

academics who teach theoretical analysis. Students of area studies will also find this volume a good read.

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Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore

CHERIAN GEORGE

Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, xiii+272 p.

This multi-disciplinary study of the relationship between the Singapore government and the press comes from the author of one of the most widely cited books on Singapore politics in recent times. Cherian George's first book, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990–2000* (2000), was written for a more general audience, and tackled a range of particular ironies that come about in living in illiberal Singapore. In that earlier book, George already pointed out the fact that while "In liberal democracies, it is all about freedom of the press from the government; in Singapore, it is about the government's freedom from the press" (George 2000, 69). These initial instincts have now fully taken root and blossomed in *Freedom from the Press*, reflecting the author's move from a journalistic milieu to an academic one.

Based on extensive historical research, and balanced with insider anecdotes, *Freedom from the Press* is a nuanced, courageous, and perceptive analysis of the relationship between the Singaporean press and the government. Unlike other more quotidian critiques of the journalists, publications, and the government of the country, George provides a far more thorough critical history and theoretical basis for his observations. Crucially, he also acknowledges his own complicity in the matter, having spent most of his early career as a fairly successful journalist for *The Straits Times*—Singapore's main newspaper. This accounts for the book's greatest strength and weakness: although George is able to reveal the inner workings of the mainstream press in Singapore, he is never really able to completely step outside of the system that he is analyzing. What is apparent though is his unwavering (if somewhat old-fashioned) commitment to the primacy of the

mainstream press and his genuine belief that a more independent press would benefit everyone in Singapore, the authoritarian People's Action Party (PAP) government included. George also extrapolates with ease between the micro and macro implications of the PAP's focus on elite control, noting how the independence of the press is entwined with the country's prospects for growth, dynamism, and creativity. He argues that an independent and professional press is essential for the proper functioning of a democracy since it allows self-determination and collective decision-making by providing a credible source of information that benefits both the citizens and the government.

Singapore has a complex, unique political system and media scene, and by providing a succinct primer on the country at the beginning of the text, *Freedom from the Press* allows non-specialist readers to quickly grasp the key historical and social issues at stake. What follows is a comprehensive look at nearly all aspects of the press industry in Singapore and its inextricable ties to the government. A few elements make this book particularly useful for scholars—George's insider perspective, his careful parsing of the historical context for the arguably dysfunctional relations between the government and the press, his keen grasp of the main theoretical *and* practical elements involved in these relations, and his initial look at the impact of alternative media in Singapore. One criticism that might be leveled against the book is that it too quickly dismisses the broadcast media (television and radio) in the city-state, arguing that it merely provides propaganda for the government. A more balanced and in-depth history and analysis of Singaporean news television and radio remains to be written, but the reader will not find one here. In particular, the implications of running a regional news network (Singapore's Channel NewsAsia) based in Singapore really need to be considered in greater detail for a more complete understanding of Singapore's media landscape. Finally, while he does not explicitly say so, George's book also seems to suggest that only journalists and editors in the print media struggle with government directives and self-censorship on a daily basis, an implication which is clearly untrue.

Aside from these minor caveats, the book does justice to its goal of elucidating the complex and seemingly paradoxical relations between the Singapore government and the press. George's first chapter "Beyond the Singapore Paradox" proposes a more balanced and nuanced view of Singaporean society against more simplistic and polemical rationales for its success. George explains the distortions in the relationship between the media and the public by pointing out how much the government uses its legal and institutional power to selectively intimidate and coerce the news media. He also points out crucially that we must see the press as "an institution enmeshed with others and shaped by historical, cultural and economic forces" (p. 15). This too has been critical to the government's success in shaping a more compliant media landscape since historical actions against the press, cultural conformity in the country, and a vested interest in the country's stability (the press companies have shareholders to be accountable to) have reduced the impulse for confrontational or contentious journalism. George argues that "sustaining a pro-

foundly undemocratic media system does not require corrupt politicians and dishonest journalists. [...] The system's inadequacies are more structural" (p. 21).

In the next chapter: "Journalism Tamed: The Mechanics of Media Control," George provides keenly researched detail on exactly how the government has been able to coerce the media through a mix of ideology, cooptation and legal controls, and how the full weight of the law, its "coercive power underwrites its politest requests for cooperation" (p. 45). He also documents how journalism in Singapore has shifted to "cultivating the public as consumers and investors rather than citizens" (p. 45) by focusing on stories on "lifestyle," entertainment and personal finance. The book's third chapter "Inside the Press: Routines, Values and 'OB' (Out of Bounds) Markers," provides an insider's view on the day to day running of the national newspaper and cautiously critiques the lack of "objective journalism" in the country. George posits that it is not the journalists or editors who lack objectivity; rather, a combination of the exigencies of news production, governmental and popular expectations, and the absence of political pluralism mean that the finished product is often less than satisfactory.

George's book then moves to a wider critique of the Singapore government's policy of elite control. In the chapters "Government Unlimited: The Ideology of State Primacy," and "Calibrated Coercion: The State Strategy of Self-Restraint," George delineates the position of the press in Singapore as "subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government" (p. 74). Summing this up, he recalls the elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew quipping that "While democracy and human rights are worthwhile ideas, we should be clear that the real objective is good government" (p. 77). This belief, he argues, prevents any progress in press reform and the development of a thoroughly informed and committed populace, since the PAP paradoxically infantilizes the population through censorship and expects it to be "rational" and vote for the PAP out of self-interest. Even more interesting is George's concept of "calibrated coercion" which he believes is the PAP's key to continued dominance. Calibrated coercion, which George defines as the government's refusal to use excessive force and violence against its citizens, "minimizes the sense of moral outrage that could be used to mobilize the public against the state [...] reduces the salience of coercion, making consensus seem like the sole basis for stability, thus strengthening hegemony [...] and] preserves incentives for economic production and wealth creation, which rulers need as much as the ruled" (p. 108). Singapore's government is only able to accomplish this form of coercion through the "perfect storm" of a monopoly of power, a history of repression, a restricted political arena and its access through invisible forms of coercion in the form of market forces and technological constraints. The government also practices what George terms "meta-censorship"—the "censorship of information about the exercise of censorship" (p. 115)—making the unknowns completely unknown as it were.

The rest of George's book mostly functions as a more recent chronicle of developments in Singapore's media scene. While, chapter six, "The Harmony Myth: Asian Media's Radical Past,"

provides a historic background to the current media controls, the subsequent chapters “Freedom of the Press: A Cause Without Rebels,” “Alternative Online Media: Challenging the Gatekeepers,” and “Rise of the Unruly: Media Activism and Civil Disobedience” ostensibly go beyond the book’s initial brief of analyzing the print media in Singapore. George provides a fairly comprehensive roundup of the effects of the internet on the availability and reliability of news in the country and also documents a small but growing activist movement. One particularly salient point that he brings out is how the internet functions as a space that unveils the counter-hegemonic conversations that are actually taking place on the island, what he calls the “hidden transcript” of Singaporean life. The revelation of this blackly humorous and irreverent transcript, he argues, has had a powerful psychological effect since “Singaporeans showed one another a different way of relating to their government, not as obedient children, but as citizens who deserved to be treated with respect” (p. 181).

The book’s most ambitious theoretical and wide-ranging ambitions however are reserved for George’s last chapter “Networked Hegemony: Consolidating the Political System.” George posits that the PAP has “embedded itself in dense networks that keep it connected with its mass base, local elites, and global economic actors” (p. 202) to compensate for the limits of its authoritarian style of government. Yet, George argues that networked hegemony has its limitations too, particularly when combined with a weakened press. He ominously concludes his book with a poignant awareness of the unfulfilled potential of Singapore’s five million strong cosmopolitan city, stymied by the PAP’s authoritarian rule and its “single-minded focus on the risk of total failure” (p. 225). *Freedom from the Press* is indispensable for scholars of Singapore’s media landscape, politics and culture. Indeed, it has many interesting theoretical implications for those readers interested in other illiberal societies in the region and beyond.

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