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Undertones

6 August 2001

Walking Hand in Hand: Indonesian Media & Politics Pt. 2

Written, produced and presented by Ariel Wee.

This is Undertones. In this edition, we take a look at the role Indonesia's media has played in the political developments of the country.

The media in Indonesia has always been closely linked with politics. In the past, that relationship was dominated by the Soeharto government. But as Soeharto later found out, the hand that feeds can get a tough bite.

Though Soeharto was comfortable wielding his power & authority for years, the ground he stood on soon became shifting sand. And the Indonesian media played a major role in shaking the political stage that Soeharto once commanded.

Professor David Hill, co-author of the book 'Media, Culture & Politics in Indonesia'.

DH: "Oh I think it did. I think it did in a way that was shared by a whole range of elements of civil society. The students most obviously were I think a vanguard. But I think there was a strong connection between students and journalists in the years leading up to the fall of Suharto. The journalists, and particularly the Alliance of Independent Journalists which was established by those journalists who were forced out of employment when Soeharto banned their newspapers, their magazines in 1996. The Alliance of Independent Journalists operated effectively as a kind of underground media and press bureau. Basically to ensure that stories which were not flattering to Soeharto but which were based on accurate research, were circulating outside the mainstream media. They had a very good web page, they had a photocopied periodical magazine which they would distribute throughout the capital and major cities to keep alive and to provide a forum for opposition. And those sorts of things, particularly outside of the mainstream media, in the underground media, I think were very important in articulating the frustration of the middle-class Indonesians and those of the NGOs, that in the final months and days banded together to convince members of the political

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Shortwave

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9600 KHz (31M Band)



elite that Soeharto's time had come and that he should step aside."

Once the Soeharto dictatorship was thrown out, freedom came like a breath of fresh air over Indonesia. Journalists in the media were released from the iron grip that restrained them when the army & the Information Department ruled the news order of the day. Formerly chained by restrictions in the past, journalists starting coming out of their closets and began to voice their convictions, airing their opinions. This led to the Indonesian media becoming one of the freest in Asia today. With their newfound freedom, how well a job has the Indonesian media done in reporting the truth?

Professor Ariel Heryanto, from the University of Melbourne.

AH: "The answer to that really has a lot of variation. It varies from case to case. You have the old big media that are more or less still doing the same with a little bit more of I think liberal policies and more courage I think to report. But the great number of new media (that have come up) I don't think have done the job very well. There's a lot of amateurism going on there, a lot of commercial venturing, a lot of gossiping, superstitions and so on. So, we're not very happy with that. But at least, you've got the air of openness in the ground really, out there. You can publish what you like and you leave it to the market to decide which newsprint you want to choose and read. I think there's a general agreement among observers that there has not been a major increase in the quality. But you still have the old, well-established principle media still operating very well there."

Now that the Information Department & its army's control over the media is history, who controls the media now?

Ariel Heryanto again.

AH: "Number one is the market. They have to compete like hell. And the second new agency that has been operating like the police, policing the media, has been different sectors in the community itself. Sometimes they do have links with the old forces like the army and so on. But they claim themselves to be representing for example, the Islamic segments of the society or this or that ethnic group. And they sometimes feel very unhappy about certain coverage of topics and they sometimes attack both journalists and the media companies and their headquarters."

When Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly Chairman, Amien Rais was in Singapore recently, he said in the news-making process, events & people can get packaged and labeled, which can lead to damaging & destructive results.

AR: "... a news story can acquire a life of its own. Like a virus that travels through cyberspace and invades, destroys or alters computer software, a news story can start as a rumour and be relayed and even twisted or amplified through repetitions by the various services. In the process, events acquire interpretations or mis-interpretations; people acquire character; numbers expand or contract. In part, because people are now bombarded with information, it is necessary to package and label events and people so it is easier for the reader or listener. But the results could be disastrous for some people since a label may be stuck to them the rest of their lives."

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Indonesia Mediawatch

[Taking stock of Megawati Sukarnoputri's two years as President of Indonesia](#)

Did the media contribute to former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid's removal, like they did to Soeharto?

Professor David Hill believes that Wahid & his inner circle blamed much of his political difficulties upon what they saw was an antagonistic media. On the other hand, Professor Hill also feels that Wahid was extremely poor in his way with the media & the way he maintained relations with them.

And the kind of coverage that Abdurrahman Wahid was getting then, was probably less than favourable.

DH: "There've been a number of stories floated by the media, certainly by the less reputable end of the Indonesian media, delving into his personal life with accusations or at least suggestions that he had been involved in various acts of an unflattering nature, romantic forays outside of marriage and various things of that kind."

All of that, David Hill says, reflected very poorly upon Abdurrahman Wahid when he was president.

And it was only in the recent months before his impeachment that Abdurrahman Wahid recognized and started to try to better manage his relations with the media.

DH: "For example, he called together, and without any advance warning in the media, a meeting with several dozen of the country's leading editors and journalists. He called them together in a neutral location, he came to meet with them without any fanfare and to discuss his perceptions of the media, and to have an open and honest discussion with them about his views and where he saw the media in the country heading. It (the meeting) was not widely reported in Indonesia. Even the editors and the journalists themselves did not speak about the contents in the meeting in their own media. But that was only at a time when the country was already deeply into crisis."

By then, Abdurrahman Wahid's efforts to establish connections with the Indonesian media, which is routinely done by leaders of most democratic countries, were sadly too late. Megawati Soekarnoputri now occupies the position once filled by Soeharto & Wahid. How will the press treat her? Ariel Heryanto.

AH: "My general perception is I think whoever is going to be there in the palace will be closely watched, and examined, and perhaps criticized by different groups of people. Including the media, but not just the media. So, everyone will be looking at her performance very closely. That's mostly likely, and they can be very critical too. Even whenever she speaks, they're not very happy too. For example, her stand on East Timor, on Irian Jaya, on the question of women and so on. They're not very happy even when she speaks. Do you think the press is going to affect the credibility of her presidency and her authority? I think so. But the press is not united. But I think after a while, the press will continue to put their pressure on the accountability and the performance of who(ever) is going to be the president and members of the parliament or cabinet and so on. So in other words, I think we are quite happy with the way the press is handling the case. And I think many of us have relied very much on the press in understanding what's going on."

Professor Ariel Heryanto joined the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies (MIALS) in January 2000. He was previously Senior Lecturer with the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore, and with the Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Indonesia. He studied Education in Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Indonesia, Asian Studies in University of Michigan, USA and Anthropology in Monash University, Australia. His areas of interest include the politics of language, popular cultures, the middle class, political violence, and the mass media.

Professor David Hill BA, PhD (ANU) is Professor of Southeast Asian Studies in the School of Asian Studies at Murdoch University. His monograph, 'The Press in New Order Indonesia' was published by UWA Press in the Centre's Asia Papers series in December 1994. His most recent book, co-authored with Krishna Sen, is 'Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia' (OUP, Melbourne, 2000). He is Director of the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS), a national consortium of 21 universities which assists Australians to study in Indonesia, and is accredited as a Professional (Level 3) English/Indonesian Interpreter and Translator by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), Canberra. 