

Politics and the Press in Indonesia: Understanding an Evolving Political Culture. By Angela Romano. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. xvii, 222 pp.

Indonesia's recently expanded media industry has gained the serious attention it deserves from local and foreign analysts alike. Romano's publication is a welcome contribution to the scholarship. It is a result of an extended period of grounded research, demonstrating an admirable wealth of detailed information. The information would be especially instructive for those who have little or no familiarity with Indonesia, particularly regarding the dynamics of its contemporary press.

No authoritarian regime has full control of its subjects, and Indonesia's New Order (1966–98) is no exception. To be resilient, an authoritarian regime would require a significant degree of collaboration from those it represses. At the same time, it cannot avoid being under the weight of its own ambitiously expansive structure as well as challenges from varied and usually non-confrontational forms of resistance from its subjects. Under such circumstances the politics of media — as well as other social institutions for that matter — is usually complex, at times ambiguous, but almost always fascinating for examination. Depending on the unwitting political bias of the researchers, or their consciously adopted analytical strategy, such examinations can throw equally important, but very different, spotlights on the multi-coloured and multi-layered relationships between the media and their political environment, especially the state apparatuses.

For instance, the work of Krishna Sen and David Hill (*Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, Oxford University Press, 2000) chooses to probe into the different and innovative ways the public and practitioners of the mass media subverted the authoritarian structures and measures under the New Order. It is a bottom-up study of the public response to the largely top-down political culture. In contrast, Romano delivers what she promises at the beginning of the book,

namely emphasizing the top-down effects of the power of an authoritarian state upon its largely disempowered subjects. No less than the first three of twelve chapters in the book are devoted to a discussion of “the country’s dominant political philosophies” before exploring “how these philosophies affect the working lives of Indonesian citizens”, especially those in “the news media” (p. xiii). This dominant ideology is held responsible for most of what is problematic, lacking, or wrong with Indonesia’s journalism according to presumably liberal norms. Such interpretation is more persuasive in some sections than others.

The author rightly claims that her book “differs from most writing to date about the role and practices of journalists, which usually focus on the opinions of politicians, bureaucrats, academics and a limited list of prominent journalists such as Mochtar Lubis, Aristides Katoppo or Goenawan Mohamad” (p. xv). The latter figures were part of both the New Order élite, and its privileged loyal critics. Romano chooses to conduct a series of interviews with and surveys on the middle- or lower-ranking practitioners who find themselves in a much more precarious position. As might be expected, the people under investigation appear to be little more than anonymous and powerless victims that are easily quantified for analysis. The surveys present some slight variations of views and experiences among the respondents, but by and large these journalists strike one as being unprofessional, naïve, backward, corrupt, inarticulate, and sexist from the standpoint of what the author designates as the “West”. The book is presented not in order to give us surprises, or to challenge the general (that is, “outsiders”) assumptions and presumptions about life in a “developing” (that is, poor) country under authoritarianism. Rather, it offers abundant empirical information that vindicates such familiar views. Such rich information is rare in English texts, and hence it promises to be helpful for those interested in the area for further investigation.

Citing several sources, the author acknowledges that “[a] common, continuing refrain of Indonesia and other developing nations is that

First World journalists highlight the negative aspects of the developing nations — the coups, corruption, crises, catastrophes and chaos ... consistently overlooking change and progress” (pp. 40–41). Obviously the author is not impressed by such a statement, and she does not find it necessary to take issue with it in any serious ways. Neither does she show interest in critically re-examining the overall “theoretical” framework through which she formulates her empirical data and personal observation. In this respect, again, her work markedly differs from that of Sen and Hill cited earlier. Given the relatively small number of literature on the subject, it is curious that the latter is not mentioned at all in this book.

Various Western theoretical propositions are deployed here mainly as a handy instrument to interpret the significance of the empirical findings. The resulting interpretation incidentally confirms the general wisdom about what is lacking in an “underdeveloped” society and its flaws in attempting to modernize. So powerful is Western intellectual tradition in the story narrated in this book that even the authoritarian outlook of what purports to be peculiarly post-colonial, Javanese-centric, and militarist New Order is in fact indebted to and analysable in terms of the ideas of Hegel.

One reservation that I have about the book is its minimal analysis of the data presented. Another is its tendency to reproduce the West/East dichotomy, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly equating it to a dichotomy of “liberal or democratic” versus “authoritarian” values and practices. The irony is most striking when one reads the book in the light of (or reads it, as I accidentally did, in Australia and at the time of) the American-Britain-Australian aggression in Iraq. During this time, major presses in Australia and presumably the United States were not only extremely patriotic and remarkably propagandistic, but they are also being more “New Order” than their counterparts under Indonesia’s New Order as portrayed in this book.

Despite a few contentious minor points, Chapters 5 to 7 on the transformation of journalistic profession, its increased economic and political significance during a rapid industrialization are the best.

These chapters constitute the most original and important contribution of the book to the scholarship on Indonesia's media industry. While the sections and chapter on women journalists are solid and innovative in their own terms, they do not integrate well with the rest of the book.

Ariel HERYANTO