Singapore picks its ground for showdown over Western values

In the Asian vanguard it seems there's no room for a free press.

THE actions of the Singapore Government have long been regarded in the West with a mixture of amusement and admiration. From the banning of long hair and chewing gum to the recent caging of an American juvenile, Singapore has either been portrayed as some sort of Orwellian Salt Lake City of the South Seas or as the last bastion of decent values.

The latest incident to capture attention involves yet another clash with the international press and a court action whose five defendants include an Australian, Michael Richardson, the Asia editor of the International Herald Tribune. It is no trivial matter, however, and one with implications for Australia beyond the fact that one of its citizens is involved.

The controversy springs from an article published in the IHT on October 3, 1994, by an American academic, Dr Christopher Lingle, an employee of the National University of Singapore at the time. In this article it was observed that, among the different tactics used by authoritarian regimes in South East Asia to suppress dissent, one relies upon "a compliant judiciary to bankrupt Opposition politicians". The Singapore response was immediate and resolute.

Following questioning by the police and amid speculation that he would be charged with criminal defamation, Lingle returned to the United States and prematurely resigned his university post. Prime Minister Ong Chok Tong proclaimed that Lingle could expect the judiciary to "thrive the book at him" if there was a basis for such charges. The spotlight was then turned on the IHT and Michael Richardson. On December 10, the IHT attempted to define the situation by dissociating itself from any inference that Singapore was the target of Lingle’s reference. This retreat came hot on the heels of a similar retraction over a different article written by Philip Boruing of the IHT. But the unreserved apology to the senior minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and the Singapore judiciary failed to appease. Instead, Lee filed a civil suit for libel to add to the existing charges.

The apology had the effect of removing from the trial the issue of whether Lingle’s presumed observations about the Singapore judiciary were correct. Richardson’s current defence thus focuses on whether or not he was alert to the possibility that readers might think Lingle had Singapore’s judiciary in mind.

What sense can we make of these events?

We could simply see this particular case as another expression of the normal process of jostling between the press and governments. Governments simply don’t trust criticism, but the Singaporean leadership clearly wishes to draw a very different line of tolerance. It has long been irritated by criticism to the point of of devoting considerable energy to "correcting" the press abroad through published letters and demanding the right of reply to critical observations about the regime. In this case, what seems to be a minor matter is being pursued with the utmost seriousness. But if the international press is suffering from battle fatigue in its periodic skirmishes with Lee and his colleagues, the resolve in Singapore has not wavered. The key to the puzzle is to be found in the crucial role Singaporean leaders are playing in the articulation of "Asian values" and contestation with Western liberalism of late. Given Singapore’s size, its strategic role is quite disproportionate. But this role is earned by such showdowns with the Western establishment. The IHT is part of the respected New York Times Company of America only boasts such credentials. Not only is Singapore leading this battle of ideas, it is demonstrating in practice that the liberal values of the West can be combated.

This is not to suggest that Singapore authorities do not take genuine offense at the IHT article. But the Singapore judiciary has previously and elsewhere been a target of international publications from more authoritative sources and in much greater detail than Lingle’s possibly oblique reference.

The 1990 Asia Watch Report, Silencing All Critics: Human Rights Violations in Singapore, for instance, portray the judiciary as one of the elements of a widespread harassment of political opposition. More recently, Dr Christopher Trethewan devotes an entire chapter of his book The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore to arguing how a "criminalisation of politics", on the one hand, and a "thinly disguised ruling by decree", on the other, keep government opponents at bay. Former solicitor general Francis Bowe’s book TV Catch a Tartar: A Disgraced in Lee Kuan Yew’s Prison further questions the judiciary’s independence, complete with a foreword from C.V. Devon Nair, president of Singapore from 1931 to 1938, that echoes these sentiments.

The implications for Australia of this latest bout with the international press are significant, especially in the wake of the "reconciliation affair" with the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir. As we saw in that case, Australian businesses were anxious for Prime Minister Paul Keating to apologise to protect their interests in Malaysia. Greater economic integration with the region could mean fast-rising in Australians with commercial interests exercising more sustained pressure on domestic newspapers and journalists to moderate reporting.

So one question this incident raises is whether Australian journalists and academic should or will be forced to adopt different standards of critical inquiry for Australia and other parts of the region. Arguably this is already under way to some degree.

However, this particular dispute is but part of a broader contest between conservative and liberal values. Daniel Huntington’s influential thesis that a “clash of civilisations” underlies growing international friction between East and West. Obscures this crucial point. Apart from the question of a free and critical press, there are conservative elements in Australian society and elsewhere in the West whose commercial interests and ideological preferences are in harmony with those taken by various Asian leaders on such issues as union power, respect for authority and family values.

Fundamentally, the IHT and other international newspapers which wish to operate and circulate in Singapore have a clear choice: either adhere to the requirements of Singaporean law or close up shop there altogether. Both carry significant costs. The latter option sacrifices a strategic market. The former risks a loss of credibility, not only in the eyes of Western readers but Asians themselves. The notion that a free press is culturally alien to Asians was rejected by Asian journalists attending a December forum at the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents Club.

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The Australian published two articles on Asian values by Dr Lingle in October and November last year — editor.