

Tuesday, November 2, 1999

THE NATION

opinion

Mass media-ting East Timor

■ Globalisation does not homogenise the media, and the media do not homogenise the public. And the public is not always aware of this, writes Ariel Heryanto.

The attainment of independence in East Timor and the subsequent damage in Australia-Indonesia relations attest to the power of the mass media. This is not about who owns, or controls, them. Obviously, it is not the mass media that delivered independence to the East Timorese or been solely responsible for the animosity between Canberra and Jakarta. But one can say that in both countries the media have been equally pro-active and powerfully provocative, if in different ways.

The aftermath of the vote for independence in August reminds me of what I saw in the Australian media and on the streets in 1991. On Nov 12 that year, Indonesian troops opened fire at unarmed youths staging a peaceful demonstration near the Santa Cruz cemetery. The impact of the violence on the prospect for East Timor's independence, and the contrast between Indonesia's reactions to this incident and that in 1999 underscore the extent to which the mass media play a role in history. This is different from and independent of the issues of information manipulation.

By no means was the Santa Cruz incident the worst atrocity committed in East Timor. Nonetheless, it was the first to draw the world's attention to the troubled territory after more than 15 years of silence and neglect, thanks to a journalist's video recording of the brutality that day. It was beamed across the globe for the next several weeks. This global media mediation distinguishes the fate of the post-1991 East Timorese struggle from earlier ones, and from others in no less violence-stricken areas such as Aceh and Irian Jaya.

East Timor has not been the same. Neither has Indonesia nor Australia. Independence for the half-island became inevitable; it was only a matter of time.

In Indonesia, President Suharto established the unprecedented National Commission of Human Rights, in response to international pressure. The commission's operation in subsequent years was more far-reaching and radical than anticipated by Suharto and his foreign critics alike. Likewise, the mass media can be more active and important than the owners and journalists intend.

To be sociable in Australia after Santa

Cruz, conversations necessarily had to include the East Timor issue, apart from the mainstay, sport.

Soon after the Santa Cruz killings, protesters in Australia attacked the Indonesian embassy and consulates. The Indonesian flag was burned in one or two such demonstrations. There was picketing and a boycott campaign against the national carrier, Garuda. Maritime unions refused to unload ships with Indonesian flags.

All these recurred in 1999 – soon after East Timorese voted for independence, and the pro-Jakarta militias rampaged through the island in retaliation against its defeat. The significant difference is that in 1991 there was no counter-attack against the Australian High Commission in Indonesia, no burning of the Australian flag by Indonesians, no patriotic volunteers to go to war against Australia, as happened in Java this September.

The Santa Cruz incident did not catch the Indonesian public imagination. The footage was definitely inaccessible. There were some marginal and dull reports in the press, mainly about how some foreign journalists allegedly made incredible accusations about political tension in the little-known East Timor. The increasingly militant student movements were too preoccupied with other more "domestic" issues in challenging the central government's moral authority.

The fall of Suharto, many believed, was a prerequisite for other changes, of which East Timor question was a part. Understandably, in 1991 neither the Indonesian government nor the nationalist segments within the media industry launched any propaganda campaigns to mobilise nationalist sentiment to counter international criticism, little of which filtered through to the Indonesian public.

The Indonesia I visited in September, this year, was different.

The media actively produced images, analyses and comment on East Timor. The double emphases in television and newsprint were on human suffering of the refugees as innocent victims of the vote for independence, and the generous assistance that the humane Indonesian government offered to rescue them. Additional reports referred to the orgy of

burning of Indonesian flags in Australia, of the harassment that Indonesian citizens endured in public places there, of the various wild accusations that the Australian media made to bring disrepute to Indonesia in the international forum, the hypocrisy of Australian foreign policy, and of the aggressiveness of Australian soldiers in dealing with captives taken by the International Forces for East Timor (Interfet).

The point is not what the truth is, or what could have been distorted, and who is responsible for it. It is the magic power of the evasive media, and the public's unreserved willingness to make an immediate response to what the media inform them about the world. Globalisation does not homogenise the media, and the media do not homogenise the public. And the public is not always aware of this.

An American friend asked me disappointedly why pro-democracy student movements in Indonesia did not turn out in their millions to attack their government for what happened in East Timor. He must have been watching CNN attentively, and assumed that Indonesians not only watched the same reports but also received them in similar ways. Another Indonesian friend based in Australia expressed his frustration at the way the Indonesian intelligentsia responded to the crisis in East Timor by attacking Australia and burning the Australian flag. In a published essay, he asked in earnest: "Don't they see on television the violence in East Timor?"

You are what you watch in the mass media. Or more accurately, what mass media give you to watch. Australians are no less susceptible than their Indonesian or American counterparts to the mass media, which can never fully and only tell the truth – or lies. That is not in the nature of the media. We cannot blame them for this. This is different and separate from the issues of ownership, editorial control and information manipulation. If anything, it is the public's expectations of and its susceptibility to this technology that, hopefully, will change.

ARIEL HERYANTO is an editor of the Jakarta-based feminist journal *Jurnal Perempuan*.