



The South-East Asian Press: its challenges, shortcomings and prospects

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Thai editor speaks on press freedom and control in Asia

Despite interference, pressure and controls imposed on the press in Indonesia it has a tradition of being a campaigning press which debated issues of substance, even during the height of President Suharto's power, Editor of the Bangkok Post, Khun Pichai Chuensuksawadi, told a packed lecture theatre at the University this week.

"The situation in Singapore and Malaysia provides stark contrast where governments exert firm, if not iron-clad control," he said in the annual A.N. Smith Memorial Lecture in Journalism on 'The Southeast Asian Press: its challenges, shortcomings and prospects'.

He said that in Singapore every effort is made to ensure that the press understands Government thinking and is therefore responsible for ensuring the main message gets across to the people. Singaporeans accept this, he said, because "the government delivered the goods". However, things are changing. "There are elements in government that recognise the need for change, the need to widen the political fairway, but they are still grappling with how to change and how it can be controlled."

In Malaysia there is no indication that the Malaysian press or the government are trying to come to terms with a rapidly changing environment, he said. "It appears unlikely that the Malaysian press will change to serve the needs of its readers in the foreseeable future. It can only change if the nature of Malay politics changes and the current controversy we are witnessing clearly shows that Malaysia has entered uncharted waters."

On the Thai press he said, that while compared to its neighbours it now enjoys a lot of freedom, the most crucial criticism is that it is guilty of not performing its duty to the people and society in a more responsible manner, that "it leans towards sensationalism catering to the mass market and that it often fails to follow up on stories or focus on more substantive issues affecting the country."

The key challenge now facing Thailand's press is to respond to the rising expectations of the public for a more responsible press, he concluded.

Edited transcript of speech, as published in UniNews

The role and objective of my chosen profession is to make a difference for the people and society in which we serve. Achieving that objective is the challenge.

This is a personal ideal. It is what I believe should be the goal and objective of the press in Southeast Asia whenever we report, explain and analyse or even comment on political, economic and social issues.

The reality is that the roles played by the press in other countries of Southeast Asia differ considerably. And these differences are frequently measured in terms of press freedom. But once you start making these comparisons, you start passing judgment and forget that the press in each country is different because their development is shaped by their cultural, social, political history and economic development.

Indonesia

Until only recently, Indonesian journalists operated under extremely trying conditions resulting from the long shadow cast by the 30-year rule of former President Suharto and his government.

While the government did not exercise direct control, the press was subject to considerable interference and pressure. They had to contend with the influence exerted by members of the first family, business and the military, not to mention the use of intimidation, threats and violence which comes with oppressive regimes.

Hanging over their heads were decrees which allowed the government to close newspapers at any time for vague reasons. Licensing was another layer of control. During the Suharto era about 30 news organisations were closed because they were deemed to have crossed the line.

Consequently, many newspapers had to be tactful and circumspect in their reporting, prompting criticism that they were subservient and timid. This perception, however, is unfair and fails to appreciate the vibrancy, strength and resilience of the Indonesian press.

The Indonesian press has long enjoyed a tradition of being a campaigning press which discussed and debated issues of substance, and this persisted even during the height of President Suharto's power. Academics were given considerable space to air their views in lengthy articles which, I must admit, tended to be long-winded and tedious, often sprinkled with philosophical passages.

And even though newspapers could not state their views outright, they did not wholeheartedly praise or parrot government policies. When they disagreed, they would find ways of depicting policies in a bad light or develop refined writing styles to get their message across. This was especially the case for dailies such as *Kompas* and the *Jakarta Post*.

Despite the interference, pressure and controls, Indonesian journalists and editors never forgot their role and obligation to society and were constantly trying to push the limits, to test how far they could go. Every now and then they would take the gloves off when the pressure eased and duck sideways when the heat was put back on.

With the departure of President Suharto and the rise of President Habibie, the Indonesian press is experiencing an unprecedented resurgence. Indonesia's Information Minister Muhammad Yunus has already approved the licences of more than 120 news magazines, tabloids and dailies. He has also promised to pass a new media law to free publishers from having to obtain a publishing licence.

Should this period of freedom persist for a considerable time, they will need to come to grips with the responsibilities of greater freedom. But there's no doubt that the future of the press in Indonesia is brighter than it has ever been.

Singapore

By comparison, the situation in Singapore and Malaysia provides a stark contrast where governments exert firm, if not iron-clad control.

Every effort is made to ensure that the press understands [the Singapore] Government thinking and therefore the major objective of the press is to be responsible and ensure that the main message gets across to the people. Because of the country's racial mix and especially because it experienced communal race riots in 1964, the Singapore press is very wary of entering debates on race and religion because it could destabilise political and social order. The thinking is that if a no holds barred approach is allowed, there would be instability and this would affect economic growth.

The *Straits Times*, which sees itself as catering to the majority of Singaporeans, is constantly sensitive of the comments it makes or even the way it reports developments in neighbouring countries, as this too could effect regional ties.

Straits Times editors say that despite these guidelines and understanding of the responsible role of the press, they often have serious arguments with the authorities over which angle needs to be presented. Disagreements over Government policy is allowed, they say, although such disagreements should not be allowed to muddle the message.

Former *Straits Times* staff further explained that not only was debate focused on which was the best angle to present, but how the right values and attitudes should be presented to the public. The Government's direct involvement in the role of the press is more prevailing because of the structure of press ownership. Temasek Holdings, a Government-listed company owns the Singapore International Media group of companies. In turn this company has equity holdings in Singapore Press Holdings, also a publicly listed company. There are two types of shares one could own in Singapore Press Holdings - ordinary and management. And through the *Newspaper and Printing and Presses Act*, the Minister of Information and the Arts effectively has the say as to who should hold management shares. The Minister also signs off on printing and publishing licences which have to be renewed each year.

Critics of the press in Singapore say that since the government is able to appoint gatekeepers in the organisation, this ensures that direct interference is not required. People inside the organisation know that if they go out of bounds, they will get their knuckles wrapped or lose their jobs.

Despite this situation, ordinary Singaporeans continue to support the Government. Why? For the very simple reason that the government has delivered the goods. The Singapore Government is efficient and its people enjoy the highest standard of living in the region.

While Singaporeans realise and appreciate what their founding fathers have done through extremely difficult circumstances; while they continue to adhere to the traditional Asian values and ethics of family and hard work; they now have new aspirations and needs.

The Singapore Government realises this, and so do members of the Singapore press who say that they have tried to respond to these changes by recruiting university graduates into their ranks. They have expanded the Forum Page (Letters to the Editor) to allow for a greater variety of views. They are also planning to run periodically, comments and think pieces from outsiders.

Critics say, however, that the government was forced to change and that expansion of the letters pages is only window dressing. These critics believe that if there is to be any

significant change then the structure of ownership must change and this, in their view, could take at least another 10 years.

What appears certain is that there are elements in Government that recognise the need for change; the need to widen the political fairway. But they are still grappling with how to change and how it can be controlled. But in my opinion, once the calls for change start, it is difficult to stop and perhaps even control.

Malaysia

I will be brief with Malaysia where political parties have control through ownership. The English-language daily, the *New Straits Times* and other Malay-language dailies are controlled by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). The Chinese political parties, through their nominees, control *The Star*, another English-language daily, and other Chinese-language dailies.

Through nominees, the political parties have a direct influence over the appointments of editors and senior staff where control is exercised through private briefings of the editors directed from the Home Ministry, Information Ministry or Prime Minister's Office. The agenda is propagated through ownership and personalities. One Malaysian journalist described the press in his country as "journalism of patronage".

Like Singapore, and the rest of the region for that matter, the economic boom fuelled the growth and free flow of information providing Malaysians with easier access to alternative sources of news, especially among the educated and middle class who were already thirsting for information. The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister; his arrest under the *Internal Security Act* and allegations filed against him, has made this group of people more aware of the shortcomings of their media. Not only are they seeking more information, they are exchanging information through faxes and the Internet.

The difference between the press in Singapore and Malaysia is obvious. While the Singapore press, and the Government, are trying to come to terms with a rapidly changing environment, the mainstream Malaysian press and UMNO are not. I must say that it appears unlikely that the Malaysian press will change to serve the needs of its readers in the foreseeable future. It can only change if the nature of Malay politics changes. And the current controversy we are now witnessing clearly shows that Malaysia has entered uncharted waters.

Thailand

Like a number of our neighbours we [the Thai press] had to operate under military rule. Indirect government-military intervention and influence was exercised frequently especially during the 1960s and into the late 1980s. Newspapers could be closed indiscriminately for so-called national security reasons. Newspaper editors were required to have their backgrounds cleared before licences were issued.

In the 1980s the *Bangkok Post* published a story of a successful army raid of a communist stronghold with an accompanying photograph of a huge cache of arms and ammunition which was seized during the assault. The catch was that the communists were in possession of army-issued weapons. We reported the anger of the troops who suspected that the weapons were sold to the communists by elements in the military. We never did get to follow up because our editors simply told us not to track the story any further.

Like Indonesia, we became adept at pushing the limits, of being circumspect although the vernacular press was more aggressive. It was a situation of pushing the limits forward and then taking some steps back.

During the Black May crisis of 1992, the government misled the public by twisting events on radio and television which it controlled. The press, however, was the only medium which continued to report the facts. From then until 1996 the press and the electronic media experienced a boom like never before.

The press and media also became more ardent in their criticism of the country's political leadership which was, I firmly believe, in tune with the aspirations of the public who were sick and tired of the serious short-comings of our corrupt political and economic system and its deep-rooted practices of patronage and cronyism.

The reality is that Thai politicians - along with members of the bureaucracy - abused the system and made it corrupt. And once in power they justified their actions because they were "democratically elected". That's why the press has not been hesitant in telling our leaders in no uncertain terms when we feel that it is time for them to go. And we don't apologise for this.

That's why we joined and supported the public campaign for political reform which started in 1994 that has resulted in Thailand now having a new Constitution which puts in place mechanisms to monitor the performance and behaviour of government, its ministers and representatives.

Clearly the objective of this new charter, characterised by a long process of public hearings, was to promote greater accountability, transparency and good governance. The charter also enhances individual rights and freedoms. And here the press benefits as well.

Despite this rather positive overview, we do have serious shortcomings. Even as we grew stronger and gained greater influence, politicians continued to enjoy and use their personal links and ties with elements of the Thai press to promote their political agendas. Political patronage and their long-standing symbiotic relations with certain newspaper columnists exists even today.

Perhaps the most crucial criticism of the Thai press is, that while it enjoys so much freedom when compared to its neighbours, it is guilty of not performing its duty to the people and society in a more responsible manner; that it leans towards sensationalism, catering to the mass market, and that it often fails to follow up on stories or focus on more substantive issues affecting the country.

Certainly the issue of responsibility and ethics emerged during the debate over the political reform. While the debate focused on how the system should be revamped with mechanisms put in place to monitor the performance and behaviour of public officials, the question was posed: who would monitor the press?

Rather than face outside control, the Thai press formed the Press Council of Thailand composed of representatives from owners, publishers, editors, reporters and also outsiders. The Council's charter has been completed as well as a code of ethics.

Certainly the key challenge we face in Thailand now is to respond, in a credible manner, to the rising expectations of the public for a more responsible press.