

# The media in Indonesia: “a subsystem of the national system”

In Indonesia, the media is largely controlled by a handful of conglomerates linked to the Suharto dictatorship. Reporters who refuse to toe the official line are subject to dismissal or imprisonment.

## Media muzzled

The press has been heavily restricted under the New Order regime, with a combination of government-imposed and self-censorship.

“The press system in Indonesia, first and foremost, is a subsystem, is a subsystem of the national system,” according to a memo from the Indonesian government. “It means that the press must conform with the national system, and is dedicated to national interests.... In exercising its function, the press in Indonesia has always been led by the wisdom of deliberation and consensus as dictated by the national ideology, Pancasila.”

The cosy system has been maintained through a “telephone culture” which discourages journalists from reporting events, and encourages them to phone government officials for stories. Those who prefer investigative journalism receive phone calls warning them not to step out of line.

In 1994, the press began to show more signs of independence. That trend was checked in June 1995, when the regime banned three popular weekly papers with a combined circulation of more than half a million, - *Tempo* (the Indonesian equivalent to *Time Magazine*), *DeTik* and *Editor*. Four other papers were warned soon afterwards to curb their reporting of the press bans or face similar punish-

ment. A court case against the closures has failed to change the mind of the government. *Tempo* continues to publish an on-line edition, but has lost its old mass audience. The void has been filled by a new journal owned by the infamous forestry tycoon Bob Hasan, a close crony of President Suharto.

The government-controlled Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) has done nothing to address the bans, choosing instead to blame the journalists at the three weeklies for inflammatory writing. The PWI-sanctioned code of ethics promises not to publish: “A. anything that may be destructive and prejudices to the nation and state, B. anything that may create social chaos, C. anything that may offend the common standard of decency, religion, faith or belief of a person or a group protected under the law.”

The press ban was denounced by the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, which called it a violation of the 1945 constitution and the 1982 press law. The ban also sparked a demonstration of hundreds of journalists and supporters in front of the Indonesian parliament buildings, which was broken up by police wielding rattan canes.

The violent suppression of dissent, part of a new crackdown by the Suharto regime, also prompted pro-democracy Indonesians to form several new organizations that will campaign for freedom of the press.

## A new voice

Indonesian journalists are motivated, for the most part, by the same drive as many of their Western compatriots: a desire to bring the facts behind the news to the attention of their people.

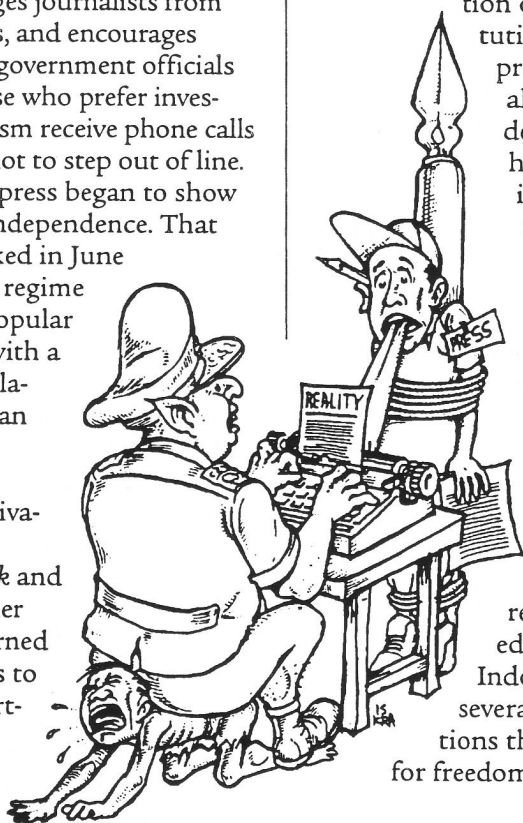
In 1994, a group of mostly younger reporters formed the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI). These journalists have been subjected to dismissal, with some sent to prison or forced into exile by the intolerable restrictions.

The press has been susceptible to government pressure to fire free-thinking employees, not only because of the all-encompassing power of the regime backed by military force, but also because most media outlets are owned by cronies of President Suharto.

Apart from state-owned radio and television, Suharto's daughter, Tutut, heads the association of private radio broadcasters, and huge sectors of the print media are owned by Suharto's family, close allies like Hasan, and above all by the minister of information, Harmoko. Harmoko, who boasts of his transformation from paperboy to press baron, is chairman of the government political vehicle GOLKAR, and has used his cabinet position to gradually acquire controlling shares in a slew of newspapers and magazines for himself. On several occasions, he has reportedly threatened to revoke publishers' licenses (SIUPP) unless they cut him in as an owner.

## Cog in the government wheel

As a “subsystem of the national system,” the media has been vital to both the rise and unchallenged rule of the 30-year Suharto dictatorship. In 1965, when Suharto seized power amidst an anti-communist bloodbath, “the media became the voice of celebration of the killings,” according to Kusuma, a spokesperson for AJI. Between 600,000 and one million



Indonesians were killed, egged on by the army's newspapers and followed by those media outlets not banned by General Suharto. To this day, there has been no reporting of the deaths of 1965-66 in the Indonesian press, merely heroic accounts of the deeds of the army officers who "saved Indonesia from communism" by exterminating the membership of the Communist Party - along with millions of civilians.

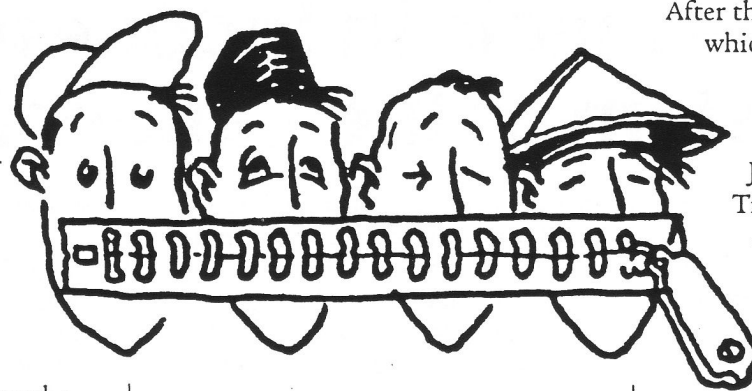
The same happened in East Timor from 1975, Kusuma says, with the press reporting that "we the Indonesians came as big brother to the East Timorese and to save them from the colonialism of Portugal ... One day they will become civilized like us. It's the result of the media that East Timor has an image as an underdeveloped country that should be helped by us."

Without this type of reporting, the Indonesian public would have resisted the invasion and occupation of a neighbouring country, AJI believes. AJI represents a new generation of journalists who reject the tight restrictions on the press and the cosy relationship between reporters and the regime.

"It's the right of 190 million Indonesians to learn the truth about what happened in East Timor, West Papua, Sumatra and any other place," Kusuma says, adding that AJI is embarked on a virtual war "to regain our consciousness, to regain our access to the facts, to regain our dignity."

Undaunted by a ban on independent media outlets, AJI has launched its own popular underground magazine, *Suara Independen* (Independent Voice). AJI never bothered to apply for a publication license, believing in the right to freedom of the press. As a result, AJI members like Ahmed Taufik (winner of an award from the Committee to Protect Journalists) have been jailed.

The pro-democracy student organization PIJAR has also begun to publish its own underground journal, *Kabar dari Pijar* (News from



PIJAR). The women's organization Kalyanamitra has its own *Media Mitra*. Dozens of other non-governmental organizations have seen their circulation increase as they wage what exiled Indonesian professor George Aditjondro has called "a battle of bulletins versus bullets."

*Kabar dari Pijar* editor Tri Agus has also been jailed in Cipinang prison, where he shares a cell block with East Timorese resistance leader Xanana Gusmao, but international supporters have shown him he is not forgotten with over 8,000 letters of support from around the world.

### Outside scrutiny not wanted

Foreign journalists trying to report on the situation in Indonesia and East Timor have received almost as little regard. In 1975, five men working for Australian television were killed during Indonesian border incursions into East Timor, with Indonesia claiming they were caught in the crossfire - despite the fact they had taken shelter in a house painted with the Australian flag. A July 1996 inquiry appointed by the Australian parliament found that the five were almost certainly the victims of a deliberate murder by the Indonesian armed forces.

A sixth newsman, Roger East, was killed in an impromptu execution on Dec. 7, 1975, the first day of the full-scale invasion of East Timor. Eyewitnesses report that he was told to stand on a dockside with his back to the soldiers that killed him, so that his body would topple into the harbour.

East Timor remained off limits to foreign reporters, except those invited by the armed forces, until 1989.

After the 1991 Dili massacre, in which two American reporters were beaten, one sustaining a fractured skull, it was placed off limits once again. Journalists going to East Timor since have had to pose as tourists or face expulsion. In July 1996, street protests for democracy erupted in Jakarta. Journalists were barred from covering the incident, with at least two

reporters, including a photographer for *Agence France Presse*, reportedly beaten. The military seized the films of *Associated Press*, *Asiaweek*, the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* and others.

Two Indonesian reporters were detained and tortured the next day for covering a protest in the city of Surabaya. "When they said they were journalists, some soldiers grabbed their heads and banged them against the wall repeatedly, until they fell to the ground, whereupon other soldiers kicked them," reported the Canadian Committee to Protect Journalists.

The day after the protests, the regime threatened to shut two newspapers (*Kompas* and *Merdeka*) and two radio stations (Ramako and Sono) unless they would report the official version of events.

AJI and other Indonesians wanting to learn the truth from their media have appealed to colleagues overseas to show their support. That support has been forthcoming from organizations like the Canadian Committee to Protect Journalists, Article 19 and Reporters sans Frontières - but much more support is needed.

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