An Independent Press: Asset or Liability to Asia's New Nations?

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INTRODUCTION

THERE are parts of Asia where the press is relatively free depending on the political system, history, cultural and social traditions and ethnic and religious make-up. In certain Asian countries, the colonial legacy of democratic values and norms has made the transition from colonial status to independence fairly smooth. Under such conditions, the press has a better chance to co-exist, albeit often uneasily, with the state. Political independence for Asian countries, including the majority in South East Asia, generally meant the ushering in of a new era of nation building. Indepencence did not bring immediate rewards in terms of economic, social and cultural upliftment of the people. In most cases, the native ruling elite benefited most from the transfer of colonial power.

Myriad of economic, cultural and social ties keeps former colonies largely dependent on the metropolitan power. In quite a number of former colonies, despite decades of independence, the people still wallow in poverty, starvation is a daily reality, and diseases are rampant. It is estimated that over one billion people in the south are still living under conditions of extreme want. According to a study by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia's Science University, one and a half billion people are without primary health care. About a billion are illiterate. Dr. Chandra contends that "poverty is directly linked to the question of political rights." He says that poor nations are in no position to exercise their right of free expression at international forums, especially if they are heavily indebted to international banks and lending agencies from the north. His question is this: how can one expect

countries which are neck deep in debt to articulate independent positions on global issues that impinge upon the interests of powerful nations in the North?

There are also internal factors that have a direct bearing on the role and functions of the press. In parts of Asia, ethnic, tribal and religious differences have spawned bloody - wars. Where the political system is under dire threat, it is not unusual for those in power to resort to intolerable curbs on press freedom and the people's right to express themselves. Where the political system is fragile, the whole fabric of society might collapse under the impact of internal convulsion and civil strife. Under some circumstances, survival of the nation is held as a justification for repression and dictatorial rule. Ethnic, tribal and religious tensions invariably influence perceptions and attitudes of people, including media practitioners. Under extreme pressure where ethnic and religious loyalties tend to dominate attitudes and perceptions, only the most committed to national interests could refrain from being partisan. Ultimately, truth and justice become the victim.

Most Asian societies, like nearly all of Africa, are not indigenous. There are countries comprising so many tribes and sub-tribes speaking a diversity of dialects that the countries could not reach consensus on a national language as a means of unifying the people. Cultural and social backwardness invariably become national problems that have to be solved. Nation building has to start from scratch. Almost all newly independent Asian nations are confronted with the crucial problem of welding diverse ethnic and religious groups into a united, strong, viable and resilient society. Endemic internal tensions and social convulsions could only obstruct the progress of the nation.

Even under fairly stable and peaceful conditions, there is no iron-clad guarantee that national cohesiveness could be preserved and enhanced in multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural societies. Competing and conflicting ethnic and tribal interests could very well surface with internal and external pressures and play hovoc on the most elaborate and carefully laid political, economic and social programmes. Some nations formulate state philosophies and ideologies to inculcate patriotism and promote national consciousness among the people. But such formulae - unless underpinned by a strong and viable economic structure - are bound to be ineffectual as the factors separating social groups sharpen and gradually dominate the political life of the people.

Asia is now entering a new era of dynamic development. The 21st century is said to be the century of Asia. The focal point of global economic development is shifting to our part of the world. China, for example, is undergoing a phenomenal economic transformation and most observers confidently predict that it will become another Japan. But China is still ruled by the communist party and freedom of expressions remains a luxury.

Vietnam is another nation that has opted for economic development at the expense of what we generally accept as freedom of expression. The communist party of Vietnam and its ideology hold sway over the people. It is pertinent to ask whether western-style freedom of expression would prove an asset or a liability to China and Vietnam. The history of the

Chinese and Vietnamese people is not replete with episodes of struggle for democracy. Chinese civilisation was not built on democratic notions of government. Vietnam united its people under conditions-of continuous war against foreign invaders. The Chinese people throughout their history fought internal wars and external aggression to preserve national boundaries.

The former Soviet Union had no historical traditions of democracy. In fact, the Soviet empire was carved out from many states populated by various ethnic and religious groups. Perhaps this explains the chaos that seems to be bedevilling Russia today following its unreserved embrace of western parliamentary democracy and free market economy. In Russia and certain European countries, the economic slowdown has sharpened racial and religious conflicts affecting even state policies on foreigners. The collapse of communism in Yugoslavia was followed by war among three communities where ethnic cleansing became a strategy of domination. The war is continuing and it is a situation that affects every facet of life of the states involved and the attitudes of the people, including those in the media, where ethnic considerations have superseded norms and ethnics of their profession.

Asia's economic achievements, remarkable and phenomenal as they are, have in some ways imbued us with confidence in our own resilience and our creative capability to compete on the global stage. It has served too to help us find our voice at international forums. Indirectly it has moved us to seek the traditions. We are less prone to be mere imitators of models that are unsuited to our way of life and values. This is not to say that we should reject everything that comes our way from the West.

Western civilisation has its negative and positive aspects, just as capitalism has its benign and benevolent face. It has created new societies and nations in our part of the world. Technological and scientific progress inevitably brings in its wake new challenges. Western technology and science have brought the people of the world closer together. Satellite television, whatever its negative influence, has brought about a universal sense of closeness among nations.

We would not have reacted with universal compassion for the tragic plight of the starving Ethiopians and Somalians and we would not now be sharing the sorrows of the unfortunate people of Rwanda were it not for satellite television. We would not have known of oppressions around the world has not the electronic media brought pictures and stories of human suffering right into our living rooms.

This brings us to the role of the media as a recorder of events. Objectivity is the journalistic principle often cited when this function of the media is discussed. But in practice that is not so easily achieved, especially in a plural society and particularly when ethnic interests are involved.

Only the most naive believe that journalists are merely neutral observers of events and impartial reporters of issues. Underlying the facts in a news item are the views of the

reporter although these are not always obvious. The reporter's political inclinations, his cultural values, and his personal likes and dislikes all come into-play. The process of writing news is not unlike the creative process where the raw material undergoes a process of rejection and retention. The reporter, like everybody else, belongs to and ethnic group and is neither immune to its aspirations nor deaf to its promptings.

Ethnic groups tend to be self-serving in their interpretation of ideals, including freedom of expression. As community, for example, may feel it only proper for its own concerns to be highlighted. And unless a mutual accommodation of interests is achieved within a framework of national priorities, freedom of expression could well result in internal instability, with far reaching consequences. In multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, where competing have yet to be resolved, constitutional and legal restraints are not enough to check media excesses. Much of the responsibility of ensuring that what is published would not arouse emotions in the streets rests on editors - on their sensitivity, their understanding of national priorities, and their conscience. A paper practising the policy of "news for news sake and damn the consequences" can find itself besieged by angry readers.

In Malaysia, the new generation of Malaysian reporters are educated in Malay, with many also proficient in English. Which is why we have more and more non-Malays working in Malay language dailies. In the English language media, we have a good racial mix. This has not always been the case. It was only after the early seventies that we had a new generation of Malays opting for journalism as a career after graduating from one of the many institutions in the country which teach mass communication. Before this, the English language dailies were monopolised by non-Malays and even expatriates. The staff composition influenced the character of the English language media, with Fleet Street ethos sinking deep roots.

But it was a time when language, culture and education were the issues of the day, generating passions that could make or break the government. It was a crucial time as Malaya, as we were called then, was laying the ground for nation-building, entailing the unifying of the various races. It was a testing time for the media. Our media practitioners had to break away from mindsets, resulting from decades of absorbing Fleet Street values, to reorientate themselves to the new reality and to redefine their role from the perspective of nation-building. Professionalism and competency in the news-writing craft were not sufficient to cope with the unfoldifng situation and the challenges that came with it.

Those were the days when work permits were unknown, and expatriates occupy some of the key editorial positions. While they were technically competent and professional in doing their job, they lacked the basic requirements that would otherwise have made them invaluable partners in nation building. Most of them did not know the native language and did not empathise with the transformation of a former colony into a nation.

The expatriates had their own personal and professional preferences, often detectable from the way they treated news on language, culture and education. A straight forward

story on language is rated well below a report on the same subject in which rivals were pitted against each other, with little thought on the emotions they were arousing.

It was at about this time that Malaysia started to have equity control of the three main dailies in the country. The symbiotic ties binding our media to western concepts of journalism gradually unloosened as Malaysians sought inspiration from their own traditions and cultural and social mores. Thus, after nearly two decades of independence, the Malaysian media were taking charge of their own destiny.

Technological progress has transformed the media in most parts of South East Asia as corporate institutions. There is exchange of ideas among the media institutions in the region and a sharing of perceptions. I believe that nations in our part of the world should cooperate more to achieve economic, cultural and social cohesiveness. Perhaps, we could have a common agenda to promote regional identity and consciousness for mutual benefit in the era of globalisation.

In an ever increasingly open world, where communication technology is becoming more sophisticated, this is of course a natural development. It is not without its challenges though. The media have rivals that are proving their efficacy in various ways.

The late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran for instance bypassed the Shah's complete control of the media by the simple expedient of distributing cassettes of his fiery speeches. From Paris, where he was living in exile, he recorded statements exhorting the Iranians to rise up against the Shah's dictatorship.

The fax machine is an effective means of communication as much for journalists as advertisers and others with a product or an idea to sell, as message to convey or a story to tell. The parabolas transmitting information and dubious entertainment from our open sky are now rather cumbersome. But technological advances in the next decade could very well reduce them to match box size.

With affluence, more people are exposed to the world as tourists, students or workers. Television cables network is making available to viewers hundreds of channels from which to tap information which is otherwise denied them by secretive governments. The world is becoming diminutive at a dramatic pace and in such a fashion as to make censorship increasingly irrelevant. All these poses new challenges to the media.

We have to prepare ourselves by increasing our knowledge, enhancing our skills and adjusting our perspectives. Economic prosperity has brought with it new political, economic and social problems especially in societies undergoing rapid changes. There are media gurus who suggest that journalists go back to school so that they may have a more than superficial understanding of events and issues around the world, such as the tragedy in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Islamic dimension in the Middle East situation, the tribal wars in Africa, and the spread of racism in parts of Western Europe. In other words, the media should

conduct themselves as global citizens, transcending national and parochial interests, and abandoning the mindset nurturd by a bi-polar world that is no more.

In Malaysia and certain other Muslim countries, people are toying with the Islamic dimension in the profession to balance western views on human rights and freedom of expression. They see negative aspects of freedom of expression such as sex and violence on television and in films as a threat to religious and traditional values. Even the secular-minded advocates of freedom reject unqualified individual rights. They assert that freedom is meaningless unless responsibly exercised for the common good and the well-being of society. Freedom in any area of human life is never offered on a silver platter. Especially for the media, freedom has to be won with patience, ingenuity and imagination. The parameters of freedom must be daily probed and tested so that they become tolerably flexible and reasonably accommodating for our profession. But the media have their professional goals. Truth and justice may also be relative.

At a time when the media are facing increasing pressures from government and corporate employers, it is crucial that we maintain and preserve the fundamental principles of our profession and, most important, our conscience - notwithstanding that a media organisation, whatever its form and character, is essentially a profit-making body. Press freedom is not for the unscrupulous. Nor is it for the opportunists. We owe it to society and to our people to exercise our rights responsibly and judiciously for, in the final analysis, our nation's survival as an independent and sovereign entity should be our supreme and overriding concern as citizens.