

How Singapore Policed the Foreign Press
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By Todd Crowell

Publication in the National Gazette was just one of many tools including contempt of court and libel suits

A few years ago the word “gazetted” was possibly the most feared word for any publication operating in Asia, especially Southeast Asia. The term described the way the Singaporean government policed the foreign press by selectively curtailing or expanding a publication’s circulation within the island republic.

The term “gazette” merely referred to the fact that the circulation curtailment order from the Information Ministry was published in the National Gazette. But as a verb it had a sinister connotation, sort of like being “garroted” or maybe “guillotined.” It was appropriate since a gazetted newspaper or magazine had its circulation cut by more than half.

I was reminded of those days with the marking recently of the 25th anniversary of “Operation Spectrum”, a severe crackdown that the Singaporean government launched against about two dozen of its citizens it said were part of a “Marxist Conspiracy” to turn the island republic into a communist state.

Between 16 and 22 people were jailed under Singapore’s Internal Security Act (ISA), which provides for unlimited detention without trial. Several of the defendants were jailed for a few months, others for a few years, where they claim to have been tortured. The government considered them dangerous agitators intent on overthrowing the government.

Much of the foreign press that was then covering Singapore, including my own magazine, the now-defunct Asiaweek, took the view that the operation was a gross overreaction. The defendants were largely charity or religious workers, and most of the Western press considered them harmless naïfs. That in effect turned Operation Spectrum into an epic freedom-of-the-press struggle.

I arrived in Hong Kong to work for Asiaweek in June, 1987, the same month as the struggle began, and I confess I found the whole thing bewildering at first. I recall being editorial meetings where the name “Harry this” or “Harry that” was bandied about. Who was this Harry? Later I understood Harry was Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. He dropped his English name as a legacy of colonialism. He doesn’t like being called Harry.

The nub of the issue seemed quite arcane. It was whether the Singapore government had the right to publish unedited any official reply to our story in our magazine. Lee put it directly at a memorable appearance before the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondent’s Club, when he said: “When you play on m turf, you play by my rules, and my rules say that we have a right to reply to any attack.”

That would seem reasonable enough, except that any reply had to be run exactly as it was written, regardless of whether we thought the words disingenuous or not. We considered it tantamount to turning our editorial pages over to a foreign government. Following an acrimonious exchange of letters, Singapore lost patience and gazetted us. Our circulation was

cut to a few hundred subscribers - selected by the government.

The Far Eastern Economic Review, faced with a similar order, decided to pull out of the market entirely. The government responded to this by simply printing its own pirated edition. Did it censor the political stories? No way . . . nothing so crude as that. It simply blanked out the advertisements. It seemed to say "Report what you want, but you won't make a profit in our market doing it."

Once I contributed to a wrist-slapping curtailment in an innocuous column of book briefs. The reviewer of a new dictionary of Southeast Asia remarked that the book included the "colorless" foreign minister of Singapore at the time, one S Jayakumar, but not some other personages he felt more important. Singapore authorities took exception to our use of the word "colorless", which they said was "gratuitous disparagement." They cut our circulation for another six months.

To my recollection our magazine stayed gazetted for the rest of the time it published. The government would raise or lower the circulation as it saw fit to reward good behavior or punish bad. One of the editors tried to convince me that he actually welcomed the gazetting, as it created an artificial shortage of the magazine and presumably made it easier and cheaper to gain new subscribers, assuming that we were permitted to do so.

Why did we put up with these indignities? Why didn't we treat Singapore like Myanmar or North Korea or even China, where one expects to get in trouble with the authorities, even expelled from the country? The answer is that unlike Myanmar, North Korea or even China, Singapore is an important market as well as a subject of news for foreign publications. Before we were gazetted, Asiaweek had some 10,000 subscribers in the Lion City, making it our second or third largest market in Asia, a significant share of our total circulation. Other Western publications such as the Review, Asian Wall Street Journal and the Economist, had similar circulations. Singaporeans overwhelmingly read English and have the money to pay for newsmagazines.

Not much has changed in the 25 years since Operation Spectrum. Asiaweek and FEER have ceased publication, but many others, such as Time, Newsweek the Wall Street Journal and others still circulate in the republic, doing their best in a difficult environment. Officially, the government continues to maintain that it is a "privilege and not a right" for foreign publications to circulate in Singapore.

Since 2006 foreign publications have been required to post a large deposit and appoint somebody to represent the publication in Singapore - in other words somebody the government can sue. Just last year a British writer named Alan Shadrake was jailed for six weeks concerning his book, *Once a Jolly Hangman*, critical of the way Singapore enforces the death penalty, especially in cases of trafficking in drugs. The court ruled that the book impugned the integrity of the judiciary.

Meanwhile the government remains unrepentant about Operation Spectrum, releasing a statement to coincide with the 25th anniversary: The purported conspiracy was an attempt "to subvert Singapore's political and social order using communist united front tactics", the Home Ministry stated.

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