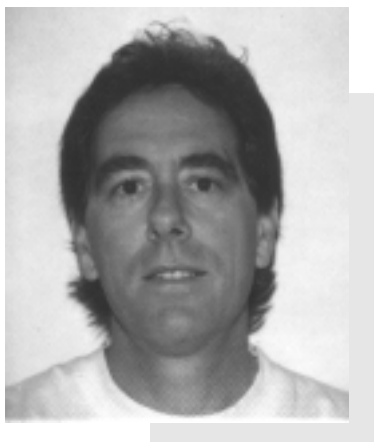


# Thaksin's Clamp on Media: Emulating Singapore?

By Garry Rodan



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**I**n a region where independent critical media are either not tolerated or remain underdeveloped, Thailand has been a notable exception in Southeast Asia. That makes recent attacks on international and domestic media by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and local authorities all the more significant. Furthermore, they have been accompanied by public expressions of admiration by Thaksin for the political system and control of opposition within Singapore. This has raised concerns that attacks on the media are symptomatic of a wider political worldview by Thaksin that could jeopardise democratic consolidation in Thailand.

Emulating the slick authoritarianism practiced in the city-state would be an especially tall order for Thaksin. The political pluralism and civil society space already established in Thailand would not only have to be extinguished, but replaced by new organisations facilitating political co-option. But he would not be the first Asian leader to find inspiration, and indeed instruction, in the Singapore model of how to tame the media. In particular, Lee Kuan Yew's demonstration of the vulnerability of media organisations to pressure on the bottom line has been noted by numerous authoritarian governments, and part of Thaksin's strategy to quell critical media draws on this lesson.

The incident that attracted most attention was the threatened expulsion of two *Far Eastern Economic Review* journalists, Shawn Crispin and Rodney Tasker, in response to a short article of about 150 words in the 10 January issue dealing with relations between Thaksin and King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The journalists, and the *Review's* Hong-Kong based editor, Michael Vatikiotis, were labeled national security threats and placed on a list of 46 'dangerous' foreigners by Thai immigration police.

Thaksin condemned the article as showing disrespect for the monarchy. However, the real 'crime' was drawing attention to the King's critical observations about business links between Thaksin and the King's son, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. Already, in the course of his birthday speech, the King had referred to what he regarded as Thaksin's double standards and egoism. Highlighting a rift between Thaksin and the popular monarch is unlikely to have been appreciated by the Prime Minister. The *Review* and another Dow Jones-owned publication, the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, had produced various articles in recent times drawing connections between Thaksin's political maneuvers and his extensive business interests. By now Thaksin may have felt a strong message needed to be sent.

A subsequent article in *The Economist* that referred to potential troubles for the Royal family and potential political impacts also led to the halting of distribution of that issue. Given that a similar expose published some time back by the *Review* encountered no problems then, Thaksin's ascent to power appears to have made a difference to how authorities respond to such pieces.

Meanwhile, other pressures have been applied to journalists and media organisations of late. Thailand's Anti-Money Laundering Office, normally deployed to investigate drug traffickers and fraudsters, has been delving into the bank accounts and financial affairs of many senior journalists or their relatives, as well as non-government organisational activists and opposition party leaders. When uncovered in March, this exercise brought howls of protest from the Thai Journalists' Association that also sought a court order to halt what it viewed as a blatantly political probe.

In the same month, military-owned radio stations dropped the use of news programmes provided by the Nation Multimedia Group following broadcasts of an interview with critics of Thaksin's government. The daily newspaper, *The Nation*, which belongs to the same group, has been a consistent critic of what it has described as shallow populism, nepotism and cronyist tendencies under Thaksin.

In other developments, advertising by both the government and Thaksin's own companies has been withdrawn from newspapers critical of Thaksin. Major publications affected by this include Thailand's daily newspapers *The Bangkok Post*, *The Nation* and *Matichon*. Thaksin's companies initiated this process during the campaign for the January 2001 general election. In one case, where this proved

unviable, Thaksin simply purchased Independent Television (ITV) and sacked critical journalists.

It is in the withholding of advertising revenue, and in the blocking of distribution, that Thaksin's attempts to combat media criticism most resonate with the effective methods adopted in Singapore. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the termination of journalists' visas, arrest under the Internal Security Act and the dissolution of entire newspapers were means for quelling critical media in the city-state. But since the late 1980s the emphasis shifted to commercial pressures. One aspect of this has been the use of the legal system to inflict hefty fines through defamation, libel and contempt of court cases. The other aspect is restricting the level of circulation, rather than outright banning of publications, which undermines the attraction of publications to advertisers. This commercial discipline has fostered widespread self-censorship among media organisations wishing to retain access to Singapore's markets.

Authorities and politically connected business tycoons in Malaysia had already taken note of these techniques before Thaksin's recent initiatives. In the last few years there has been a spate of massive legal suits taken out against media organisations and opinion piece writers. The Home Affairs Ministry has also delayed nearly every major current affairs magazine at some time or other in response to critical reporting. When approval finally comes through, the editions affected are often more than a month out of date. This technique has been exercised in recent months against numerous editions of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Newsweek* and *Time*.

Although all of this has resonance with Singapore, it is clear that these larger, more diverse political systems will not be able to simply replicate a Singapore model of control. Replicating the same degree of discipline of media control as in Singapore would require the development of a mutually reinforcing set of institutions comprehensively subordinated to ruling party interests. There are no cracks in the Singapore system. This brand of foolproof state corporatism is unmatched in the region. While Thaksin admires the Singapore political model, significant opposition and civil society groups will oppose its implementation in Thailand. Nevertheless, the Singapore model will continue to inspire Thaksin and other proto-authoritarian leaders. It will offer guidance on how to move some way towards an authoritarian ideal that the city-state's leaders seem to have come closest to.