

The Canary in the Mineshaft

Activist and journalist Steven Gan was the guest speaker at the 10th Human Rights Awards. Gan is the award-winning publisher of *Malaysiakini* (*Malaysia Now*), an online newspaper that tests the Malaysian government's tight limits on press freedom. The following is a transcript of his speech:

When I was in Hong Kong 12 years ago, little did I know that I would be back here today to speak at this prestigious event. I am truly honoured to be with you.

I thank the organisers – the Hong Kong Journalists Association, the Foreign Correspondents' Club and Amnesty International (AI) and key sponsor Mrs Anne Marden – for giving me the opportunity to publicly thank AI for naming me a prisoner of conscience when I was briefly detained in 1996.

I understand that AI Hong Kong has done a lot of work on Malaysia, in particular the Irene Fernandez case.

Ten years ago, I helped unearth the deaths of 59 detainees in an immigration detention camp. The detainees died of malnutrition and other diseases. I wrote for the newspaper that I was then working for, *The Sun*, that this was a case of criminal negligence on the part of the police who ran this hell hole. The story was spiked hours before it went to print.

So I decided to hand the information to Irene Fernandez, who ran a support group for migrant workers. It wasn't until Irene exposed the deaths at a press conference – and these deaths were confirmed by the government – that my newspaper had the courage to publish the story, but not without four revisions.

That was not the end of the story. Irene was subsequently arrested for spreading “false news” under the Printing Presses and Publications Act – a law originally used to muzzle the press. I was interrogated by the police for over three days. And after seven years of court hearings – which is the longest criminal trial in our history – Irene



was found guilty and slapped with a one-year jail sentence. She is currently appealing against that decision.

Ironically, the death camp story that I wrote won a major journalism prize in 1996, and I received the award from none other than the then prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. In a weird way, it proved to be a good thing as I gave the prize money to Irene for her legal defence.

I am glad that there are people in Hong Kong who are concerned with human rights abuses in my part of the world as we are similarly concerned with human rights abuses in this part of the world.

Unfortunately, not enough Hong Kong people are taking an active interest in human rights issues. And if they are, it is mostly confined to the situation in Greater China – Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan. This does not reflect well with Hong Kong's reputation as an international city. More

work should be, and must be, done to raise awareness on human rights in Hong Kong, both by journalists and the civil society. And this award will definitely help in achieving that.

Now, why am I doing what I'm doing today, despite facing government threats and harassment all the time? I am an eternal optimist. I believe that resistance is not futile, and if we put up a good fight, changes will come soon enough.

Take a look around us today. The world when I was a student activist 20 years ago was very different. Then there was Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines and Thanom in Thailand. Now they are all gone.

We have seen much change in the region. Democracy is slowly taking roots.

In the Philippines, the democracy baby is learning to walk, and getting better each time. And with the current political intrigues in Manila, depending on how you look at it, it is nevertheless democracy at work.

In Thailand, the democracy baby is still crawling. I saw a cartoon many years ago. It depicted a baby crawling in a circle. Sometimes it attempts to walk, but falls after a few hesitant steps. It appears that the Thai democracy baby, with Thaksin Shinawatra in power, is perhaps faltering again.

In Indonesia, the democracy baby has just been born. It is crying and getting all the attention it deserved.

In Malaysia, the democracy baby has been conceived, but not born yet. We are undergoing birth pangs, and it looks like a very difficult birth. The doctor is recommending a caesarean, but unfortunately not many trust the doctor. Especially when the father of the child was put away for, of all things, sodomy.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, the democracy baby is not even conceived yet and Lee Kuan Yew is working overtime to ensure everyone is taking protection. Video cameras are installed everywhere to keep citizens

from doing anything naughty. And if all fails, there is always abortion.

In the old days, miners used to take canaries with them into the coalmines. If the birds died, the miners knew that the air was turning toxic and they had better get out. The press is like the canary in the mines. When press freedom is being stifled, it is a warning that bad things are about to happen.

Ladies and gentlemen, words and images are powerful. They can make or unmake heroes. They can build or destroy democracy. They can promote or smother justice. Which is why journalists often pay a high price for their profession, some with their lives.

There are few human undertakings which demand a fiercer commitment to truth as journalism. Not surprisingly, in countries where truth is hounded by those threatened by the power of the written word, journalism has become not only an onerous endeavour but also a perilous task.

In many countries, journalists are murdered, assaulted, detained and harassed simply for telling the truth. Newspapers are censored, suspended and closed down for their temerity to express opinions contrary to those of the powers that be.

Malaysia is no exception. Much has been said about the assault on press freedom in my country. We have a litany of restrictive laws – the last time I checked, there are 35 laws which directly and indirectly impinge on press freedom. Self-censorship is an obsession. The government even bans the formation of a foreign correspondents' club.

The only democratic space left in Malaysia is cyberspace. Still, despite the government's pledge not to censor the Internet, my website was raided by the police two years ago and 19 computers were carted away.

But I'm not complaining. The situation in Singapore is far worse. The media there is so cowed that its first chief minister (not Lee Kwan Yew) once referred to journalists there as nothing more than "boot-lickers" and "running dogs" of the government.

So it is not surprising that the Singaporean government has been rather

silent over the arrest of *Straits Times* journalist Ching Cheong. After all, what can Singapore tell Beijing? That you cannot simply lock dissidents up when they themselves do the same in their own country?

In Singapore, like in Malaysia, we have the Internal Security Act which allows the government to detain dissidents without trial, without access to

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lawyers, without access to their families for months and sometimes years.

I'm happy that the Hong Kong Journalists Association and the Foreign Correspondents' Club and a number of other organisations are taking up the Ching Cheong issue.

But while repressive regimes are an obvious threat to press freedom, commercial interests also encroach on the independence of the media.

Indeed, attacks on the press do not only come from the government, or goons hired by drug lords. The threat to press freedom also comes from the men and women in business suits. On this, journalists have been silent for too long.

Even in countries where there is some measure of press freedom, where democracy flourishes, there still exists a situation where those who write the cheques, write the laws, and those who own the media, ask the questions.

Indeed, the threat to press freedom comes from the likes of Rupert Murdoch, who own the papers we read, the radios we listen to, the television networks we watch, and now the information superhighway we surf.

This silence among journalists

regarding the threat to press freedom from the market is not surprising.

After all, the investors are the employers of the journalists and the providers of advertising revenue. Moreover, most journalists dream the same dreams as the business elites and espouse the same contempt for the poor, the powerless, the voiceless.

In our global marketplace today, increasingly the media is not about delivering information to the people but delivering the people to advertisers. Yet globalisation is being sold by the media as a great model for humankind.

And when this doesn't quite work, journalists write apologetic pieces about there being not enough free market, there being not enough tax breaks, there being not enough consumption, and if all fails, that we have no choice.

Yet perhaps the market is a model that works well for a few and not for most people. Perhaps the market can be a great wealth-creating machine but not so great when it comes to building a humane and just society.

Perhaps while we speak out against authoritarian regimes, we should also be concerned about the dictatorship of the market. Perhaps we should express the worry that citizens are being replaced by investors, that the government we elect listens to the movers and shakers of capital, not to us.

Indeed, those who write – the journalists – must ask the questions. That's what press freedom is for, to give power to the powerless and a voice to the voiceless.

That is why people like you, those who have gone out on a limb to write about such unsexy topics as human rights deserved a pat on the back. And these human rights awards will go some way in recognising your efforts and make it perhaps a little more worthwhile.

But let me conclude with this. It doesn't really matter whether you win an award today. What matters is that the victims of human rights are the ultimate winners.

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Photographer of the Year Awards 2005

AFP photographer Peter Parks has been named Photographer of the Year for his series of graphic portraits of Tibetan nomads on the high Himalayan plateau entitled "Nomads Land". Once again, it was a close and difficult decision for requiring extensive debate among the Photographers of the Year Awards (POYA) judges.

Chan Wai-hing of Latent Image won the Photograph of the Year Award with his dramatic news photo of a Hong Kong woman plunging to her death from a housing estate rooftop.

There were a total of 126 individual entries submitted over nine categories in both the Professional and Non-Professional Divisions.

It has been a long and often rocky road for the FCC Photographer of the Year Awards. We launched POYA in 2000 and enjoyed an overwhelming response, attracting excellent support from sponsors. The next year we struggled to get the sponsorship needed, but still managed to maintain a high standard of entry. These, the third Awards, were delayed because of difficulties in obtaining sponsorship and without the strong backing of SriLankan Airways, we would have been without any support at all. The POYA Travelling Exhibition has still to attract sponsorship.

To continue the FCC Photographer of the Year Awards we would like to appeal to the Club membership for support. These are the only non-partisan photographic awards held in Hong Kong or the region and have the potential to become so much more than they are.

– Terry Duckham, Chairman, POYA



Photograph of the Year,
Chan Wai-hing



Nomads Land, Photographer of the Year,
Peter Parks

FCC POYA 2005 Winners

Category	Awards	Name	Company
Photographer of the Year	Winner	Peter Parks	AFP
	Runner-up	Virgile Simon Bertrand	Red Desert Ltd
Photograph of the Year	Winner	Chan Wai-hing	Latent Image
Professional Divison: Hong Kong, China & Asia News	Winner	Chan Wai-hing	Latent Image
	First runner-up	Andrew Moore	<i>Time Asia</i>
	Second runner-up	Lee Shiu-Cheong	<i>Ming Pao</i>
	Honourable mention	Chan Wai-hing	Latent Image
	Honourable mention	Simon Song	<i>The Standard</i>
	Honourable mention	Virgile Simon Bertrand	Red Desert Ltd
	Honourable mention	Peter Parks	AFP
	Honourable mention	Fu Chun-Wai	<i>Next Magazine</i>
	Honourable mention	Chua Chin-hon	<i>The Straits Times</i> (Beijing Bureau)
Professional Divison: Hong Kong, China & Asia Magazine Features	Winner	Peter Parks	AFP
	First runner-up	Virgile Simon Bertrand	Red Desert Ltd
	Second runner-up	Richard Jones	Sinopix
	Honourable mention	Graham Uden	Graham Uden Photography
	Honourable mention	David Wong Chi-kin	<i>SCMP</i>
	Honourable mention	Grischa Ruschendorf	Assignment Photography
Professional Divison: Corporate	Winner	Graham Uden	Graham Uden Photography
	Runner-up	Richard Jones	Sinopix
Professional Divison: Advertising	Honourable mention	Garry Chan	Garry Studio
	Honourable mention	Virgile Simon Bertrand	Red Desert Ltd
Professional Divison: Personal / Non-Commissioned Work	Winner	Chua Chin-hon	<i>The Straits Times</i> (Beijing Bureau)
	First runner-up	Chester Ong	Skylight Productions
	Second runner-up	Alexander Pendrite	Freelance / Corbis
	Third runner-up	Sonia Au Ka-Lai	Freelance
	Honourable mention	Peter Parks	AFP
	Honourable mention	Andrew Moore	<i>Time Asia</i>
	Honourable mention	Virgile Simon Bertrand	Red Desert Ltd
Non-Professional Division: Women of Asia	Winner	Anthony Chan	Alliance Capital Management Corp.
	Runner-up	Gerard Henry	<i>Paroles Magazine</i>
	Honourable mention	Norman William de Brackinghe	Freelance
	Honourable mention	Lau Koon-loy	MTR Corporation
	Honourable mention	Peter Kan Tse-sum	Visual Impact
Non-Professional Division: Reflection of an Urban Landscape	Winner	Anthony Chan	Alliance Capital Management Corp.
	Runner-up	Remo Carlo Notarianni	Freelance
	Honourable mention	Peter Kan Tse-sum	Visual Impact
	Honourable mention	Chiu Kai-hing	Environmental Protection Dept
Hong Kong - Live it... Love it... See it	Winner	Virgile Simon Bertrand	Red Desert Ltd
	First runner-up	Richard Castka	Sportpix International
	Honourable mention	Clement Tang Wai-kin	<i>Ming Pao</i>
	Honourable mention	Healthy Tam King-hong	Artcom Computer Project Co Ltd
	Honourable mention	Chiu Kai-hing	Environmental Protection Dept
	Honourable mention	David Wong Chi-kin	<i>SCMP</i>
English Street Student Perspective - What's hot? What's not?	Winner	Matthew Leith Trauer	West Island School
	Runner-up	Zoe Kwa Joo-inn	West Island School
	Honourable mention	Ho Kai-in	Tak Nga Secondary School
	Honourable mention	Leung Chin-ya	Mun Sang College

Paying the Price

The name Arun Senkuttuvan is so little known to most in the regional media today that though he is still very much alive it was perhaps no surprise that *The Correspondent's* story on the recent *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)* wake muddled him up with another Arun – Arun Subramaniam – who was also at the party, writes **Philip Bowring**.

But there is good reason why I singled him out in my speech at the wake for having suffered more for his journalistic activities than any of other distinguished list of FEER correspondents who did time in jail. Arun not only went through two months at the tender mercies of the Singapore internal security thugs but he was also forced to write a “confession” and appear on television in an episode worthy of a Stalin show trial. He was then stripped of his citizenship and for years deprived of the right to work as he wished as a journalist. That was in 1977.

Arun's career up that point was intertwined with many a famous name in Asian journalism. He was born in India in 1943, his parents migrated to Malaysia and then Singapore but most of his education occurred in India. Arun began his career as cub reporter on the *Malayan Times* and was an early beneficiary of

a training scheme for young journalists started by Tarzie Vittachi. From the soon-to-fold *Malayan Times* he went to the *Straits Times* when former FEER editor Dick Wilson was there, starting its business section. Dick recommended him to his successor at FEER, Derek Davies, and in 1966 Arun began his association with FEER. He started as Singapore stringer at the time when Harvey Stockwin's coverage of Malaysia – especially during the 1969 riots – was establishing the weekly as the independent source of news.

Arun, who became a naturalised Singaporean citizen, then joined the entrepreneurial band who started the *Singapore Herald*, a paper which took local journalism to a new level. Francis Wong, Ambrose Khaw, Jimmy Hahn, Bob Reece and the then very youthful Morgan Chua and Mary Lee were among those who briefly gave it lustre. But it was too much for a Lee

Kwan Yew besotted with power and growing more authoritarian by the day. He closed it down claiming it was a “black operation”.

After a brief stint with *The Asian*, the short-lived weekly set up by Vittachi to rival FEER, Arun went back to near full-time stringing for FEER and also wrote regularly for the *Financial Times*. At the time, FEER had no staff correspondents so Arun had a desk in the office in the Reuters building rented by of Tiziano Terzani, the distinguished Italian writer and *Der Spiegel* journalist who died last year.

Arun wrote mainly about economics and business and together with his colleague, the late Andrew Davenport in Hong Kong, was instrumental in exposing an infamous company called Spydar. This was a corporate vehicle set by the Asian operations of British wheeler-dealer Jim Slater to manipulate the profits

Arun himself was released from jail on condition that he did not write for foreign publications or about politics in Singapore. He was encouraged to emigrate but was determined to stay. He ended up working as a lowly editor at the Ministry of Culture!

AFP



Lee Kwan Yew closed down the Singapore Herald, claiming it was a 'black operation.'

of its Singapore and Hong Kong affiliates, respectively Haw Par and Slater Walker Securities (HK). These revelations helped speed the 1975 collapse of the Slater empire and ignite a banking crisis in Britain.

Arun was arrested in February 1977 under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and held without trial for two months. He has never revealed his experiences during detention but he was required to sign the "confession" and his release was accompanied by a stage-managed "press conference" at which he admitted portraying the Singapore government as "undemocratic, totalitarian, autocratic oppressive" – words which ring as true today than 28 years ago and of which Arun's treatment was itself an example.

The Singapore government also attempted to smear Arun, Davies and FEER by reference to a tape which Derek Davies had made a year earlier of his recollections of the content of a not-for-publication conversation in March 1976 with Lee Kwan Yew. Arun had made a copy of this tape (seized by the authorities after his 1977 arrest) and played it

to a few friends. The content was never published by him or FEER but both were accused, along with a Singapore lawyer, G. Raman, also detained under the ISA, of promoting the "Communist cause" and trying to create problems between Singapore and Malaysia.

Like a few FEER staffers (I was Business Editor at the time) I heard the tape and am sworn not to divulge its contents. However, Terzani wrote at the time:

"Arun played the tape to me because he was worried about his situation since earlier that day he had been questioned by the Director of Internal Security ... The tape indicated that the Prime Minister had told Mr Davies that Arun Senkuttuvan's loyalty to Singapore was questionable as he had been born and educated in India and had not done his national service. If he stepped out of line he would be dealt with... Davies had replied that Arun had been too old to do his national service".

Events were to prove that Arun, the Indian immigrant, had good reason to be worried. Not only was he to lose his citizenship but be prevented

from freely practicing journalism for many years. Meanwhile his FEER colleague Ho Kwon Ping, who also had a brief spell in jail, was treated very differently. Lee Kwan Yew was reported by Terzani as expressing confidence in Ho's loyalty noting he came from a distinguished family – his father was a well-known businessman and long-time ambassador to Thailand. Ho went on to become a pillar of the Singapore establishment, chairman of Singapore Power etc.

Arun himself was released from jail on condition that he did not write for foreign publications or about politics in Singapore. He was encouraged to emigrate but was determined to stay. He ended up working as a lowly editor at the Ministry of Culture! He later started and ran a business teaching English to students about to go to overseas universities. He was finally able to return to real journalism when he got his citizenship and passport back in 1995 and moved to Bangkok for the *Asia Times* – unfortunately shortly before it folded. He stayed on in Bangkok for some time thereafter before returning to Singapore. He is now partly retired but does editing and conference organization work for *The Nation* in Bangkok.

Memories of what the Singapore government did to Arun is particularly poignant at this time when we are appealing for the release by China of colleague Ching Cheong, Hong Kong correspondent for that official Singapore mouthpiece, the *Straits Times*. Such is the hold that Singapore has over the supposedly free foreign media that cases such as that of Arun receive scant attention in the outside world, particularly after Dow Jones made a deal with the government and FEER was allowed to return to circulation in Singapore in 1993. Arun never got a Human Rights or any other kind of award. FCC

Of Guns and Coconuts

Things haven't improved for journalists in the Philippines. A radio broadcaster who accused officials of being close to drug dealers has been shot dead, becoming the sixth journalist to be murdered there this year.

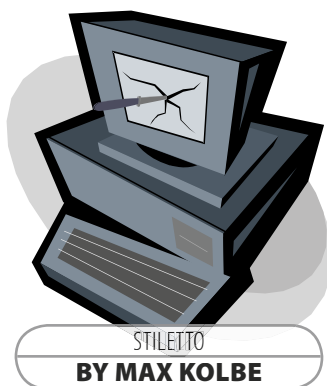
Rolando Morales of THE DXMD station was ambushed while riding his motorbike in southern Mindanao. Police insist there is no systematic targeting of journalists by anyone in the Philippines. The journalist had accused local government officials of either protecting drug dealers or being involved in the trade themselves.

In Nepal, fed-up radio reporters are feeding coconuts to monkeys in a bid to lampoon a ban on broadcasting news bulletins in a symbolic but sarcastic protest against the government's muzzle on FM stations.

One hack explained that if a monkey is given a coconut with its shell, it won't be able to taste the fruit inside because it cannot crack it open. The government, he argues, is in a similar position. How can it taste and assess the quality of services provided by FM radio if they cannot broadcast? More than 2,000 reporters have lost their jobs since King Gyanendra's took power earlier this year.

Down under, an Australian coroner will reopen an inquest into the death of a journalist killed alongside four others while covering an attack by Indonesian troops on East Timor in 1975. Television cameraman Brian Peters will be the subject of the inquest. He was one of five Australian-based journalists killed during the attack in Balibo.

Indonesian official reports



maintain the men, Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham, Tony Stewart, Malcolm Rennie and Peters, were killed in crossfire. Few believe them. There were two inquiries into the incident, in 1996 and 1999, but no formal inquests have been held.

Also dead is Dagestani journalist, Magomedzagid Varisov, murdered on June 28 at Makhatchkala, capital of the Caucasus Russian republic. He was gunned down by unknown assailants as he was driving home. According to the International Press Institute, Varisov, who was in regular contact with foreign media, had been threatened after publishing an article about a raid by special forces on a village in neighbouring Chechnya that was extremely critical of the authorities.

In Addis Ababa, authorities have launched a crackdown on independent media in Ethiopia after deadly post-election violence last month. So far 11 journalists are facing various charges and the credentials of five others have been revoked.

All were working for private Amharic-language weeklies but were bailed pending a decision from the prosecutor on whether to charge them with defamation on complaints from the defence ministry.

The first batch of six editors

were arrested on June 28 for allegedly defaming the air force, when they reported that eight pilots on a training programme in Belarus had asked for political asylum. Another five editors were detained for their coverage that allegedly depicted the police as brutal.

Get this: Every journalist working Turkmenistan's state-controlled media – newspapers, television or radio – has been summoned by his or her editor-in-chief and told to sign a document obliging them not to meet foreigners, not to pass them information, and, except with special authorisation, not to attend meetings organised by foreign organisations. Now that President Saparmurat Niyazov has stamped on the independent media, television channels now show his profile in gold in the corner of the screen. Oh, and in case you wondered about Internet cafes – they don't exist there.

On a lighter note, Michael Hayes, owner and publisher of the *Phnom Penh Post* in Cambodia, and known to many a hack around the region, is threatening Hong Kong with an October visit. Word has it the erstwhile Hayes has picked up a fellowship with a notable university.

And finally... who said journalists were often noble victims. In India a crime reporter who allegedly used his contacts to move stolen goods was arrested for car thefts and burglaries himself. Sanjay Kumar Singh, 42, who reports from Bihar state, was held alongside three accomplices for allegedly stealing 56 cars and breaking into about 20 homes. Reports said, the journalist, who also holds a doctorate in child psychology, allegedly used his contacts to then sell the cars and other stolen goods he collected between assignments.

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