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The Indonesian Media and the Absence of Peace

Santi Soekanto

I wonder what peace is in Indonesia.

As of writing, the Indonesia media were reporting how police fired upon pro-independence supporters in Indonesia’s easternmost province of Irian Jaya, killing at least six people during the local commemoration of the failed Dec. 1, 1961 declaration of independence for the region. This incident was only one in a string of violence striking various parts of Indonesia, the most notable of which is the continued sectarian conflict in another eastern province, Maluku, where thousands have been killed and more have been displaced. In addition, it was only last week that the Indonesian media were full of reports about the killing of dozens of people suspected of practicing witchcraft. This particular violence was by no means now, as it had taken place in various parts of the main island of Java—often a pretext to some political conflicts. These all came on top of the political violence raging among Indonesian political elite, in particular between President Abdurrahman Wahid and his opponents at the legislative councils.

Most people my age remember the past two or even three decades of Indonesia as a state of relative calm and stability but with a strong overtone of fear. Those who had a mind of their own and an inclination to speak out remember feeling afraid of many things, but mostly of the military (which then included the police force) and the government. Many scholars and journalists have only recently stopped beating about the bush and attributed the pervasive fear to the authoritarian regime of former President Soeharto—the father of development and stability—and his armed forces.
May be, for Indonesia, there is peace and there is peace. If peace is defined as a state of untroubled calm with all elements of society being in harmony with each other, with not one group dominating any other groups, then one would not find much of it in the pluralistic Indonesia where polarizing forces of ethnicity, religious and group differences exist significantly. There is also peace where one element does not dominate so much as subjugates the rest of the society, and where any signs of dissension are nipped in the bud. I remember Indonesia as being in the latter state for much of my life, hailed by even the so-called most democratic Western countries as the model of stability.

But does stability equal peace?

Challenging the democratic peace theory, Kurt Dassel (*Paths to Peace*, 1997) described how Indonesia shifted rapidly and dramatically from a relatively pacific foreign policy (1956-61), to an aggressive policy (1961-65), then back to a pacific foreign policy even cooperating with former enemies (1966-71). Dassel attributed the changes in such a quick succession to how the Armed Forces (TNI, then ABRI, and back to TNI) handled institutional instability.

Basically, Dassel says there are two consequences of institutional instability. The first is that instability threatens the core organizational interests of the military, for example its existence as an organization, its internal unity, its monopoly of force, and its political prerogatives. This increases the degree to which the military is motivated by parochial concerns; this can make the military more willing to take extreme actions to protect and advance its interests, including the use of force across or within state borders. Second, institutional instability tends to deprive civilians of
devices to control the military, so the military will be more able to use force in the manner it wishes.

Whether the military is likely to advocate external aggression depends upon the consequences of using force in the domestic arena. If it can use force domestically without splitting apart, then it will prefer to repress domestic opponents. If, however, using force domestically will divide the military against itself and precipitate a civil war, it will use force abroad. Usually, the military can use force domestically and maintain its unity; hence, it usually uses force domestically and pursues a pacific foreign policy in order to maximize its chances of successfully repressing domestic opponents. Therefore, for Indonesians, doomed if the military did and doomed it if did not not. A pacific foreign policy meant fear for the domestic opponents of the government and the military, while an aggressive foreign policy meant fear on another level of international confrontation that brought with it social, economic and political ramifications.

Although Dassel focused his attention to the periods before 1971, I do not think it is too long an overshot to find similarities with the Indonesian scene under Soeharto’s 32 years of rule. A support for this conviction can be found in the history of Indonesian media. Following the removal of Soeharto in May 1998, a flourishing of the new publications took place. A total of 1397 licenses for publication were issued for the period of 1998-1999 alone.

This development in the print media is a long distance away from how the early newspapers appeared in the 1930s and 1940s. They were then published by newly educated Indonesians, mostly as underground publications to spread the gospel of independence from the Dutch colonial masters and later the Japanese occupation. Newspapers later developed to become an outlet to vent attacks against the first president Sukarno in the
1950s and 1960s. *Indonesia Raya* led by noted journalist Mochtar Lubis exemplified the print media at the time.

When Soeharto took over power in 1967, the newspaper was also critical of the government before it was shut down in the early 1970s. The media soon learned to become compliant under the rule of Soeharto. There were always newspapers and magazines critical in their reporting of the government but most ended up losing their publication licenses. The biggest showcase of government’s strict authority over the print media was when the information ministry revoked in 1994 licenses of three publications—weekly news tabloid *DeTik*, weekly news magazine *Editor* and the leading news magazine *Tempo*—on charges of endangering national stability.

This helps explain to me that peace has been for decades a rare, transient commodity for many Indonesians. Would we have expected the media under such circumstances to play a role in promoting a culture of peace?

About ten years ago, which I think marked the time where the tide began to turn against Soeharto, the media did not yet report about abuses of public offices much less the bloody violence in Aceh or anywhere else. I remember feeling frustrated because we were warned against running the story of a military helicopter crash for fear it would cast light on the Armed Forces (then ABRI) "infallibility." "ABRI choppers do not crash." "ABRI soldiers do not get killed by separatist guerrillas."

We did not report about hundreds of people being killed, raped, and tortured in Irian Jaya, Aceh, East Timor or anywhere else. We did not report about communal conflicts--we did run stories about the bloodbath between indigenous Kalimantan people with migrant Maduranese, but in such a way
that took away the horror. We were told that it was to maintain stability, unity and peace.

The press gag was lifted officially in 1999 by virtue of the Press Act No.40/1999 signed by succeeding President B.J. Habibie, but the media actually found its new freedom a year before when the heady rush of student-led reform movement began. We suddenly found ourselves in the position of being able to say and report anything we wanted to. May be today, with the newly-found freedom and the growing threat of national disintegration, is the good time to answer the first question posed in this symposium: how the media in Indonesia have performed vis-à-vis their role in promoting and perpetuating a culture of peace? I have a simplistic answer: They have not, because they were rendered impotent. Previously, we had wanted to expose social-ills and conflicts because we thought that was our responsibility to inform the public and to raise awareness of the need of peace. Now we can, but many of us stop doing so at one point because sometimes there is simply too much ugliness and we get tired of it. A semblance of peace emerge when we stop reading about violence.

How can mass media be effectively utilized to propagate and promote a culture of peace? They cannot do so all the time for many reasons, the most important of which is that they are partisan socially, politically and religiously. An idealistic answer, however, could be formulated:

1. The media can contribute significantly by taking a responsible and impartial stance on conflicts and violence. I remember having to send out Christian reporter to the Christian-side of the conflict in Maluku, and a Muslim reporter to the other side, exposing both to great risks, in order to get a balance report about the violence.
2. By emphasizing efforts to achieve peace--this would be difficult, however, when those involved in the conflicts have already lost hopes of peace and reconciliation.

3. By creating awareness of the negative impacts of conflicts, drawing attention to those suffering in the violence such as the plight of a child who had to witness troops scalp his father alive and shoot him to death. By telling the suffering of women being raped, children victimized and living in fear in refugee centers. Ironically for the media who have been blasted as thriving on conflicts, when we sometimes really have to draw attention to the negative side of things in order to create an awareness of an alternative namely peace.

4. By creating an awareness about potential conflict areas.

I am placing great stock on media impartiality but that is not all. One needs to be fair. We do not expose conflicts by ignoring certain parties--this is why the media give an airing to those accused of being the perpetrators. During a recent meeting between military and police troops with their generals, several soldiers questioned why the National Commission for Human Rights was always eager to expose violations of human rights committed against, for example, the separatist rebels but did not even bat an eye when guerrillas attacked and killed them and their family members.

Do we want peace at all costs?

If we force peace at all costs, namely halting all forms of violence, then Muslims in the Christian-dominated Ambon capital of Maluku would perish because that would mean expulsion of them. The media cannot advocate peace at all costs for areas such as Maluku and Irian Jaya, the site
of recent violence by state apparatus to native Irianese and by natives to migrants who have been living there for decades. This is what I mean by fairness.