensationalism. In the Philippines, the licentiousness of the press in the post-War period, goaded President Marcos into instituting draconian controls on the media in September 1972. And in Thailand, Journalist Kukrit Promaj, who became Prime Minister after the October 1973 student revolt, cautioned the press that it could obstruct democracy by its thoughtlessness and sensationalism -- a warning that tragically went unheeded, resulting in frequent crackdowns on the country's media.

Likewise, Dr. Sinaga explains that Indonesia's historical experience, including a 14 year dallience with Western liberal democracy between 1945-1959 -- a period marked by political instability, armed rebellions and separatist movements in which the press played a very partisan and inflammatory role -- makes Indonesians chary of both liberal and communist philosophies.

It is not surprising therefore to find Mrs. Aquino, a feverent loyalist of a free press, admonishing the Filipino media to temper their new found freedom with discipline and responsibility to perform their mission to give the public "the fairest, most accurate, and most comprehensive reportage possible on all events that count."

The recognition also exists among many Thai journalists who are mindful of their social responsibility. Many in the Thai press, Dr. Chirasapone says, are striving to establish a press council in a bid to introduce some form of self-regulation, prompted no doubt by concern that licentiousness invites greater controls on the media. As Dr. Fernandez says in the Philippine paper, "It is a matter of concern and hope that the government, committed as it is to democracy, continue to keep the press free; and that the press, forged by both repression and freedom, focus on truth and live up to the responsibility of being free."

Press and Society

It remains to Mr. Jakob Oetama, the sole media practioner represented in this

volume, to ask the press to recognize that it is a part of the social fabric. The press cannot stand outside of society, he says, but must exist within it and thereby be influenced by its main currents and fundamental structures. "[A]lthough the press plays an active role [in shaping society], it can never become an autonomous power; it is significant only in terms of other institutions and it is invariably influenced by the main currents and structure of society."

Dr. Mahathir makes the same point when he asks the press to recognise that it is but one actor within a human community, explaining that primitive man sought safety in numbers for security and for services and values that only a group could provide. "But the modern man has no experience of the dangers of individual isolation. He, therefore, tends to see the restraint on his individual freedom as irksome and rebels against it. He has forgotten that there is a price to pay in order to get all those things that society provides him."

The press has a role in surveying and interpreting the environment for individuals in society, Mr. Oetama says. (At the Consultation, the participants went further to assert that the press has a *responsibility* to make fair comments on all institutions that combine to make up society after taking account of the many interest groups they must serve.) To perform this role, according to Mr. Oetama, it must necessarily have a certain value system; this value system can only come from a critical and deep intellectual awareness of the social context and dynamics and from reflection.

As Indonesia is what Mr. Oetama calls a "democracy in making," the press has a responsibility in nation-building. The press must be both free and responsible. It must recognize the need to report the context and complexity of events to present a comprehensive and multi-dimensional picture of reality.

Mr. Oetama says that a press which takes a role in a system of "democracy in making," has a responsibility in "the development of political culture and

infrastructure, and the socialization of society's basic values which have been socially sanctioned to be the principles and frame of reference of national existence . . . in the establishment and development of a way of life."

Mr. Oetama thus outlines five roles of the press, to wit: strengthen and inject creativity into basic national consensus . . . for national integration; comprehend and report sensitive social issues with a view to find solutions; encourage and popularize public initiative; strengthen public confidence in their ability to change; report inadequacies and failure with the intent to stimulate and correct.

At the Consultation, the participants identified the primary functions of the Asean press as: supporting nation-building, political stability, national development and social justice; promoting regional cohesion; moulding national identity; promoting social harmony; explaining public issues; informing and educating; and exercising self-restraint in sensitive racial, ethnic and religious matters.

The positive function of the press is also stressed by Mrs. Aquino, who exhorts the media not to be cynical, because "for every corruption you will also find instances of generosity; for every inefficiency, you will also find dedication; for every foolishness, there will also be a flash of greatness." She therefore urges the Philippine media to use their power to build up rather than to tear down, to create rather than to destroy.

As Mr. Oetama writes:

> The will and instinct to survive means also the instinct to improve life based on all human aspirations. It covers the desire and attempt to put order into the social structure, to improve living conditions, and to enjoy life. Politics, the economy, cultural and social issues affect social life, and should, therefore, have appeal. Development is an attempt at prosperity. In the process of development we find elements of heroism, conflict, frustration, romance and human nature.

Organization of the Book

This volume is organized in two parts. Part I is a compilation of papers

presented at the AMIC-DEPPEN Consultation on Press Systems in Asean in Jakarta. Part II is a compendium of reflections on the role of the Asean press. It includes speeches by heads of states in the region, as well as the perspective of a media practioner and the Final Report of the Jakarta consultation.

There isn't, nor perhaps can or should there be, unanimity on the press system for any country. As Dr. Mahathir says, no system or tradition is "completely without virtue," nor any "without flaws of logic or relevance or legitimacy." Even in the West the debate continues between those who want greater controls on the press and those who aspire for even greater freedom. That debate in different forms persists in Asean countries as well. While this book does not claim to have captured that debate in its totality and individual nuances, it has sought to offer a broad sweep of the dominant thinking on the press systems in the region.

The search for appropriate press systems for Asean is an open-ended exercise; it is hoped that this volume provides grist for reflection in the region within the industry, government and academe.

Footnotes

1. Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Gordian Press, 1971), pp. 65-80.

2. Justice Brandeis concurring in *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357, 375 (1927).

3. Archibold Cox, *Freedom of Expression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 2.

4. John Milton, *Areopagatica and Other Tracts* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), p. 61.

5. *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357, 375-376 (1927).

6. Alexander Meiklejohn, *Political Freedom: The Constitutional Power of the People* (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 14.

7. *New York Times v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254, 269-270 (1964).

8. Potter Stewart, "'Or of the Press'," *Hastings Law Journal*, 26:3 (1974), p. 634.

9. All references hereafter are to people and text in this book.