

Singapore: Books, videos and upcoming elections

In 2010, the spotlight was again on the city state's judicial system in particular and the state of free expression in general as a Singapore court convicted a British author of contempt of court, gave him a six-week prison term, and fined him for daring to question the integrity of the courts and the city state's capital punishment in his book.

It was no surprise, as the judiciary has been an effective tool of the Singaporean government in the past years to go after critics—whether domestic or foreign—of the city state, its policies and its leaders.

Overall, self-censorship is still the name of the game as the state apparatus makes it clear to everyone that it does not pay to go out of bounds in Singapore. And the laws and the courts make sure anyone in Singapore does not forget this.

City-state's courts

Malaysia-based British author Alan Shadrake was sentenced on 16 November 2010 to six weeks' imprisonment and fined the equivalent of USD15,400 for contempt of court. He was also ordered to pay the equivalent of USD42,000 for legal costs. Shadrake was arrested on 19 July when he visited Singapore for the launching of his book there.

This case stemmed from the publication of his book, "Once a Jolly Hangman: Singapore Justice in the Dock", which discussed the independence of Singapore's courts. Based on court documents, it featured interviews with lawyers, human rights activists, and a former executioner. The book, according to Singapore's Media Development Authority (MDA), is not banned in the city state. But observers noted the difficulty one gets in finding a copy.

An observer from the city state said, "Singapore courts have no tradition of judicial activism and see their role as circumscribed by Parliament's intentions".

Singapore's parliament has been dominated since 1959 by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). With a strong executive branch, government control permeates almost all aspects of life in Singaporean society, from public criticism to gum-chewing. In the words of Lee Kuan Yew, "I do not believe democracy necessarily leads to development. I believe what a country needs to develop is discipline more than democracy."

Media ownership

This quote pervades not only government as a whole, but Singapore media in particular as well. Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), a publicly listed company which is not owned by the state but is closely supervised by government, owns almost all newspapers. Mediacorp, on the other hand, which runs broadcast outlets and one remaining newspaper, is owned mainly by government.

As a Singaporean media observer noted, "News media are closely supervised by the government, which has the power to appoint directors and through them influence the

appointment of editors. Although independently owned, SPH is closely aligned with government; self-censorship rather than overt censorship prevails."

Media laws

To achieve this, the Singapore government enacted laws that ensure media outlets will not cross forbidden boundaries. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act and the Broadcasting Act allow for discretionary licensing of news media. The NPPA also empowers the government to appoint newspaper board of directors.

Other laws that limit freedom of expression include the Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act, the Films Act, the Parliamentary Elections Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Defamation Act and contempt of court laws.

Over the years, contempt of court and defamation charges have been frequently used by authorities against journalists. Singapore officials have won settlements, fines and damages from such media outlets as the "Wall Street Journal", "The New York Times", "Bloomberg", "The Economist", and Dow Jones & Co.

New media

Singapore has a high Internet penetration rate and new media in the city state ostensibly enjoys some democratic space. No political site has been shut down; Singapore blocks only a token list of pornographic/extremist sites.

A Singaporean media observer said, "Blogging and citizen journalism does not encounter prior censorship in the form of discretionary licensing requirements and is therefore a major avenue for alternative expression. There are a handful of influential blogs. However, none of the socio-political/news blogs are commercially viable; they depend on volunteers. As such, they are limited in original reporting and confined mainly to commentary."

However, the government still exercises control over online content in other ways. For instance, Internet service providers (ISPs) are required to register and comply with the MDA's Internet Code of Practice. The MDA is authorized to order ISPs to block websites that are considered a threat to public security, national defense, racial and religious harmony and public morals. This apparently is enough deterrence for bloggers to post comments critical of government.

Banned films

Films and videos are a different matter, however. The online video-sharing site You Tube figured prominently in Singapore in July 2010 after the MDA ordered filmmaker Martyn See to remove from You Tube and from his own website all copies of his film, "Ex-political prisoner speaks out in Singapore" or "Dr. Lim Hock Siew". The MDA, after reviewing the film, classified it as prohibited as per Section 35(1) of the Films Act, which bans films deemed as 'contrary to public interest'.

See said that "Dr. Lim was detained during Operation Coldstore in 1963 and was held for 19 years". Before being taken down on 14 July, See's film recorded 49,903 views in You Tube.

Several of See's films had been banned in past years. One of them, "Singapore Rebel", a documentary on Singapore Democratic Party leader Chee Soon Juan, had its ban lifted only last year. However, another of his films, "Zahar's 17 years", which features Said Zahari who was detained from 1963 to 1979 under the city state's Internal Security Act, remains banned.

These cases of censorship are significant in the light of PM Lee Hsien Loong's promises way back in 2008 of a lighter touch when it comes to new media. After two years, his promises appear to be empty, as "Dr. Lim Hock Siew" only goes to show. It should also be noted that the Films Act still has provisions allowing authorities to ban works that 'distort' political developments, a vague phrase that can easily be abused by authorities.

Outlook

Observers noted that national elections are likely to be held in 2011. "Elections are generally a sensitive time for the media. News outlets come under extra scrutiny both by the public, which expects journalists to report the elections fairly, and by the government, which is hypersensitive about reports that may sway the electorate," said an academic based in the city state.

"The role of the Internet will be closely watched. Since the last elections, more organised blogs have emerged, as well as social media such as Facebook. While it is certain that these will raise the volume of alternative and opposition voices, it is impossible to predict whether this will translate into more seats for the opposition, given the PAP's overwhelming dominance," he added.
