MEDIA FORTUNES

ASEAN States in Transition

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Edited by
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ISEAS

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Foreword

ASEAN has been undergoing a tremendous change in the last decade. Just as the region has diverse cultural and political systems, the Southeast Asian media scene is no different. It ranges from the very free in the Philippines to those strictly following party lines as in Vietnam, Laos and military-ruled Myanmar. Is the nature of the media industry highly dependent on the power of media practitioners or does the state have greater control over it instead? Although it is ideal to believe that the pen is mightier than the sword, in reality the governments in most of the ASEAN countries have greater control. However, media ownership and market dynamics also play a role in defining the position of media in the region.

In some ASEAN countries, governments view media as a tool of national development. Yet in others, media practitioners are not protected and are constantly putting their lives in danger when they report what they believe to be true. In more press-liberal countries like the Philippines and Thailand, media has become a toy of the owners, usually big business groups or politicians who serve their private agendas. Sometimes the media itself lacks a clear concept and direction, making it unreliable, irresponsible and corrupt.

The original ASEAN members who have experienced a higher level of economic development have better media technology, both print and satellite, and are now embracing multimedia. The newer members are still struggling with limited television and radio coverage in rural areas. New technologies pose new challenges for ASEAN governments. Direct satellite broadcasting has increased significantly and foreign-owned media broadcasts are easily accessible today. Technological breakthroughs together with public demand are making it difficult for the governments to restrict access to international information.

The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, initiated the workshop on "Media and Transition in ASEAN". This book, which analyses the position of media in a changing region, is a result of the contributions of eleven researchers covering eight countries. The position of the media in each country is unique and thus the results should be analysed bearing in mind the developments influencing the economic, social and political environment in the respective countries.

Wolfgang Möllers
Regional Representative
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Acknowledgements

The chapters in this volume began as papers presented at a workshop on "Media and Transition in ASEAN" organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, in November 2000 and funded by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

The idea of looking at how the media were faring in the respective countries of ASEAN was first broached by ISEAS Director, Professor Chia Siow Yue. It fell upon me to set down a framework for a workshop that would gather scholars who are familiar with the subject of the media in the ten ASEAN member states. Media and politics is at the core of my research interest, having previously been a media practitioner before researching intensively the politics of Vietnamese media in the past five years. My research bias, I confess, shaped the workshop agenda up to a point.

A theme had to be found that would be broad enough to accommodate the many ways of looking at the media in the region without losing a common thrust in analysis. The theme also needed to provide a flexibility that allowed writers to steer clear of sensitive political issues if they were not comfortable with them. Talking about the media tends to lead to the matter of censorship and the democratic (or otherwise) nature of the regime behind it. Finally, the theme of "transition" was selected as a solution to this problem.

The search for appropriate paperwriters was daunting. The pool of specialists was not large. In the final headcount, the workshop had papers covering 9 of the 10 because no suitable person could be found for Brunei.

Each paper writer was allowed to make of the term "transition" what he would. Some tackled the politics head on, while others discussed politics rather more obliquely by looking at the impact of economic reforms on the media. One writer chose to explore the topic from a cultural studies perspective, by studying the media coverage of sensitive gender issues.

When subject matters and the approaches used are syncretic, the publication risks giving the ultimate impression that it is theoretically diffuse or incoherent. Diffuse, yes, to a certain degree; but certainly not incoherent. There are reasons for not focusing on any one theoretical

issue. For a start, this would not have been possible: the writers come from different professional backgrounds. Although the theme is about the media, there was never the intent to make this a gathering of mass-communication researchers. Among the participants are practising journalists and academics schooled in various disciplines. History and political science, not just media studies, inform many of the chapters. Hands-on journalistic experience and first-person activism are also obvious in some of the papers.

The discussion at the workshop, apart from being stimulating and enjoyable, helped to tease out the common threads of intellectual concern running through the diverse papers. For that I want to thank the invited paper discussants and the observers. This book features ten of the thirteen papers presented at the workshop. For various technical reasons, I regret not being able to include all of them.

I am grateful to the staff of the ISEAS Administration and Publications units without whose logistical support, the workshop and this published volume would not have been possible. Finally, I want to thank the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) again for their generous support, without which this whole project culminating in this published volume, would not have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION

RUSSELL HIANG-KHNG HENG

Over the last 20 years, a sense of "transition" has dominated the affairs of the ten member nations of ASEAN — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Transition does not just refer to changes in general. It comes about only when the magnitude of these changes points to a transformation of the status quo in significant ways. For some countries, it is the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. For others, the transition is from a planned socialist economy to a capitalist market model. Technological and lifestyle changes are also transforming societies in the region. Chapter 1 sets down these events in greater detail.

Synergy exists among the various types of transition; the dynamics in one often trigger change-inducing forces in another. For example, market reforms in the state-controlled socialist economies — Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar — provide individuals with more options for work, a trend that facilitates greater independence from the state. They also enhance the connections between these societies and the rest of the world. These are liberalizing influences that must be given some leeway by the political leadership if the latter wants the market transition to be a success. In other parts of the region, thriving market economies have produced affluent and better-educated societies that will hanker for a more democratic political culture (the underlying assumption of modernization theory). Economic development has to reach a certain level for IT (Information Technology) to become widely available to the public. The IT-facilitated free flow of information needs a certain level of democratic allowance. When a society rides the crest of this IT revolution and allows its citizens considerable exposure to a wide range of international influence, it hastens socio-cultural transformation. This also generates more political space.

These different strands of transition can be interwoven in any number of permutations to make up a rich and diverse tapestry of societal change; but as much as it is essential to acknowledge their connectivity, it is sometimes necessary to refer to the transitional trends as distinct and separate identities. This is because different countries place a different emphasis on each of them.

This book, therefore, is an attempt to explore where the media are located within these forces of transition, rather than merely looking at the role of the media and whether or not they have contributed to the transitional processes. The media are so integrated into social-political-economic changes that they are in fact part of the transition itself, contributing to as well as being shaped by it. All of these chapters seek to give a picture of how the media itself has been transformed by the various transitional trends.

All of the authors in this book acknowledge that media in their respective countries have changed. Most significant is the move away from state monopoly in media ownership to private ownership, sometimes even entertaining foreign investment in the information sector. Apart from the question of ownership, the media, whether state-run or privatized, are also being made to compete on market principles. The chapters on Cambodia, Indonesia (in Chapter 4), Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam address these issues and illustrate how market dynamics have brought changes to the form and substance of the media. Running through these chapters is the theme of market forces as a liberalizing mechanism in media development. Cherian George, writing on Singapore, takes the issue beyond the market by raising the importance of the legal framework, the political economy within which the media operates, and the impact of changing technology. He identifies the key factor to be the actions of individuals and institutions — most importantly, the decisions a journalist makes "between the highway of least resistance on one side, and the legally- or politically-forbidden no-man's-land on the other". Ariel Heryanto and Stanley Yoseph Adi, writing on Indonesia, also locate in the individual journalist a key factor in the dynamics of transition. For them, although the ancien regime in Indonesia has been removed, and the country, as well as its media, is undergoing great political changes, the typical Indonesian journalist is still saddled with a cultural mindset that hobbles his or her adjustment to this transition.

Heryanto and Adi bring the debate into the area of culture of politics, although this is not made explicit. However, Peter Jackson's chapter on Thailand is a more direct discussion of culture politics and its role in state–media relations. He has chosen the subject of media representation of homosexuality and transgenderism as a window to look at state–media dynamics in a country that has moved from long years of military rule to a dynamic multi-party democracy. In so doing, Jackson

has broadened the debate from state versus media to one that considers society and the cultural values it forges over a long period of history. Historicity is quite evident in almost all the chapters. Each traces events over several decades, from the birth-pangs of independence to the present-day dynamics of transition. In this regard, Zaharom Nain's paper on Malaysia stands out, by examining developments that are telescoped into one event — the controversy over the arrest of the country's deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998. For Nain, this event seems to have triggered fundamental changes in Malaysia's political landscape, as well as in its media culture.

Generally, the chapters in this book are empirically driven. Readers will not find any attempt by the writers to engage in some of the major theoretical debates that have emerged in the literature on the media in Southeast Asia. Russell Hiang-Khng Heng, in his literature review, identifies three paradigms that have pre-occupied scholars through the decades: development journalism, Asian theories of communication and public journalism. The country studies in this volume have not dealt with any of these concepts. However they do have a unifying thrust by engaging the theme of transition. When states or rather regimes are grappling with powerful forces of transition, they have to reinvent themselves. Many of the chapters in this volume are close-up examinations of how the political élites in various ASEAN states have had to reinvent themselves. In so doing, the state continues to want to manage the media even as it has to surrender some of its managerial powers.

All the works have engaged, either entirely or partially, the following key questions:

1. Given a certain transition process (for example, from a centrally-planned to a market economy, or the collapse of an authoritarian regime), do the media always have to be at odds with the state?
2. If there is room to negotiate, how do members of the media do so? Writings on state–media relations in situation where the media is controlled tend to focus on how control is exercised by the state — that is, a state-centred perspective. It would be useful, therefore, to approach the question from another point of view: how members of the media negotiate for more journalistic space.
3. Has the transition process resulted in a reconfiguration of state–media dynamics?

What can the existing literature on the Southeast Asian media tell us about state–media dynamics during this period? Heng's review in Chapter 1 notes that one feature has dominated the corpus of works: the dominance of the state. The issue has invariably been discussed as a case of the state losing or gaining control of the media. Evidently, there can be no denial that state power has shaped media behaviour in all ASEAN countries. However, the literature also warns against any simplistic assumption that the media is or wants to be the brave nemesis of an authoritarian state. The media can generate their own dynamics that do not improve journalistic content. State–media relations have collusive possibilities. Media dynamics, particularly, at a time when the media have to engage market forces like never before, can produce their own corruption within the profession.

Most of the papers in this collection continue in this vein, reminding readers to look beyond a simple assumption that state–media dynamics are all about the media resisting state control. Theoretically, this poses interesting alternatives, such as a possibility that media-liberalizing changes can come from *within* the state. For example, George's chapter on Singapore observes that the state is very conscious of the forces of transition that drive societal demands for a more liberal and open regime; the state then prepares for these challenges rather than be caught off guard. Sanyoto on Indonesia also draws attention to occasions when the Indonesian state, for a variety of reasons (some related to the market, some not) has let down its guard and allowed the media more space. The idea that these case studies raise is the possibility of liberal changes coming from within the state. Both George and Sanyoto suggest a mechanism for change that involves working from within the system and keeping cannily within the agenda imposed by the state. To a certain extent, the chapters on Myanmar by Tin Maung Maung Than, and on Vietnam by Tran Huu Phuc Tien, imply the same. In these countries, editors and journalists have harnessed the state's market reform agenda to bring significant changes to a rigidly controlled media. This puts a different construction on a widely-accepted perspective that state and media are naturally locked in contention over state-control of the media. It is correct to say that the media often have to negotiate with the state for more editorial space, but the tactic of negotiation is a far more intriguing phenomenon, not always characterized by a head-on clash between state and media. Often, it involves the media learning

how to work within the confines of the state's power structure and policy.

The market as a liberalizing force in the media receives endorsement in several chapters, for example from Ham Samnang on Cambodia, Sanyoto on Indonesia, Duangsavanh on Laos, Tin on Myanmar, Jackson on Thailand and Tien on Vietnam. But even in the common refrain of how market produces diversity in media products, there are noteworthy differences in the political economy of the media in each country. For Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, the question becomes, how real is marketization in the media. In all three countries, state reluctance to liberate fully the media market betrays a deep-seated political fear that allowing market forces full play may see control slipping out of official hands. Sanyoto's depiction of the situation in Indonesian television portrays a state that is tactical in its privatization of the media, putting media ownership in the hands only of those whom the state trusts. For Cambodia, international pressure has obliged the old political élite to suffer the replacement of state ownership by private ownership where the media were concerned. However, the political leaders continue to manipulate the rules in their favour as well as to ensure that the privatized media remain largely in their hands. Evidently, there are limits to the liberalizing impact of the market, and George on Singapore warns that it is fallacious to believe, as some do, that Singapore's governing philosophy, anchored on one-party dominance, is incompatible with the needs of an advanced market economy. Zaharom Nain, describing the recent vicissitudes of the Malaysian media, leaves an impression that a media that is in private hands can still betray a singular bias for the state. Collectively, these chapters caution against unrealistic expectations of the ultimate liberating influence of market forces.

One of the most prevalent claims of the times is the impact of IT on almost every sector of life, including the media. Many see in IT a greater scope for the free flow of information, relatively free of state control. Two chapters refer to this perspective. Nain describes how the political crisis in Malaysia has spawned the birth of a Web media functioning as an alternative to the mainstream media. However, he cautions that this may be a temporary phenomenon born of the mainstream media's loss of credibility. George also accords importance to Singapore's marginal media finding expression in cyberspace, but forecasts its impact to be in

the long term. Other chapters have referred to existing media making an effort to launch Internet editions, even in countries where IT usage is very low, such as Myanmar and Vietnam. All in all, the interest in IT as a medium has taken hold in most ASEAN countries, but it is early days yet to speak of any clear outcome for this nascent trend.

Collectively, the chapters in this collection, dealing with eight of the ten ASEAN member states, tell us that while the media have played a role in resisting state hegemony to deliver a more liberal media model, the media and the state are not always locked in contention over the state agenda. Sometimes it is tactical for the media to work within the parameters of the official agenda in order to gain greater editorial prerogative. To understand this better requires interest to be focused on the individual media practitioner. Finding ways to get round state injunctions requires conviction, courage and cunning of an editor or a journalist. Sanyoto, writing of the Indonesian media's struggle to practise a more politically-engaged form of journalism during the Soeharto regime, gives his readers a flavour of this interesting dynamic of the individual negotiating the system. Unfortunately, no other chapter in this volume has taken up this theme.

Given the density of transitional forces, how much have state–media relations been configured? My opening description of the interlocking dynamics of the four major kinds of transition risks giving a simplistic impression of a linear development of human societies between two ends of a spectrum. At one end are democracy, free market economics, socio-cultural liberties and IT at an advanced stage. At the other end are the negation of all four of these. Societies then are viewed as moving to or away from these two endpoints. Media also move along this spectrum between the two extremes, becoming either an exemplary free press to be prized, or a controlled press to be abjured. The chapters in this volume tell their readers that reality is never so neat. They suggest that serious thinking about media and politics should avoid the distinct black-and-white of binary outcomes. Collectively, these papers represent a small step towards a more nuanced understanding of media fortunes in changing times.