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<th>Press freedom: has the press gone over the top?</th>
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PRESS FREEDOM: HAS THE PRESS GONE OVER THE TOP?
JAKOB OETAMA

I don't recall having received or read the terms of reference from the organizers of the 25th AMIC conference. So what I am presenting here are my own thoughts on the topic chosen for discussion: "Press Freedom: Has The Press Gone Over The Top?".

In the 1970s, when countries in the Third World began to develop economically, the Press Foundation of Asia, based in Manila, held several seminars on the "development press." They addressed the questions: What was the role of the press in economic development? What was the role of press in countries entering the national development phase of their histories?

The initiators and founders of the Press Foundation of Asia were senior Asian journalists who believed in the freedom of the press. The international journalists' organization, the International Press Institute or IPI, which serves as a watchdog for freedom of the press worldwide, was also involved as an initiator and source of funding for the foundation.

What is interesting about these seminars and the concept of a "development press" is that the supporters of a free press also recognized and understood the need for the press in developing countries to have a special approach in this era where countries who had fought for their independence began to try and fulfill the demands brought by this independence.

So different points of view have developed about the concept of the "development press." It could even be stated more bluntly as two diverging points of view.

The first school of thought tends to stress a particular priority in the selection of news and commentary, as well as the objectives and methods of presentation. The priority here will be economic news, with such news even further focused towards certain aspects, such as agriculture.

What is stressed even further is how the press in developing countries have a point of view and certain skills, so that they can provide information to their readers about how to work the soil, how to select good seeds, how to use fertilizer and pesticides. It is a technical and pragmatic approach.

Although pragmatic and technical in nature, and prioritized towards agricultural development, the frame of reference of this point of view are liberal press freedoms. The economic
news uses a sectoral, practical and pragmatic approach. But political news includes an understanding of liberal democracy as its frame of reference. Therefore, there is an inconsistency, even a contradiction in their reporting. In my opinion, this is the reason why this first stream has not fully developed.

What about the second type or school of thought? It is more comprehensive. It also questions the ordering of priorities in press coverage, but is not solely limited to providing technical, practical and pragmatic information. The idea of the "development press" here is interpreted as more comprehensively.

Development probably does maintain the economy as its main priority and primary agenda. However, this is directed toward national development, or development as it relates to every aspect of national life. To this way of thinking, development is understood as involving every viewpoint and field, including social, national and state affairs.

The role of culture, for example, as the social capital of these nations, then grows from this concept. And when this understanding is supported by successful economic development in the countries of East and Southeast Asia, the pattern and framework of cultural reference for national development becomes ever clearer and more expressive.

The idea of national development in this instance includes a political viewpoint and concept, a political system and political culture and an understanding about national leadership. By itself, this concept influences the position of the press and its role, and has an impact on what is meant by freedom of the press.

Several categories are used to organize and at the same time judge this idea. Some may call a government paternalistic, in a form of enlightened paternalism, because progress and prosperity have been brought to the people. Some may call a government authoritarian. But is it enlightened or repressive? The qualification of being a strong and effective government is used here, since the creation of stability has allowed economic development to take place.

So what is the position and the role of the press, and what sort of understanding of freedom is being sought? After being involved in newspaper publishing for a long time and with much opportunity for critical reflection, I believe ever more strongly that the press as a profession follows
both universal tendencies and attitudes as well as a localized point of view and frame of reference.

One tendency, for example, is the inclination to side with the underdog. There is a strong instinct to uphold fairness, justice and the truth. There is a strong instinct to respect and defend democracy and human rights. There is also the tendency to poke holes in and overcome the interests of certain groups and individuals with the inclination to support the public good.

The problem faced by press is not that it is not sensitive of its professional image. The problem is how to place itself and carry out and develop its role from within the system and realities of where it works. The press gives to society and plays an active role. The press also accepts that what happens within the nation and in society more or less reflects on it.

The concept of the "development press" is construed as being a press which participates not only as an instrument to improve economic behavior by providing useful information, but also by being involved in the process of national development, including development in society and politics, the economy and culture, and the development of the nation and state itself.

It is not simply a means of introducing and acting upon new and foreign ideas to talk about the development of the nation and the state, nor is this concept something plucked out of thin air. This process is inseparably tied to history and its struggle. There is no such thing as a transplanted nation and, even if there were, it is hard to imagine such a nation firmly establishing itself. It must also be recognized that each nation is supported by a diverse society.

From the nationalist era through its fight for independence, Indonesia is one country that has recognized the need to build and develop its own concept of the nation, the state and its goals. This effort has taken the form of an internal dialogue and struggle and has been influenced by the views and experiences of other nations.

The Indonesian press is actively involved in the search for and development of its true identity. Its views on press freedom and on the broader guiding framework of human rights and democracy are undeniably influenced and colored by this struggle, which means also a struggle within the realities of the state and society.

These realities point to an empirically valid experience: that there is a give-and-take in the understanding of democracy and of economic development. The cause for this relationship is not a simple matter of diverging points of view but rather the consequence of different social realities.
Development must also be carried out with a simultaneity of multiple functions, such as the enlightenment and education of the people, social integration, and the encouragement of the opinions, knowledge and skills needed to improve the manner of living in the socio-economic sphere.

Nevertheless, although the press wants to head towards those universally-valid values relating to the understanding of democracy, human rights and freedom, they must also acknowledge the realities they face in the here and now. I.e., how does the philosophy, and quality, of the relationship between the government and the people show the degree of democracy, human rights and press freedom?

It would not be enough however if democracy was only seen from this angle, of the relationship between the people and the government. It is increasingly recognized, whenever the economic development in East Asian countries shows bright promise, that the democracy which must be achieved through a process of democratization is multi-dimensional.

Democracy requires more than a philosophy and political will. It must also be supported by values, culture and infrastructure. We live in an era of networking, meaning the network of the market, and it is not just the market economy which needs to have a network, but democracy as well.

Why has it happened that the democratic ideals held by many countries during their respective struggles for independence have now ebbed away to be replaced by so many different systems of government? Apparently, when it came time to apply these ideals, the means to do so were not yet sufficient. Political organizations were able to articulate their interests and aspirations but failed when they had to work together and overcome their own particular agendas to bring about the common good.

At this same time, in this paradoxical state, the press had to position itself and carry out its role. On the one hand, it oriented itself to the principle of freedom, but on the other hand also to the mandate to choose or follow the priorities of the national agenda, either objectively or subjectively.

The role of the press in assisting with the development of the perspective, values, culture, and methods of democracy both established and determined its relationship with the government. The role of the government can be quite large here, and is even further cemented with the emergence of strong national leadership. It cannot be overlooked however that the effort to germinate democratic
values and culture within people, organizations and institutions requires a process of education and enlightenment. Discussions over economic and political progress in South Korea are still tinged with the debate over whether this development was brought about through education or the economy.

Now, with the emergence of newly industrialized nations in East and Southeast Asia, it can no longer be doubted that economic progress is the strategic trigger for the emancipation of a society and a nation, particularly if this economic progress means the progress of the market economy. Some additional notes deserve discussion here.

Economic progress as achieved through the means of a market economy in East and Southeast Asia has come about through an effective partnership between the government and the private sector. This partnership, as has been revealed through the recent dramatic events in South Korea, is not always a clean one, and can be influenced or corrupted by the impact of collusion of interests between political power and the business world.

This economic progress can also prompt the emergence of other institutions in society, for education, industry, trade, science and also community political organizations.

What about the existence and progress of the press as an institution? This important question is frequently overlooked. The press can only grow as an institution if it is not always in the process of rebuilding. If the economy demonstrates the idea of economics of scale, outside of choice and demand, the press must also consider this truth if it wants to continue to play a role.

Once freed from the question of how to assess this situation either positively or negatively, the conditions created by economic progress, which include the creation of a number of institutions in society, can influence the press in understanding the meaning as well as the function of freedom. Freedom here is understood broadly, with a continuity across the spectrum, and as multidimensional with many nuances.

From an intensive politically-based understanding, the concept of freedom then grows to become an intellectual and cultural understanding demanding a wider and deeper understanding and point of view from the press. The conscience must continue to motivate and inspire, but honesty and perseverance is ever more necessary in the implementation, accompanied by this knowledge and point of view. Freedom of the press then not only makes demands but also seeks and finds.

So what is sought or found within the phenomenon of the economic progress defended by
the market economy? Particularly within the market economies at work in developing countries after the successes of East Asia? Apparently there are several new influences at work, not yet felt at the time when South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong began to become newly industrialized.

The rate of globalization was not as extensive or far-reaching as it is now. Globalization has continued in the economy. It has also taken hold in the instantaneous exchange of information. It is strong also as an effective influence through global entertainment and global consumerism.

These two factors have changed the dynamics of the market economy. Once upon a time, for example, the meaning of economic development was to fulfill basic needs as well as those needs rationally determined, in short to satisfy the needs of the people.

The situation has now changed. The goal of the economy is no longer to meet basic needs but rather to create endlessly new needs as reflective of the viewpoint and lifestyle of consumerism.

It is not just social and political aspirations which have become the problem but also social and economic aspirations related to the pattern and style of consumerism. Consumers, or citizens, are not only in the position of carrying out their relationship with the government but at the same time are negotiating their connection to the endless demands and pressures of consumerism. It is an oppressive feeling of powerlessness with two aspects: politics on one side and the economy on the other.

The model of global entertainment also affects this feeling by affecting views and values through violence, sex and money. Globalization now touches all aspects of life and no longer recognizes the boundaries of nation and state.

Endless ethnic and religious wars carried out in other countries can now be followed and witnessed every day all over the world. How will this influence be felt in the conditions of conflict among the people of these nations themselves?

When seen from the point of view of democracy, human rights and freedom, the agenda remains the same: how to empower the people. Or how to develop the people to form a strong civil society which is able to nurture and support a life system in the midst of these great changes.

As for its connection with the main topic of my talk, I must also mention the results brought both internally and externally with the growth of an open society - which is a very interesting phenomenon.
Globalization in all aspects of life relating to the economy and information has opened up the nation and the state, as has people's growing ability to move about and brush against citizens of other nations. The level of global openness has become quite high, even to the point of being called "the borderless world."

Will the flow of ideas and information as well as social power be enough on their own to stimulate the growth of open societies everywhere? Does opening up the nation and state in a physical sense also mean the opening up of people's hearts and minds, and their outlook on life?

In the developments until now, a countervailing phenomenon has also been noticed. Global openness has actually prompted a greater degree of narrowness and deeply-rooted introversion. This tendency has been made even more serious by the conflict created by internal change, particularly change resulting from economic progress, both planned and unplanned.

The results of this condition appear as symptoms in the form of sensitivity and social violence, with the government feeling that nothing is right. Should it provide more space or should it worry about a loss of control?

These symptoms are not just limited to the government, but turn up in society as well, with people inclined to become more closed even as they meet up with openness.

The process of developing an open society as the basis for the growth of a civil society and a democratic populace is not an easy one. In this complex job, it is the duty of the press to understand and bring about freedom. The press are to travel which road? To join in the development of an open society or to be swept along in the current to forestall it?

How is it possible to build an open society through the mechanism of the market economy? And where does the culture and infrastructure of democracy fit here? What if we borrow an idea of Francis Fukuyama's and talk about how the market economy helps build social capital?

Speed is a symptom and also a strategy of today. Time very much affects the point of view, attitudes and strategy for development in developing countries. This speed multiplies then and becomes almost simultaneous as the whole world is brought into the midst of globalization.

The pace of economic development influences the rate at which a business sector grows and expands. Differing local conditions as well as the necessity for speed can prompt a business sector
to emerge more quickly than a sense of vision or social responsibility. Social problems are still unresolved in many countries.

This condition is what brings forward the criticism that the emergence of a middle class in economic terms does not in itself bring about or establish the emergence of a middle class in a cultural or political sense.

So this is the homework which becomes an ever more pressing agenda. The emergence of a business sector in society should not just be a locomotive for economic progress but should also prompt social, political and cultural progress. It is through institutions in the private sector that a social capital will be created. This social capital in turn will become a culture and infrastructure for the growth of an open society and a means to further empower the people.

Without ignoring or underestimating the role of educational, community development, socio-political and socio-cultural institutions, it would seem wisest if the press were to follow this path. The agenda then would be to provide meaning in the struggle for freedom while also building social and cultural capital. This would allow for economic progress and at the same time prompt the emergence of the ideas, values, culture and infrastructure that strengthen the development of an open society. A true open society would be part of the emerging global phenomenon.