Consultation on Press Systems in Asean :
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Report

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INTRODUCTION

The role and form of the press varies from region to region and country to country. A nation's press system reflects in part its material wealth, demographics, historical experience, social and political milieu, the nature of man and state and their inter-relationship, the nature of knowledge and truth, and indigenous philosophies and mores.

The Consultation on the Press Systems of Asean, organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), Singapore, and the Directorate General of Press Development and Graphics (DEPPEN), Indonesia, with support from The Asia Foundation, attempted to abstract the principal legal and philosophical tenets of the press systems of Asean states to generate a comprehensive doctrine of press systems in Asean societies. The meeting also provided a forum of exchange of views and perspectives among media professionals, academics and government officials in Asean countries in an effort to promote mutual understanding.

PARTICIPANTS

Three participants were drawn from each Asean state -- one representing the media, another representing the academic community, and the third representing the

government. Five of the six Asean states participated in the meeting. The sixth member, Brunei, was unable to participate at the last minute; however a paper outlining the press system of the country was made available to the participants. The complete list of participants is attached as Appendix 1. Several observers from the Department of Information, the media and media scholars also attended the consultation as observers.

PROGRAMME

The four day consultation was held at the Sahid Jaya Hotel from August 23-26, 1988. A pre-conference orientation meeting was held on the evening of August 22 to discuss and approve the conference agenda and programme (Appendex 2 and 3).

Inaugurating the conference, Mr. H. Harmoko, Minister of Information, Republic of Indonesia, said the sharing of experiences of the various press systems would be very useful because "as developing nations, we in Asean are continuously developing a more solid foundation for our respective press systems, as we improve daily through trial and error."

We should be able to benefit from the experiences, the successes as well as the failures of each other, as we individually and collectively move on towards further progress," he said.

Earlier, in his welcoming remarks, AMIC Secretary General Mr. Vijay Menon said that Western press theories cannot be automatically be applied to Asian societies. Indigenous philosophies and cultures and traditions play a strong role in

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defining the press systems of Asian countries, he said. The conference aimed to examine the historical background and the legal and philosophical tenets of the press systems of the region.

On the first day, the consultation heard country reports on the press systems of Asean countries, covering the historical events that had shaped the country's press system; the legal and philosophical tenets of the press system; the role of press in society; access to and ownership of the media; media regulatory mechanisms; restrictions on the media and their legal and philosophical foundations; and the distinctiveness of the press system compared to other press systems. Each presentation was followed by a lively exchange of views among the participants. The rappoteurs' reports of the discussion are attached as Appendix 4. The country reports are annexed in Volume II.

The Thai Press System. In his presentation, Dr. Pira Chirasopone, Deputy Dean, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, identified the crucial historical ages that have shaped the Thai media as the period of absolute monarchy regimes from 1844 to 1932, and the democratic, limited monarchy regimes since 1932. In the latter period, he said, "Thai press controls have fluctuated almost wildly between complete freedom and virtually complete repression, depending on the particular views of the individuals in power at any given time." Since the mid-1970s, however, the administration has been more tolerant and press freedom has strengthened.

The principal journalistic philosophy in Thailand, according to Dr. Chirasopone, is one of press freedom, along the lines of Western liberalism. Indeed,

the press code of Thai journalists states that "Promotion and maintenance of freedom of the press shall be the most important duty of every member." However, there is recognition of the need for social responsibility on the part of Thai journalists and there is acceptance of the concept of development journalism.

The Indonesian National Press System: Past, Present and Future. Dr. Edward Janner Sinaga, Director General for Press and Graphics, Department of Information, Republic of Indonesia began by describing the philosophical basis for Pancasila as the guiding state philosophy that has been embodied in the Indonesian constitution, then traced the historical background of the press during the Dutch colonial period (pre-1942); the Japanese occupation (1942-1945); the Western liberal democracy era (1945-1959); and the guided democracy era (1959-1965) in the nation's search for a suitable press system. Under the Pancasila press system, he said, the press is a "very important element in the process of nation building." He identified four key elements of the Pancasila press system: a free and responsible press; the important role of the press council; the licensing system; journalists and workers as shareholders.

He said that the Pancasila press system, which unlike the liberalistic and individualistic charcateristic of the Western press is philosophically consensus-oriented, "can be regarded as an original contributor to the international press systems in general and to the enrichment of the press systems in the region in particular."

The Malaysian Press System. Dr. Syed Arabi Idid, Chairman, Department of Communications, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, began his presentation by

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outlining the complex racial mix of Malaysia and the provincial character of the ethnic press. Several legal and extra-legal constraints exist on the Malaysian media, but the media have also voluntarily participated in campaigns for independence, promoting national unity and Bahasa, cleanliness drives, tourism and national culture. He said that although the technology and writing style have been imported from the West, reporters are trained to report in the context of Malaysian values.

"The press system within a bigger social system is active. It interacts with other systems as much as other systems consider it imperative to do likewise. The press is said to be the conscience of society. It must extol the virtues of its integrative functions, its functions of surveillance and cultural transmission for the betterment of society. It cannot remain subservient to the dictates of undue interference that would debase its purpose and function. The press system owes that to itself and to the society as a whole."

Freedom Lost, Freedom Won: A Study of the Philippine Press System. Professor Doreen Fernandez, Chairperson, School of Mass Communication, Ateneo de Manila University, said the Philippine press system had been shaped by the country's chequered history through the periods of Spanish colonization, revolution, American colonization, the Commonwealth, independence, post-war politics, martial law and the Marcos dictatorship and finally the Aquino government. The struggle for freedom has been an underlying characteristic of the 120 year existence of newspapers, she said. "When there was control, there was urgent and imaginative solutions such as the underground presses and "xerox" journalism; there were protests and struggles to be free. When there was freedom there was a free exchange of ideas and a venturous pursuit of the truth -- but also the abuses of irresponsible freedom."

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The Philippine press plays a critical role in the democratic process as a watchdog on government, she said, and "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 centuries of repression and interludes of freedom, focus on truth, and live up to the responsibilities of being free."

The Singapore Press System. In his presentation, Mr. Basskaran Nair, Senior Assistant Director (Planning), Ministry of Communications and Information, said the Singapore press system is premised on three social realities: Singapore wants social cohesion at any cost; Singapore experienced communalism and communism at its worst and has no intention of repetition; and- it inherited laws from the British colonial system, which it has modified to suit the local situation. At the same time, the press laws must not curb the flow of information as Singaporeans must keep abreast of developments to conduct business in the modern economy of a global city.

He outlined five factors that influence the role of the press in Singapore: the Singapore press has a great role in nation building; the press must cater not merely to the elite, but the masses; the press must never allow itself to be manipulated by foreigners; the government must be open; and the press must carry the public debate and dissent. He concluded by discussing the recent amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Act and their impact upon the foreign media.

On the second day, the participants debated the legal and philosophical tenets of the Asean press systems; the role and responsibility of the Asean press and the balance between freedom and responsibility.

Legal and Philosophical Tenets of Asean Press Systems. At this session, participants discussed the individual legal and philosophical tenets of each state. The reports of these discussions are attached as Appendix 5.

The Role and Responsibility of the Asean Press. Participants decided to focus this discussion on how the press in Asean countries could help and work with each other. Participants stressed the need for practical action in strengthening news exchanges among the Asean media. The report of their discussion is attached as Appendix 6.

The Balance Between Freedom and Responsibility. Participants discussed the conceptual premises of freedom and responsibility, and mechanisms and guidelines for actualizing the freedom and responsibility of the press. The report of their discussion is attached as Appendix 7.

At the end of the day, the participants split up into three groups (Appendix 8) to separately debate further each of the three areas discussed during the day and to prepare reports that attempted to bring together the primary legal and philosphical tenets of the Asean press.

The groups worked on their reports for most of the third day and their reports were debated collectively by the participants on the final day. The final report of the consultation was arrived at by consensus for dissemination to the media. The report is attached as Appendix 9. A press conference was held to discuss the outcome of the conference on the final day. The press reports on the conference, as well as other

reports on the meeting are attached as Appendix 10.

The Indonesian Publishers' Association and the Director General of Press and Graphics hosted separate dinners for the participants.

EVALUATION

The meeting was successful in its principal objective of initiating discussion on the Asean press systems. Several participants felt that the structure of the meeting, which brought together government officials, as well as media practioners and academics was unique and very useful. This was unquestionably the greatest strength of the meeting and it provided a rare opportunity for honing in on the central issues for each constituency. It was the feeling of some participants, however, that the presence of government officials sometimes impeded free and frank exchange of views, particularly in drawing up the final report. The presence of the media and observers also occasionally prompted some degree of posturing by individual countries.

Notwithstanding these glitches, the meeting provided major impetus to consideration of the social and political milieu, the nature of man and state and their interrelationship in the search for the legal and philosophical tenets of Asean states. No doubt, this is a very preliminary exercise and will require much discussion among the three societal components most affected by the system: the professionals, the government and the academe. In this very significant task, the Jakarta meeting was a very important tentative first step.