

# Media in Indonesia: Forum for political change and critical assessment

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**Abstract:** *This paper reviews the struggle for freedom of the press in Indonesia from the colonial period until 2006. First, the paper examines press initiatives and restraints placed on these during the colonial period, followed by those during the period of Sukarno. Then, the paper questions Suharto's efforts to censor the press during his presidency drawing on the author's personal experiences working as a journalist in Jakarta during this period. More recent governmental changes are then analysed with regards to the press and questions raised regarding how far this emancipation has enabled journalists and the mass media – especially the popular press – to live up to what some argue is their responsibility, to serve as a forum for political change and critical assessment. The paper questions if newspapers in Indonesia have been successful in reaching in practice, their mottos of implementing press freedom, and it debates whether announcing that one is 'working on the people's behalf' is the same as maintaining 'press freedom'. I conclude with case studies that raise questions regarding whether, in the present political climate, a newspaper can really be free from government interference in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** *Indonesia, Indonesian media, Indonesian press, Suharto, Tempo*

How can it be, when 100 people work for us, that we can sacrifice our principles of press freedom?

Mochtar Lubis (*Indonesia Raya* editorial, in *Atmakusumah*, 1992)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

To picture Indonesian press history, imagine a portrait gallery, each likeness showing fluctuating situations of freedom and constraint. Although Indonesia's 1945 Constitution 'guarantees' the freedom of civilians to express and state their opinions, there is no assurance that the mass media will not be muzzled. Although the principle of press freedom is clearly stated in *Press Act No. 11/1966, on the Basic Principles of the Press*, which states that 'no censorship or bridling shall be applied to the National Press' (Soerjomihardjo, 1980: 315),<sup>2</sup> this undertaking becomes blurred when those in authority feel that the press is exerting too much influence, is too critical of government, or is competing with

government as an outlet for sensitive information. To limit the 'damage' that the press can produce, authorities have found ways to restrain and control the press from colonial times to the demise of the Suharto regime. A substantial degree of press freedom was eventually achieved on 21 May 1998, when Suharto was ousted from power, and demands reverberated throughout the nation for *reformasi dan demokrasi* (reformation and democratisation). This paper begins by reviewing the struggle for press freedom in Indonesia during the reigns of Sukarno and Suharto, including insights from personal experiences into the censorship of the press during Suharto's time. The paper then turns to discuss the position of the press since Suharto's downfall, and the impacts of the changing political environment and new press emancipation. It questions whether this new freedom has enabled journalists and the mass media (especially the popular press) to live up to their opportunities and responsibilities to serve as a forum for critical assessment and, potentially, political change.

## Defining, securing and using press freedom

It is hard to find a consensus among journalists or scholars as to whether or not the media can be truly free in Indonesia. Press freedom is relative, although each newspaper confidently announces its own particular motto or mission. For example, *Indonesia Raya* recently proclaimed itself the 'Reform Voice from People, by People, and for People', *Kompas* claimed it had the 'Mandate of People's Conscience', *Media Indonesia* that it was the 'People's Voice Carrier', *Suara Pembaruan* that it was 'Fighting for People's Hope Based on Pancasila', *Rakyat Merdeka* that it was 'The Flame of Indonesian Democracy', while *Sinar Harapan* insisted that it was 'Fighting for Freedom and Fairness, Truth and Peace based on Love'. Have these newspapers really been successful in living up to their mottos to implement press freedom? Is announcing that they are 'working on the people's behalf' identical with 'press freedom'? For how long can a newspaper remain really independent, and what should be done, if anything, about those newspapers that do not radiate the clear colour of independence? Can a newspaper really be free from government interference? The answers to these questions are not always self-evident or easy to answer. Indeed, disseminating news or opinions that are critical of government policies and actions, without 'disturbing' the government's political interests, is not easy. In fighting for press freedom, should the mass media in Indonesia wage guerrilla warfare and become an underground media? Or, for the sake of survival, must the media generally or ultimately collaborate with the authorities?

The control that the Indonesian government has maintained over the press is clearly demonstrated in the case of Mochtar Lubis and his newspaper *Indonesia Raya*. In Lubis' opinion, to operate a free press, the journalists and owners of *Indonesia Raya* had to be prepared to take a lot of risks. In effect, he argued, a free press should regard government as its 'adversary number one' (Atmakusumah, 1992: 22–23). This approach saw his newspaper banned several times by both the Sukarno and Suharto administrations. He was frequently imprisoned or placed under house arrest and barred from travelling outside the country, as were his

vice-editors Enggak Bahaudin and Kustiniyati Mochtar, and Sam Suharto, the caricaturist. For Mochtar Lubis, telling the truth and offering constructive criticism constituted the main mandate, motto and mission for the news media. When in his 80s, around the year 2000, Lubis was at last recognised as a leading symbol of press freedom, voted President of the Press Foundation of Asia, and elected to membership of the International Press Institute and the Jakarta Academy, although the government still brought legal proceedings against him and *Indonesia Raya*. Although his generation of journalists may have been relatively poor in journalistic techniques and technologies, it was extraordinarily rich in the 'idealism of freedom'. Another outstanding champion and exemplar of press freedom was Jakob Oetama, a founder of *Kompas*, a daily newspaper that managed to survive a challenging era of ideological ferment and change. Despite all the socio-political turbulence over the last three decades, *Kompas* now has the longest continuous publication record in Indonesia, and perhaps in all of South-East Asia.<sup>3</sup>

These two examples raise yet more questions. Is it possible for the Indonesian mass media to actually change politics and culture? In publishing the truth 'come hell or high water', to whom should journalists owe their loyalty – the company they work for? – the authorities? – their potential readers? – if so, which readers? Should journalists closely monitor the authorities and become self-appointed public watchdogs, and should they be people's messengers and champions, giving voice to the oppressed? As a public forum, do they provide their readers with sufficient information and range of viewpoints?

## Press initiatives and restraints during the colonial period

Nationalism in the Dutch East Indies began to emerge during the early 1900s, as an elite group of educated Indonesians began to level 'guarded criticism' at selected aspects of Dutch colonial rule. In October 1928, a congress of youth organisations put forth the notion of 'one nation, Indonesia – one people, Indonesia – one language, Indonesia'. In turn, this helped

promote the adoption of one national language, *bahasa Indonesia* (Frederick and Soeroto, 2005).

Also at this time, a new set of newspapers began publishing, including *De Expres* in Surakarta, *Oetoesan Hindia* in Surabaya, *Sinar Deli* in Medan, and later *Keng Po*, owned by Chinese-Indonesian interests who sympathised with the independence movement. They published in Dutch or Malay, and the emergence of Malay newspapers helped to create and promote *bahasa Indonesia* as the nationalist's 'language of independence' (Hill, 1994; Frederick and Soeroto, 2005).

An early example of 'rebellious writing' was an article written in 1907 by a 21-year-old Javanese doctor, Tjipto Mangunkusumo, published in *De Locomotief* (a Yogyakarta daily). Tjipto wrote against the appointment of a Regent (*bupati*, district head) on the sole basis of inherited right. A Regent was not a King, he said, and should be appointed on merit and ability. His article was deemed to contain '*Hatzaai Artikelen*', ('news that can produce hate'), forbidden under the Dutch colonial *Persbreidel Ordonantie* ('press-bridling ordinance') (Hill, 1994). Indeed, colonial authorities viewed the newspapers as if they were horses, which had to be 'bridled' or restrained if they got out of hand. During 1931–1936, at least 27 newspapers were penalised for having contravened the *Persbreidel Ordonantie*. More broadly, newspapers were fined and 'bridled' (banned) if considered to be dangerous or subversive, and reporters were often exiled, as happened to Tirta Adhi Soerjo, Mohamad Tabrani, Haji Misbach, Haji Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto and Mas Marco Kartodikromo (who was exiled to Boven Digul in Papua where he died of malaria).<sup>4</sup> During the Japanese occupation (1942–1945), all newspapers using the Dutch language had to stop publishing. The Dai Nippon government then published the *Asia Raya* daily in Japanese with the slogan *Dai Too-A Sensoo* ('the Rise of Greater Asia'), and filled its pages with Japanese colonial propaganda (Kakiailatu, 1997).

### Press activity and constraints under Sukarno (1945–1966)

After the Independence Proclamation of 17 August 1945, several new Indonesian-language

newspapers emerged, including *Abadi*, *Merdeka*, *Indonesia Raya*, *Pedoman*, *Duta Masyarakat*, *Suluh Indonesia* and *Harian Rakyat*. These all started out by asserting themselves to be self-governing and independent. Yet Cold War competition around the world between pro- and anti-communist newspapers reached a peak in the mid-1950s, and this ideological struggle strongly affected Indonesia. Virtually all newspapers during the Sukarno era helped to promote government policies and propaganda. Sukarno assured US ambassador Howard P. Jones: 'Ah, they are not communists. Indonesians are good Moslems. They are just a group of left-leaning nationalists' (Jones, 1971: 236). Still, the US government was increasingly concerned about 'communist sympathisers' in the Indonesian press.

By 1956, political conflict had led to the resignation of the independent country's founding Vice-President Mohammad Hatta. In 1959 Sukarno decreed a new system of 'Guided Democracy', a return to the 1945 Constitution as an institutional framework, and other forms of ideological control such as 'Manipol'.<sup>5</sup> The magic of Indonesia's two charismatic founding fathers – Sukarno and Hatta – was broken and political rebellions broke out in some regions. With heightened political conflict, several previously independent newspapers became openly partisan.<sup>6</sup>

On 17 August 1960, President Sukarno outlawed *Masyumi* (the main Muslim political party) and the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI), but not the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). A month later, he gave a speech at the United Nations entitled 'To Build the World Anew', indicating a radical change in Indonesia's ideology and international alliances. Indonesia then became rife with international political conflicts, especially the demand to annex Dutch-ruled Papua and *Konfrontasi*, a military struggle against the new Federation of Malaysia. Sukarno railed against *Nekolim* (an abbreviation for 'New Colonialism and Imperialism'), took Indonesia out of the United Nations and told industrial nations to 'Go to Hell with Your Aid!'. Thereafter, those Indonesians who did not agree with Sukarno's ideology and contravened his orders would be arrested or banished. All anti-communist newspapers were forbidden to publish, including, for example, *Abadi*,

*Pedoman, Indonesia Raya, Berita Indonesia* and *Nusantara*. 'Rebellious journalists' expressing political opinions were often arrested as political prisoners. Communist newspapers such as *Suluh Indonesia* and *Harian Rakyat*, on the other hand, were encouraged, with *Harian Rakyat* becoming the daily with the largest circulation.<sup>7</sup>

### Press activity and constraints under Suharto (1966–1998)

After the failure of a political coup on 30 September 1965 supported by PKI, Lieutenant-General Suharto took control of the country. Sukarno technically remained President, but his power base quickly eroded, and Suharto arranged a *Supersemar* (*Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret* 1966 ('Letter of Command, 11 March 1966')) that immediately transferred full power and authority to himself. Suharto then consolidated military control, outlawed the PKI, and instigated a thorough and far-reaching 'political cleansing' of Indonesian citizens. In 1967, Suharto officially replaced Sukarno as President.

In stark contrast to the 1960s, when Sukarno had banned all anti-communist papers, Suharto now prohibited any media commentary sympathetic to communism. Between 1963 and 1967, 163 newspapers across the country were banned, and thousands of mass media workers who were communists, or alleged to be communists, were arrested or killed. No media source was able to report or discuss the exact number of Indonesians killed, but estimates throughout the country now range from 1 to 2 million. Many 'troublesome' or 'left-leaning' journalists were arrested as political prisoners. Editors were classified as Group B (alleged PKI members), and reporters as Group C (suspected PKI sympathisers). Both groups faced imprisonment and after their eventual release continued to be prohibited from writing or teaching. In short, a 'New Order' regime replaced what it labelled and dismissed as the 'Old Order'. It promised 'new hopes', increased individual freedom and opportunity, improved economic performance, poverty reduction, and a firm approach to law and order.

The New Order imposed its control over the media by requiring two kinds of licence, a

Printing Permit (SIC) and a Publishing Permit (SIT). This instituted a system of what can be called 'self-censorship' whereby a journalist or editor had to develop a 'sixth sense' about what type of content might lead to one of these licences being revoked, and readers had to develop an astute ability 'to read between the lines'. In particular, reporters had to be careful not to write articles that touched upon such banned topics as 'SARA' (an acronym for *suku* – ethnicity, *agama* – religion, *ras* – race, and *antar golongan* – 'between-group' relations or conflicts). Then, in 1982, the Ministry of Information issued a new regulation that all media must also obtain a Press Publication Enterprise Permit (SIUPP) that could easily be revoked. Such newspapers as *Indonesia Raya* and *Pedoman Nusantara* were banned. Criticising government policies, or reporting on corruption and mismanagement scandals, were 'bannable' offences. All journalists had to join the Indonesian Journalists' Association (PWI), whose board was packed with 'stooges' representing Suharto's totalitarian government. A 'telephone culture' also came to prevail as the Ministry of Information or Ministry of Defence and Security issued their orders to editors and owners of the mass media to resist publishing specific news items, reporting certain incidents, or releasing sensitive facts or information (Hill, 1994).

In the early years of the New Order, Suharto made strategic use of the mass media, especially newspapers managed and staffed by military journalists. The government controlled all broadcast media, such as *TV Republik Indonesia* (TVRI) and *Radio Republik Indonesia* (RRI), denying broadcast permission to all others. It was thus not difficult to constantly disseminate pro-government propaganda and to continually accuse and denigrate anything identified as 'communism'. The main military-backed newspapers were *PAB* (Military News Bureau), *Angkatan Bersenjata* (The Army) and *Berita Yudha* (The War News). The content of these newspapers fomented deep public hatred towards PKI, its affiliate *Gerwani* (Indonesian Women's Movement) and all organisations sympathetic with communism. Other than these newspapers explicitly acting as New Order trumpets, by the end of the Suharto era many others had been forced to close or had been replaced by a state-dominated publication. A

few new newspapers appeared, such as *Sinar Harapan* and *Kompas*, and two student newspapers, *Kami* (Jakarta) and *Mahasiswa Indonesia* (Bandung), while *Tempo* weekly news magazine appeared in 1972.

Hopes for an independent press faded rapidly as the New Order established itself. For example, in 1971, during the first election of the Suharto era, *Kami* and *Duta Masyarakat* dailies were closed down for about three weeks, having violated a government regulation imposing a 'quiet week' prior to election day. As early as the 1970s, student activists began to demonstrate against the Suharto administration's economic policies and failure to implement its egalitarian promises. Protests were aimed in particular at three of Suharto's personal assistants (*Aspri*, or *Asisten Pribadi*). These were three army generals: Ali Murtopo, Sudjono Humardani and Suryo, close friends of Suharto since the late 1950s. Being *Aspri*, there was no transparency regarding their job descriptions, and the students accused Humardani, for example, of being a Japanese pawn.

The deteriorating relationship between students and government reached a peak on 15 January 1975 in what was called the 'Malari Incident'.<sup>8</sup> Festering discontent exploded during the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Kakue Tanaka. In the aftermath, the government banned 12 newspapers for varying lengths of time. Among these were *Indonesia Raya*, *Pedoman Nusantara* and all campus newspapers that had been critical of government policies, that had commented on government corruption and that had reported on scandals, such as the *Pertamina* scandal, and many others involving the Suharto family and cronies.

### *Learning from personal experience*

It is clear at this point that government interference in the media under Suharto had become much more focused, systematic and manipulative than during the Sukarno years. The environment in which journalists operated at this time can be illustrated by two incidents from my own experience. In 1968, as a reporter for the newspaper *Pelopon Baru*, I was sent to report on a student demonstration calling for lower rice prices. These were the same students who had earlier demonstrated against Sukarno. This was

the first demonstration of the New Order era, and as I was working for an afternoon daily, I was facing an abrupt deadline. The office was far away from the demonstration, so instead of taking public transportation, I phoned in the news, which became a headline. When I came to the office next day, everybody was quiet, including the chief editor. Surprised, I asked Sam Suharto (previously caricaturist for *Indonesia Raya*) what the matter was and he handed me the previous day's *Pelopon Baru* with my report as the headline. On the right-hand corner a question had been written in red ink: 'Is the reporter who wrote this article a communist!' It was signed 'Suharto'. Someone had been sent the previous evening to convey Suharto's displeasure. I do not remember who kept or what happened to that historic copy of the newspaper, but from the start, I was made to realise that Suharto was an authority figure who could not be criticised. Apparently, the 'Smiling General' kept a grudge behind the smile.

My second experience occurred in the mid-1970s, when a *Tempo* correspondent sent news that 'batik makers in Sala were frightened' as they had been raided for producing a certain motif of *batik* as a uniform design for *Dharma Wanita*.<sup>9</sup> *Batik*s carrying that design could be confiscated because the design was 'owned' by Mrs Bustanil Arifin, sister of Ibu Tien (Suharto's wife). It was a Friday and close to the deadline, and I was assigned the task of checking and clarifying the report. I went to the State Secretariat to meet Lieutenant Colonel Dwipayana, whose duty was to liaise with journalists on news relating to the Palace. Confirmation also had to be obtained from Mrs Sudharmono, Head of *Dharma Wanita*. Dwipayana tried to connect me by telephone, to Mrs Bustanil Arifin, Secretary General of *Dharma Wanita* (and also the wife of the Head of Bulog, the State Logistics Bureau). When I finally got through, she said I must first ask Mrs Sudharmono for permission. I said the deadline was rapidly approaching and that 'we just need a short answer whether the news is true or not. It is already printed; we just need to confirm'. Yet Mrs Arifin insisted 'you must get permission from Bu Dhar'. Dwipayana's phone eventually rang and he answered very respectfully: 'Yes Ma'am, alright Ma'am, I'll do it'. It was Mrs Sudharmono ordering him to forbid publication

of the article. I returned to the office empty handed. Before I said anything at the office, Goenawan Mohammad, chief editor of *Tempo*, smiled and said: 'It must not be published, right?' Apparently, Goenawan had received phone calls from the Director General of Press and Graphics, Sukarno SH (no relation to the President) from the Ministry of Information, and from Mrs Sudharmono, in connection with the *batik* case.

### *The phases of Suharto's press control*

During the Suharto era, there were more than 25 cases of publishing permit (SIT) cancellations without judicial process (*Tempo*, 1994). In 1978, seven papers were 'bridled', including *Kompas*, *Sinar Harapan*, *Pelita* and *Merdeka*, for reporting on the explosive rise of student movements. *Tempo* was banned for five weeks in 1983 for reporting a riot in Lapangan Banteng during the election campaign. For various other reasons, *Sinar Harapan* (1986), *Prioritas* (1987) and *Monitor* (1990) were also banned.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1990s, dissatisfaction and complaints about excessive and arbitrary control were escalating and becoming more widespread. The *Jakarta Post* (1992), for example, editorialised: 'After more than twenty years of political stability and with a greater demand for democratisation in the air, we believe the government should open an even wider corridor of freedom.' Nonetheless, the repression continued.

A peak of Indonesian press closures was reached on 21 June 1994, when *Tempo*, *Editor* and *Detik* were forbidden from printing. The explanation given by Minister of Information Harmoko was 'the need to maintain national stability' (Hill, 1994: 63–65). *Tempo's* chief editor Goenawan Mohammad responded that the cancellations themselves were more likely to shake national stability. Over the following days, demonstrations in several large cities condemned the bans. A *Media Indonesia* (1994) editorial complained:

This situation is very unhealthy. The press may not be handcuffed by a protracted scare, and the Ministry of Information should not drift into the habit of winning conflicts with the press by

cancelling their licenses as the cost of this for democracy and transparency would be extremely high.

The Suharto regime, however, chose to deny and ignore the turbulent political situation building across the country. The press was expected to simply report and support its 'sublime' plans for national development, despite the fact that these plans all too often depleted and despoiled the natural wealth of the nation, funnelling the proceeds into a 'nest of rotteness'. Journalists who reported on wasteful mega-projects and fraudulent dealings, such as the Busang gold mine in Kalimantan, the Freeport-McMoRan copper and gold exploitation in Timika, Papua, and the 'Million Hectares Peatland' project in Kalimantan,<sup>11</sup> were banned, while others buckled under the pressures and felt they must cooperate with the authorities to survive. Many euphemisms emerged to disguise the real meaning and intent of media reports. For example, instead of reporting that the government had raised the price of rice, we had to report that 'the government has decided to adjust the price of rice', and, instead of writing that there were labour protests or conflicts, we had to note that 'the factory workers had some disagreements'.

Suharto's press control went through three phases: the first was self-censorship by journalists and editors; the second involved control by coaxing and warnings; and the third consisted of bridling through the threat of SIUPP and other licence cancellation. The government was determined that 'Indonesia's press must be a *Pancasila* press', defined as 'being responsible', obeying the rules, following instructions, and complying with the ideology and interests of those in power. For three decades the Indonesian press was used to cover up scandals and mismanagement, to hide facts and ignore unpleasant realities. News coverage was based on what 'the authorities' said were the realities, thus making newspapers official 'views papers'. Press distortions caused the population at large to lose their ability to detect fact from fiction, truth from lies and national interests from corrupt elite interests.

As is now well known, by January 1998, political unrest was heating up and there was a sharp increase in violent incidents, with several

students killed on Jakarta's Trisakti Campus in May of that year. Thousands of students, workers and other citizens then occupied the Parliament building, while factions of the military effectively shifted their allegiance to protect rather than disperse or arrest them. The key demands were for Suharto to resign and for a genuine commitment to reform and democratisation. Finally, on the historic day of 21 May 1998, Suharto was forced to step down and Vice-President B.J. Habibie assumed control as President, promising early democratic Parliamentary elections that would either ratify him or select a new President.

Though Habibie only led the country for nine months, he managed to accomplish four especially important reforms: he freed the press from censorship and control, he allowed political freedom in organising new political parties, he called a reasonably democratic election (7 June 1999), and he allowed a referendum to take place to 'solve' the East Timor problem. Habibie's choice for Minister of Information, General Yunus Yosfiah, turned out to share the popular reform vision and mission. Press censorship came to an end, the SIUPP was abolished, anyone could launch new mass media, and journalists were allowed to found their own professional association (the AJI, *Aliansi Jurnalis Independen*, separate from the government-dominated PWI). Yosfiah dismissed KORPRI (Corps of Civil Servants of the Republic of Indonesia) from his department that for three decades had represented *Golkar* (Suharto's 'functional group'). As Atmakusumah Astraatmadja, President of the Press Board during 2000–2003, remarked: 'Yosfiah was a real miracle' (pers. comm., 8 September 2001)

These major reforms provoked euphoria in the mass media. Recruits into journalism increased by thousands, and hundreds of new newspapers and magazines appeared. According to Press Board records, as of December 1999 there were 818 publishers in Jakarta, all operating without censorship. This created intense competition, and the law of survival of the fittest came into effect, with the verdict of life or death in the hands of the readership. Also, as anyone could now found a political party, hundreds of new parties were born, all concerned to see that a fair, clean and safe

election was achieved, and all sponsoring or getting support from the proliferating mass media.

Habibie 'lost the gamble', however, as the public and press still linked him irretrievably with the Suharto administration. Many also blamed him for the East Timor referendum and the loss of Indonesia's newest province. Finally, in October 1999, Parliament (MPR/DPR) rejected Habibie's justification speech, and, in a process monitored through television, radio and the print media, chose Abdurrahman Wahid as the new President. Although Wahid's National Resurgence Party (PKB) was not one of the largest parties, he was leader of one of the largest Muslim organisations (*Nahdatul Ulama*, or NU). Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P) had won the most seats, was eventually selected as Vice-President. Although the outcome was a complete surprise, the public in general seemed happy with the transparency of the election and the even undemocratic 'log-rolling' process that gave them a new President and Vice-President. But was this really a good start for the new *demokrasi*?

### **Reformasi under Wahid and Megawati**

Abdurrahman Wahid (or 'Gus Dur' as he was popularly known) made himself very accessible to the press, and this was initially considered a good sign of a new, open and transparent government. The Palace, where he lived, was always open for anyone. But it was this style of leadership that eventually brought him down. Wahid's populist but erratic and inconsistent style of leadership rendered members of his cabinet unable to cooperate or function efficiently, and the public soon became dissatisfied with the slow pace of social, political and economic reforms. His promise to bring Suharto to court was also increasingly regarded as 'grand-standing', or a distraction, as it was constantly delayed and eventually thwarted. Wahid liquidated nine ministries, including the Ministry of Information and the Department of Social Affairs, and thus thousands of civil servants suddenly lost their jobs. He replaced the Ministry of Information with a National Information and Communication Bureau, but could not decide whom to appoint; the name was then changed

again to the National Information Agency, and by the end of his term, Wahid had still not chosen anyone to head this agency.

There is an English expression that 'fish begin to stink at the head' – the implication being that corruption begins in the highest ranks of an organisation. Despite his initial popularity, rumours of financial scandal began to hound Wahid at a very early stage of his administration. For example, the press uncovered evidence of secret funds that Wahid had personally received from the Sultan of Brunei, ostensibly to be used for undefined 'social programmes', and this became a scandal known as 'Brunei Gate'.<sup>12</sup> There was then another major accusation of financial misappropriation at the State Logistical Agency (Bulog) that was inevitably labelled 'Bulog Gate'.<sup>13</sup> The 'unfettered press' was having a heyday with corruption allegations and other 'Gus Dur' mistakes and bumbling embarrassments. Increasing crime and street violence led to a sense of anarchy, and journalists came to be obsessed with (or 'trapped by') events, descending into 'yellow journalism' and sensationalist reports. Wahid was even accused of agitating the social conflicts and political disaffection to cover up his mistakes and lack of reasonable solutions for Indonesia's worsening problems. As the media commentaries became increasingly disrespectful, Wahid accused the press of character assassination, and became increasingly reclusive, autocratic and unpredictable. Nor did violence against the press end. The Independent Journalists' Alliance reported 43 known incidents of public violence directed at the press during the first six months in 2000, as groups who felt attacked by the media felt free to mob newspaper and magazine offices.

Meanwhile, Wahid's relationship with the Legislature was also becoming increasingly tense and dysfunctional, with mutual recrimination escalating to absurd and often hysterical levels. These confrontations eventually resulted in impeachment proceedings against Wahid. Meanwhile, the press accused his government of ignoring or losing sensitivity to the people's pressing needs and their legitimate demands, while politicians in all camps were obsessed with furthering their own self-serving interests. Wahid was eventually forced to resign, after just

one year in office, and Megawati was elevated to the presidency.

After having only two Presidents over Indonesia's first half century of independence, during 1997–2001 it had four Presidents in four years. One might question, how many presidents might be needed for the nation to achieve stability, security and prosperity? Megawati's term in office (2001–2004) was a 'mixed bag' of accomplishments, but at least her administration (in contrast to Wahid's) brought more economic stability and lower levels of crime and violence. Yet, like Wahid, the new President never named an information bureau chief.

Megawati often criticised the press openly, while the military accused it of disloyalty in not adhering to the nationalist line in its coverage of the war in Aceh. Press groups allege that attacks on reporters by security forces, police and public mobs are on the increase, and the political elite is turning more to the courts when critical stories about them appear. In 2003, Supratman, the executive editor of *Rakyat Merdeka*, was put on trial over a cartoon of Akbar Tandjung (then chairman of *Golkar* and head of Parliament), shown shirtless and dripping with sweat; for this he was given a suspended five-month sentence. He had previously received another six-month suspended jail sentence for headlines that appeared to compare President Megawati to a cannibal and a leech.

A prime example of the difficulty in defining and realising 'press freedom' in Indonesia's 'transitional arrangements' between autocracy and democracy can be illustrated by the convoluted legal battle between Tommy Winata, a close friend of several military generals and a successful businessperson, and *Tempo* magazine.<sup>14</sup> Tommy Winata's main case against *Tempo* involves an alleged libel in an article exposing 'The Way of Life of the Mafioso in Jakarta'. The saga begins in February 2003 with a mysterious fire that gutted part of Tanah Abang, Jakarta's largest textile market, popularly known as 'Tenabang'. While the Jakarta municipal government planned to rebuild it, *Tempo* received an exclusive tip that Tommy Winata had been given the project when there should have been open bidding. *Tempo* went on to publish an article entitled 'Ada Tommy di Tenabang?' (*Tempo*, 2003) implying that

Tommy Winata had been involved in starting the fire in the hopes of being awarded the renovation project.

Tommy Winata has filed a number of lawsuits against *Tempo* as well as its journalists for alleged material and non-material losses. In January 2004, the South Jakarta District Court ordered the *Koran Tempo* daily to pay Rp.8.4 billion in damages for an article saying Tommy planned to open a gambling den in South Sulawesi. Other suits followed while the criminal trial involving the alleged libel of Tommy in the 'Ada Tommy di Tenabang?' article reached a verdict in September 2004. *Tempo* was found guilty of defamation and of 'inciting unrest', fined Rp.50 billion (US\$6 million) and obliged to pay for full-page apologies in four major newspapers. Chief editor Bambang Harimurti was jailed for one-year sentence, ex-chief editor Gunawan's house was confiscated, while the co-defendants' deputy editor Iskandar Ali and journalist Ahmad Taufik were acquitted (the prosecution had requested a two-year jail term for all four). Harimurti, who remains free pending an appeal, smiled, raised a clenched fist and remarked: 'It's a sad day. The judges had a golden opportunity to write a new chapter in Indonesian history, but they did not take it... Chief editors will now be scared to do their jobs' (*Jakarta Post*, 2004).

The case prompted the 'Committee Opposed to Criminal Charges against the Press' to call a protest rally in Jakarta against the criminalisation of offences committed by the press. Journalist unions in several big cities (including Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Makassar and Ambon) had also protested against trying journalists in criminal trials. The case and verdict has also been widely criticised in the international media as an attack on Indonesia's press, now lauded as one of Asia's most free, but clearly still vulnerable to intimidation and a biased and corrupt legal system. Roby Alampay, Executive Director of the Asian Press Alliance, said: 'The judges could have made a ruling that could have strengthened Indonesia's democracy, but they blew it' (*Straits Times*, 2004). The issue remains contested: Jakarta's high court upheld a defamation verdict against Goenawan Mohammad and press group *PT Tempo Inti Media Harian* for 1 billion Indonesian *rupiah* in January 2006. Reporters Without Borders (2006)

responded by saying 'Indonesian courts have started the year by sending a terrible signal for press freedom'. On the other hand, Harimurti's prison term was overturned by the Supreme Court on appeal in February 2006. That verdict is a breakthrough for freedom of the press in Indonesia. Harimurti applauded the court's decision to apply Law No. 40/1999 on the Press as a basis for its verdict. 'This is good news. It means that the Supreme Court acknowledges the Press Law as *lex specialis*. All press-related cases should be settled by considering the social role of the press in reporting matters of public interest', he said (reported in numerous local newspapers).

### Conclusions: A new role for the press?

Under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who defeated Megawati in Indonesia's first direct presidential election, Indonesia still has far to go in its economic recovery, in restoring public trust in the system and in addressing many other unsolved problems. Its political leadership still seems to lack a 'national vision', or a generally acceptable programme or strategy for improving Indonesia's social, political and economic future in a way that is capable of uniting and animating national renewal across its many regions and social groups. What role should the mass media be expected to play in articulating the key issues to be resolved, and in providing an open forum where all factions can debate and seek consensus on where the nation should be heading and how it is likely to get there?

*Kupas* (literally 'peeled') is the name of a 'media watch' journal published in Medan. It has expressed the opinion that, although the Ministry of Information is now defunct, the press, now independent and free, seems to have made little or no meaningful progress in fulfilling its responsibilities. It is true that there are now many more media channels in operation but, from a 'professional ethics and responsibility' perspective, many senior journalists can see no significant progress. There has been a lot of sensationalism and emotional expression of opinions, but little initiative shown in undertaking objective investigative analysis of opportunistic greed, mismanagement and the continuing misuse of power, or in providing a

rational and responsible forum to help reconcile the cacophony of opposing viewpoints. Some critics have accused the press of relishing the euphoria of free expression while the public is drowning in the world of lawlessness and insecurity. Corruption, alienation, disaffection and many types of violence continue, without the press doing a responsible job in objectively reporting the events and investigating the likely causes. Bachtiar Aly (2001), for example, suggested that the public at large sees the mass media, along with the political elites, as major causes of popular discontent and social instability.

The most conspicuous result of the new press freedom era has been the brashness and audacity with which the press has delivered the news. While it is legitimate for journalists and editors to express their opinions, these orations should be accompanied by facts, carefully collected and analysed. Inflammatory reporting, insensitivity and pornography may sell newspapers, but in Indonesia they can be counted on to trigger mass anger as well.

Continued threats to press freedom include lawsuits against the press brought by influential persons, who frequently can 'purchase' favourable verdicts with the aid of corrupt judges and law enforcement personnel. The 'inciting unrest' indictment, based on the colonial *haatzai artikelen* (news that can produce hate) regulations, remains on the books, evoking bad memories of Suharto-era media repression and intimidation.

Apart from shielding journalists and editors from criminal proceedings for alleged slander and libel, there is also an urgent need for an influential and substantial group of journalists and media owners to openly criticise the irresponsible practices of their colleagues, to recognise the weakness and shortcomings of the press in general, and to promote an upgrading of professional journalistic skills, especially in investigative journalism, critical assessment, informed political commentary and dissemination of positive, forward-looking suggestions for democratic reform. Transparency, both in journalism and in other public affairs, is essential for healthy social, political and economic progress. There is now a television channel named *Swara* that reports the DPR sessions, and an organisation called 'Parliament Watch' that regularly

disseminates its disclosures and commentaries in the public media, but which the government generally ignores. Many non-governmental organisations have founded independent monitoring organisations, such as the Habibie Centre's sponsoring of the Media Watch Consumer Centre (MWCC) and the 'Refuse Pornography Society' (*Masyarakat Tolak Pornografi*, MTP) to counter advertising that it sees as constituting 'a crime against norms of humanism' and 'a crime against women'. However, thus far, Indonesia has no laws or official regulations regarding pornography.

Media Watch bulletins are published not only in Jakarta (*Pantau*), but also in Makassar (*Jurnal Kajian Media*) and Surabaya (*Kebebasan Informasi dan Ekapresi untuk Kemanusiaan*). The Association of Newspaper Printing (Media SPS, or *Serikat Penerbit Surat Kabar*) has complained about the many obstacles to its capacity to influence public opinion more widely, such as low literacy and desire to read, poverty and lack of discretionary income, and competition that may weaken distribution networks. The law of survival of the fittest means that a newspaper must make a profit or die, so its life depends on attracting customers. Do the public prefer newspapers with high journalistic quality, or those that highlight sensationalism and scandal? Media SPS recorded that in the first year of reform, there were 113 daily papers and magazines, but now there are only 32, the others having closed. These are just some of the difficulties faced by the Indonesian press, seeking to play a normal role in an abnormal situation. The protracted political crisis, the confused and depressing economic situation, the general violence and the many conflicts that follow one after the other, pose a very challenging agenda for journalists to fulfil.

The Media Customer Organisation (*Lembaga Konsumen Media*) in Surabaya believes the press should be expected to be, not simply a watchdog, but also a guide dog. Is this expecting too much? Perhaps so, but before journalists even begin to take on this task, they face a major obstacle in that none of the whole sequence of post-Suharto governments has yet passed the draft 'Law on Transparency and the Public Right to Obtain Information' drafted in 1999. Meanwhile, journalists must still obtain most of their information from personal inter-

views that can be biased or untruthful, or from press releases that typically have no news value. The authorities often regard official reports and even routine and trivial documents as 'state secrets'. There must thus be a concerted drive to assert the 'public's right to know'. I would argue that the Indonesian press through its organisations, through public support campaigns, and through all other channels of influence it can find, must fight harder for a law on transparency and access to information. As there is no longer a government censor, the press is now more open and critical, and this no doubt contributes to this reticence to allow total transparency in political dealings. Nevertheless, the Public's Right to Know Law needs to be passed and systematically implemented, if journalists and the mass media are to be fully able to perform their key role and responsibility as a forum for political change and critical assessment.

## Notes

- 1 After suffering from ageing illness, Mochtar Lubis died at age 82 on 4 July 2004. He was frequently imprisoned and his *Indonesia Raya* daily newspaper was banned for many years during the Sukarno and Suharto eras.
- 2 '*Terhadap Pers Nasional tidak dikenal sensor dan pembredelan*' (Chapter 2, Article 4).
- 3 The circulation of *Kompas* has risen from 500 000 soon after its launch in 1964 to around 750 000 today. David Hill describes *Kompas*' progress 'from cottage industry to the ranks of big-business' as one of the key enterprises that initiated the rise of Indonesia's industry (Hill, 1994: 83–96). KGG (*Kompas Gramedia Group*) also owns six newspapers in several regions, six magazines and its own printing house, plus several hotels, bookstores and, the latest acquisition, a TV channel (Channel Seven).
- 4 Kartodikromo, who was only 23 at the time, wrote for *Doenia Bergerak*. Takashi Shiraisi (1990) considered these journalists to be 'the natives who had moved a nation through language'.
- 5 '*Manipol*' denotes a political manifesto, a term used to describe Sukarno's speech of 17 August 1959, entitled 'The Rediscovery of Our Revolution'.
- 6 Between Independence and 1965 there were at least three rebellions in Indonesia. First, the *Darul Islam* (House of Islam) movement was founded in 1948 and aimed to turn Indonesia into an Islamic State. Its greatest strength was in West Java and South Sulawesi, but it had a presence in several other regions. It was suppressed by the army in a long series of military campaigns ending in 1962. Second, *Permesta* (*Piagam Perjuangan Semesta Alam*, Universal Struggle Charter) denoted the unilateral declaration of martial law by

local commanders in Eastern Indonesia in March 1957. The movement was the strongest in North Sulawesi and was largely defeated by June 1958. Third, the PRRI (*Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia*, Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia) was formed in February 1958 by regional and anti-communist politicians opposed to Sukarno's abrogation of parliamentary rule and the growing power of the Indonesian Communist Party. It was based in West Sumatra and was largely defeated by June 1958 (Lloyd and Smith, 2001).

- 7 When *Harian Rakyat* first published in 1951, its circulation was only 2000. Five years later it was 58 000, compared with 50 000 for *Pedoman* and 40 000 for *Indonesia Raya*. By 1965, *Harian Rakyat* circulation was as high as 110 000 (Swantoro and Atmakusumah, 1982).
- 8 'Malari' is an abbreviation for 'Fifteenth of January Disaster'.
- 9 A National Women's Organisation founded in 5 August 1974, under the oversight of KORPRI (Corps of Civil Servants of Republic of Indonesia). Since KORPRI's members must automatically become *Golkar* members, so did members of *Dharma Wanita*, and, like KORPRI, membership was automatic. Under the New Order, several other 'wife organisations' were established that obliged members to 'support her husband's struggle to succeed'. Such organisations appeared positive to many women who were happy to be involved, but others considered it an onerous chore, or resisted joining, especially when they had their own jobs. On the negative side, *Dharma Wanita* was considered a more prestigious organisation, but important issues such as 'gender discrimination', 'women's rights', 'domestic violence', 'employment opportunities and working conditions for women' were never discussed, nor was it even acknowledged that women were autonomous individuals. As Julia Suryakusuma has observed about *Dharma Wanita*: 'socially, it mediates the notion of domestication of women through mobilization and volunteerism. Economically, the notion of housewives supports the "modernization" aims of capitalistic, stateless development' (Suryakusuma, 1991: 54). After the death of Mrs Tien Suharto (10 April 1996) and after Suharto stepped down (21 May 1998), the organisation's existence has become unclear (Buchori and Soenarto, 1996).
- 10 The tabloid *Monitor* (published under *Kompas Gramedia Group*, KGG) polled its readers about 'The Top Ten Figures in Indonesia' and came up with some amusing results. Number one was President Suharto while Prophet Mohammad was in fourth place. Purportedly, Jesus was at the 12th position, but since he was below 10, it was not announced. Many Muslims were angry about the ranking of the Prophet and demonstrated at the office of *Monitor*. KGG immediately closed *Monitor*. Later its very creative and productive chief editor, Arswendo Atmowiloto, was brought to trial and sent to jail.
- 11 The Million Hectares Peatland (MHP) mega-project illustrates what can happen when there is an inattentive or bridled press. The story begins in Rome in

November 1985, when the Food and Agriculture Organisation awarded Suharto a gold medal as an exemplary leader in enabling Indonesia to achieve rice self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, the next year a prolonged drought occurred in several regions of the country, so Indonesia was compelled to resume rice imports. To deal with this calamity, Suharto informed his key ministries that the project would be launched in South Kalimantan in January 1986. Without undertaking an EPA (Environmental Planning Assessment), 5.8 million hectares of peatland was drained for rice production. Nobody opposed the scheme, not a single newspaper, and certainly not Parliament, even though, according to Ordinance No. 24/1992, peatland should be a 'protection area'. As the irrigation infrastructure paid no attention to EPA or risk assessment, the project offered 'fertile soil for corruption and greed' (*Investigasi Tempo*, 1999). After Suharto was forced to step down, the whole project came to an end, and the transmigrants left because they could not plant a single tree. With huge human-made canals (10 metres wide and 10 metres deep), all of the surrounding primary forest was an ecologically degraded clear-cut area.

- 12 The Sultan of Brunei had given about US\$500 000 to Wahid to 'help address social problems arising from Indonesia's economic crisis', but the money was deposited in Wahid's personal bank account (reported in numerous local newspapers).
- 13 Bulog (the State Logistics Bureau) was an executive agency whose budget was not accountable to Parliament (such agencies were known as 'wet' as they were seen as easily corruptible). The amount of money given to people close to Wahid was estimated to be 'only' around 20 billion *rupiah*, but it was delivered in cash by two of Wahid's friends, and in error into the hands of police officers.
- 14 Tommy Winata is in his early 30s and recently finished secondary school in Pontianak (West Kalimantan). He owns a large house in Ancol, near the sea shore of Jakarta, plus several islands in 'Jakarta Bay' (also a rich business district centre), and rumours have suggested that he also owned ships used for illegal gambling. He also owns Indonesia's largest crematorium in Bekasi (east of Jakarta), and his latest business acquisition is an airline company 'TWA' (Tommy Winata Airlines). Tommy Winata felt insulted because the *Tempo* article also said he was a '*pemulung*' (garbage collector).

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