

## Press freedom in Indonesia

Susanto Pudjomartono.

1996

Susanto P. (1996). Press freedom in Indonesia. In AMIC Seminar on Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia: Kuala Lumpur, May 16-18, 1996. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/93162>

**Paper No. 9**

## PRESS FREEDOM IN INDONESIA

by

Susanto Pudjomartono

On March 6, 1996, a party attended by about 100 people was held in Jakarta to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the weekly newsmagazine *Tempo*. The "celebration" was followed by a week-long photo exhibition and closed with a well-attended public discussion. The irony is, *Tempo* had been banned (the official term is "its publishing permit has been revoked") and ceased to be published for almost two years, and currently one of its journalist is in jail for distributing an illegal alternative media publication.

Another irony is, on the same evening it was announced that starting from March 6 *Tempo* could be obtained through the Internet. Immediately, within a few days, more than a thousand would-be subscribers reportedly had called and registered, including some from outside Indonesia.

Most of the discussion during the party centered on the prospect of *Tempo*'s case against Minister of Information Harmoko. After *Tempo*'s closure, former chief Editor of *Tempo* Goenawan Mohamad filed a lawsuit at the Jakarta Administrative Court against the Minister of Information to challenge the banning of the magazine. The court's surprise verdict was that the Minister of Information's ban was illegal, and therefore the minister was required to issue a new publishing permit to *Tempo*. The minister appealed but the Jakarta Higher Administrative Court upheld the lower court's decision. Minister Harmoko then appealed to the Supreme Court which has yet to issue a ruling.

The event is perhaps the best illustration of the current state of freedom of the press in Indonesia. Press freedom is curtailed, and the threat of media bans endures. All the media are now exercising self-censorship, but there is a growing opposition to the ruling. On the other hand, press freedom activists have found a new outlet to channel their aspirations through the alternative media and the Internet.

Speaking about press freedom, one should remember that the level of freedom in a country reflects the political situation in that particular country. In Indonesia's case,

the government's tight control of domestic politics is also mirrored in its regulation of the press, the majority of which are privately owned.

Despite the impending threat, one has to admit that the current situation is much more relaxed than, say, a year ago, although it is still a far cry from the pre-banning period when the press enjoyed a spell of apparent freedom.

The question now is, what is the extent of press freedom in Indonesia? Since the press is perceived to shoulder a great responsibility, what is the right proportion between press freedom and responsibility in Indonesia?

One has to admit that the June 21, 1994, banning of *Tempo*, *Detik*, and *Editor*, constitutes a turning point in the history of the freedom of the press in Indonesia. The press has discovered that it cannot jump too far across a certain line -- the so-called "golden rule" of the freedom of the press. Now the press is fully aware that although the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and that the Press Act of 1966 stipulates that "no censorship or bridling shall be applied to the National Press", the government through various means could stop a publication. They also know that the government perceives that "openness" and democracy should be implemented gradually, in stages.

The first and most effective means for the government to control the media is through the publishing permit. All media publications have to obtain a permit which is issued by the Ministry of Information. To obtain a permit one must file an application in which the candidates for the positions of general manager and chief Editor are named. Attached to the application are recommendations for the two candidates from the Indonesian Journalist Association (PWI) and the Association of Newspaper Publishers (SPS).

Later, if the permit is granted, any change involving the general manager or the chief Editor must get the approval of the Ministry of Information. Without such an approval a publication may lose its publishing permit due to "administrative violations", as happened to the weekly tabloid *Detik* and the news magazine *Editor*.

The Ministry of Information can also revoke the publishing permit should the Indonesian Journalist Association (PWI) or the Association of the Newspaper

Publishers (SPS) withdraw its recommendation for the general manager or chief Editor.

The latter clause is heavily criticized by the press because many believe that it is very well possible for the Ministry of Information to put pressure on the PWI or SPS to revoke certain recommendations, which would lead to the revocation of the publishing permits.

The Ministry of Information also limits the maximum number of pages for the printed media through the Press Council which is chaired by the Minister of Information. The ministry also restricts the pages that can be allocated for advertisements to 35 percent of the total maximum number of pages, which at the moment is 24 pages.

These uncertainties somehow have not discouraged people from investing into the media business. Last month saw three new magazines obtain a permit. It is apparent, then, that many people believe information is power, some even see the media as a lucrative business, or as the most appropriate vehicle to serve their plans. And since a publishing permit is hard to obtain, some are willing to pay hundreds of millions of rupiah for a valid publishing permit "through the back door".

The fact is, the printed media in Indonesia is now hard-hit by the inroads made by television. In 1991, according to unofficial statistics, Indonesia had 68 daily newspapers and 86 weekly newspapers with a total circulation of 10,5 million copies. In 1994, however, the total circulation had decreased to some 7 million copies, published by 75 daily newspapers and 87 weeklies -- a decline of more than 33,33 percent.

The alleged culprit for this misfortune is the electronic media. Today, Indonesia has one state-owned television network, five private television stations and 823 radio stations, 627 of which are privately owned.

Against the television assault, the printed media seems to be helpless. Not only is its ability to penetrate the public weakened, its share of advertising income has also been heavily reduced.

The printed media in Indonesia has yet another reason for envy: the private television stations relatively enjoy more freedom, due to, as many perceive, their

ownership. Although private television stations are officially barred from producing their own news, in fact they can broadcast "information" which is, of course, news.

Yet, there is a possibility that this freedom may be shortlived. A draft bill on radio and television broadcasting which was presented by the government to the House of Representatives for deliberation last week stipulates that news to be aired by privately owned television and radio stations are subject to government censorship because "news has a great and direct impact on the public".

Under this heavy pressure, many printed media have decided to lie low and play safe by not venturing into the darkness. Some prefer to exploit crime and sex, which is relatively much "safer" than the more sensitive political or economic news. This new strategy somehow has outraged the public because some media publications overstepped the boundaries of propriety by carrying sensational reports and violating privacy, causing a considerable increase of complaints to be filed with the Press Honorary Council.

Let us now examine the concept of freedom of the press as it is perceived in Indonesia. Almost all experts agree that freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and a proper system of checks and balances are prerequisites of democracy.

Although the Indonesian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, the actual implementation of those principles is somehow rather different. For the last twenty-five years the Indonesian government has been undertaking a national development drive. National stability is perceived as an absolute prerequisite for the success of national development. Therefore, any effort or anything which may hamper the national stability is seen as a threat and will be dealt with accordingly.

The government has repeatedly acknowledged that the national press is an important and inseparable part of the nation which has gone through the ups and downs over the same road which the nation has traveled. The press' important role in the country's progress is also recognized. But, since Indonesia intends to accelerate its forward momentum for the sake of keeping abreast of other nations, all people have to

make some sort of sacrifice. The press is expected to develop and become a force which encourages healthy development.

In the drive toward national development, the nation has its priorities. And the preservation of national stability, to prevent the nation from falling into chaos, is one of the top priorities.

Thus, according to the authorities' line of thought, if the press goes too far and approaches, or oversteps, the delicate line which separates news reporting from activities which may harm the nation and create unrest, then the authorities will act. In other words, the press must be "constructive and corrective, but not destructive". The government expects the Indonesian press "to use the freedom it enjoys with the greatest sense of responsibility".

The press, for example, has to be sensitive enough to understand the diversity of the Indonesian society. If some racial or religious incident occurs, any style of news reporting style that might instigate even bigger incidents must be avoided. In other words, the government asserts that press freedom should be applied in the context of Indonesia's social, political and cultural setting. The freedom of the press should be used in accordance with the Pancasila state ideology.

In the last several years the government has also noticed with wariness the tendency of members of the press to "sacrifice the nation's interest for the sake of business". The government also repeatedly warned the press to be cautious to "foreign information sources" whose products may not be suit domestic values. The government has asserted that some of the foreign information sources "have missions and visions which may not be in agreement with the nation's interest".

In the past, the government had often been upset over reports from the foreign press which it considered to be "negative", since most of them ignored the government's success in the national development drive and concentrated more on the "bad" news. This resulted in a policy which limited the admission of foreign journalist into the country.

Of late, however, the government has been seeing another specter in the form of Internet. Numerous officials have warned the public about "the provision of misleading information by certain irresponsible people" on the Internet global computerized

information service. They also worried that this assault may bring a negative effect to the national values and spread disinformation about Indonesia.

The government's wrath is understandable. For the last two years information which is not available in the domestic press has found its way through cyberspace, which is later copied and disseminated to numerous hands. Some of the information comes in the form of pornography, but most of it is information produced by dissidents or government critics.

The government has indicated that it intends to regulate information on the Internet, but how it will do that remains unclear. Several Internet providers have disclosed that they have never been asked to censor politically sensitive material and only ordered to curb pornographic material. The authorities have also appealed to the public "to look only at the positive information, not the negative".

Against that backdrop, the Indonesian press continues to call for more openness and greater freedom, claiming that without freedom it cannot carry out its function. Yet, few have ever dared to invite the government's wrath by crossing the line. On the other hand, the public, particularly the middle class, has called on the press to help promote more transparent governance, and they expect the press to play a leading role in the nation's journey towards democracy.

Squeezed in between those two forces, most newspapers seem to sway and remain undecided. Some try to exercise a hit-and-run tactic while pushing for more freedom, but the majority remains cautious. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why more and more newspaper have been losing their readership.

Many people have criticized the press' stance and accused it of becoming more "docile" because the press is a big business now and would not dare to make any risky moves. Indeed, the press is becoming a big industry and unlike in the old days, it costs billions of rupiah to set up a newspaper nowadays. Some old-timers have rightly charged that the press now has lost its idealism and its commitment to, for instance, supporting the common people and promoting human dignity.

Overall, the current state of press freedom in Indonesia is a bit gloomy. Globalization and the wave of democratization which is now rollercoasting throughout the world seems somewhat distant. Many Editors feel that the government is



controlling the press by sending unclear signals as to what degree of freedom is allowed. This uncertainty has created anxiety among the press because it has to continuously gauge the sensitivity of the authorities. It has to rely instinct only.

Yet, the press itself is not entirely innocent. I believe that a few years ago, when the government was experimenting with a police of greater openness by providing a greater political leeway, some members of the press have misjudged the situation and over-eagerly believed that the long awaited "freedom" has at last arrived. They outdid themselves by indiscriminately criticizing almost everything -- in a "liberal" manner, according to some critics, causing the government to believe that the press had transgressed the mutually agreed bounds. And so the axe fell.