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Press Systems In Asean: The Singapore System

By

Basskaran Nair
PRESS SYSTEMS IN ASEAN
THE SINGAPORE SYSTEM

ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

Last month, we had Howard Simon, Curator, Nieman Foundation, Harvard University to speak to us at a function organised by AMIC. He had impressive credentials: an Intellectual Scholar in Japan, a Senior Fellow at the Asia Institute and member of the Council of Foreign Relations.

Howard Simon described himself as an absolutist. That means he does not believe in any laws for the press, not even libel laws if he had his way. Total freedom for the editors. Editors decide. And the press must play an adversarial role with the Government.

Governments should never interfere; certainly not to draw lines. Though Governments are elected to govern, they must be watched. And the press, unelected, is in the best position to be the watchdog on behalf of the electorate. In other words, the press must not just inquire and investigate, but must play the role of the inquisitor. Specifically, the press must dictate national agenda, denigrate the incompetent in public office, denounce big business and malpractices, and delight in helping the underdog.
Ask whether journalists should behave responsibly and he will cite the First Amendment. No responsibilities, only freedom. Generally, there is a believe that America is strong because of the First Amendment. And generally, Americans relish the often boisterous debate of an uninhabited political process, enjoy the sharp expression of conflicting points of view.

Yes, absolutism is fascinating as a concept. But as I told Simon: an absolutist is someone who wants to go to heaven; but does not want to die for it. We must face realities.

SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL REALITIES

The press system in Singapore is based, in my opinion, on three realities. The three realities are: Singapore wants social cohesion at any cost; Singapore experienced communalism and communism at its worse and has no intention of repetition; and Singapore inherited laws from the British Colonial system (which never subscribed to absolutism) which has been modified to suit local situations. Yet, just as quickly, it should be said that Singapore wants its people to keep abreast of developments and to conduct business in the modern economy of a global city. The press laws must not curb the flow of information as the national objective is also to have a well-informed society.
SOCIAL COHESION

The first and continued priority goal is creating one nation, one people out of the different religions and races. Even the Chinese are divided into several dialect groups; the Malays comprise people from Malaysia, Bataks, Sumatrans and Javanese; and the Indians include Tamils, Sikhs and Sri Lankans; all jostling within 622 sq km. The visceral, emotional pools are strong and the social cohesion can easily be unglued if the press are allowed to abet and polarise the racial and religious differences by playing on emotions. It is so easy to evoke them. Few knew that when Indira Gandhi was killed by her Sikh bodyguard, there was tension in Serangoon Road (popularly called Little India) between the Tamils and the Sikhs.

Richard D Lamm (former governor of Colorado and head of Center for Public Policy, University of Denver) echoes similar concerns for the USA and his insightful comment is worth quoting:

Unassimilated minorities, selfish special interests, and regional tensions have all contributed to a Balkanizing of America. The United States is a much less homogenous country than it was in the 1930s. Large numbers of immigrants remain outside the cultural,
linguistic, and economic mainstream. The social glue that will be needed to hold the society together in a time of turmoil will be much more difficult to find." (The Futurist, July-August 1988).

EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNALISM AND COMMUNISM

The 1950 Maria Hertogh riots, the 1964 Riots during Prophet Muhammed's birthday, the May 1969 Riots spillover from Malaysia are frequently, and often fervently, cited by the leadership to the point of ad nauseam. But they are constant reminders of the role of the press in inciting racial riots. For example, in the Maria Hertogh case, the Malay newspaper (called Dawn) played their stories (pictures and choice of words) to evoke strong emotions: that the Dutch girl given to a Malay family was now forced to worship another religion. The story fired the imagination of the Muslim population that there was religious injustice, and soon a racial riot broke out. Eighteen people were killed and one hundred and seventy three wounded. In the 1964 riots, thirty six people were killed.

The communists threats are also enlarged to include Black Operations where outsiders have interfered with domestic affairs using the media. What are the examples? One is a broadcasting station, Radio Peking. During
the Cultural Revolution in China, the Red Guards wielding Mao's Little Red Book went on a rampage and the local communist open front organisations followed suit. Though the Little Red Book was banned, members of the Communist front copied down Mao's quotation from Radio Peking, and that year they mounted 75 illegal demonstrations, miniature versions of the upheaval in China.

Another example involves the print media, the Eastern Sun and the Nanyang Siang Pau. The Eastern Sun, an English-language newspaper, was funded by a communist intelligence network through its front organisation in Hong Kong. In return for soft loans at the ludicrous interest rate of 0.1 per cent per annum, the newspaper agreed to toe the paymaster's line: on major issues, a neutral attitude, and no opposition to the donor country; on minor issues, a neutral attitude be adopted; and to be even handed on editorial comments and the treatment of news.

Similarly, the Chinese press, particularly the Nanyang Siang Pau, where four top executives were detained, glamourized the communist way of life by stirring Chinese racial emotions.

The bottom line is this: In media and other relations, the government will neutralise attempts by foreign power and the communists to make political gains by shaping opinions and attitudes of Singaporeans.
LAWS WE INHERITED

Singapore inherited most of its laws from India and the United Kingdom. The Penal Code and the Criminal procedures are almost 90 per cent from the Indian Legal system, though there have been modifications over the years. On the other hand, the other laws, those on Sedition, Libel, Defamation, Trade Marks and Patents are UK-modelled laws. So most of our laws were in place even before we became an independent nation.

However, there are some laws that were written because of our unique multi-religious situation and because of our historical experiences. For instance, Administration of Muslim Laws was written to incorporate Singapore’s racial mix; while the laws on the press were written to ensure social cohesion and that the freedom of the media are subordinate to the over-riding integrity of Singapore.

WELL-INFORMED CITIZENS

Singapore has an almost total exposure to foreign ideas and influences. The reason: The future belongs to societies that spread knowledge; that adapt, innovate and tap the unfettered talents of well-informed citizens. And well-informed people are best placed to fully exploit the new technologies.
One illustration shows how that openness has helped us. The Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) which I overlook from my room, has a staff strength of 7694 employees (1987) who are responsible for: General cargo tonnage of more than 51 million tonnes; containerized cargo of over 38 million tonnes; and total value added figure of more than 596 million. 10 years ago PSA needed 2,800 more employees producing substantial less output. And the value added was only 310 million dollars. What gives PSA the edge are: technical skills of the staff; access to the latest information technology; inventiveness and willingness to adapt to the tremendous global changes.

Internationalism in education is another factor. A large number of foreign professionals and businessmen is reflective of the policy of keeping Singapore open and directed towards the outside world. There are 23 schools for the expatriate community, including the United World College, the American School, the Japanese school and several European schools. It is not uncommon for Singapore's education ministry officials to check with their counterparts in the expatriate schools on what is practised in their schools when they are considering new policies. These inputs enrich our experience and improve the educational service in Singapore.
Singapore has the third largest community of foreign correspondents in Asia. There are more than ninety foreign correspondents representing the international and regional news agencies, foreign newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting corporations. In all, there are about 60 news organisations. All operate freely. Their ideological biases and political slants do not matter in this context; hence even TASS and Xinhua news agencies operate in Singapore as the news is either for their own domestic or for international consumption.

Singapore has about 3,700 foreign publications circulating in the country. Singapore plays host to the main BBC shortwave relay station for Asia and Oceania. And Singapore receives BBC World Service on FM round the clock. This information flow is at the specific request of the Singapore Government. No other country has this facility, not even Hong Kong.

ROLE OF THE PRESS

Several factors could be considered on the role of the press. One, the Singapore press has a great role in nation building; to educate Singaporeans - not just with facts, but also in terms of national education and values. One way or the other, the press moulds the perceptions of Singaporeans. Thus the press should avoid portrayal of...
situations as the norm which should not be accepted as the norm. For instance, homosexuality, living out of wedlock, acceptable norms in United States, should not be presented as acceptable social behaviour in the Singapore press.

Two, the Singapore press must not only cater to the elite, but also to the masses. Information must be packaged with human interest. Journalists must have the ability to put complex matters in readable and simple terms. Yet at another level, the press must avoid the bottom line syndrome that causes citizens to set their sights on short term profits at the expense of the nation's future.

Three, the Singapore press should never allow itself to be overawed or coerced into accepting the judgements of others. We must have enough self-confidence to decide for ourselves what we want. There are unique features of the Singapore society that perhaps could be highlighted here.

a. One of our tragedies is that we don't have a mainstream. In Japan, the mainstream is very clear -- one language, culture, history, a homogeneous people.

b. Our multi-racial society, plus the smallness of the country, makes reporting on sensitive subjects a delicate matter.
c. Relations with neighbouring countries also need sensitive handling. Whether or not government can disown responsibility, the views of the Singapore press can have repercussions on our foreign relations and even on domestic events in neighbouring countries.

d. Need to create a love for Singapore. A nation of concerned and committed citizens can claw its way out of difficulties; an apathetic one will be fertile ground for demagogues.

Four, the government must be open. It should tell no lies, and asks the press to tell none. It can explain all its actions, although some issues may be sensitive. It keeps key journalists briefed, for background, on its thinking. In this way, the journalists share broadly the values and perceptions of the government. There will of course be the difference of views on details.

Five, the press must carry the debates and dissent, often adequately covered in Parliament. In expressing their opinions the press should separate opinion from reporting news. If a journalist wishes to go beyond having a point of view, and wants to campaign for an issue, the right place is not in his newspapers but in the political arena.
NEED TO REVIEW LAWS

Singapore reviews press laws regularly. Publications relating to communism, obscenity, pornography are still banned. Izvestia and Renmin Ribao (communist papers) are not allowed. Playboy and Penthouse (classified as morally undesirable) are banned. But lately, regional publications that carry useful information but at the same time are heavily partisan have made the government sit up and re-think how to deal with them. In the past, the foreign press were funded by Governments to undermine the society; but now foreign press are fired by idealism that Singapore is not democratic enough. Same result: domestic interference. But the Singapore government's response has been different. These publications depend on profit motives. Also Singaporeans must be exposed to all shades and shapes of opinion.

The result was two amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Press Act. The Newspaper and Printing Presses (Amendment) Act on 1 September 1986, empowers the Minister for Communications and Information to restrict the sales or distribution of foreign publications which have been declared as having engaged in the domestic politics of Singapore.
The Government gave the following as examples of engaging in domestic politics: publishing material intended for Singapore readers, to generate political, ethnic and religious conflict and unrest; indulging in slanted, distorted or partisan reporting; or persistently refusing to publish the Government's replies to refute misreporting and baseless allegations.

Any foreign publication guilty of engaging in domestic politics will be declared a gazetted publication under the NPPA. Its circulation will be restricted to a limited number of copies as decided by the Minister.

In order that the public will continue to have access to the restricted publications, copies will be made available in libraries and sold by authorised dealers. The public can also photocopy articles in these publications for their private use. Thus restricting the circulation of magazines will not stop the free flow of ideas and information contained in the publication, but will reduce the sales and advertising revenues of the publication.

The Act allows reproduction and sales of restricted publications to ensure the free flow of information in Singapore, provided no profits are made and other standard conditions are met, including the removal of all advertisements. Such reproductions may be made, circulated or sold in Singapore only.

When the amendment took effect in February 1988, several organisations applied to reproduce and sell the FEER. The reproduced copies are now freely available in Singapore. This underscores the Government's efforts to ensure the free flow of information in Singapore.

CONCLUSION

Absolutism is absolutely out. Nice as an ideal, nasty when imposed on a multi-religious and multi-racial society. There should be a broad sharing of ideas, ideals, values and purposes between editors and the government. The laws do not control editors but they do constrict communalists and communists. Laws are not meant to prevent the free flow of information, of differing views and expressions. Singapore progressed because the leaders believed that minds are like parachutes— they work only when they are opened.