John A Lent

# A cruel deception

## Government and mass media in the Philippines after martial law

When President Ferdinand Marcos signed a proclamation on 17 January 1981, ending over eight years of martial law, *Asiaweek*, catching the mood of many cynics, yawned: 'Next day, the Philippines was still in the southwest Pacific, about 800 kms off continental Southeast Asia.'

Opponents of the administration pointed out that the lifting of martial law was in name only, that one-man rule continued because Marcos retained the power to make law by decree, and that all of his previous decrees remained unless he specifically repealed them. In fact, in 1983, it was reported that many additional 'secret' decrees were signed by Marcos on the eve of termination of official martial law, including one recommending the death penalty for publishers who engage in 'sustained propaganda assaults' on the government (*Index on Censorship*, 4/1983, p. 42).

Observers of the mass media industry were just as pessimistic that a free and independent press would re-emerge. First of all, the decrees remained, including the power of the president to close newspapers. Second, most media were under the control of large groups owned by friends and relatives of Marcos, and new dailies are not on the horizon. As one critic noted, no one in his right mind would invest the needed US$12.8 million to start a new daily, which, under the president's continued powers, would be liable to closure and newsprint controls. Third, most journalists had grown comfortable, frightened or tolerant, not wishing to make waves.

Obviously not all journalists and media were in the latter category. Immediately before the end of martial law, publications such as *We Forum*, *Bulletin Today* and its sisters, *Who* and *Panorama*, and Cebu's *People's Times* were willing to report on subjects and institutions not to the government's liking. As will be seen, some journalists on these publications eventually suffered severe penalties for what they wrote, under what has been called 'pained journalism'.

Consistently outspoken against the government since 1977 was *We Forum*, published first as a weekly and then thrice weekly. Labelling itself the 'National Weekly Forum of Free Expression'. *We Forum* was published and edited by Jose Burgos Jr, a *Manila Times* police reporter when this writer knew him in the mid-1960s. As the opposition voice, the paper had, by 1979, reached a circulation of 22,000, but was still in trouble. In April 1980, Burgos, who had financed *We Forum* with his life savings and the mortgage on his property, announced that the paper might fold because it could not afford to increase circulation with the high costs of newsprint. When public pledges were made, *We Forum* stayed in business. However, that year, the paper, which (along with Hans Menzi's weekly *Who*) had been tolerated by authorities because of its low circulation, felt increased political pressures. Burgos was denied travel clearance to attend a July conference in Hong Kong and was the target of the military which, except for Marcos' veto, would have arrested him.

In late 1982, with mounting criticism from increasingly-vocal opponents, and an economic recession staring him in the face, Marcos again cracked down on dissidents. Opposition sources said Marcos felt confident after his September 1982 United States visit, when President Reagan did not broach human rights violations with him. First hit were labour leaders and the Roman Catholic opposition, but the chief victim was *We Forum*, closed on 7 December, when 10 of its staff were arrested. Actually, the order signed by Marcos included 16 *We Forum* staff members. The charges were subversion and conspiracy to overthrow the government through black propaganda, agitation, and the advocating of violence. The paper was accused of having links with the Communist Party, the New People's Army and the US-based Movement for a Free Philippines, and Burgos was identified as associating with violent groups such as the 'Light-a-Fire' urban terrorists. Besides Burgos and two of his brothers who were staff members, others named in the warrant were former Senator Francisco Rodrigo, former *Manila Times* journalist and professor Armando Malay, and Joaquin 'Chino' Roces, at one time the most powerful man in Philippine communications as owner of the *Manila Times*, its two sister dailies, three radio and one television stations. Roces was accused of masterminding a disinformation campaign to discredit Marcos and forcibly take over the government, and of providing *We Forum* with a press. Although Marcos said he was worried about the rising tide of dissent and a possible assassination attempt, *We Forum* personnel believed he was offended by a story reprinted from the *Philippine News* in New York, implying his numerous World War II medals were not deserved. Still other opponents felt the president made the arrests to placate the military.

Concurrently, a US$4.4 million libel suit was filed against Burgos by wartime comrades of Marcos (Armed Forces adjutant general, Brigadier-General Sinoforoso Duque, former Comelec commissioner Venancio Duque and Attorney Jose Salindong) for the series questioning Marcos' wartime awards.

After being detained a week at Fort Bonifacio, the accused were put under house arrest on orders of Marcos, who said he did so in the spirit of the Christmas season. The president also ordered that printing equipment, which the military wanted confiscated, be released for use by the Burgos family. Upon arraignment on 13 December, the 10 were represented by 30 defence lawyers, led by former Senator Lorenzo Tanada, most of whom saw in the trial an opportunity to fight for press freedom in the Philippines. Protests and pleas came from a number of quarters: the International Press Institute called for the release of the editors and resumption of the paper; the New York Committee for the Protection of Journalists and 50 members of the House of Representatives expressed serious concern over the arrests, and Assembly-man Francisco S. Tatad, earlier fired as Marcos information minister, appealed for presidential clemency. Tatad's replacement, Gregorio Cendana, issued a statement saying the government would prove its case in an open and forthright manner without delay and equivocation. He added that the case would strengthen freedom of speech by confronting those who would subvert the Philippine press by using its 'mantle of prestige and credibility to conspire against the state' — Marcos, at about the same time, directed the authorities to proceed with the speedy trial of Burgos and staff.

When the trial resumed in January 1983, it was described as having a circus atmosphere. Opposition Assemblyman Salvador Laurel was barred a second time

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from serving as defence counsel on the grounds that a constitutional provision disallowed assemblymen from serving in that role. Laurel pointed out that it should be equally wrong for the military to serve as prosecution. One defence lawyer was fined for contempt when he laughed at a prosecutor's remark, while a second was sentenced to two days in jail for calling Marcos a 'super subversive'.

Curiously, the three-year-old trial of Eduardo Olaguer, another Media man accused of masterminding a series of 1979 arsons in what was called the 'Light-a-Fire' movement, resumed at about the time of the *We Forum* incident. Even stranger was that on 13 December, just hours before the Burgos group was to be arraigned, two defendants in the Olaguer case turned state's witnesses and implicated Burgos with 'Light-a-Fire'. The witnesses, executives of Business Day group of companies, said they overheard Burgos discuss anti-Marcos propaganda aims in meetings with Olaguer. The defence charged that the government manipulated the Olaguer case to obtain the evidence it needed on Burgos. It pointed out that on 14 December, all Manila dailies carried identical stories linking the accused in the Olaguer and *We Forum* cases as members of one conspiracy. The four defence attorneys in Olaguer's case were so outraged by the state's witnesses' 'newly fabricated and fantastic story', that they withdrew from the case, which continued to be tried by military court despite the lifting of martial law.

The prosecutor in the Burgos case, Brigadier-General Balbino Diego, continued to argue that *We Forum*, which he said had become the mouthpiece for the Movement for a Free Philippines, had abused freedom of speech by threatening government stability. As the trial continued, one defence attorney said no one took seriously the charge that Burgos was trying to overthrow the government. He believed the arrests were meant to cripple Burgos' freedom of expression by closing his paper.

### *Panorama* and *Bulletin Today*

In late 1982 and early 1983, Marcos engaged other media opponents in a show of strength. At the time of the *We Forum* arrests, six women journalists were summoned to a series of interrogations by the National Intelligence Board. Claiming the interrogations were meant to intimidate, the journalists sought an injunction from the Supreme Court. By early 1983, officials promised to stop interrogating journalists who wrote critical articles about the military, and announced the dissolution of the National Intelligence Board committee in charge of the interrogations.

Although overall pro-government under

Lek Hor Tan

# Courage or collaboration?

**Indonesia: Law, Propaganda and Terror** by Julie Southwood and Patric Flanagan *Zed Press* London 272pp £5.95 paperback

In the early sixties, during the period of 'guided democracy' under President Sukarno, the increasingly powerful Army and the equally strong Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) worked together in a tense and uneasy alliance with the President.

In October 1965, a small group of left-wing Army officers attempted to destroy the army leadership by assassinating a number of senior generals. This attempted coup known as G30S (30 September Movement) was quickly crushed by the Army led by General Suharto. Soon after, the Army also took over President Sukarno's administration. Thus began a massive and violent purge by the Army of people identified as PKI members (or suspected as such) and of everyone affiliated to left-wing organisations.

Various social and religious groups took advantage of the situation and wreaked their revenge on those they believed to be communists or left-wing elements. The result was a bloodbath, unprecedented in the region, and exceeded only by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia ten years later.

In October 1966, the head of the Indonesian state security admitted that more than half a million people were killed. Many independent observers, however, put the number at over one million.

During the killings and in the subsequent years mass arrests of PKI members and sympathisers took place. At least three-quarters of a million people were arrested and detained. Many were reported brutally treated. By 1977, at least 100,000 political prisoners, or 'Tapols', were still being held throughout the country, according to an Amnesty International report (1977). Most Tapols were held without trial and many were used as servants by local military commanders or exploited as forced labour. Most notorious of all was the labour camp on Buru Island.

A few Tapols were eventually tried, but as Amnesty's report shows, 'the courts have never been known to acquit a single defendant, and convictions have been based on the merest shreds of evidence'. Amnesty also adds that the 'cynical use of the courts to try prisoners is merely an attempt by the Indonesian government to present the world with the illusion that they are trying to solve the problem according to established standards of justice'.

Most Tapols were eventually released by 1979, perhaps thanks to wide international concern and constant pressure from human rights organisations such as Amnesty.

In their book, Southwood and Flanagan deal with this period, the Tapols, and much more. Concerning the attempted coup, the authors argue that the PKI leadership was not responsible for the G30S, that it was manipulated by the 'Suharto Group', and that the PKI was made a scapegoat. As for 'the Suharto Coup' and the massacres that followed, the United States, via its various agencies, was either directly or indirectly involved. This is a very serious allegation, but not new in some left-wing circles. This reviewer wonders whether the evidence provided in the book can convince many people that this was really the case. However, the authors are adamant that the United States has always regarded Indonesia as a 'strategic linchpin' of its efforts to defend the 'free world's economic and cultural riches against communism'. Thus Indonesia under the Suharto regime is a form of US neo-colony.

The main theme of the book is the power relations between what the authors call the Dominators (the Suharto regime), the Collaborators (civil servants, parliamentarians, lawyers, journalists, and students) and the Victims (the floating mass, i.e. the rest of the population).

What astonishes most about the book is the authors' sneer (although they deny it) at courageous lawyers, journalists and students who are prepared to work within the system in order to improve it by fighting for human rights, law, and more democracy. Many of them have risked their freedom and their lives. These people, the authors argue, are only 'critical collaborators' for they directly or indirectly function to maintain the system of domination and 'because they have no choice'.

This line of argument on 'critical collaborators' — as on many other aspects of the book — is convoluted and repetitive. The tone is often unctuous and hectoring and the vocabulary loaded with pseudo-sociological jargon; the authors note that 'our use of "collaborationist", like our other descriptive and explanatory categories throughout the book, is intended as a contribution to science, not ideology or politics'. ■

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former military aide Hans Menzi, *Bulletin Today*, and more specifically its lively Sunday magazine, *Panorama*, had given the Marcos administration cause for concern. Two weeks after the closure of *We Forum*, the president threatened to take action against *Bulletin Today* if it did not publish his denial of a letter charging that political prisoners had been tortured. In February 1983, the military followed up by threatening to file charges of 'scurrilous libel' against *Panorama*. As he made his threats, Marcos probably remembered earlier problems caused by *Panorama*. In an incident at *Panorama* nearly two years before, the press had had its boldest show of protest since martial law had begun. In July 1981, the weekly's editor, Letty Magsanoc, had been forced to resign after writing on the pomp of Marcos' inauguration, stating that the president was 'powerless before corruption and the corruptors' and was 'astride the same tired tiger (the discarded and discredited New Society) carrying on under a different name, the New Republic'. Immediately, Publisher Menzi was threatened by government officials with a lawsuit for subversion and libel and given a dressing-down at Malacañang (the presidential palace); he, in turn, had an angry exchange with Magsanoc which led to her resignation. Magsanoc claimed that no major daily, radio or television station carried the story of her resignation, stating, 'from a single violation — my constitutional right to practice my profession — there is now a wholesale violation of Philippine media's right to the freedom they are entitled to as provided for in the Constitution'. The journalists chose to fight their battle, not on the pages of their pro-government papers — in itself a futile effort — but instead from the floor of the National Press Club. NPC personnel rapped the government and publishers who 'subordinate press freedom to profit and political convenience', demanded the abrogation of Presidential Decree No 1737 (Public Order Act), which empowers Marcos to close media whenever 'he may deem necessary', and called for an industry-wide strike in protest at various incidents curtailing press freedom.

*Panorama* had been threatened or censored previously in 1980 and 1981, for writing articles on the murder of a tribal leader who opposed a government dam project and on the victory of opposition candidate Jose Laurel for governor of Batangas.

Some staff members of the parent daily, *Bulletin Today*, have been victims of mysterious circumstances, thought to be related to their work in exposing corruption and unrest. In February 1981, reporter Enrique Dimicali was gunned down while reporting peasant unrest in Tarlac, and Demosthenes Dingcong, also of *Bulletin Today*, was killed in December 1980 while investigating corruption at the state university in Mindanao. Four soldiers were detained in the death of Dingcong. (A third journalist killed in December 1982, was Porfirio Doctor, publisher-editor of the weekly *Nationalist Guardian* of Zamboanga City.)

Antonio Nieva, dismissed as senior deskman of *Bulletin Today* in late 1982, became the 24th journalist in four months to be interrogated by the military when he was arrested in April 1983. Nieva, who had led the first press strike since martial law and was founder/leader of Brotherhood of Media Unions (an association of five newspaper unions formed in March 1983), was arrested for 'suspected links with some elements who seek to destabilise the government' — in this case, 'Kilusang Mayo Uno' (May First Movement), suspected of being a Communist front organisation. He was not allowed bail and could be released only on orders from Marcos. Both the National Press Club and Brotherhood of Media Unions launched 'Free Nieva' campaigns.

## Other control mechanisms

Media-government relationships are affected in other ways, including government-inspired campaigns and appeals, blacklists, inadequate coverage, and discrediting of media enemies.

Officials have for years publicly called for media to support the goals and campaigns of the New Society (New Republic now) and to downplay certain types of content. Perhaps what that has meant was best explained by Information Minister Gregorio Cendana in mid-1983, when he said that, in fostering development and national unity, the Philippines anchors its communications policy on the promotion of a Filipino ideology as enunciated by Marcos. In 1982, and earlier in 1978, that ideology must have included toning down crime news and emphasising economic issues; those were appeals made by the president. On a number of other occasions, most recently in early 1983, Marcos or his information minister led anti-smut campaigns, telling lewd magazines to stop publishing obscenity or face prosecution and warning dailies to stop exploiting sex in movie ads and bold pictures of movie stars in their Sunday supplements.

After five international newspapers and magazines had given the government unfavourable reporting during the Pope's visit in February 1981, an angered Marcos helped set up a directive from senior governmental levels which told advertisers to cease spending money with those media. In early 1982, distribution was blocked of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *International Herald Tribune* and *Far Eastern Economic Review*, because they carried accounts of the disappearance of Marcos' son-in-law.

Numerous instances have been given where the pro-Marcos media have either ignored events or reported them in a slanted manner. The Roman Catholic Church claimed the press gives prominence to stories damaging to its image, without allowing for adequate response. Church authorities have reacted by allowing nuns to reprint church news and to distribute it in churches, cinemas, restaurants and supermarkets. Commenting on this system, Jaime Cardinal Sin said the fastest means of communications in the Philippines are telephone, telegram, and 'tell-a-nun'. The wife of a political leader, and an activist herself, recalled that when 2,000 women marched in a United Democratic Opposition rally which grew to over 17,000 people, there was no radio or television coverage and the press sliced the number of participants to 6,000 or 7,000, at the same time ignoring some of the prominent women involved.

High on the list of Marcos targets has been the foreign press. Repeatedly angered by foreign press dispatches, the administration has joined hands with other Third World nations in accusing the Western press of racially and culturally prejudiced coverage. Cendana said it most strongly in July 1982:

'Rarely can the Western journalist working for a brief period among a people whose colour he subconsciously regards as denoting inferiority, accord such strange people and seriousness and studiousness with which he would regard his own'.

Marcos himself has attempted to get into the news service business, proposing in the late 1970s, the International News Exchange (INEX), which would tell things the way Third World governments see them. In 1980, Marcos approved government funding for INEX, which was conceived as a Manila agency whose copy would be written by government information services of 40 interested nations. The project has not left the drawing board, critics claiming it would serve no real value, except as an 'exercise in which several dozen governments help to fill each other's waste paper baskets'.

More recently, in January 1983, Marcos told ASEAN journalists that their media should be the primary source of information for their own people, adding that the Third World is hostage to the West in information and culture.

At other times, foreign reporters have received the wrath of the government in the form of expulsions, censorship, or libel suits. For example, a Police Constabulary

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provincial commander sued *Newsweek* in 1981, and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* is the object of a 20 million peso suit filed in March 1983 by the police and military for the 'alleged fictitious account' of a 1982 massacre.

The presidential decrees still in place after martial law, coupled with the pro-government nature of media ownership, provide a secure infrastructure for the administration. In fact, Marcos felt secure enough to abolish, two days before the end of martial law, the Philippine Council for Print Media and the Broadcast Media Council, thereby freeing media from watchdog regulatory bodies for the first time since martial law began. In making this move, Marcos said that under the two bodies, the media 'demonstrated their ability to regulate themselves and impose internal discipline', and added that, 'with the destabilisation of the political setup, it was time for the government's participation in news dissemination to end'. The president said this did not preclude media from legal action for violating subversion and libel laws. The demise of the councils meant that to start a newspaper or broadcast station, one need only register with the Securities and Exchange Commission and the National Telecommunications Commission.

Perhaps the councils were part of an overkill in a press atmosphere where decrees and codes abound, one of the most stringent being the National Security Code of 1978. The section on journalists designates as offences:
'uttering, publishing, distributing, circulating and spreading rumours, false news and information and gossip, and causing the publication, distribution, circulation or spreading of the same which cause or tend to cause panic, divisive effects among the people, discredit of or distrust for the duly constituted authorities, undermine the stability of the government and the objectives of the New Society, endanger the public order, or cause damage to the interest of the State'.

Even more serious than the legal codes have been the trends in media ownership. Early in martial law, the newspapers and magazines evolved into four major groups, all owned by friends or relatives of the president. Chief among these media owners has been Roberto Benedicto, Marcos classmate, who was allowed to draw heavy Philippine National Bank loans to expand his Radio Philippines Network to at least 13 television and 31 radio stations. Benedicto was also tied into ownership of Express newspapers. But domination of mass media is only part of the Marcos communications empire. In conjunction with multinational corporations and the US military, the Marcos inner circle dominates the telecommunications industry. Benedicto is the principal domestic partner of Eastern Telecommunications (with the British Cable and Wireless and Western Union International), Oceanic Wireless (with Cable and Wireless), and Nivico and Radio Philippines Network (both with Marubeni Trading Corporation of Japan). Benedicto shares the principal domestic partnership with Ramon Cojuangco, whose wife is a friend of Imelda Marcos. in Domsat (Marubeni is main foreign partner) and with the Philippine government, through Defence Minister Juan Ponce Enrile, in Philcomsat (with GTE and Plessey of England). Cojuangco also is principal domestic partner of Philippine Long Distance Telephone (with GTE and the West German firm, Siemens) and GTE/Philippines (with GTE), while the Ayala family, one of the oldest and most financially extended businesses, owns Globe Mackay Cable and Radio (with ITT) and ITT/Philippines (with ITT). Enrile, besides being part-owner of Philcomsat, is chief partner of Philcom (with RCA).

Although a martial law ruling states that all mass media establishments must be 100% Filipino-owned, advertising and public relations agencies were exempted as being only media-related. However, that is about to change. In 1982, a new group of Philippine advertising agencies (Federation of Filipino Communicators) sought a ruling from the justice minister to overturn the exemption. They complained that multinational advertising agencies were cornering the lucrative government accounts, while Manila dailies waged a campaign against public money being spent in foreign agencies such as Dailey and Associates, J Walter Thompson and McCann-Erickson.

Have the mass media opened up — become tougher *vis-à-vis* government — since martial law was abandoned in 1981? Hardly. With most of the authoritarian policies and practices still intact, not much has changed in the overall picture of the big media, prompting one to remember a quote from opposition leaders the late Benigno Aquino and Raul Manglapus: 'Lifting of martial law without dismantling the institutions of dictatorship is a cruel deception.'■

## Israel

### Samih al-Qasim

# Slit lips and other poems

## The work and experience of a Palestinian poet living in Israel

*Samih al-Qasim is a poet who lives and works in Haifa. Born in 1939, his first collection of poems appeared in 1958. His second book,* Songs of the Alleys *(1965), was 'full of empty pages. The censors cut whole poems, parts of poems, or individual lines' (see the interview with him and Emile Habibi in* Index *4/1982). In 1967 while in prison during the Six Day War he joined the Israeli Communist Party. He decided not to submit his next work* Waiting for the Thunderbird *(1968) to the censor and he was arrested.*

*The poems which follow are from an anthology* Three Arab Poets *(Samih al-Qasim, Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish) to be published in 1984 by Saqi Books. They are preceded by a short interview. This was given on 18 June 1983 when Samih al-Qasim was one of several writers who took part in a series of readings entitled 'Voices at Curfew'. The interviewer is the Yemeni writer Abdullah al-Udhari.*

ABDULLAH AL-UDHARI **As a Palestinian poet living in Israel, are you able to write with the same freedom as Jewish writers?**

SAMIH AL-QASIM I must confess that the word 'censorship' means a lot to me, because I have had terrible experiences with Israeli censorship. I don't believe that Jewish writers are free under the Israeli regime. You may have heard of two outstanding Jewish playwrights, Hanoch Levine and Yeshuwa Sobol whose plays were recently censored and banned from the stage. So talking about freedom and democracy in Israel is pure hypocrisy. I can write and read a poem against Menachim Begin, according to Israeli law, but according to the same law, Menachim Begin can confiscate the land on which I stand to read my poems. And he does that. Personally I prefer the worst regime in the world to the *beautiful* Israeli law.

**Unlike many other Palestinian writers you have chosen to remain in your own country.**