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The Balance Between Freedom And Responsibility
CONSULTATION ON PRESS SYSTEMS IN ASEAN
JAKARTA

Topic : The Balance between Freedom and Responsibility of the Press
Session : 16.15 - 17.30 hours, August 24, 1988
Chairman : Dr Mohd Nor Abdul Ghani

Discussion

The chairman began by asking the floor to agree first on the definition of responsibility. To whom should the press be responsible? What mechanism should there be to make the press responsible?

A Philippine delegate argued that a newspaper is responsible to its buyers/readers because by buying a newspaper the readers elect the particular paper to tell them the truth.

But the chairman argued that the definition is too broad. It should be defined to which group of people the press should be responsible.

Another delegate said that the press should also be responsible to all people having contacts with it and the sources of its information, to the institutions that support it and to the local environment.

Another delegate said that freedom is indeed related to the environment. There is no universal definition of freedom because it should be related to the prevailing condition which means the cultural, social backgrounds, the economic and political conditions and other aspects, such as the legal and philosophical aspects.

In the case of Indonesia, for example, it was Pancasila to
which all the people and organizations have committed themselves.

The Indonesian Press Law stipulates, among other things, that the press shall:

1. defend, protect, support and carry out Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution;
2. struggle for the aspirations of the people;
3. fight for truth and justice based on the freedom of the press;
4. nurture and develop unity;
5. channel the public opinion which is constructive.

Article 3 of the law stipulates that the press has the rights of control, criticism and correction which is constructive in nature.

Freedom of the press, according to the fundamental rights of the people, is guaranteed by law. Freedom of the press is based on the national responsibility of the press. The freedom is thus qualified and not absolute.

But the balance between the freedom and responsibility in the implementation is different from one society to another.

Another delegate argued that freedom and responsibility of the press is a loaded concept. One also should look at the relationships between the press and the government/state. On one side, the state asks and prods the press to play a proper role, setting the responsibility and freedom of the press.

On the other hand, the press is prodding the state to be honest and to be responsible. Thus, there are two institutions interacting. But it should also be noted that the strength of
the press and the profession lies in the strength of individual journalists. Often, politicians advise the journalists on their role in society, but they never advise other professionals such as medical doctors, architects and lawyers. Thus journalism as a profession is very weak. Training and code of ethics should be emphasized.

Another delegate said that government officials, in looking at freedom and responsibility of the press, tend to put each idea in one extreme point or another. And then there are also conflicts of responsibility because the press is responsible to the readers, shareholders (owners), bankers and the government.

In Thailand, the press should function simultaneously as the watchdog and inspector general and motivator of the people to participate in development. It is thus a matter of reconciliation. How far can we go?

Another delegate said that the integralistic approach (as pursued in Indonesia) is valid in the sense that you cannot simply make a sharp division between freedom and responsibility. One time you have the freedom to criticize, another time you have the responsibility to strengthen the unity of the people.

Another delegate said freedom should be thought within a confined set of responsibility and within that responsibility also include consequences. You have to consider the consequences of what you have done.

A delegate explained that the Indonesian Journalists Association has established a code of ethics of its own.

The journalists, not the government, decided their code of ethics:
An Indonesian journalist should be an Indonesian citizen having responsibility reflecting the following characteristics:

a. Devoted to the Almighty God;
b. Faithful to Pancasila;
c. Loyal to the 1945 Constitution;
d. Patriotic;
e. Highly respectful of the fundamental human rights;
f. Dedicated to the emancipation of the nation in all fields.

An Indonesian journalist shall discharge his/her duties under a responsible liberty for the public safety. He/she shall not abuse his/her authority and skills for seeking personal advantage and/or group interests.

An Indonesian journalists, in carrying out his/her journalistic duties bearing on other nations, shall give precedence to Indonesia's national interests.

A delegate said that the press has got to be responsible to a number of different people as well as the whole society and the elected government. And freedom has to operate between these constraints. Thus freedom is not an absolute term.

In Singapore, the press clearly understands what is its responsibility. At the same time, we want the journalists better trained, and for the press to be of higher quality.

The press should not only inform the people of what is going on, but also to raise the level of their understanding. The problem is that there are not enough qualified journalists so we discourage the mushrooming of too many newspapers in Singapore.
A delegate said that the press should get freedom from the government and at the same time the press should practice that freedom for a certain purpose. Even though the condition in the ASEAN nations is different, all of them are developing countries. So why don't we look at the freedom for the common purpose that every nation shares the same purpose? Freedom should have some directions and cannot go anywhere.

The chairman commented: Now we have three things in common:
- conceptual premise;
- mechanism for freedom;
- guidelines for the actualization of this freedom.

A delegate said there is enough commonality to be able to frame that which will suit our general directions. One of the general directions is a statement on the commitment to the nation.

In Indonesia it has been very well institutionalized. But maybe one of us has to work out a formulation of this. It is implied in most of the journalistic codes of ethics.

We should look at all these codes of ethics and consider ways to formulate a common one for ASEAN.

A delegate commented that the press has the right to information and freedom. The press has to get access to the information, but it should also have accountability/responsibility.

Another delegate said that ASEAN editors, in choosing news items from neighbouring countries, should have the attitude of not only a good national citizen, but also an attitude as an
ASEAN journalist.

A delegate commented that ASEAN countries still use the Western values as the basis for their news values.

In the interpretation of the indigenous philosophy there is demand for responsibility by the press. But there needs to be a concomitant recognition of the role of the press. Have these governments considered facilitating the media in that role and it seems in Indonesian that the facilitation has been at the generosity of the director general. The structures to facilitate the role of the press in the indigenous system should be instituted.

Another delegate (from Indonesia) commented that Indonesia has a philosophical foundation. In the case of Indonesia this concept is very fundamental and very important because of our experiences. We had challenges from the left and right.

And in order to answer challenges we should have a philosophical concept, guidelines to go into. So we have Pancasila and the Constitution. Article 28 of the Constitution stipulates that freedom of every citizen to express himself is guaranteed.

Then there is the Press Act which is the elaboration of that Constitution. Then we have the main outlines of national policy decided by the highest body of the nation and the press itself participates and is represented in that body. Several journalists are also members of Parliament. They participate in the formulation of the law.

Besides that, there is the Press Council which is a micro reflection of the positive interaction between the government,
the press and the society. The representatives of journalists in
the council are appointed by the press itself and not by the
government.

Then there are the representatives of publishers,
advertising companies, printers, and the society. And the
government representatives are also there. Every six months we
meet for strategic matters, policy matters.