

*Press Systems in ASEAN States*. Edited by Achal Mehra. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, 1989. Pp. 146.

Get together a group of academics and civil servants to write about a topic from different national perspectives and, *voilà*, there is a ready-made book. *Press Systems* is that sort of a book with, however, a difference. The larger part of it comprises six papers delivered at a conference on press systems in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), held in Jakarta in August 1988, but it also includes speeches by a number of leaders of the ASEAN nations on the role of the press previously published or released elsewhere. Readers familiar with published proceedings of seminars or conferences will probably know what to expect. Having said that, however, it must be stressed that this is not an indictment of what is really a familiar practice in academic publishing.

After all, getting assorted writers to tackle a generic theme is perhaps the most cost-effective way to get as much research done or reflections committed to paper in as short a time as possible or feasible, without extravagant outlays of funds, provided the topic is not so abstract that the paper writers go off in different directions; and provided also that there is a competent editor to pull the various papers together. On both these counts, *Press Systems* passes muster and offers a compendium of useful basic information such as, amongst others, a systematic outline of six chapters of Bruneian law which, in one way or another, regulate the press.

With a theme so straightforward, the six writers (one from each of the ASEAN states) appear to have been given the task of discussing the dos and don'ts for newsmen in their respective countries with little leeway to stray from the subject. They know their stuff or, rather, given their credentials, one expects they do. Their approach is methodical, which is no bad thing for it means readers get a concise systematic account of the history of each country's press, the laws that tend to them, and the rationale for the various systems which officialdom chooses to promote. However, do not expect to read anything approaching an apologia for curbing the press because there is none. From Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and

Brunei came loud and clear messages that they do not see any reason for applying the norms of the Western press to their newspapers. However, the papers on Thailand and the Philippines have quite a different view, affirming the values of the Western media and saying they intend to keep things that way.

Apart from a common desire for responsibility in the press and acknowledging that this is not always what the public gets, it is clear that a philosophical divide separates the ASEAN states on this question of press systems. If viewpoints were so diametrically opposed, was there an interesting debate during the seminar? Just what did the other participants have to say when Thai academic Dr Pira Chirasopone closed his paper with a quote from Western commentators lauding the Thai press as being “the only light in the dark situation of the press in Southeast Asia”? Alas, if there were any illuminating exchanges during that conference in Jakarta, none of them appears in the book. Instead, what readers get is a four-page final report from that meeting, which is four pages too many.

The unmistakable impression given by that document is that it prescribes both the obvious and the unlikely. The primary functions of the ASEAN press, pronounces the report, are to help explain public issues, inform and educate, and so forth. Such platitudes are symptomatic of those international gatherings at which divergent views have to be reduced to the lowest common denominator. At that sort of intellectual low altitude, words are not meant to say anything and often do not. Much of that axiomatic declaration would have no problem being endorsed by media as unlike as the *New York Times* or whatever dailies they read in Tirana or Pyongyang. That an ASEAN gathering can produce no better than a general statement of this sort is another indication of a philosophical divide within the Association with regard to press freedom, somewhat like that which exists between democratic and totalitarian states. The report also urges the press in ASEAN to look at problems in member states from an ASEAN perspective. The remote likelihood of this prescription being applied, in an ASEAN context, has been well-demonstrated some one to two years after the conference. In 1989–90, Singapore attempted to

repatriate unregistered Thai workers working illegally in the country. Legislation was introduced in which, after a period of amnesty, if such workers were found they would be tried and if guilty would be subject to caning. In a later, unrelated, development it was made known that for several years there has been a worrying occurrence of Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome (SUDS) among Thai workers in Singapore. These developments provoked outraged and outrageous reports in the Thai press. So much for calling the press in ASEAN, including the Thai press, to look at problems in member states from an ASEAN perspective when they report, as in this case, the problems of Thai workers in Singapore. At other points the document is downright obtuse when it intones: "The national press of Asean countries carry heavy responsibility in exercising freedom as they have to consider the element of loyalty to their countries as well." What is the reader supposed to make of that?

For those who are more inclined towards a publish-and-be-damned approach for the press, there is much in this little book to provoke one into a debate but the book should, as was said in the beginning, be valued for the hard information it provides and not for the persuasiveness of its arguments. However, even on that count, the collection of papers are also uneven. For instance, the paper from Singaporean Baskaran Nair, which at six pages is the shortest, and the sharpest — it ticks off the U.S. media in the first paragraph — could do with a mention or two of the Republic's Newspaper and Printing Presses Act 1974, which set down new rules about who can own newspapers. That bill stipulates that when going public, newspaper companies in Singapore should issue management shares, each carrying the voting power of 200 ordinary shares on some matters like the dismissal of staff. These shares may be sold only to people approved by the state. The omission is all the more regrettable when Nair is not exactly stinting on details elsewhere: he gives a statistical breakdown of the view from his office window — the Port of Singapore Authority with its 7,694 employees responsible for 51 million tonnes of general cargo and 38 million tonnes of containerized cargo, and so on.

Speeches of ASEAN leaders on the press published in this book are: Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's address to the World Press Convention in Kuala Lumpur in September 1985; Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 1988; the Philippine's President Corazon Aquino's speech to Time, Inc. Distinguished Speakers Forum in New York in September 1986; and an adapted version of a speech made by Indonesia's President Soeharto on the country's National Press Day, 9 February 1989. If the leaders of Brunei and Thailand had made speeches on the same subject as well, one suspects they would also have been included. The words of these leaders together with a piece by Jakob Oetama, Chief Editor of the major Indonesian daily *Kompas*, form the reflective part of the book. Here again, the perspectives are diverse. Mrs Aquino has termed the media, which helped to topple the Marcos regime she replaced, "icons of our revolution". Mr Lee reminded his audience that it was a privilege and not a right for the foreign press to circulate in Singapore.

Editor Achal Mehra in his Introduction says plainly that the book does not claim to have captured the "totality and individual nuances" of press freedom in the region. It has offered only a "broad sweep of dominant thinking". The "dominant thinking" he refers to is most evident when a particular country's perspective in the book is represented by those who do the controlling of the press and not those who have to work under the restrictions. And given that there are sensitive and contentious issues involved, in which a variety of opinions are likely to exist besides those included in the book, are there alternative perspectives waiting to be presented and will they get their forum? If there are, they would certainly deserve another book.

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