



Singapore's freedom from the press

Douglas Wong, who worked in Singapore for the country's daily *The Straits Times* as well as for the *Financial Times*, reviews a new book on the Singapore government's relations with the media.

Singapore's rulers have long welcomed foreign advisers such as the Dutch economist whose counsel from 1960 included building public housing and not removing the statue of colonialist Stamford Raffles.

Foreign correspondents have been less well regarded. "You are not going to teach us how we should run the country," then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew told one in 1959.

Journalists like Cherian George, whose 10 years with the *Straits Times* yielded one of the best books on contemporary Singapore politics (*The Air-Conditioned Nation* – Landmark Books 2000) and accusations of contempt of parliament from the ruling party, have been more difficult for it to brush aside.

Now a journalism professor at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, George has the credentials (Cambridge degree, Columbia masters, Stanford doctorate) that his country venerates, and the commitment to the public good that his government until recently insisted only world-beating salaries could encourage.

Freedom From the Press; Journalism and State Power in Singapore, his new book, is a must read then for anyone interested in an intelligent understanding of how the city state ticks.

Previous books like *The Media Enthralled* by Francis Seow, a former Singapore solicitor general who was detained without trial after running for parliament as an opposition candidate and now lives in the US, have laid out the mechanics of press control that we all know about: arrests and detentions of journalists, circulation restrictions on foreign media and defamation lawsuits.

George's story of the media in Singapore goes far beyond this and paints a picture – better than any of the critiques by exiles or those pesky foreign correspondents – of a successful, self-satisfied and smug establishment.

Throughout the book, he makes a relentlessly

rational case for the freeing of controls on the press, including the supplication that it is in the regime's own self-interest to have a responsible and credible media rather than the cacophony of online voices whose appeal is partly because of the inability of his former employer to tell the Emperor that his clothes are increasingly out of fashion.

The range of the book – including sections on the Chinese and Malay-language press, for example – allows George to highlight paradoxes of the Singapore government, such as how it flipped from treating Chinese-educated Singaporeans as subversive communists to Confucian defenders of social harmony and community spirit.

In one particularly enjoyable section, he lays out the internal contradiction in the ruling party's ideology that the public is both too irrational for a system not led by self-selected elites, and the font of the regime's legitimacy by wisely choosing it in free elections.

A change of course, might appear to have arrived in Singapore. Belatedly, given the political changes in the Middle East a year ago and closer by in its neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia, both of which have freer media than the city state.

George isn't optimistic that change is imminent, however. The ruling party's form of authoritarianism is intelligent enough to avert catastrophic collapse, he says. "Freedom from the press is part of a political system designed to dampen the impact of public opinion and political competition on governance, thus preserving [ruling party] dominance," he writes. **FC**

Freedom From the Press
Journalism and State Power in Singapore
 Cherian George
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