

# LESSONS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF SAMSUNG

**M**any lessons for developing countries can be found in South Korea. The small East Asian country has come out of decades of dictatorship to become a developmental success story. It is now a model for many developing countries making the transition to democracy and free market economies. South Korea confronted the challenge of establishing a free press in a country with an authoritarian history, but nowadays it is perhaps providing lessons in what not to do.

South Korea's press freedoms were recently downgraded from "free" to "partly free" by Freedom House's Freedom of the Press 2011 survey. Contributing factors included an increase in official censorship as well as government attempts to influence news and information content, says Freedom House. While South Korea's economic and technological advancement garner praise outside the country, the recent regression in media freedoms receives far less attention.

Media freedoms are not something South Koreans take for granted, but are the result of a prolonged battle against authoritarian instincts. A free press was a key victory of the democracy movement of June 1987 made to then-president General Chun Doo-hwan, whose government was forced to cede power by the protests. Prior to the late 1980s, the South Korean media was subject to strict government control and operated with almost no editorial freedom.

After democratisation, South Korea's media had gained formal independence but retained the attributes of authoritarianism. Ownership of media outlets was concentrated in few hands, management lacked transparency and government figures continued to influence coverage.

South Korea's media landscape is still dominated by three main newspapers: the *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo*, which gain much of their power from guaranteed advertising from South Korea's big conglomerates. These three papers account for more than 60% of the South Korean readership. Their influence in public life has earned them the moniker, the "unelected power".

Critics, including Freedom House's recent assessors, cite government censorship as a serious problem among the big newspapers.

According to veteran foreign correspondent

Donald Kirk, much of the censorship may come from within the papers themselves. "They're quite supportive of the government and the *chaebol* system. There's an issue of self-censorship. Their views are in accordance with people who are in government and in big business. They're very much dependent on the big

corporations for their advertising and they're very much in line with them philosophically."

Like in media markets elsewhere, the new media options provided by advances in technology are eating into newspapers' power in South Korea. Kim Hee-kyung, a former newspaper reporter and editor who quit journalism out of frustration with changes in the industry, said: "The changes in society have reduced the influence of newspapers. But their influence is still strong among the upper classes because the upper classes share interests with the administration. These days major newspapers act as propaganda outlets for the government."

The ruling government of President Lee Myung-bak has fostered warm relations with major media outlets, but it has distanced itself from medium and smaller outlets, which tend to be more critical.

Lee Jung-eun, a national politics correspondent for the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper, said: "The Lee Myung-bak government has kept good relations with the major media outlets. The view could be quite different from the liberal and conservative outlets."

Conservative media outlets generally have much friendlier relations with the big businesses that dominate South Korea. These outlets are largely sustained by advertising from South Korean conglomerates. Many in South Korea

The most significant structural change in the South Korean media landscape in recent years was the passing of a media reform bill that relaxed broadcasting ownership restrictions, allowing cross ownership of print and broadcast outlets. The pre-existing law was rewritten to allow the country's big three newspapers to open television networks.

The newspaper companies are hoping this will make up for the losses in revenue and influence they have suffered in recent years. The ruling Grand National Party claims that the media reform bills will promote competition in the media industry, whereas the opposition Democratic Party argues the reform drive reflects a conservative push for more control of the media. Many fear it will become too easy for the large companies to monopolise the spread of information.

When the newspapers' channels hit the air later this year, they will bring the total of major television news networks to seven, all of which will have to share a limited pool of advertising revenue. As critics of the move fret over centralisation pushing out smaller outlets, others are questioning the wisdom of moving into an already-crowded market. There is no guarantee they will all survive. Said Lee of the *Dong-A Ilbo*, "They will have a very bloody fight in their red ocean."

The countries of the Arab Spring have more pressing concerns than the establishment of a free press. They need to be primarily concerned with devising a more just division of power and addressing the material needs of citizens, many of whom live without proper access to education or health care.

Developing countries can learn from both the mistakes and successes of South Korea. Recently liberated countries would do well to heed the example of South Korea's persistent pressure for a free press from an engaged and concerned public.

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feel the media is not at a sufficient distance from the government and business, often opting to be uncritical.

For example, the Samsung group's strong influence on the South Korean media can be considered a serious problem. "Samsung is the most sensitive issue in Korean journalism. Samsung funds almost all newspapers in Korea, so the papers don't dare to report Samsung's faults. They hide everything bad that Samsung does. It's not the Republic of Korea; it's the Republic of Samsung," Kim Hee-kyung said.

They may avoid South Korea's current troubles by insisting on greater separation between the media, big business and government and a more transparent style of management from the establishment.

Protestors in South Korea in the late 1980s and in the Arab world in the spring of 2011 learned that the euphoric movement of ousting a dictator is not an end, but the beginning of the much longer process of establishing a just society. As the case of South Korea shows, the fight for media freedom is long and harsh, but also rewarding.