

Media and democratic transitions in Southeast Asia

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Political transitions in Southeast Asia

Over the past fifteen years, there have been three cases of unpopular Southeast Asian governments being toppled by mass protest movements: the Philippines, 1986 (the 'People Power' movement, which ousted Marcos), Thailand, 1992 (the 'May events', which forced out the government of Suchinda Kraprayoon), and Indonesia, 1998 (the student-led protests and unrest that saw the downfall of Suharto). A comparable but unsuccessful movement failed to oust the military regime in Burma in 1988. The media played an important role in all four of these movements. A core assumption of much of the literature on democratisation is that a more independent press with greater freedom will make a positive contribution to political change, supporting democratic transitions and the downfall of authoritarian regimes. In other words, media can play an especially crucial role at the 'transition phase', where it may act as a decisive agent of change.¹ Neumann argues that freedom is 'taking hold' in Southeast Asia, in a process of political liberalisation inexplicably linked with the rise of a more open and critical press.² This paper will examine three relevant cases: the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia.

General issues

This paper begins with several general observations:

- Those who study politics generally have a limited understanding of media
- Political scientists are mainly interested in 'political communication' issues such as election coverage and campaigning, what Cook calls 'the voter persuasion paradigm'
- Those who study media generally have a weak understanding of politics

¹ Vicky Randall, 'The media and democratisation in the Third World', *Third World Quarterly*, 14, 3, 1993, pp. 625-46.

² A. Lin Neumann, 'Freedom takes hold: ASEAN journalism in transition', New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 1998 (www.cpj.org).

- Those who study media typically espouse far-fetched and highly sympathetic interpretations of media
- Those who study media have a weak understanding of how media actually works, especially in non-western societies
- The media specialist's over-riding preoccupation with outputs, typically studied through content analysis, often obscures the important processes which generate those outputs
- Those who study the interplay between media and politics are almost always overly preoccupied by western examples
- Many arguments advanced about media and politics have limited value for developing countries, perhaps especially Asian ones

The result is that very little sensible and rigorous work has been done on the political role played by the media in developing countries. The study of the political role of media is a twilight zone, a shadowy territory that lurks on the border of two rather nebulous disciplines.

This paper works from two core assumptions:

- the media is a political actor and institution in its own right
- as such, the media can play a variety of political roles, some of which support a process of democratic transition, and some of which do just the opposite

A core assumption of this article is that the press should be regarded as a political institution. As Cook notes, this apparently obvious point has long been overlooked in western societies: journalists have been very successful in discouraging people from

viewing them as political actors, while political scientists have generally failed to recognise the media as a political institution.³ In a chapter entitled 'Why don't we call journalists political actors?', Cook argues that:

First, journalists work hard to discourage people from thinking of them as political actors. Indeed, they may be so successful at this attempt that they have convinced even themselves. Second, the study of political communications developed amidst a tradition emphasising 'media effects', and the disciplines most involved in the study of the politics of the news media have held back from the implications of their work. In particular, while political scientists have been quite comfortable referring to the media's political contribution, they have been less willing to see the news media as an institution.⁴

In other words, journalists have successfully persuaded academics that they are not political actors, and scholars working in both politics and media studies have missed the scoop.

If we believe that the media is a political actor, what kind of role does it play? In developing countries such as Indonesia, the centrality of the media's political role has long been recognised. The state has often emphasised the importance of the press in the process of nation-building. As President Suharto of Indonesia declared in a speech on National Press Day in 1989:

As an integral part of our developing society, nation and state, the press has an important role to assist in managing this nation in all its complexity through the dissemination of news, opinions, ideas, grievances and hopes to the masses... It is in this respect that the press has a role to play in helping build and preserve our unity and cohesion as a nation.⁵

What are the functions performed by the media in its role as a political institution? One function is that assigned to the press by Suharto and other state elites in developing

³³ Timothy E. Cook, *Governing with the news: the news media as a political institution*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, p. 4.

⁴ Cook, p. 4.

⁵ Soeharto, 'The role of the press in national development', in Achal Mehra (ed.), *Press systems in ASEAN*, Singapore: AMIC, p. 131.

countries: promoting national ideology, and legitimating the development process. In performing this function, the press is an agent of stability, charged with the task of helping preserve social and political order. This function is commonly associated with the term 'development journalism'.

A second function is that of monitoring the political order in peacetime, providing checks and balances, in the interests of more effective and representative government. Such monitoring might range from, say, publishing critical editorials on government policy, to fully-fledged investigative reporting about corruption in high places. In this second function, the press is an agent of restraint.

A third function is a fire-fighting one: helping to determine the outcome of dramatic social and political changes in times of crisis. Recent Asian examples include the role of media in the ousting of the Marcos regime in the Philippines in 1986, or the support provided by the press during the May 1992 pro-democracy demonstrations in Bangkok.⁶ In this third function, the press is an agent of change.

These three alternative modes of agency—of stability, restraint, and change—are possible functions for the press as a political institution. It is tempting to assume that the press performs a specific political role in a given society at a given juncture: an agent of stability in an authoritarian regime (such as Burma today) an agent of restraint in a liberal democracy (such as Japan in the 1970s), and an agent of change in a society in the throes of political transition (such as South Korea in 1987). But in practice, the press is polyvalent, and may adopt multiple modes of agency simultaneously. Different

⁶ Isagni R. Serrano, *Civil society in the Asia-Pacific region*, Washington DC: Civicus, 1994, p. 62.

sections of the press may be cheering, reproving and denouncing power-holders on the same day. Indeed, a single publication may itself be polyvalent: different columnists and editors may adopt different forms of political agency within the same issue of the same publication: a critical front page story indicates that the publication is seeking to restrain certain power-holders, while a bland editorial appears to offer them tacit support, and an aggressive columnist calls for their resignations. Evaluating the nature of the political roles performed by the press in any given situation requires close scrutiny of two factors: ownership and control of publications, and the relationships between owners, journalists, and power-holders. This paper is concerned with problematising received views about the media as a benign agent of change.

The term 'power-holders' is used deliberately here. Much of the literature on media in developing countries emphasises the dominance or 'hegemony' of state power, the way in which media has been used as a tool of state propaganda. In the case of Thailand, for example, the focus is often upon the use of electronic media by the military and other state actors. Media is seen as a pawn of state power, a servant of the state.⁷ This emphasis upon censorship and government control, whilst appropriate to an understanding of how aspects the media do function at particular junctures, also tends to be unduly state-centric: it overlooks the plural and diverse character of media, and especially the inventiveness with which the print media has often covered political issues. As the power of states declines across the world, preoccupations with state censorship are becoming increasingly dated. Attempts to influence the tone and content of news publications are not confined to states: opposition politicians, military officers,

⁷ Similar arguments are made by Wolferen about the Japanese media. See Karel van Wolferen, *The enigma of Japanese power*, London: Macmillan 1989, pp. 93-8, and Duncan McCargo, 'The political role of the Japanese media', *Pacific Review*, 9, 2, 1996, pp. 251-264.

civil servants, lobbyists, companies, pressure groups, think tanks and non-governmental organisations are all engaged in such activities.

One interesting attempt to theorise concepts of the media's political role is a chapter by Japan specialist Susan Pharr, who argues that there are four broad competing views: media may be seen variously as spectator, watchdog, servant or trickster. She favours the view of media as trickster,⁸ a coinage of her own. While arguing that the trickster is an active participant in the political process, she sees the main effect of the trickster's role as building *communitas*; the 'trickster' label turns out to be yet another positive, benevolent construct of media behaviour. The behaviour of media is frequently ambiguous, hypocritical, and inconsistent—in short, tricky. But this trickery, though sometimes positive in its results, can also be destructive and dangerous. Whereas Pharr argues that the trickster media serves the interests of no particular group, the media in Southeast Asia is frequently the captive of various interests. Its trickiness derives not from its lack of loyalties, but from its multiple loyalties, the plurality of its obligations and the diversity of its stakeholders. It is precisely the multiplicity of stakeholders in the media that gives it both strength and weakness. Western analysts of the media have tended to see 'partisanship' in terms of the formal and informal links between media organisations and political parties.⁹ In the Southeast Asian context, such a definition is woefully inadequate; partisanship must be understood as a whole range of connections between practitioners in the parallel worlds of media and politics.

⁸ Susan J. Pharr, 'Media as trickster in Japan: a comparative perspective', in Susan J. Pharr and Ellis S. Krauss (eds.), *Media and politics in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996, pp. 24-36.

⁹ Jay G. Blumer and Michael Gurevitch, *The crisis of public communication*, London: Routledge 1995, pp. 64-65.

The Philippines: radio station ousts Marcos?

Mass demonstrations in Manila in February 1986 culminated in the ousting of President Marcos from office. Marcos had ruled the Philippines for twenty years, initially as an elected president, but later through martial law. Opposition to his rule increased after 1983, when opposition leader Ninoy Aquino was shot dead at Manila Airport under highly suspicious circumstances. Ninoy's widow Cory Aquino rallied anti-Marcos opposition, and assumed the presidency after Marcos fled to Hawaii.

Accounts of the 1986 'people power' movement (or 'yellow revolution') often emphasise the contribution of the media, especially that of Radio Veritas, a radio station controlled by the Catholic Church. Hernandez describes the media as performing 'a role that in the final hours was crucial'.¹⁰ When Fidel Ramos and Juan Ponce Enrile defected from Marcos on 22 February, they broadcast an appeal on Radio Veritas for people to rally around two army camps and protect them. It was this appeal that triggered the EDSA demonstrations, and so indirectly led to the ouster of Marcos on 25 February. Nemenzo observes that 'Without Radio Veritas, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to mobilise millions of people in a matter of hours'.¹¹ According to one popular account of the events, 'Radio Veritas, in fact, was our umbilical cord to whatever else was going on'.¹² On 24 February, however, the transmitters of Radio Veritas were destroyed by troops loyal to Marcos, an action that testified to the political significance of the station.

¹⁰ Carolina G. Hernandez, 'Reconstituting the political order' in John Bresnan (ed.) *Crisis in the Philippines: the Marcos era and beyond*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 191.

¹¹ Francisco Nemenzo, 'A nation in ferment: analysis of the February revolution', in M. Rajaretnam ed.), *The Aquino alternative*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986, p. 46.

¹² Cynthia S. Baron and Melba M. Suazo, *Nine letters: the story of the 1986 Filipino revolution*, Quezon City: Gerardo P. Baron, 1986.

Evaluating the political influence of the Philippine media as a whole, however, is a more difficult matter. Most Philippine newspapers are not published for profit, and require subsidies from their owners. Despite the appearance of a vigorous and critical press in the Philippines, much of the media-inspired political debate reflects the voices of powerful owners and interest groups closely tied to identifiable political and business interests. During the Marcos period, some of these subsidies were provided by cronies of the President, while publications hostile to Marcos faced harassment or closure. Writing before the events of February 1986, Doronila argued that the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983 triggered a rekindled critical press in the Philippines: small, independent newspapers mushroomed, and the opposition initiated a somewhat successful boycott of controlled newspapers, so undermining the credibility of publications owned by Marcos cronies and supporters.¹³ Nevertheless, he cautioned that this trend was a 'temporary tendency', and argued that even under a more liberal post-Marcos government, the dominance of big media companies would pose a threat to the free flow of information.¹⁴ A decade later, Rivera wrote that most Manila newspapers were still heavily subsidized by their owners, though went on to claim that despite these subsidies, journalists exercised considerable autonomy.¹⁵

Accordingly, Smith claims that the role of the media in the February 1986 events has been overblown. Quoting approvingly from a speech by Cory Aquino herself ('The media do not make or unmake governments, tanks do that, and more rarely but surely, people do'), Smith declares that:

¹³ Amando Doronila, 'The media', in R. J May and Francisco Nemenzo (ed.), *The Philippines after Marcos*, London: Croom Helm 1985, p. 194.

¹⁴ Doronila pp. 205-6.

¹⁵ Temario C. Rivera, *State of the nation: Philippines*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996, p. 7.

Some individual—usually minority—media outlets may reflect, ‘mediate’, and even facilitate change; they do not initiate it, either individually or collectively, whatever their own euphoric accounts at the time may tell us to the contrary. They also, rather, tend to reflect the class interests of their owners, advertisers and readers.¹⁶

For Smith, the ousting of Marcos was a more complex event than media-focused accounts suggest. The great bulk of the electronic and print media was supportive of Marcos almost throughout, whilst Radio Veritas was not a conventional media outlet, but a voice of the highly partisan Catholic Church. As Smith writes:

The perception of the media, alternative or otherwise, as ‘heroes of EDSA’, is likewise a distortion: ‘people power’ and the potential fire-power of military revolt were the factors which actively ousted Marcos. Radio Veritas did, it is true, prove a useful weapon in the logistical deployment of the Manila crowds who rallied around the rebel troops; the Manila press was at this point, however, simply reporting retrospectively a ‘spontaneous’ show of (largely urban middle-class) strength against a hated regime.¹⁷

Smith concludes that sections of the media could *help* challenge a regime if they received middle class support, but that the media lacks the capacity to initiate or lead the challenge to a regime. The Philippine case points to the dangers of generalising about ‘the media’, especially based on minority news sources.

Thailand: vigorous print media brings down Suchinda?

Thailand has a population of almost 60 million, and was one of the world's fastest growing economies during the 1980s and early 1990s. Since 1932 the military has played a pre-eminent role in the Thai order, although the 1980s saw an apparent institutionalisation of parliamentary politics. Contrary to most expectations, the Thai military staged a coup in February 1991, the first for almost 14 years. There followed a period of intense confrontation between military and civilian political forces.

¹⁶ Desmond Smith, ‘Democracy and the media in developing countries: a case study of the Philippines’, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1996, p. 152.

In April and May 1992, mass protests took place on the streets of Bangkok against unelected prime minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon.¹⁸ Some analysts have seen the protests (which the military sought to repress by violent means) as a key moment in the development of a democratic order in Thailand. Many newspapers proprietors and journalists aligned themselves with the opposition movement, playing an important part in forcing Suchinda's resignation.¹⁹ These same newspapers were also influential in creating the climate that led to the victory of 'anti-military' parties in the September 1992 general election.

The stance taken by the print media throughout the 1992 crisis was in contrast with the pro-government line taken by the state-controlled electronic media.

There is a longstanding tradition of a critical and outspoken press in Thailand. In the early decades of the twentieth century, newspaper columns were used to articulate conflicts within the elite: columnists frequently hid behind pen-names, and included high-ranking officials and even the king himself. The press was a kind of parallel political universe, which permitted more open debate and contestation in an era of absolute monarchy. Influential individuals and groups (including the state) sought to present their views through owning or supporting newspapers. The absolute monarchy ended in 1932, but newspapers continued to be owned and controlled by those seeking to advance their power and influence. Historically, only a handful of daily newspapers in Thailand have ever been commercially viable. By the 1970s, when the country was riven with ideological conflicts between left and right, wider political debates were clearly reflected in the press: ownership and control broadened to include elements of the left.

¹⁷ Smith p. 270.

¹⁸ For an account, see Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the new Thai politics*, London: Hurst 1997.

¹⁹ See Duncan McCargo, 'The buds of May', *Index on Censorship*, April 1993, pp. 3-8.

Repressive legislation made it possible for governments to close newspapers with relative impunity, and 1976 saw a major clampdown on press freedom, as a short-lived 'democracy period' gave way to authoritarianism. But the vibrancy of the Thai press proved difficult to repress, and by the 1980s the Thai press was once again the most open and critical in the region.

The Chatichai administration of 1988-91 saw an elected politician become prime minister for the first since 1976. Chatichai sought to establish good relations with the media, hosting parties for reporters, and allegedly planning a special budget to buy gifts for prominent columnists, a plan that was severely criticised and so never implemented. Nevertheless, early on in the Chatichai period reports of corruption began to disappear from the pages of the press', apparently as a result of the systematic bribery of reporters, columnists and editors by certain Cabinet ministers, coupled with a selective policy of intimidation, partly through threats to investigate the tax affairs of hostile columnists.

One of the first actions of the NPKC was to announce that all newspapers would be censored; within days, these stipulations were lifted, partly because the idea was virtually unworkable, and partly because many Thai language newspapers gave such positive coverage to the coup that censorship seemed unnecessary. This honeymoon period was a relatively short-lived one, however, and by mid-1991 the press was becoming increasingly critical of the coup group. This criticism intensified after April 1992, when coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon was appointed prime minister, despite having promised previously that he would not take the job.

Many writers have portrayed May 1992 as the Thai print media's finest hour. Faced with a government that controlled parliament, the military, the bureaucracy, and the electronic

media, the press joined forces with opposition parties and protest groups to bring down Suchinda. As the protests against Suchinda intensified, the gap between reporting and reality strained viewers' credulity beyond breaking-point. On 4 May, one of Thailand's most popular politicians, Palang Dharma Party leader Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, made the dramatic announcement that he would fast unto death unless General Suchinda resigned from office. This major story, which made the headlines in every newspaper the following day, went entirely unreported on the evening television news bulletins. For the next two and a half weeks, no politically conscious Bangkokians paid any serious attention to the news on their television screens.

The culmination of the May protests was from 17-21 May, when hundreds of thousands of unarmed demonstrators were attacked and fired upon by troops. Just under fifty people were eventually confirmed dead, and a similar number 'missing'. The authorities made repeated attempts to control press coverage, and actually briefly banned three newspapers on 21 May (though the bans were never implemented). A combination of factors, including domestic opposition, international pressures and a belated royal intervention, forced Suchinda to resign after only 47 days in office.

The crowds of protestors in Bangkok had not simply opposed to Suchinda Kraprayoon's becoming premier; they were objecting to a political order in which the military and the bureaucracy exerted tremendous influence. At the heart of this struggle, between entrenched state power on the one hand, and the collective popular will in a rapidly-changing urban society on the other, was a battle for the control of information. The achievement of the press was examined in a commemorative book published by the Reporter's Association of Thailand, which highlighted injuries sustained by reporters during the protests, intimidation of press personnel, and attempts by the Suchinda

government to silence the critical voices of the newspapers. Without the courage and determination of Thai journalists to inform the public about the unfolding political situation, it is questionable how successful the anti-Suchinda protests would have been.

The received image of the Thai press as the courageous guardian of liberty and democracy contains elements of truth. At the same time, a complete understanding of the role of the press in the May events requires a more nuanced analysis; some elements of the press were not whole-heartedly behind the anti-Suchinda campaign, and others were downright sympathetic towards Suchinda. Certain newspapers, notably *The Nation*, *Phujatkan* and *Naew Na*, took the lead in resisting Suchinda. *Phujatkan* was closely allied with the political enemies of the NPKC, whilst *Naew Na* enjoyed strong personal ties with the opposition New Aspiration and Palang Dharma parties. The stance of other major newspapers was much more ambivalent. *Matichon* had close links with the NPKC, and its owner was a personal friend of Suchinda's. Although *Matichon* staff insisted that they were on the 'right' side in May 1992, the public perception of the newspaper was that it could not be trusted in this particular crisis. The top-selling newspaper *Thai Rath* was broadly supportive of the Suchinda premiership, only changing sides when the anti-Suchinda protests built up an irresistible momentum. While crude, old-fashioned state censorship was central to government control of the electronic media, personal ties between military officers, politicians and newspaper staff were important in determining the tone of press coverage.

To regard the privately-owned mass media in Thailand as a force for democratic reform and political liberalisation is rather simplistic. In May 1992, some elements of the private mass media sector were attempting to displace the entrenched power of the military dominated 'bureaucratic polity' in Thailand: a new business elite was seeking to displace

an old public sector elite, and harnessed the rhetoric of democratization for its own ends (Laothamatas 1992). This applied particularly to newspaper groups such as *The Nation* and *Phujatkan*. At the same time, some of the elites who owned and controlled the press (especially leading Thai-language newspapers *Thai Rath* and *Matichon*) were deeply uneasy with the anti-Suchinda protests, and declined to endorse the movement wholeheartedly. The street politics of May 1992 undermined the cosy, collusive relationship between newspapers owners, editors, and columnists, and their counterparts in the bureaucratic and political orders. Indeed some of these media figures were directly or indirectly in the pay of Suchinda's supporters, or key politicians who were collaborating with Suchinda.

Ubonrat notes that in 1992:

For the first time in history, the majority of the press united against state suppression of freedom of expression. Professionalism and press autonomy prevailed over any political patronage.²⁰

The key word here is 'majority'; some elements of the press were not wholeheartedly behind the anti-Suchinda campaign, and others were downright sympathetic towards Suchinda. Political patronage may not have prevailed in the May crisis, but it was still an important issue. The anti-Suchinda role of the Reporters' Association of Thailand during the May events represented the stance of one particular group.²¹ Then RAT President Banyat was known to sympathise with the anti-Suchinda protests. Certain newspapers, notably *The Nation*, *Phujatkan* and *Naew Na*, took the lead in resisting Suchinda. *Phujatkan* was closely allied with the political enemies of the NPKC, whilst *Naew Na* enjoyed strong personal ties with the opposition New Aspiration and Palang Dharma parties. *The Nation* stood out as the leading anti-Suchinda newspaper, adopting a clear liberal stance largely on the basis of ideological and principled opposition, rather than

²⁰ Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'The development of a participatory democracy: raison d'etre for media reform in Thailand,' *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 22, 1994, p.105.

²¹ Interview with Chavarong Limpattamapanee, 6 February 1996.

personal connections. This stance was recognised by the international Committee to Protect Journalists, which presented then *Nation* editor Thepchai Yong with an award in recognition of the newspaper's 'courageous and straightforward' stand in reporting the May events.²²

The stance of other major newspapers was much more ambivalent. *Matichon* had close links with the NPKC, and its owner was a personal friend of Suchinda's. Although *Matichon* staff insisted that they were on the 'right' side in May 1992, the public perception of the newspaper was that it could not be trusted in this particular crisis.²³ Similarly with the top-selling newspaper *Thai Rath*. As a recent Thai master's dissertation shows, *Thai Rath* was broadly supportive of the Suchinda premiership, only changing sides when the anti-Suchinda protests built up an irresistible momentum.²⁴ In other words, the stance of the press during the May events was largely a function of the personal alliances of key columnists, editors and owners. The press was far from monolithic. Whilst the print media was infinitely more oppositional than the captive electronic media, the quality of critical coverage in the press varied significantly from one publication to another.

The events of May 1995 are an important counterpoint to those of May 1992. The Chuan Leekpai government (1992-95) was ousted in May 1995 after an intensive campaign against it, led by *Thai Rath* in conjunction with opposition politicians. Pasuk and Baker note that the press became stronger and more sophisticated, as a result of its successful

²² *The Nation*, 23 October 1992.

²³ *Matichon* deputy political editor Pattara Khumphetak expressed irritation at the praise of *Phujatkan's* actions in the May events (such as giving away special issues free), and pointed out that during the demonstrations *Matichon* took out all advertising, ran a 16 page paper (which lost money) full of news, and reported all the events in full. Interview, 4 August 1995.

²⁴ Pajaree Tanasomboonkit, 'Nangsuephim Thai Rath kap kankamnotwarasan khwam khatyaeng thang kanmuang nai hetkan pritsapa 2535', [*Thai Rath* newspaper and the agenda setting of political conflict in the May crisis 1992], unpublished MA dissertation, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 1995.

role in challenging the military during the May 1992 protests. They also declare baldly that: 'The Chuan government (1992-95) was brought down after a campaign by *Thai rat* to expose abuses of a land distribution scheme in Phuket.'²⁵ Thitinan agrees that it was 'not the opposition's efforts, but unrelenting press inquisitions' which led to Chuan's downfall.²⁶ These assertions raise two important questions: how justified was *Thai Rath* in pursuing the land reform issue as it did, and how far could press coverage had been responsible for the demise of Chuan?

The cynical answer to the first question is that *Thai Rath's* campaign against the Chuan government can be related to personal conflicts between the newspaper's owner and the prime minister. When a new government led by Chart Thai party leader Banharn Silpa-archa took over from that of Democrat leader Chuan Leekpai in July 1995, many Thai journalists felt that their lives were about to become more difficult. Banharn and Chart Thai were not felt to have a sympathetic attitude towards an independent-minded press. However, one senior figure in the Thai newspaper world, *Matichon* executive director Pongsak Payakvichien, argued that the opposite was true.²⁷ The *raison d'être* of the Thai press was to oppose governments. This had been extremely difficult during the Chuan period, since the government had been a good one with which most journalists sympathised. Most of the issues on which the government could be criticised were too technical to make good headline material and hard-hitting copy. With the return of a 'bad' government populated by machine politicians of questionable integrity, the press was back in business. The job of exposing the shortcomings of ministers would be a very easy one.

²⁵ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 'Power in transition: Thailand in the 1990s', in Kevin Hewison (ed.), *Political change in Thailand: democracy and participation*, London: Routledge 1997, pp. 33-5.

²⁶ Thitinan, p. 226.

²⁷ Fieldnotes, 11-23 July 1995.

From the perspective of *Thai Rath*, however, the position was rather different. In contrast with most other newspapers, the best-selling popular daily had been opposed to Chuan virtually from the outset. The anti-Democrat stance of *Thai Rath* had to be seen in the context of the position adopted by the newspaper during the April-May 1992 government of Suchinda Kraprayoon. When Suchinda fell from power, the new Democrat-led government was composed mainly of parties which had opposed Suchinda. *Thai Rath's* best connections were now with opposition parties such as Chart Thai and Chart Pattana. Yet the core issue in determining the newspaper's relations with the Democrats was not these personal ties, so much as the attitude which new prime minister Chuan Leekpai adopted towards *Thai Rath*.

Partly as a function of his combination of lowly origins and immense wealth, *Thai Rath* owner Kamphol expected the great and the good of Thai society to appear at his birthday party on 27 December each year. The party, held in a banqueting hall at his home, was usually attended by several hundred guests. No invitations, however, were issued. Instead, those whose presence was expected at the party were informed by the relevant *Thai Rath* reporter. Senior politicians, including the prime minister of the day, would always be expected by Kamphol to attend. Their attendance was an indication of their willingness to 'suhok' Kamphol, to pay their respects to him and acknowledge his importance. To fail to attend would be to snub Kamphol, and thus to invite his wrath. As Abhisit Vejjajiva—who served as government spokesman under Chuan from September 1992 to December 1994—explained:

Thai Rath has been a very, very influential force in politics, and you just have to witness this birthday party with all the biggies, from every circle, not just political, who have to pay respects to him. Chuan is not that kind of man... he doesn't think it's necessary for him to do that, and he thinks that he has to do things in a straightforward way; if they didn't like it they would criticise him, and if they stepped over the line he'd take them to court, and that's what happened.²⁸

²⁸ Abhisit Vejjajiva, interview, 31 January 1996.

Anand Panyarachun had also refused to attend Kamphol's parties, but Anand (who served two short terms as prime minister in 1991 and 1992) was an unelected appointee who did not have to contend with party political opposition. Despite three requests to attend Kamphol's birthday party in 1992, Chuan failed to show up, preferring to keep another engagement in the South. A similar pattern followed in 1993 and 1994. Thus from early on in Chuan's premiership, he found himself at loggerheads with *Thai Rath*.

This conflict was also symbolised in his decision to sue *Thai Rath* columnist Santi Viriyarangsarit (known as 'Typhoon') for suggesting in his 11 May 1993 column that Chuan was dictatorial, and implying that he had ordered violent action to be taken against farmers protesting in Kamphaeng Phet province.²⁹ It was unusual for a serving prime minister to sue a newspaper, especially such a powerful one as *Thai Rath*, and Chuan's decision amounted to a declaration of hostilities. From early 1993 onwards, *Thai Rath* was looking for an issue on which to mount a major campaign against the Democrats. When that issue presented itself in the form of the Sor Por Kor land reform scandal, *Thai Rath* did not hesitate to put the boot in, 'locking' the story onto its front page for six months. As Abhisit put it:

By the time of the land reform issue, anybody who follows politics could expect to see that they saw in *Thai Rath*. Of course they would do that because they don't like the Democrats. So in a way by sort of declaring an open war, *Thai Rath* didn't have the status of being a neutral and straightforward newspaper, and so people who had read *Thai Rath* would have that in mind.

It is impossible to prove that the presence of several former close associates of Chart Thai Party leader Banharn Silpa-archa among the senior editorial team of *Thai Rath* had anything to do with the 'open war' declared by the paper on the Democrat administration. The picture was complicated by the fact that important figures at the newspaper, including political editor Pramote Fai-uppara, retained close personal ties with the

²⁹ *Thai Rath*, 14 May 1993.

Democrats. Indeed, at a private party for the *Thai Rath* political team on the night of 22 April 1995, Democrat Party secretary-general and Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasat was the guest of honour—one of the only outsiders present. The *Thai Rath* campaign against the Democrats over the land reform scandal was then at its height. Sanan gave a speech in which he promised to protect the newspaper from its enemies,³⁰ and described how torn he felt between his attachment to the Democrat Party and his deep affection for *Thai Rath*. Senior members of the political team gave replies, speaking of their admiration for the Democrats, Sanan himself, and prime minister Chuan Leekpai.

Nevertheless, the onslaught against the Democrats mounted by *Thai Rath* over the land reform issue was a formidable one. Coverage of the story, which began on 23 November 1994, was 'locked' onto the front page and carried in immense detail. The November and December coverage of the story alone—as pasted up, bound, and submitted for the Reporters' Association prize for best environmental story of 1994—came to several hundred A4 pages.³¹ Chuan resisted calls by some elements in the Democrat Party to sue *Thai Rath* over its hostile coverage of the issue.³² When the Chuan government collapsed on 19 May 1995, Palang Dharma Party leader Chamlong Srimuang remarked in a radio interview that any story which ran on the front page of the newspapers every day for six months had to have some basis to it.³³

Other newspapers, such as *Matichon*, were much less forceful in their criticisms of the Democrats over the land reform scandal, in part because of their good relations with Chuan and other senior Democrat leaders. At the same time, some commentators

³⁰ The newspaper's 'enemies' might have included some southern Democrat MPs, including former deputy agriculture minister Suthep Thueksuban.

³¹ Despite this comprehensive coverage, *Thai Rath* failed to win the prize; the newspaper's treatment of the land reform issue was generally seen as too biased.

³² *Bangkok Post*, 3 May 1995.

³³ *The Nation*, 20 May 1995.

defended *Thai Rath*'s decision to declare open season on Chuan over land reform. Chatcharin Chaiyawttn argued that this was a really substantive political issue, which other newspapers failed at first to pursue because of their partiality for the Democrats.³⁴ Many parliamentary reporters agreed that the land scandal was a real issue, not simply one manufactured by *Thai Rath*. Certainly, *Thai Rath* was not the only source for criticism of Democrat handling of the land reform issue. The press derived much of its information from the 'Group of 16' MPs (most of whom were members of Chart Thai), a group of young, aggressive and highly ambitious political boover boys led by Newin Chidchob. Some of the information was leaked by officials from the government land reform agency, who were appalled by the abuses that were taking place. Many academics, intellectuals, and NGO activists (notably the Confederation of Democracy, a key group in the May 1992 events) were intensely critical of the Chuan government over land reform, and their views were widely reported and echoed in many sections of the media. Technically, Chuan was defeated by the collapse of his coalition, but the press (led by *Thai Rath*) undoubtedly assisted in bringing about that collapse. Given that the Chuan administration was replaced by a less progressive, more corrupt, less competent and generally far more distasteful government (the Banharn government of July 1995 to November 1996),³⁵ the wisdom of the press in helping hound the Democrats from office may be questioned.

This close scrutiny of the Thai press in relation to the events of May 1992 and May 1995 reveals both positive and negative features of its political role. The Thai press emerges as an extremely partisan political actor, pursuing agendas of its own based largely on personal ties and connections. Where the weight of those connections (coupled with wider political trends) favoured a 'positive' outcome (from the perspective of

³⁴ Chatcharin interview, 7 February 1996.

'democratisation'), the net contribution of the press might support positive developments (such as the ouster of Suchinda in 1992). However, where the weight of those connections and wider political trends supported a 'negative' or retrograde outcome, then the press could actually exert a malign influence (such as the replacement of the relatively competent Chuan government with the hopelessly inept Banharn government in 1995). The role of the press in Thailand is highly situational: sometimes progressive, and sometimes just the opposite. Even in a society as open as Thailand's, the media can be bought off or toned down by a variety of state or non-state actors. In short, the press is not a trustworthy political actor that can be relied upon to support political liberalisation or democratic transition. The May 1992 events trained the Thai press in how to bring down governments, a trick that the press successfully repeated in 1995, 1996 and then 1997. The more difficult long-term task of supporting democratic consolidation has largely eluded them. As Randall observes concerning the role of the national media in democratic transitions:

Generally they have responded eagerly to the new democratic openings and opportunities, but have been better at knocking down the old regime than in positively shaping the new.³⁵

Nowhere is this observation more apposite than in the case of Thailand. Following the end of Democrat rule in 1995, the governments of Banharn Silpa-archa (1995-96) and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996-97) proved themselves willing to silence critical voices in the electronic media. When Thailand ran into serious economic trouble in July 1997 (and had to be bailed out by the IMF), the media business suffered a severe recession, many publications and radio stations closed down, media ownership was narrowed, and the range of views expressed in the media was greatly curtailed.

³⁵ On relations between the media and Banharn government, see Gordon Fairclough, 'Free to air', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 November 1995.

³⁶ Randall, p. 644.

Indonesia: information age destroys Suharto?

President Suharto of Indonesia lost power in May 1998, forced out by a combination of international and domestic political and economic forces. Suharto had ruled Indonesia from 1966. His semiauthoritarian 'New Order' regime (based on strong support from the military) derived much of its legitimacy from relatively successful economic development, though tightly controlled elections were permitted. At various junctures during the final years of the Suharto regime, the Indonesian press performed each of the three alternative modes of agency: stability, restraint, and change. Much of the Indonesian press was engaged in the kind of essentially uncritical 'development journalism' favoured by the authorities, serving primarily as an agent of stability.³⁷ Suharto ensured that the press was limited in its criticisms of the New Order by using a variety of methods: formal and informal censorship, bannings (both temporary and permanent) of publications which overstepped the mark, a strict licensing regime for all news publications, and monitoring and control of journalists through a state-sponsored journalists' association, the PWI.³⁸

The result was a press that constantly walked a difficult tightrope, forced to make accommodations with the ruling order. A prime example was the leading newsweekly *Tempo* (modelled on the American *Time*) one of three publications banned in 1994. After

³⁷ See Duncan McCargo, 'Killing the messenger: the 1994 press bannings and the demise of Indonesia's New Order', *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 4, 1, 1999, pp. 29-47.

³⁸ For detailed accounts, see David T. Hill, *The press in New Order Indonesia*, Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1994, and Yasuo Hanazaki, 'The Indonesian press in an

the banning, *Tempo* was hailed internationally as a brave, critical publication cruelly snuffed out by an authoritarian regime. This was an oversimplification, however. Asked about his reaction to the banning of *Tempo*, media analyst Daniel Dhakidae explained:

Tempo is part of the New Order thing... it is a part and parcel of the New Order... so why should they ban *Tempo* which is part of their personality, part of the development of Indonesia?... How could they do it, it's impossible, it's like killing one's own self.³⁹

Aristides Katoppo made a similar point, arguing that *Tempo* was 'really the product of the Establishment. You cannot say that *Tempo* was the opposition'.⁴⁰ *Tempo* chief editor Goenawan Mohamad himself acknowledged that *Tempo* could best be seen as a 'mainstream' publication.⁴¹ He argued for a more nuanced understanding of the magazine, rejecting both establishment and antiestablishment labels: 'it's very hard to say that *Tempo* is radical and it's even harder to say that it's progovernment'. Instead, *Tempo* was a 'polyvalent' publication, 'many voices, many colours, inside one publication', changing over time depending on a variety of factors, including the demands of its readers. He explained *Tempo*'s relations with the government, especially during the magazine's early years, as follows:

Our strategy was not to be close to the government, but not to be distant from it—for the sake of power, access to information, we had to be close. And the government itself was not a monolithic one, never was. So you have to keep some distance from certain elements of the government, and keep some proximity to some elements.... we always had a problem with the security branch of government, not because we were radicals, no, because we wanted more stories.

Early *Tempo* was broadly aligned with the technocratic policies of the original New Order and its 'Berkeley mafia', which emphasized the rational management of economic

era of *Keterbukaan*: a force for democratisation?' Unpublished PhD thesis, Monah University, 1996.

³⁹ Interview with Daniel Dhakidae, head of *Kompas* research department, 11 August 1997.

⁴⁰ Interview with Aristides Katoppo, former chief editor of *Sinar Harapan*, a daily banned in 1986, 15 July 1997.

⁴¹ Interview, 4 August 1997.

issues.⁴² The New Order was in no sense monolithic: rather, it was semi-porous, and *Tempo* sought out leaks and openings wherever possible. Herry Komar, a former *Tempo* journalist who became chief editor of the new magazine *Gatra*, argued that *Tempo* always supported the government.⁴³ It contained 'critical content' on certain issues, and there were divergences of political views among the editorial team, but much of the focus of reporting was the coverage of government activities. *Tempo*'s mission was to communicate political developments to the people. Another ex-*Tempo* staffer spoke of the excitement of the early period of the New Order, the sense of being involved in a new beginning for Indonesia after the mismanagement and chaos of the late Sukarno years.⁴⁴

By 1994, the New Order was not so new any more—but almost thirty years old. *Tempo* had become more questioning and more critical, as the Suharto regime (itself, of course, like *Tempo*, always containing many voices) was becoming less rational, and more centered on the President personally. Despite being an old and trusted friend of the New Order, *Tempo* was banned. The banning of *Tempo* did not demonstrate a simple, black-and-white clash between the forces of state power and the challenge of critical journalism. Rather, it illustrated that a newsmagazine could play multiple roles and speak with multiple voices that changed over time. *Tempo* was a political actor, which could act in support of stability, restraint, or change in different weekly issues, or even within a single issue. In order to operate within the New Order, *Tempo* had to engage in a constant process of adaptation, according to rules which were never entirely explicit. Rather like the Catholic Church during the Marcos regime, *Tempo* was more often a 'critical collaborator' than an out-and-out critic of the government,

⁴² 'Berkeley mafia' is a term often used for a group of key economic ministers from the early period of the New Order. They all held doctorates from the University of California, Berkeley.

⁴³ Interview, 12 July 1997.

⁴⁴ Interview, 12 August 1997.

During the last weeks of the Suharto regime in April and May 1998, critical reporting (for example, by the English language daily *Jakarta Post* and the outspoken weekly *Detektif & Romantika*) served as an agent of change, helping to undermine the ailing New Order. This is not to suggest that an increasingly vocal Indonesian media directly brought down the government in 1998. Indeed, the media itself was always polyvalent, reflecting the cracks and fissures that existed within the New Order regime. When Suharto could not bear to hear the sounds of dissent and discord inside his own camp, he punished the messengers who brought him the news. The permanent closure of three weekly publications (*Tempo*, *Detik*, and *Editor*) in 1994 showed that Suharto was beginning to lose its grip on power. An intolerable proportion of the polyvalent voices were now critical ones. Suharto installed his own cronies as owners of two new publications to replace the banned weeklies, hoping to limit the capacity of the media to undermine his regime.

When that demise came, however, much of the impetus was external. The economic pressures that brought about the collapse in the value of the rupiah, and the subsequent restructuring forced upon Suharto by the IMF, undermined the rhetoric of successful economic development which had been crucial in legitimating the New Order. Suharto was not simply toppled by a vocal civil society, by a domestic 'subestablishment' opposition. Such an opposition existed, but gained the confidence to mobilize only when the regime had already been badly wounded during earlier rounds of combat with international investors and with the Bretton Woods institutions. Domestic opposition to Suharto took heart from critical coverage in the western media, from the solidarity expressed by Indonesians living and studying abroad, and from other sources that might be described as an 'international civil society'. Yet such an international civil society had long existed, a global community of Indonesia-watchers expressing critical views on

issues such as the New Order's human rights record, and the regime's handling of East Timor. The existence of such a community contributed to the demise of the Suharto regime, yet international civil society was powerless without a strong combination of international and domestic economic pressures, working in conjunction with domestic political protest. During April and May 1998, a barrage of critical reporting in the international press, coupled with pockets of critical reporting in the domestic press, along with information posted on internet, were all factors which contributed to the demise of Suharto.

Nevertheless, the end of the Suharto regime did illustrate the extent to which the New Order's understanding of the media was captive to outdated ideas of national sovereignty. John Keane has argued that: 'Our globe is beginning to resemble the *form* of the medieval world, in which the political powers of the monarch or prince were forced to share authority with a variety of subordinate and higher powers'.⁴⁵ Central to Suharto's demise was his preoccupation with the maintenance of absolute sovereign authority, his unwillingness and inability to coexist either with higher powers (such as the IMF), or with subordinate powers, such as a more outspoken press reflecting divisions in his regime, and in Indonesian society. By refusing to allow the Indonesian press to evolve from serving as an agent of stability to functioning as an agent of restraint, Suharto may actually have destabilized the New Order. The kind of restraining influence practised by *Tempo*, *Editor* and *DeTik*—alerting both rulers and readers to important tensions within the elite—actually served valuable purposes for the regime. But Suharto refused to read the message, choosing instead to kill the messenger. By viewing the

⁴⁵ John Keane, 'The crisis of the sovereign state' in Marc Raby and Bernard Dagenais (ed.), *Media, crisis and democracy: mass communication and the disruption of social order*, London: Sage, 1992, p. 30.

press merely as a threat to be neutralized, Suharto failed to heed the weeklies' warnings of his own weakening power.

Conclusion

Isagani Serrano rightly notes that:

(The) media have been important in deciding the outcomes of dramatic social changes in Asia-Pacific. Certainly, media played a role in galvanising people's responses, in deterring dictators from engaging in mass slaughters in the Philippines, South Korea, Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand and elsewhere.⁴⁶

Yet several recurrent themes emerge from a close scrutiny of the media role during 'democratic transitions' in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. In the political upheavals discussed:

- The media serves as a sophisticated political actor in its own right, not simply serving the agendas of the state, the public interest, or of opposition movements
- Generalising about the media role is almost impossible. The electronic media typically proves easier for the state to control; support for political change tends to come from minority sections of the media, often newspapers
- Even individual publications are often polyvalent, articulating contrasting perspectives even in the very same issue.
- This polyvalence reflects the multiplicity of stakeholders in a given media outlet.
- In some cases, a simple conflict between state power and media freedom remains the central area of contestation.
- However, in many Southeast Asian cases the picture is vastly more ambiguous, and the issues are far more complex and subtle.
- Frequently, editors, columnists and reporters enjoy close (often financial) relationships with a range of power-holders from different elements of the elite.

- The media often rises to the challenge during a political crisis, when there is an explicit 'fire-fighting' role to perform.
- Evidence that the media led or initiated political transitions is patchy (though a case can be made for the demise of the Chuan government in 1995).
- For the most part, the role of the media in political transitions is a supporting one.
- When the crisis is over, the media may decline in effectiveness as an institution of civil society.
- Media institutions are untrustworthy political actors, capable of supporting political liberalisation at one juncture, but undermining an elected government at the next.

Much more work needs to be done on the political role of the media in times of transition. This field of study has been largely occluded, for reasons outlined at the beginning of the paper. A preliminary discussion of some actual political transitions quickly calls attention to the inadequacy of most research in this field: media practitioners are inclined to overstate their own importance, communications specialists are inclined to depoliticise media activity, and political scientists tend to discount the media's role. Western understandings of media do not translate well to Southeast Asian contexts, and crude Third Worldist paradigms preoccupied with images of state censorship and repression fail to do justice to the complex realities of media ownership and control in the region. Apprehending the political role of Southeast Asia's media in democratic transitions requires a nuanced approach, based on uncovering multiple layers of ambiguity.

⁴⁶ Serrano, p. 62.

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