

More and more Asian newspapers are being made to conform as petty bureaucrats assume new role of intimidators and censors.

PRESSURES ON ASIAN EDITORS

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Editors and publishers in most countries of non-communist Asia are probably facing their most difficult period since the liberation struggles were won.

We have now reached a point in many countries where we may further jeopardize the remaining traces of freedom enjoyed by an editor simply by naming him and stating his problems.

Cholera, yaws and beriberi spread fast in Southern Asia. Government attempts to trammel and subjugate the press have been just as infectious.

The spectacular extreme has been achieved by the Soekarno government of Indonesia. Six or seven years ago, there were more than a score of daily and weekly papers expressing a vigorous variety

of viewpoints, from extreme left to extreme right. Today, the Indonesian press is entirely gagged. It is harnessed to the chariot wheels of the Soekarno machine and virtually nothing can be read in it which can embarrass members of the government or the bureaucracy.

Pretences abandoned

In Indonesia, even the pretences have been abandoned. The national news agency has been controlled and is dominated by cabinet ministers. Yet, in other Asian countries with more subtlety and heed for appearances, a variety of pressures are being used to force the courageous, exposing, protesting editor into line.

In one country, relatively renowned for freedom of the

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press, there have been minatory remarks about powers enjoyed by the chief executive to control political columnists and those who publish their writing. In another, a couple of quite mild and strictly fair objections to government policy have led to presentation of demands for books and tax returns going back a number of years. The amount of information demanded alone can militate against effective working of this newspaper.

What is even more alarming to many Asians publishers and editors is the emergence of the provincial or local civic boss and his chief bureaucrats as intimidators and censors. The matter is often not known to the central government but there are police raids at night, threats and occasionally physical violence against editors and correspondents. Official "warmings", which are nothing short of blackmail, have become increasingly common.

What seems most alarming in several countries is that the situation has now deteriorated so far that the wronged newspapers and news-

papermen dare not disclose their hardships to the rest of the press at home or abroad. Worse still, there are large areas where their colleagues, knowing and resenting what is being done, are still too fearful to publish the facts.

If one might draw a rough graph of overall freedom of the press in non-communist Asia, it might be shown to have climbed steeply and cheerfully from about 1947 until six or seven years later. Then there was a marked leveling-off and, ever since, I fear, an undeviating but perceptible downward trend in the majority of areas.

It is very easy and most unhelpful for the overseas visitor to criticize.

The surprising and heartening thing is that in towns and cities all over Asia, there are still so many publishers, editors and working journalists, fiercely conscious of the threat, courageously resisting it and looking around for new armholds and support in their fight against the current.

However, when you get below the surface, you find that a similar pattern of news-

paper behaviour has helped in the undermining of the press by totalitarian-minded politicians.

Among familiar factors damaging the press are: —

- a) Blackmarketing of news-print and faking of circulation and, therefore, consumption figures;
- b) Soliciting of central government, city or municipal advertising.
- c) Suppression of matter embarrassing to the groups supported by the paper;
- d) Irresponsible reporting.

None of these activities are unknown in western countries with far older traditions of press conduct and press freedom.

It would be utterly wrong to suggest that the South Asian press as a whole bears responsibility for the gradual but general whittling down of its freedom by the political authority, particularly in the last two or three years.

It is easily understood that the great nationalist leader, who has been a champion of freedom of the press in the days of "colonial" domination, finds it awkward and embarrassing when his political opponents use this free-

dom of the press to criticize measures which he sincerely believes to be in the best interests of his emergent people.

The tempting example of the world's various dictatorships is always at hand. In Southern Asia today, many political leaders, both military and non-military, are inclining to the view that freedom of the press is a nineteenth century luxury which has no relevance amid the desperate needs of twentieth century Asia. They are now unmindful of the disasters which befell those masters of a muzzled press, the dictatorial governments of nazi Germany, Italy and Japan, destroyed in the 'forties'.

It is extremely grim that, in 1962, one should find, in countries which nominally still pretend to freedom, an editor who looks you in the eyes and says:

"I never know, when I leave home in the morning, if I shall see my wife and children again in the evening."

or "I expect several of us, including myself, will have to go to jail before things are any better."

There are still informed, thinking liberals in Asian cabinets and even in the military cabals that now enjoy complete control in several of these countries.

These men realize the dangers to the development of their countries of destroying criticism, controversy and exposure of grievances.

They realize how easily in nations, where there is a great shortage of skills, training and general knowledge, government and bureaucracy, protected from criticism, can obstruct progress and development. The history of Asia, from Turkey across to China, is replete with examples of the damage so done under the empires of old.

But these enlightened men are in a minority. The power-hungry, the unsure, the ambitious demagogues, having once got themselves into the saddle, now prove themselves the first to turn on the healthy criticisms and exposures by the press which often helped them attain office.

In Asia today, these men are increasingly the influential majority. Hence, real and vivid fears, often backed by

bitter personal experience, have invaded scores of newspaper offices and executive desks.

The scared publisher is quickly revealed. His editorials steer clear of "sticky" subjects. Passion and fervour appear only in support of official government projects. Columnists are warned about those banderilla paragraphs which are the spice and highlight of good political columnwriting about the powerful. The opposition parties (where such exist!) get less space.

In short, the paper is at pains to conform. This carefully ordered conformity is the muzzle of total frustration for the conscientious journalist who believes his job is to expose and inform.

Quite apart from the plight of many Asian newspapermen today, this tendency is an immense threat to the solution of free Asia's crying needs during the remainder of the twentieth century. The far-sighted in Asia see this clearly.

How can publishers and editors in the western world strengthen their hands?