

By John C. Brown

Drawn into the political maelstrom: *Cambodia's nascent press*

In common with other sectors of Cambodia's emerging 'civil society', the press has not remained immune from the country's culture of personality politics and patronage. During and after the UN intervention in Cambodia, a virulent opposition press emerged. Some 150 papers have been in operation at one time or another since 1993. When publication rates peaked, just before the July 1997 crisis, six dailies were publishing. In contrast, before the UN arrived, there were only seven government publications and no daily, private, or opposition press.

Freedom without responsibility

This dramatic expansion of the Khmer press stemmed not simply from political liberalisation but from a greater tolerance of unregulated private behaviour even when it had public consequences. Cambodia still is, it has been said, a country of very few formal liberties but a great deal of anarchic freedom. Attacks against reporters have occurred in recent years, and many suspect government involvement. For the most part, however, the print press in Cambodia has exercised its freedoms without constraint and, regrettably often, with little responsibility.

As desktop publishing equipment and newly-developed Khmer language fonts have become more available, private printing houses have proliferated. However, with the market for Khmer newspapers small, dozens of Khmer-language papers competing for sales and revenue from advertising limited, most newspapers have been dependent for survival on political patrons.

Khmer newspaper publishers are most attentive to the market created by the competition between political parties and personalities. Newspapers have published articles supporting opposition politicians, one or the other of the ruling parties, personalities within various parties or the King. With the exception of the minority royalist or republican papers, these newspapers are not ideological. Their focus is not primarily on the use of policy, but rather on the possession of power and who should or should not have it.

Patron politics

In this context, Khmer newspapers are criticised — to some extent rightly so — for being politically biased, inattentive to fact, and for failing to distinguish appropriately between factual reporting and opinion. That does not mean, however, that these newspapers cannot and do not also address

serious issues, even as they help to further the political aims of their patrons, promoting political division even as they despair over the violence such divisions might produce.

Publishing peaked during each of the three political crises which preceded the July 1997 events. Newspapers attacked their political opponents, often slandering them through unsubstantiated and unfair accusations or fabrications. Across the political spectrum editors worried about a breakout in fighting even as they predicted it and, at times, threatened it. But as they wondered how political difficulties could be settled peacefully, it was clear — whatever the settlement — that their patron or party had to come out on top.

Apart from their political relationships, however, editors also worried about leaders who could act without constraint, about political competition that was not channelled into peaceful confrontation, and about the build-up of armed bodyguard units bound by loyalty to their political patron but outside the law. They wondered whether there was something wrong with a Cambodia that was seemingly continually faced with crisis. Though these newspapers had not developed a shared consensus for what constitutes professional journalism, they did share a concern for peace in Cambodia.

Regulation without democracy

In the West, the press is an important part of the formal organisation of democracy, exercising vigilance on behalf of an often inattentive and sometimes uncaring public. While it is criticised for its failure to do that job properly, the important fact is that shared — though often conflicting — conceptions of what the press is, what it might be, and what it should be, do exist. It is in light of these, sometimes contradictory images that its role is debated, criticised and shaped in mature democracies.

That such a press has not materialised in Cambodia should not be surprising. The remarkable post-UN proliferation of newspapers was made possible by democratic-like conditions (a political environment that was free, though intermittently — but never systematically — oppressive), but also by a Khmer political culture of personality politics and patronage. Until Cambodia's political competition is channelled into democratic confrontations, a consensus of opinion on the role of the press and how it should be regulated will be slow to emerge. ■