

## *The International Media and the Domestic Political Coverage of the Thai Press*

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### **The International Media in Pacific Asia**

Although the Thai electronic media remain subject to considerable state control, newspapers in Thailand have gained some latitude to report and comment on political developments. The Thai press is one of the freest and most outspoken in Pacific Asia. In particular, the Thai language press frequently engages in antagonistic exchanges with political office-holders, and has often been credited with contributing to major upheavals. Most recently, the press was involved in the downfall of the Democrat-led government coalition over a land reform scandal in May 1995.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, however, Thai newspapers have been regarded as platforms for articulating the political views of their owners. Politicians have typically cultivated close personal ties to newspaper editors and columnists in order to further their own objectives. In recent years, the character of some Thai newspapers has changed. Whereas old-style newspapers such as *Thai Rath* and *Daily News* remain private family companies, newspapers such as *Matichon*, *Phujatkarn*, and *Siam Post* are part of larger corporate entities. In this article, Thai newspapers will be viewed as essentially independent political actors,<sup>2</sup> with considerable autonomy to pursue their own news agendas. It will further be argued that some politicians—such as prime minister Banharn Silpa-archa—have not fully recognized the political independence of Thai newspa-

<sup>1</sup> See Gordon Fairclough, 'Free to air: newly assertive media pique the government', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 November 1995.

<sup>2</sup> This article rejects more common conceptions of the press as a 'mirror', 'agenda-setter', or 'watchdog' as unsatisfactory in the Thai case, since Thai media organizations are generally political actors in their own right, often linked to or owned by prominent political figures, and dedicated to the promotion of particular vantage points. For a detailed discussion, see Duncan McCargo, *Media Machinations: The Politics of the Thai Press* (forthcoming).

pers, persisting in viewing them as largely passive instruments of the domestic political 'game'. This view becomes especially problematic when Thai newspapers run news stories which are in turn based upon stories about Thai politics which have appeared in the international press.

In recent years, the use of nationalist or regionalist rhetoric by Asia-Pacific politicians has grown increasingly common, especially in terms of criticisms of the international media as a 'western' force. The international media have frequently been criticized for attempting to impose their own political values upon Asian states and societies in an almost neo-colonial fashion. They have also been accused of misunderstanding and misrepresenting Asian societies and cultures. In Southeast Asia, these criticisms have been most vocally articulated by Singapore and Malaysia. Garry Rodan has noted that a court case brought by the Singaporean government against the *International Herald Tribune* was one of a number of incidents indicating 'a firming of the Singapore government's already strong resolve to combat what it regards as hostile reporting'.<sup>3</sup>

Negative reactions to foreign coverage are by no means unknown in Thailand. Where the story deals with social problems, especially the issue of prostitution, the general Thai reaction may be hostile.<sup>4</sup> Where the story deals with political issues, the pattern is more complex: typically there is a clearly discernible divide between hostility from an aggrieved party—such as a politician accused of corruption—and support for the foreign story by the domestic press. Given the partisan nature of the Thai press, it is quite common for the foreign story to be given considerable prominence in an attempt to cause political embarrassment at home. Sometimes it is the foreign story which is distorted by the Thai press, rather than the Thai story which is distorted by the foreign press. In other words, far from a relationship in which the international press lords it over Asian countries in a condescending and manipulative fashion, the reality is of a mutually beneficial relationship between the international and domestic media.

<sup>3</sup> Garry Rodan, 'Symbolic clash with international press in Singapore', *Asiaview* (Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University), 5, 1, April 1995, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> An example was the 1993 Longman dictionary affair, when it emerged that a dictionary published by the British publisher Longman described Bangkok as a city known for its large number of prostitutes. For a critical view of the affair, see Suthichai Yoon, 'A case of misplaced Thai anger', *The Nation*, 12 July 1993, reprinted in Suthichai Yoon, *Thai Talk: A Collection of Writings from The Nation* (Bangkok: Nation Publishing 1995), pp. 233–5.

The situation in Thailand has some parallels with that in Japan.<sup>5</sup> Frustrated Japanese journalists have been known to tip off foreign correspondents about scandals; former *Economist* bureau chief Nick Valery received such information about one aspect of the Recruit scandal in 1989.<sup>6</sup> More significantly, a grilling received by Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in 1974 was a crucial turning point in his downfall over corruption allegations. Once the Tanaka story—already published in a political magazine in Japan—was 'launched internationally', it was then picked up by the mainstream Japanese newspapers, 'bringing it back into the country' and Tanaka's demise was assured.<sup>7</sup> The Tanaka incident closely resembles a development in March 1992, when Narong Wongwan, a veteran politician and leader of the Samakkhi Tham Party looked certain to be nominated as prime minister. A Singaporean journalist asked Narong at a press conference whether it was true that the US government had denied him a visa over allegations of involvement in drug trafficking. This became a major international news story, was taken up by the domestic press, and Narong prime ministerial hopes were dashed.<sup>8</sup> During the mass demonstrations against the Suchinda Kraprayoon government which followed in May 1992, the international media was regarded by progressive elements in the Thai press as an important ally in publicizing military attempts to suppress popular protests by means of violence. The international media communicated news of the protests to the outside world; this news was in turn filtered back into Thailand through satellite television, short-wave radio broadcasts, and direct fax and telephone communications from Thai living abroad.<sup>9</sup> The international media offered a wider forum to publicize political problems in Thailand, a forum which could exert a positive influence over domestic developments.<sup>10</sup> A central lesson of the May events was that

<sup>5</sup> On Japan, see Duncan McCargo, 'The political role of the Japanese media', *Pacific Review*, 9, 2, 1996, pp. 251–64.

<sup>6</sup> Maggie Farley, 'Japan's press and the politics of scandal', in Susan J. Pharr and Ellis S. Krauss (eds), *Media and Politics in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Farley, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion, see Jon Vandel Heuvel and Everette E. Dennis, *The Unfolding Lotus—East Asia's Changing Media* (New York: The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1993), pp. 173–5.

<sup>9</sup> Duncan McCargo, 'The buds of May', *Index on Censorship*, April 1993, pp. 5–8.

<sup>10</sup> For some broader discussions of the media and political change in Thailand, see Duncan McCargo and Ramaimas Bowra, *Policy Advocacy and the Media in Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Public Policy Studies, 1997); Ubonrat Siriyusak, 'The

the international media could be enlisted by the domestic print media to pursue its own political objectives.

Early in 1995, I was interviewing a well-known public figure in Bangkok. During the course of the interview, he asked me whether I could help him publicize an important development with disturbing political implications. He told me that taking the matter to the Thai press could not have sufficient impact; he wanted the story to appear in a British or international English-language newspaper or news-magazine. In addition, he wanted the story to appear under the by-line of a westerner, not the name of a Thai journalist employed by one of those publications. Only if the government believed that foreigners (to be more precise, in fact, westerners) were monitoring their actions would they be sufficiently alarmed to take notice. This conversation starkly illustrated a tendency among political and media practitioners in Thailand: the tendency to make use of the international media for domestic purposes. Stories written about Thailand by foreign publications could have a significant impact on domestic political debate. Thai newspapers (particularly Thai language newspapers) pick up on international news stories and use them to criticize particular politicians or to illustrate particular themes. Very often, however, there are discrepancies between the tone or content of the original international stories, and of the domestic stories they generate. Sometimes the international stories contain misrepresentations or distortions of domestic political developments in Thailand. Very often, the domestic stories reflect a misreading of international coverage. It will be argued that these processes of reciprocal misreading form part of a mutually beneficial dialogue between domestic and international media.

### **Foreign News Gathering in the Thai Language Press**

Foreign news forms a significant part of the news content of Thai-language newspapers. Even popular mass circulation newspapers such as *Thai Rath* assign a full page for foreign news, and foreign material is also extensively used in the business, features, and sports pages. However, foreign news (especially foreign political news, including Thai coverage of foreign coverage of domestic Thai

development of a participatory democracy: *raison d'être* for media reform in Thailand', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 22, 1994, pp. 101–14; and Glen Lewis, 'Current issues in Thai media debates', *Media International Australia*, 78, Nov. 1995, pp. 31–8.

politics) is gathered very differently from domestic news. Whereas domestic news is gathered firsthand by teams of reporters, the primary source of foreign news is wire service reports, supplemented by material from the international English-language press. Thai newspapers do not employ full-time, salaried foreign correspondents, though they do sometimes have stringers (often informal ones) in cities with sizeable Thai populations such as London and Los Angeles. Foreign news staff on Thai-language newspapers are essentially translators. Nor are they professional translators: typically, a young university graduate with a degree in a humanities or social science subject will be assigned to the foreign desk, and expected to start translating wire service reports almost immediately, with the aid of a few dictionaries. Most Thai-language newspapers employ no more than only one or two reporters or editorial desk staff with a good command of spoken English; very often, those who can speak English are not employed in a job where they can use this skill for news-gathering purposes. Some reporters with good spoken English skills working for Thai-language publications complained that other staff were jealous of their English ability, and this led them to feel inhibited about using English during the course of their work. Most such reporters quickly moved on from the Thai-language press to work for local English-language newspapers (mainly *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*), or to international press agencies or foreign publications.

When an important foreign story breaks, Thai-language newspapers are faced with serious practical difficulties in pursuing it. There are no professional foreign correspondents already in place. Except in very rare cases, resources are not available to send correspondents abroad. In any event, there are very few staff with the experience and linguistic competence to be sent off in pursuit of stories. Insofar as wire service stories can be followed up, telephone interviews and faxed requests for documentary information are the main methods used. Requests for comment from Thai agencies involved (especially the Foreign Ministry) are another standard approach, as well as calls to the Bangkok embassies of countries concerned. In covering foreign stories, including those directly relevant to Thai interests and to domestic political concerns, the Thai-language press often operates largely in the dark, fumbling around to grasp what is really going on.

The strengths and limitations of the Thai-language press in dealing with foreign stories become especially apparent when the story concerned has an immediate domestic political impact. This

paper will examine two cases from 1995: the coverage of Banharn Silpa-archa and the Chart Thai Party in the international press during the early stages of the general election campaign, and the way this coverage was portrayed in the Thai press; and Thai coverage of an 'international' story concerning accusations by Swedish peace activists that the Chart Thai Party had accepted tainted election campaign contributions from a submarine manufacturer.

*Siam Post*, until early 1996 the sister-paper of the English-language *Bangkok Post*, differed somewhat from other Thai newspapers in its use of foreign stories. *Siam Post* (established in 1992) quickly gained a reputation for hard-hitting political stories. One of the techniques favoured by the paper was using foreign news stories with a Thai dimension as front-page leads. One senior member of the foreign news staff was assigned to work closely with the front page desk, constantly looking out for foreign stories with domestic political mileage. In practice, this meant looking for stories in the international press which were critical of Thailand or of Thai politicians. However, in seeking this criticism, the editorial staff of *Siam Post* were not wanting to pick a fight with the western press. On the contrary: they were seeking to use the western press to highlight and legitimate concerns of their own about issues such as political corruption, and the low quality of many Thai politicians.

One staff member of *Siam Post* explained that they regarded the international press, and particularly well-known regional international publications such as the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, as highly influential in shaping foreign perceptions of Thailand.<sup>11</sup> Thai people ought to be aware of what these publications were writing about their country. Whereas Thai newspapers were very willing to highlight the coverage of the international press, they were very unwilling to give 'credit' to issues uncovered by other Thai newspapers, including English-language papers. This resulted in a curious circulation of information. Critical stories about the government would appear in the Thai-language press. These would then be discussed in the domestic English-language press, particularly in *The Nation*. Foreign correspondents in Bangkok (only two or three of whom could read Thai in 1995) would pick up the stories from the English-language newspapers and work them into their own despatches. Thai-language newspapers such as *Siam Post* would then 'pick up'

<sup>11</sup> Interview notes, 24 Nov. 1995.

the stories as an example of how Thailand's image was suffering in the eyes of the international community. Very often, *Siam Post* (and sometimes other papers) would reprint the original English story in facsimile form on its front page, with an accompanying Thai translation. Thai politicians would then read the story (very few politicians in the Banharn government could read English with ease) and be interviewed about it by reporters from the political desks of all the Thai-language papers, whereupon the 'foreign attack' on Thai politics would be denounced by Cabinet ministers, and sometimes even the prime minister himself. In this way, the press would manufacture news stories which had virtually no kernel of factual content, pyramids of accusation and counter-accusation.

An important distinction in the context of the Thai-language press is the distinction between news and comment. 'News' especially political news, is narrowly defined as literal descriptions of actual events, plus the verbatim utterances of people involved, especially senior figures. News rarely contains background information, or explanation of the significance of events or statements concerned. By contrast, the inside pages of Thai-language newspapers contain considerable amounts of political 'comment', mainly by regular columnists. Most political columns consist almost entirely of opinion, with very little factual material. Most political news consists of the comments of people 'outside' in the wider political world (mainly MPs, party leaders, and ministers), whilst most political columns contain the comments of those 'inside' the newspaper, and those closely associated with it. In other words, Thai-language newspapers are structured around a constant political dialogue between two groups of commentators, both of which have the status of 'insiders' in the Thai political system. There are often close personal ties between politicians and columnists, ties which sometimes bring financial and other benefits to the columnists concerned. The addition of foreign voices to the ongoing noisy conversation among different political commentators enhances the boisterous, 'temple fair' atmosphere. As with local voices, political commentators will rush to denounce or to support the foreign speaker, seeking to discredit him or to co-opt him. Most Thai politicians see a critical foreign commentator as a potential threat to their image and public standing. For Thai columnists, a foreign voice can lend credibility to concerns which they have been voicing about the behaviour and conduct of politicians. The foreign voice is a potential maverick which does not fit into the

usual Thai categories.<sup>12</sup> Typically, Thai politicians will try to undermine the foreign voice by arguing that it is really a Thai voice, a disguised player in the day-to-day 'game' of politics. A domestic publication wishing to criticize a Thai politician will seek to establish the credibility and international status of the foreign voice, so as to demonstrate that the foreign voice stands above the domestic 'game'.

### Responding to Coverage of the 1995 General Election

The *modus operandi* of the Thai press in recycling foreign coverage of domestic politics was especially clear at the time of the 1995 election held on 2 July. The election was preceded by around six weeks of intensive media coverage, following the collapse of the Chuan Leekpai government in a non-confidence vote in mid-May.

On 1 June 1995, *Siam Post* led with a story based directly on a front page article from the previous day's *Asian Wall Street Journal*. The original story by Paul M. Sherer was headlined 'Elite appear to underestimate Banharn', and sub-headed 'Observers see Chat Thai Party leader in contention to be Thai premier'.<sup>13</sup> The article was accompanied by an artist's sketch of Banharn. *Siam Post* reproduced the entire front page of the *Journal* on its own front page, thereby making it clear that Sherer's article had been prominently featured in the newspaper. As its headline suggests, the thrust of Sherer's article was that Banharn's political ascent was not being taken seriously by many people in Thailand. Sherer stressed Banharn's ministerial record and his achievements in his home province of Suphanburi, and noted the tendency of many prominent and well-informed Thais to belittle both Banharn's record, and his prospects of gaining the premiership. The story continued on an inside page, where Sherer mentioned Banharn's old nickname of 'Mr ATM' (the nickname satirized Banharn as a 'fixer', who could always sweeten his requests for political support with immediate cash incentives) and the fact that senior members of his party had been denied US visas on account of their alleged involvement in the drugs trade. Sherer concluded by quoting an unnamed western diplomat as saying that while it remained unclear how far Banharn might be supported by

<sup>12</sup> For a relevant discussion, see Susan J. Pharr, 'Media as trickster in Japan: a comparative perspective', in Pharr and Krauss (eds), *Media and Politics in Japan*, pp. 19–43.

<sup>13</sup> *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 31 May 1995.



intellectuals, he would be accepted by ordinary people if he became prime minister. Sherer's article was scrupulously fair to Banharn; if anything, it was a sympathetic view of him.

For *Siam Post* though, Sherer's background details were of more interest than his main thrust. This was in spite of the fact that both the 'Mr ATM' nickname and the drug allegations were very old stories which had been extensively covered by both the international and domestic press before. The *Siam Post* headline was 'Foreigners eye Banharn, assess old poisonous wounds'.<sup>14</sup> Above the main headline was the smaller headline 'Keeping an eye on premier-to-be/Dubious ATM machine—Party members trade dust'. The story lead-in declared 'Foreigners are starting to keep an eye on Mr Silpa-archa, the leader of the Chart Thai Party; now that he might gain the position of prime minister people are generally starting to notice his ATM machine image and members of his party selling drugs.' The article went on to give a detailed and very restrained translation-cum-summary of the Sherer piece. There was a clear discrepancy between the content of the Sherer article (reflected in the body of the *Siam Post* story), and the *Siam Post* headlines and lead-in material. The headlines, coupled with the accompanying reproduction of the original article, suggested a critical denunciation of Banharn by a leading regional publication. This image of the *Journal* story (rather than the content of the story itself) was highly effective in embarrassing Chart Thai and the party leader, putting them immediately on the defensive. The line taken by *Siam Post* was echoed by mass-circulation *Khao Sod*, which ran the story with the headline 'Foreign newspaper missile hits Banharn'. Unlike *Siam Post*, *Khao Sod* dealt only with the negative aspects of the article. The story was also carried by *Matichon*, and covered by the radio news service INN.

Chart Thai's response to the story became news for a couple of days following its appearance. Banharn himself declared that there was a conspiracy at work by his domestic political opponents, who had given information to the *Journal* in an attempt to discredit him. He was reported as saying 'Somebody here gave the information to the newspaper. This is just the beginning. More will follow'.<sup>15</sup> Chart Thai secretary-general Sanoh Thienthong declared: 'This kind of news is likely to have some political party behind it'.<sup>16</sup> Somsak Pris-

<sup>14</sup> *Siam Post*, 1 June 1995.

<sup>15</sup> 'Newspaper's "praise" leaves Chat Thai, Banharn fuming', *The Nation*, 2 June 1995.

<sup>16</sup> *Siam Post*, 2 June 1995.

sanananthakul, deputy Chart Thai spokesman, called the article 'a conspiracy to destroy Chart Thai, curbing our growth and blocking our leader from rising to the premier post'.<sup>17</sup> He went on to argue that since Chart Thai had begun to gain in popular appeal during the no-confidence debate, the party's opponents had been trying to discredit it. He believed that it must be someone of considerable political importance who had given information to the *Asian Wall Street Journal*.<sup>18</sup> Like Banharn, Somsak expected further damaging reports to appear in the foreign press in the next couple of days.

Although far-fetched in this instance, Banharn and Somsak's view that a conspiracy was at work linking foreign journalists with domestic opponents acknowledged the degree to which critical coverage in the international press could be damaging to Thai politicians. As an internationally-published newspaper report, the *Journal* article on Banharn had considerable credibility. The response of Banharn and Chart Thai was to attempt to neutralize that international credibility by characterizing the article as part of a domestic political 'game'. If the *Journal* article could be viewed in the same light as a commentary in a Thai-language newspaper such as *Siam Post* or *Khao Sod*, its impact would be minimal. In this case, the comments by Banharn and Somsak illustrate their failure to read the original article and grasp its intended significance. They interpreted the article as part of a Thai political 'game' precisely because of the game-playing of misrepresentation practised by the front page editors of the Thai-language press. Banharn and his associates did not fully understand the way the international media operated.

At the same time, Banharn's belief in the existence of conspiracies to discredit him cannot be dismissed as mere ignorance or paranoia.<sup>19</sup> His view was based on two known facts: Thai reporters are employed by the Bangkok bureaux of several international publications (one such reporter worked for the *Asian Wall Street Journal*), and some Thai politicians enjoy close ties with certain foreign correspondents, sometimes supplying them with 'leads', unattributed leaks, and misinformation (*ploi khao*). One such politician was Prasong Sunsiri, former intelligence chief, and foreign minister from 1992 to 1994. Prasong had played a part in publicizing US narcotics-related

<sup>17</sup> *The Nation*, 2 June 1995.

<sup>18</sup> *Siam Post*, 2 June 1995.

<sup>19</sup> For a Thai view highly critical of the western media's coverage of the election, see Prangtip Daorueng, 'Thais like their democracy, warts and all', *Manila Chronicle*, 13 July 1995.

allegations about Narong Wongwan and Vattana Assawahame, two leading figures in Chart Thai. The Democrat Party also contained some of MPs with academic backgrounds and fluent English, who maintained excellent ties with the foreign journalistic community, including party spokesman Abhisit Vejjajiva and former deputy foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan.<sup>20</sup> Chart Thai had no equivalent figures to manage its relations with the international press. The outlines of the plot imagined by Banharn would involve either an unsympathetic Thai reporter (perhaps with links to a politician or political party) using influence with a foreign colleague to get a critical story written (or even ghost-writing it for a foreigner), or else a foreign correspondent falling under the sway of a persuasive Thai opponent such as Abhisit or Prasong. According to one source, Banharn was so concerned that he went personally to at least one Thai newspaper office (that of *Matichon*) on 1 or 2 June to explain that people were plotting against him.<sup>21</sup>

In its 2 June front page story on the political response to the *Journal* article, *Siam Post* noted that there was now a movement for a 'neutral person' to become prime minister, rather than the leader of either the Democrat or the Chart Thai parties. People who did not relish the prospect of a Banharn government were trying to generate a 'krasae', a political 'current' or 'bandwagon' for an alternative prime ministerial candidate to emerge. Was *Siam Post* attempting to build up this kind of tide of feeling, or was the newspaper simply reporting an existing sentiment (like that of middle class distrust of Banharn)? The story described the *Asian Wall Street Journal* as 'a newspaper which has influence among the leading businessmen of the world'. This theme of 'the world is watching our politicians' was a recurrent one in *Siam Post's* treatment of international news stories about Thailand. *Siam Post* consistently sought to invoke the wider world as a watchdog of Thai political standards and public morality.

On the same day, *Siam Post* ran as its lead a second story about supposed foreign criticism of Chart Thai. Under the headline 'Getting Banharn to clean up cast-off image of "white powder" government'—with a smaller headline above reading 'Foreign news agency takes a look at Thai politics after the election'—the story described how an Associated Press article questioned the qualifications of pro-

<sup>20</sup> When the Democrats returned to power in November 1997, Abhisit was appointed a minister in the prime minister's office, and Surin became foreign minister.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Bangkok-based journalist, 2 Feb. 1996.

spective Chart Thai ministers in the wake of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* story. The story went on to summarize the AP account, describing how Thai political scientists were speculating that Chart Thai politicians accused of involvement in drug-dealing could become ministers after the election. The AP story was based upon interviews with two Chulalongkorn University political scientists, Chaiwat Khamchoo and Kramol Thongdhammachart. But because these two academics had given interviews to AP, the story had been recycled by *Siam Post* as an example of international scrutiny of the Thai political scene. Again, however, there was a serious discrepancy between the prominence and bold headline of this front-page lead, and the substantive content of the article. A story which would only have merited a small item on the inside pages, had the academics given interviews to Thai reporters, became front page news, simply because of the 'international' route by which their statements had emerged.

On 3 June, *The Nation* ran a front page story entitled 'Rivals behind smear campaign, insists Banharn'. The story linked the *Asian Wall Street Journal* article, press agency reports, and (less plausibly and relevantly) one of *The Nation's* own previous articles on calls by Thai academics for Banharn to clarify the issue of alleged drug-dealers in his party. Typically, the story included no new information, simply citing the latest responses of senior Chart Thai members to the criticisms being voiced in the press. One telling detail was a quotation from prime minister Chuan Leekpai, who pointed out that most Thais didn't read English-language newspapers. The standard Thai practice of publishing 'news' stories which consisted of nothing more than comments on the comments of others made it easy to keep alive political 'issues' of no substance. Yet the apparent objective of the media was to create pressure upon the Chart Thai Party to clean up its political act.

*Siam Post*—now for the third day running—ran a new front page lead story on 4 June 1995 about coverage of Chart Thai in the international media. Using the headline 'Chart Thai evades answering, says it's is a Democrat game to harm them'—the paper went on: 'The foreign media is still eyeing up the future of the "Banharn 1 government"' as concerns the fact that Chart Thai won't agree to give a clear answer about the issue of public figures affiliated with it, openly stating that the Democrats are playing a game to harm them'. The peg for their story was an article in the latest issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* by Michael Vatikiotis, entitled 'Devils'

advocate: Banharn wants to change Chart Thai's image'. *Siam Post* reproduced most of the article alongside its headline, a further example of the kind of 'intertextuality' employed with the *Asian Wall Street Journal* story. However, the original story contained only one passing reference to the issue of Chart Thai figures linked to drug allegations, the point highlighted by the *Siam Post* headline. *Siam Post* gave a brief account of the *Review* article, before again referring to the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and Associated Press pieces and their mention of the drug allegations. *Siam Post* quoted Banharn as saying that the stories were an example of 'ploi khao' by political opponents. Banharn claimed that Chart Thai also had information about its opponents which it might decide to release. If it did so, people would know who had deeper information about the other. Banharn's response illustrated his view of politics as a game in which all parties gathered dirt on each other; any party which threw an unreasonable amount of dirt at an opponent through the media could expect to be attacked in return. None of the interviews with various political figures dealt directly with the content of the *Review* article.

The furore over the *Asian Wall Street Journal* article subsequently died down, as it gradually became apparent that the episode was the kind of storm in a teacup so beloved of Thai-language newspapers and Thai politicians. Dr Surakiart Sathirathai, then dean of the law faculty at Chulalongkorn University and a close advisor to Banharn, was one of the few Banharn aides to enjoy good relations with the international media. Surakiart made it known that Banharn now understood that the *Journal* article had not been conceived as an attack on him. A few days prior to the election, Banharn had a private dinner at an upmarket restaurant in Bangkok's Sukhumvit area, with a handful of editorial staff and senior reporters from *Siam Post*. A Thai reporter from the *Asian Wall Street Journal* was also invited. One purpose of the gathering was to 'clear' the problem between Banharn, the *Journal*, and *Siam Post*. The English word 'clear' is often used in Thai to indicate this kind of conflict resolution involving politicians and journalists, a wiping clean of the slate. At the dinner, Banharn appeared to understand that the foreign newspaper had not been involved in a plot against him. A truce was called in this particular match in the long-running series of press versus politician 'games'.

The rules of the game remained the same, however: a news story which appears in the international media has more impact than a story in the local media, even if the international story came from

the local media. Former government spokesman and Democrat MP Abhisit Vejjajiva expressed it like this:

The Thai press takes a stance, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* merely reflects what the Thai press says, and it becomes big news that the *Review* says it. There is this attitude that if the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Time*, or *Newsweek* says it, everyone else in the world must be reading it, and it must carry weight. It's baffling even to the people who write for the *Review*.<sup>22</sup>

### Henrik Westander and the Kockums Case

In November 1995 Henrik Westander, a Swedish peace activist and independent researcher on the arms trade, published a newspaper article alleging that Kockums, a Swedish submarine manufacturer, had promised sizeable campaign contributions to the Chart Thai Party, conditional on receiving submarine orders from the Thai Navy.<sup>23</sup> According to Westander: 'This information was provided by a centrally-placed source with direct access to the submarine deal.'<sup>24</sup> Westander's article was distinctly short on details about the alleged bribery: he did not specify who was to be paid, who was to do the paying, when the payments were to be made, or how much money was involved. An AFP story which carried details of the original article was picked up by a number of Thai newspapers, including *Thai Rath*, *Matichon*, *Siam Post* and *The Nation*. For several weeks, Westander's accusations were extensively covered in the Thai press. *Siam Post* was particularly detailed in its coverage of the issue; a few days after the story broke, Chart Thai sued *Siam Post* for libel, despite the fact that other newspapers had carried the story, and that coverage in the Thai press was based on Westander's claims. Despite intense media interest in the issue, no new information of a substantive nature emerged about the core allegation. Nor did Westander provide any documentary or other evidence to back up the indirect testimony of his anonymous 'centrally-placed informant'.

The Kockums case provides excellent illustrations of the *modus operandi* of the Thai press in dealing with a foreign news story which had important domestic political ramifications. The allegations by Westander came at a time when the Banharn government was facing

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Abhisit Vejjajiva, 31 Jan. 1996.

<sup>23</sup> *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 Nov. 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Translation from 'What the contentious article on bribery said', *The Nation*, 29 Nov. 1995.

media criticism for its alleged lack of financial and political integrity. The Kockums charges allowed the media to broaden out the attacks on Banharn: not only were they accused of 'domestic' corruption, but they had also allegedly been willing to sell out Thailand's national interests to a foreign arms company.

It must be stressed that this article does not assert or imply that Kockums, its representatives, or any Thai politician, military officer, or government official acted improperly over the submarine question.<sup>25</sup> The article is concerned solely with analysing media and political aspects of the press controversy. However, undertaking such an analysis involves first sketching out the rationale behind the media's considerable interest in Westander's accusation.

The purchase of submarines had been under consideration in Thailand for some time. The Thai Navy had long been something of a Cinderella service, lacking the longstanding political clout of the Army, and latterly that of the Air Force. At the same time, the public looked sympathetically upon the Navy, which had not participated in the violent suppression of political protests during the May 1992 upheavals. Military reporters for the major newspapers were overwhelmingly supportive of the Navy's desire to acquire submarine capabilities, but the Chuan government had vetoed submarine purchase on budgetary grounds in April 1995. Chuan had become prime minister against a backdrop of anti-military feeling following the May 1992 events, and although he had done little to curb military privilege, he had been reluctant to approve major arms purchases. There was every reason to think that a new government coalition led by senior figures in the Chart Thai Party might be sympathetic to increased spending on defence contracts, given their desire to secure military support, and their known partiality for 'commissions'. A number of companies were interested in bidding for the submarine contract; the German and Swedish proposals were generally considered leading contenders. The Navy was believed to be very sympathetic to the Swedish bid, but in practice any decision would have to be approved by its political masters.<sup>26</sup> A complicating factor was the

<sup>25</sup> In the interests of full disclosure, I should make clear that during late Nov. and most of Dec. 1995, I was undertaking fieldwork at *Siam Post* newspaper, and was therefore a participant-observer in the newspaper's coverage of the Kockums case. This included regular telephone and fax communication with Henrik Westander and SPAS. This article draws upon field notes from this research.

<sup>26</sup> For background details see, for example, 'Behind the scenes . . . the submarine political torpedo: national strategy collapses because of political strategy?' *Arthit*

role of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, leader of the New Aspiration Party (NAP). Before entering civilian politics, Chavalit had been Army commander-in-chief and armed forces supreme commander. He had approved numerous arms purchases during his tenure in these positions, including that of Chinese-made frigates for the Navy. Some of Chavalit's purchases had been controversial. Chavalit was rumoured to be sympathetic to the German submarine bid. The NAP was likely to join a Chart Thai led coalition, and Chavalit was bound to take an interest in defence matters (in the event, he became defence minister). It was therefore highly possible that Chavalit would seek to use his influence in the new government to approve the purchase of German submarines. Thus it would have been entirely logical for Kockums to have made efforts to buy Chart Thai's support.

For the Thai-language press, covering the Westander story proved difficult. Their normal technique in dealing with a political controversy was to seek quotations from protagonists, but in this case Westander himself was accessible only by telephone, and only through the medium of English. Very few Thai journalists had the ability to conduct a telephone interview with Westander, or with other sources in Sweden such as the Kockums company, the Defence Ministry, or opposition politicians. No Thai newspaper had a stringer or correspondent in Sweden; to complicate matters, Westander himself was living in Denmark, though the offices of his organization—the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society—were in Stockholm. Although a television crew from Pacific Intercommunications did eventually visit Sweden to make a documentary about the story (they never met Westander) no Thai newspaper sent a reporter there.

*Siam Post* dealt with this problem by seeking to publish material which supported Westander's account, and enhanced his credibility. On 28 November, *Siam Post* ran the story as its front page lead, accompanied by a large photograph of Sweden's ambassador in Bangkok calling upon the Thai foreign minister to deny the allegations. Westander's claims had been dismissed by some Chart Thai politicians on the grounds that no one would offer bribes before the outcome of the election was known. Interviewed by telephone for the article, Westander clarified the position: the campaign contributions were 'a much more uncertain form of investment', a speculative

*Weekly*, 925, 3–9 March 1995, pp. 24–8; Surasak Tumcharoen, 'US subs find little support in bedevilled bidding war', *Bangkok Post*, 16 Dec. 1995.



attempt to secure later support rather than an outright bribe for a specific favour. He was also asked about his track record as a peace campaigner, and explained how in 1984 he had provided evidence concerning illegal arms exports to the Middle East by the Swedish company Bofors, which had resulted in criminal proceedings being brought; in 1989 three executives of the company were convicted in a Swedish court. This detail was included in the story's lead-in: Westander was 'the one who had been responsible for the Bofors case, resulting in company executives jailed'.<sup>27</sup> He had later played a part in uncovering details of the Bofors India case, publishing a book on the subject.<sup>28</sup> *Siam Post* noted that Westander had been working as a full-time arms researcher for thirteen years, working solely on the Bofors and Kockums companies.<sup>29</sup>

*Siam Post* also pointed out that in addition to giving a special interview to the newspaper, Westander had also given an interview to the BBC in London, 'which is broadcast all over the world'.<sup>30</sup> In fact, however, Westander was interviewed (with translation) by the BBC World Service Thai Service, which is listened to almost solely by Thais, most of them in Thailand. This interview was important in lending additional credibility to Westander, since the BBC Thai Service plays an important role in legitimating news stories. A story which a Thai-language newspaper might be hesitant about running can be covered as an account of a BBC story. News and political editors at major Thai newspapers such as *Bangkok Post*, *Matichon*, *Manager* and *Thai Rath* are in regular telephone contact with the producers and presenters of the Thai-language service, all of whom are Thai, and most of whom are themselves former journalists on Thai newspapers. Whenever Thai newspaper reporters make trips to London (as they commonly do during the March–May hot season, often on company-sponsored 'inspection tours') they drop in at the BBC Thai Service. Physically removed from the daily machinations of Thai politics—but in constant touch with events—the BBC Thai Service is an authoritative voice which acts as an external referent. A story not covered by the BBC can much more easily be dismissed as frivolous or spurious than one the BBC is taking seriously.

<sup>27</sup> This was actually an over-statement; Westander said simply that the three executives were convicted in court.

<sup>28</sup> Henrik Westander, *Classified: The Political Cover-up of the Bofors Scandal* (Bombay: Gentleman Books, 1992). The book reveals information from classified correspondence between Olof Palme and Rajiv Gandhi.

<sup>29</sup> Again, this was a slight embellishment of what Westander had said.

<sup>30</sup> *Siam Post*, 28 Nov. 1995.

*Siam Post* supported its lead story on the submarine allegations with a second front page story concentrating on the domestic angle, detailing the denials of Banharn and other government figures. Defence Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh reprimanded the Thai press for lacking caution in publishing a story which could have an impact on revered national institutions. He claimed the story was planted. Chavalit's response reflected a military mentality which saw freedom of information as a potential threat to the Thai state. For the Thai press, this line of argument was crude and transparent; in an editorial *The Nation* described Chavalit's statements as 'a gesture typical of political immaturity'.<sup>31</sup>

On 29 November, *Siam Post* continued its coverage of the Kockums allegations with two front page stories. Its lead story concentrated on allegations about the role of the company's Thai 'advisor', former naval officer Supridi Sribhadung. A second story dealt with the latest government responses. The comments of Chart Thai secretary-general Sanoh Thienthong were especially telling. Sanoh declared:

This story is a matter of national honour; we're hitting back—it's not true. I ask the media to be aware that we are living together in a Thai way. We have to be careful concerning anything which tarnishes the nation. What this is all about I don't know. Foreigners tend to like planting news to make trouble for our government.<sup>32</sup>

Like Chavalit, Sanoh sought to present the accusations as a foreign intervention in Thailand's domestic affairs, and attempted to invoke nationalist sentiment to discredit the claims. As a leading figure in the Chart Thai Party (in most Thai parties, the secretary-general takes principal responsibility for fund-raising, lobbying, and other kinds of dirty dealing), Sanoh's own 'honour' was at stake. Just as for *Siam Post* the foreign character of the allegations was evidence of their credibility—on the grounds that Westander was not involved in domestic political concerns—so for government politicians the foreign origin of the allegations was invoked as evidence that Westander was seeking to meddle in Thailand's internal affairs. There was intense speculation about the identity of Westander's 'centrally placed source', generally assumed to be Thai until Westander gave discreet assurances to the contrary.<sup>33</sup> What was

<sup>31</sup> 'Subs scandal: why worry if there's nothing to hide', *The Nation*, 29 Nov. 1995.

<sup>32</sup> *Siam Post*, 29 Nov. 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Westander made it clear that his source was Swedish in a letter to the *Bangkok Post*, 16 Dec. 1995.

Westander's motive? The obvious answer was that Westander was a professional pacifist, a campaigner dedicated to opposing the arms trade. This answer made him suspect in the eyes of many Thais, who saw him as a leftist agitator pursuing his own political agenda. But it was not a sufficient explanation to discredit him altogether. Discrediting Westander would mean either linking him directly to figures in the Thai business or political worlds (therefore demonstrating that he was part of the local 'game'), linking him to other vested interests involved in the submarine bidding (especially to a rival company out to disqualify the Kockums bid), or ideally linking him to some kind of wider 'plot' connected with the bidding exercise, Thai politics, or even both.

*Siam Post* continued its pursuit of the Kockums story the following day, again with two front page stories devoted to the case, one on the resurfacing of Kockums 'advisor' Supridi (who had been lying low in Chantaburi province since the story broke), and another on the SPAS call for the Swedish government to investigate bank records of money transfers between Sweden and Thailand, to see if there was evidence to support the allegations. The first part of a SPAS press release, complete with letterheading, was reproduced on the front page. The paper gave over most of page 3 to transcripts of two radio interviews with Supridi, one from *Nation* radio, and another from INN. Also on page 3 was a translation of a commentary on submarines in Asia from the previous day's *International Herald Tribune*. In the absence of new hard information, *Siam Post* was filling its pages with any available material—from radio interviews to foreign press stories—to keep the controversy alive. In the text of the main front page story, *Siam Post* quoted Westander as stating that there was now great media interest in the case in Sweden itself, and opposition parties were raising questions about the actions of Kockums and of the Swedish government.

One of the issues exciting public interest in Sweden was the claim that Democrat Party secretary-general Sanan Kachornprasart had been offered money by people claiming to be representatives of Kockums when his party was still in government. This claim had appeared in the *Bangkok Post* on 28 November. The *Bangkok Post* story was picked up by an international news agency, and then appeared in the Swedish newspaper *Tidnigarnas Telegrambrya*. A piece of domestic reporting in Thailand—coincidentally by *Siam Post*'s then sister paper—created a political stir in Sweden, which then was recycled in turn for Thai consumption. On 1 December, *Siam Post* ran copies

of headlines from six Kockums-related stories in the previous day's Swedish press on its front page. The stories—which no one at *Siam Post* could read—illustrated the degree of interest the issue had raised in Sweden, thereby further legitimating the story. *Siam Post* reported that Banharn had announced his intention to sue the Thai newspapers which had covered the case, and to investigate the possibility of suing the Swedish newspaper as well. In its second story, it reported that two opposition parties in Sweden had now formally called for the issue to be officially investigated. The story was now focusing on questions of litigation and investigation, relating to the core allegations. Westander had still produced no evidence whatever for his claims, and apart from Sanan's rather vague allegations, there had been no further concrete development in the case itself since the original article had appeared.

On 2 December, the Chart Thai party filed a lawsuit against *Siam Post*. Although other Thai-language newspapers had covered the story, the tone of their coverage was more mild, and the coverage itself less detailed than that of *Siam Post*, which had set aside most or all of page 3 for the case for five consecutive days, in addition to its extensive front page stories. The 3 December issue of *Thai Rath* illustrated the extent of the climbdown: the weekly political analysis column on page 3, one of the most influential articles in the Thai-language press, came out in strong support of the Chart Thai party. 'The source who wrote the Swedish newspaper article is from the NGO movement', declared *Thai Rath*, which speculated that the allegations might be related to intense rivalry between competing bidders for the submarine contract. *Thai Rath*'s 'political team' urged that the interests of the country be put first, implying—like government politicians—that those who criticized Banharn over the allegations were behaving unpatriotically.

The *Thai Rath* article itself became the basis of speculation as to what had been taking place behind the scenes. During the previous week, close aides of senior Chart Thai politicians had invited a senior editor from *Siam Post* for a lunch or dinner meeting on Friday, 1 December, to discuss the problem of the paper's trenchant coverage of the case.<sup>34</sup> The senior editor had replied that he would be happy to meet them, but that they should not expect the paper's coverage of the submarine issue to change as a result. In the event, no meeting took place, and the following day *Siam Post* was sued. It seemed

<sup>34</sup> Field notes, Dec. 1995.

highly possible that Chart Thai figures had made contact with the editors of other Thai-language newspapers, and successfully induced them to 'tone down' the submarine story, leaving *Siam Post* to bear the brunt of legal action alone, on account of its non-co-operation. The international character of the story meant that *Siam Post* could be implicitly criticized by both government figures and rival newspapers for betraying Thailand's national interest in pursuit of a story. According to a Chart Thai spokesman, *Siam Post* had been singled out because it had gone beyond the original wording of the Swedish newspaper story in saying that monies had been received by Chart Thai.<sup>35</sup> Coalition leaders were reported as saying that *Siam Post* was being sued because of its 'aggressive, insulting, and obviously biased' coverage of the case.<sup>36</sup> Although the Reporter's Association of Thailand issued a statement<sup>37</sup> criticizing Chart Thai's decision to sue *Siam Post*, Chart Thai had sought to isolate *Siam Post* from the broader newspaper community.

In retrospect, the lawsuit brought by Chart Thai against *Siam Post* was the beginning of the end for the Westander/Kockums story, although articles on the allegations continued to appear intermittently for some weeks. The second week of the case saw several new developments, including: an official four-page statement on the case from prime minister Banharn Silpa-archa, a second article by Westander, the appointment of a Swedish investigating committee, and attempts by Supridi and Kockums further to discredit Westander and to defend themselves. One of the most interesting developments was the statement from Banharn, in which he claimed that he was not acting to defend himself or his party, but out of higher motives: 'This matter concerns the country's prestige and political legitimacy. If it is ignored, people would think the allegations have grounds'.<sup>38</sup> He went on to say that he and his party 'even in opposition, never accentuated issues for publicity in other countries'. The implication was that the Democrat opposition had breached implicit 'rules' of the Thai political game by first leaking information to Westander, and then corroborating his story. Banharn

<sup>35</sup> Paul M. Sherer, 'Scandal pits Thai leaders against media', *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 5 Dec. 1995.

<sup>36</sup> *The Nation*, 5 Dec. 1995.

<sup>37</sup> Reporters' Association of Thailand press release, 5 Dec. 1995, published in *Siam Post*, 6 Dec. 1996.

<sup>38</sup> For full text in Thai, see *Siam Post*, 5 Dec. 1995. For an English summary, see 'Banharn blames sub allegations on trade conflict', *Bangkok Post*, 5 Dec. 1995.

found it strange that ‘even our media’ (*suamuanchon fai rao*) were spreading Westander’s allegations without any clear first-hand evidence to back them up. He implied that he expected the Thai media to demonstrate its loyalty in the face of criticism from abroad. According to Banharn, it was obvious that the allegations ‘were born of a conflict of trade linked to regional political interests’, a cryptic sentence on which he did not elaborate. The accuser seemed to have been successful on account of the prompt assistance provided by Thailand’s media. Like the *Thai Rath* Sunday political analysis article, Banharn pointed out that Westander was affiliated to a pacifist group which campaigned against war and the arms trade, and went on to suggest that other countries were trying to prevent ‘developing countries’ from acquiring the means to build up their own defences. He concluded by arguing that interest groups both inside and outside the country were trying to harm Thailand’s good name and reputation. Banharn’s statement was long on self-justification and insinuation, but contained very little factual content.

On the same day, Westander produced a new five-page article specially for publication by the Thai press. Rather like Banharn’s press release, it contained little new factual information, except to confirm that his source was not a Thai naval officer or one of Kockum’s competitors.<sup>39</sup> Westander argued that the onus was now on the Swedish government to investigate the allegations by checking bank transfers to Thailand. The investigation could be helped by the various agencies: by the Democrat Party revealing more information, by Swedish opposition parties pressing the Swedish government to pursue the matter, and by the Thai government putting diplomatic pressure on the Swedish government. Following a debate in the Swedish parliament, it was agreed on 6 December that the government’s War Materials Inspectorate (known as KMI) would look into Westander’s allegations. In the absence of any new revelations from Westander, and the continuing refusal of Sanan and the Democrats to fuel the flames of the controversy any further, the submarine issue began to die down.

In any case, *Siam Post* began running a new ‘exclusive’ story on 6 December, concerning allegations that Dr Surakiart Sathirathai, the current finance minister, had operated a company to broker arms

<sup>39</sup> Henrik Westander, ‘Article on the “Sub-Affair”’, faxed press release from SPAS, 4 Dec. 1995. Published in full in Thai translation (and authenticated by reproducing a section of the original press release), *Siam Post*, 6 Dec. 1995.

and other deals during the 1990–91 period when he was a member of former premier Chatchai Choonavan's Ben Phitsanulok advisory team. Kockums remained an important story, but was increasingly eclipsed by the new story, which became known as the 'Dr S' case.<sup>40</sup>

On the evening of 14 December, Supridi Sribhadung appeared on the satellite television station Thai Sky Channel 1, in a panel discussion with Prasong Lertratanawisute (one of the front page editors of *Matichon*), Aroon Larnlua (editor of *Siam Post*), and Phiraphan Phalusuk, a Chart Thai MP. On this programme, Supridi mounted his most trenchant defence yet of his own activities, and of Kockums. Supridi criticized Westander's allegations for their lack of specific details, describing Westander as having used 'masked source' and 'big liar'<sup>41</sup> tactics in his attempts to discredit Kockums. He cited a series of alleged errors in previous allegations by Westander,<sup>42</sup> and claimed that there was a plot to block the sale of Swedish submarines to the Thai Navy. Up to six different groups were involved in the plot, including SPAS (with its ideological opposition to weapons sales), other countries which did not want to see Thailand get submarines, rival submarine manufacturers, weapons agents, and Thai government officials who want to discredit the Navy (this presumably implied military officers from other branches of the services).

However, when Supridi was pressed by the moderator he conceded that his explanation was 'theoretical', rather than based upon hard information. Not all the groups he had listed had necessarily been involved in the plot. In other words, Supridi's explanation was little more than conjecture, a grand conspiracy theory with no more detailed evidence to support it than Westander's original allegations. The beauty of Supridi's argument was that Westander became not a detached peace campaigner, but the front man for an elaborate plot linking commercial, geo-political, international and domestic rivalries. Supridi implied that neighbouring countries (obvious suspects might be Singapore and Malaysia) were seeking to block Thailand's acquisition of submarines, and so might have made common cause with Thai Army or Air Force officers (wanting to preserve the

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed discussion of the 'Dr S' case, see McCargo, *Media Machinations* (forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> Supridi used these English phrases in his explanation.

<sup>42</sup> Many of Supridi's points had been previously mentioned in letters from Dag Tornblom, a retired Swedish Brigadier-General and by Kockums Submarine Systems President Per Johnsson, *Bangkok Post*, 9 Dec. 1995. Westander responded to these points in a letter published in the *Bangkok Post*, 16 Dec. 1995.

higher status of their own forces *vis-à-vis* the Navy), rival submarine companies (such as the German company HDW), Thai arms dealers (by implication, individuals such as Rasri Bunlert, a major Thai arms dealer said to be working for HDW,<sup>43</sup> and alleged by some sources<sup>44</sup> to be close to New Aspiration leader Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and his wife Khunying Pankrua), and foreign NGOs such as SPAS. If substantiated, Supridi's master-plot would have undermined Westander's credibility, involving him inextricably in the Thai political 'game'. But although Supridi's theories were certainly ingenious and entertaining, to most commentators they seemed rather less probable than Westander's original allegation.

Supridi's interpretation elaborated on the conspiracy theory suggested by Banharn's reference to a 'conflict of trade linked to region political interests'. Just as he had arrived at his own notion of a domestic political conspiracy to account for what he misinterpreted as a hostile article about him in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, so Banharn had come up with another conspiracy to explain criticism of his administration over the Kockums and 'Dr S' cases. The outlines of this conspiracy are hinted at in a *Nation* commentary by Sorrayuth Suthassanachinda.<sup>45</sup> Banharn had told *The Nation*: 'I know who is behind all this and I'm watching to see what he's going to do next'. Sorrayuth observed that Banharn: 'seems to have sound reasons for believing his present crisis can be tracked back to just one man, a dangerously ambitious one.'

Sorrayuth's article makes clear—without ever saying so—that the man in question was Defence Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh.<sup>46</sup> The suggestion was that Chavalit, with his eye on becoming the next prime minister, had used the Kockums allegations both to improve the prospects for the German HDW bid, and to weaken Banharn's political standing. The investigative reports published in *Siam Post* on the 'Dr S' case focused upon two close Banharn aides, and clearly made use of leaked documents confiscated during the 23 February 1991 coup. Banharn believed that military sources had leaked the documents so as to discredit the two men, and assumed that former Army commander-in-chief and current defence minister Chavalit

<sup>43</sup> *Siam Post*, 30 Nov. 1995.

<sup>44</sup> See *Bangkok Post*, 16 Dec. 1995.

<sup>45</sup> Sorrayuth Suthassanachinda, 'Plot thickens in Kockums bribery scandal', *The Nation*, 18 Dec. 1995.

<sup>46</sup> This was made explicit in an earlier article, 'Coalition blues: rumours of treachery', *The Nation*, 17 Dec. 1995.



was responsible for these leaks, as well as for feeding information to Westander.

Banharn's apparent interpretation of the Kockums scandal, like his view of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* article, reflected a profoundly Thai-centric view of the world. Banharn failed to appreciate the way foreign journalists and researchers operated, not recognizing that these were professionals with their own agendas, objectives, and standards, people with a wide range of sources, and people who were not passively dependent upon unreliable Thai messengers for all their information. Banharn saw the media in traditional Thai terms, where politicians cultivated reporters and columnists, plying them with financial favours and giving them useful leads, in exchange for sympathetic press coverage. Under such conditions, any rumours or scandals appearing in the press usually had traceable origins and predictable meanings. The internationalization of the media had made this view of the Thai press increasingly outdated; like the generals behind the military attempts to suppress the May 1992 popular protests, Banharn was out of touch with the realities of modern communications, which have made political news unconstrained by national boundaries, and thus almost impossible for individual politicians or governments to monitor, let alone control.<sup>47</sup> There was no necessary or probable link between a Swedish peace activist writing an article for a Swedish newspaper based on a Swedish source, and the internal problems of Banharn's own coalition administration. Nor did extensive coverage of the Swedish story by elements of the Thai press prove the involvement of rival politicians in a plot to discredit the Banharn government. In his case, they simply illustrated the refusal of newspapers such as *Siam Post* to play the government's 'game' by acceding to Chart Thai's 'lobbying' requests that the paper 'tone down' an important story. The intensity of the Kockums furore testified more to *Siam Post*'s refusal to play the domestic political 'game', rather than to *Siam Post*'s determination to play such a game. The Kockums case offered an opportunity to newspapers such as *Siam Post* to operate as political actors, providing them with excellent materials with which to run a campaign.

The Kockums affair rumbled on, with no clear end in sight. On 14 December *Dagens Nyheter* published new bribery allegations, saying that Kockums had given money to five different political parties in

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, 'Generals fail to come to grips with information age', *Bangkok Post*, 1 June 1992.

Thailand in an attempt to secure the submarine contract. The story, by a professional correspondent rather than an activist such as Westander, lent further credence to the earlier allegations.<sup>48</sup> The BBC Thai Service interviewed an assistant editor at the Swedish newspaper, who confirmed that the paper would not have published the story unless it had confidence in its accuracy.<sup>49</sup>

The results of official investigations into the submarine affair were mixed, however. Whilst the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Thai House of Representatives (chaired by an opposition MP) came out with a report criticizing the government and raising a number of unanswered questions, the Committee had been hindered by its inability to compel important witnesses to testify. Among those who had failed to appear was the prime minister himself.<sup>50</sup> On 15 January, the Swedish KMI reported finding no evidence of Kockums having paid bribes to Thai politicians in an attempt to secure submarine contracts.<sup>51</sup> But like the Thai investigation, the KMI investigation was limited in scope: it had called various witnesses, including Westander, but had not investigated bank transfers between Sweden and Thailand.<sup>52</sup> Westander was unsurprised by the outcome of the KMI probe, but in the absence of strong political pressure from the Thai side (even the opposition Democrat Party, for all its posturing, had not formally called upon the Swedish government to investigate the bank transfers) and his own inability to reveal more, the story became a dead letter. The Chart Thai Party eventually won its libel case against *Siam Post* and its editor, Aroon Larnlua. The newspaper and Aroon were fined 100,000 baht each, Aroon received a one year suspended jail sentence, and *Siam Post* was ordered to publish an apology.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

The two cases examined here—Thai media coverage of an article about Banharn Silpa-archa by Paul Sherer, which appeared in the *Asian Wall Street Journal* during the 1995 general election campaign,

<sup>48</sup> *Siam Post*, 16 Dec. 1995, *The Nation*, 16 Dec. 1995.

<sup>49</sup> *Siam Post*, 16 Dec. 1995.

<sup>50</sup> *The Nation*, 5, 6, and 9 Jan. 1996.

<sup>51</sup> *The Nation*, 16 Jan. 1996.

<sup>52</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 16 Jan. 1996; *The Nation*, 16 Jan. 1996.

<sup>53</sup> *Matichon*, 26 Sept. 1997.

and media coverage of allegations made by Henrik Westander in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* concerning clandestine payments to Thai politicians by Kockums or its agents in an attempt to secure submarine orders—illustrate the ways in which Thai domestic politics can interact with stories appearing in the international media. Thai newspapers, especially Thai-language newspapers such as *Siam Post*, have a tendency to respect the credibility of the international press as a news source, and value the corroboration of international news stories in order to support their own criticisms of politicians. In particular, they regard the foreign media as a resource which they can use in order to campaign against abuses of power in the Thai political order. Sometimes this kind of campaigning involves a wilful misreading of stories in the international press, exaggerating their criticisms of domestic politics.

Some Thai politicians regard the international press simply as an extension of the domestic political ‘game’. Politicians who believe they are being criticized by the international press readily subscribe to conspiracy theories which attribute ‘hostile’ foreign coverage to the mischief of political opponents. Although some stories about Thai politics which appear in the international press may result from leaks by political opponents, the majority do not. Whilst politicians such as Banharn Silpa-archa are right to believe that media organizations can behave as political actors, they are wrong to assume that newspapers invariably played supporting roles to the plots and schemes of political rivals. Both the domestic and the international press were entirely capable of independent action, pursuing agendas and ‘games’ of their own devising. Just as military commanders misunderstood the nature of the global information order during their violent suppression of demonstrators in May 1992, so Thailand’s civilian politicians have failed subsequently to appreciate the degree to which their performance is being monitored by an international media audience. Nor have politicians recognized the degree to which Thai political observers themselves have access to information which originates far outside Thailand’s borders.

The considerable freedom of the Thai press in comparison with the media in most other Southeast Asian countries means that Thai patterns of interaction between domestic and international media are not widely replicated. In Malaysia and Singapore, the relationship with the foreign press is generally a more antagonistic one, in which the overseas publication tends to be seen as a hostile commentator rather than a potential ally. In Indonesia, whilst the for-

eign media can be invoked by the domestic press in order to raise sensitive political issues, there are serious limits on the extent to which the local press is free to play such games. The banning of three weekly publications (*Tempo*, *Editor* and *Detik*) in June 1994 symbolized a decline in official tolerance for 'openness' in the Indonesian media.<sup>54</sup> Increasingly, critical and outspoken reporting has been forced into underground publications, and onto the unregulated Internet, where foreign press reports and material produced by non-mainstream sources such as the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) offer alternative sources of news to the heavily self-censored material to be found in the mainstream Indonesian press. Nevertheless, there is some co-operation between Indonesian journalists and foreign correspondents which parallels Thai interactions.<sup>55</sup> The foreign media commonly functions as a means of first exporting, then re-importing, sensitive news stories (rather as happened in Thailand in May 1992). Another technique used by the Indonesian press is to run foreign news reports of official denials by the Indonesian government concerning controversial incidents. Covering the denial allows the newspaper an indirect means of referring to the original incident. As David Hill notes: 'Readers can thus register what information was being carried by the overseas media, compare it with the official line, then choose the more credible interpretation'.<sup>56</sup> More complex interactions in which a foreign news story itself prompts a series of domestic political developments are less common than in Thailand.

Foreign press reports were regularly cited by critics of the short-lived governments of Banharn Silpa-archa (July 1995–November 1996) and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (November 1996–November 1997); parliamentary no-confidence debates during both administrations featured references to critical international media stories. Chavalit sought to use both domestic and international media as scapegoats for declining investor confidence, during the crisis which

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Yasuo Hanazaki, 'The Indonesian press in the era of keterbukaan: a force for democratisation?', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Monash University, 1996.

<sup>55</sup> For example, in July 1997 Andreas Harsono, a journalist closely associated with AJI, was attacked in his car in Jakarta. Indonesian newspapers were reluctant to cover the story directly, but when AFP ran a story about the incident, at least one local publication published it as a news agency report (see 'Men attack journalist', *Indonesia Times*, 27 July 1997).

<sup>56</sup> David T. Hill, *The Press in New Order Indonesia* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1994), pp. 130–1.

engulfed the Thai economy during his premiership.<sup>57</sup> At one point, he declared that foreign leaders were now treating him contemptuously, as a direct result of a hostile media campaign.<sup>58</sup> The Thai domestic media again made extensive use of foreign press reports to highlight and support their concerns about the parlous state of Thailand's economy and financial institutions.

The western media does not play a hegemonic, neo-colonial role in Thailand's information order; nor can domestic plots dictate the content of international news stories concerning Thailand. Rather, the relationship between domestic and international political news in Thailand is based upon processes of reciprocal misreading, and paradoxically forms part of a mutually beneficial dialogue between domestic and international media. In future, news stories of international origin may decline in domestic importance as Thai newspapers become more politically independent, and thus more credible. Yet, given the endemic structural weaknesses of Thailand's electoral system and political order,<sup>59</sup> it may be some time before the Thai press becomes a truly effective fourth estate. Until then, the international media will probably continue to function as a valuable external ally for critical voices in the Thai media.

<sup>57</sup> For a relevant discussion, see Glen Lewis, 'The impact of the mid-1997 crash on media freedom in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore', *Asia-Pacific Magazine*, 1998.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, 'It's not my fault, it's global—PM. Blames media for contemptuous tone of foreign leaders', *The Nation*, 30 Oct. 1997.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Surin Maisrikrod and Duncan McCargo, 'Electoral politics: commercialisation and exclusion, in Kevin Hewison (ed.), *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation* (Routledge: London 1997), pp. 132–48.