INDONESIAN PRESS AND THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

Kejatuhan rezim Suharto tidak lepas dari kekeliruannya dalam memandang kebebasan pers, karena dengan mengebiri kebebasan pers rezim Suharto menjadi kehilangan kontrol. Tulisan ini membahas kekeliruan-kekeliruan pandangan rezim tsb. serta implikasinya terhadap berbagai penyelewengan dan derajat kejujuran masyarakat.

INTRODUCTION

During the protest of Indonesian university students addressed to the regime of Suharto (or the New Order Regime) between March and May 1998, the ministry of information Dr Alwi Dahlan instructed any private television to relay two news programs broadcast by TVRI, a state owned television station. The first one was called Info Pagi, and another one was Berita 14. The Info Pagi was broadcast from 6:00 to 6:30 a.m., while the Berita 14 was at 2:00 p.m. As a result, all Indonesian televisions presented same news at the same moment.

Those news programs all together were called TV-Pool. The TVRI produced the TV-Pool, as stated by Alwi Dahlan, in a co-operation with reporters of private televisions such as Surya Citra Televisi (SCTV), Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia (RCTI), AN Teve, and Indosiar. However, the news presenters were from the TVRI and the news presentation style was subject to the TVRI's stiff and monotonous appearance. The private televisions' reporters just contribute a few numbers of report to the programmes.

Alwi Dahlan's policy raises many criticisms from journalists and television audiences. The Public Relations Manager of the SCTV Dr Edward Depari evaluates the programs as a new form of Indonesian government control over the press.[1] Nevertheless, according to Edward Depari, the TV-Pool did not break the law because The Broadcasting Act 1997 allows the TVRI requires private televisions to rely its programs. The Indonesian Institute of Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) stated in its press relations that the policy will bring about self-censorship and shareholder's intervention toward editorial policies, including firing some television journalists who exposed the military violence.[2]

Suharto stepped down on 21 May, and Alwi Dahlan lost his authority. The Info Pagi disappeared from private televisions ever since. The Berita 14 is still on air, but it is not relied by private televisions any longer. That change indicates the decrease of a regime's control over the press, but it can not be regarded as the beginning era of the freedom of press in Indonesia. It is because the change just happened at the level of official policy, while legislation (i.e. Act no. 21/1982 concerning the Basic Principles of the Press) that allows such a policy is still maintained. Thus, without changing the legislation and its basic assumption on press roles, Alwi Dahlan's policy-like might be produced again by the next regime.

The TV-Pool story is only a starting point for a wide-range discussion of Indonesian press. The main purpose of this essay is to examine the political background of the miserable condition of press freedom in Indonesia, particularly under Suharto's dictatorship. Besides, the essay analyses the various impacts of the regime's policy in about 20 years to the press. As I am writing this essay, Suharto just 12 days retired. Therefore, I cannot argue much on the policies and treatments of the successor to the press.

The Victim of National Stability

As Suharto came to office in 1966, he showed his personal outlook for the freedom of press by closing some PKI (the Communist Party of Indonesia) affiliated newspapers such as Harian Rakyat, Bintang Timur, and Warta Bhakti. The vast majority of Indonesian people supported such an action due to their hatred to communism. Suharto regime's policy to ban communist oriented press was in line with its strong effort to erase communism in Indonesia.

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[1] Interview with a foreign radio announcer, 22 May 1998

[2] 'TV Pool Perburuk Citra Indonesia' *Singgalang*, 24 May 1998

For Suharto, control over press seems to be a strategic point to control people's mind. He stated in the 2nd Seminar of Infantry (*Seminar Angkatan Darat II*),

> In developing the New Order, it should be realized that easy to get rid of a tyrant or to destroy its concentration camp rather than destroying and eliminating dreams or ideas that produce and give power for it. The physical victory on it is absolutely important, but it is not enough. Because we destroy dreams, while that we must win is also dreams...(Abidin and Lopa, 1969:300).

Suharto's statements point that he was not only reacting strongly into tangible actions of his political rivals, but he also tended to reject the differences of ideas. In 1984, he arrived on the top of his desire to control people's ideas as he decreed all socio-political organisations, including civilian political parties, to declare Pancasila as their sole ideology. He was strongly eager that everybody was subject to his ideas and applied in daily life terms that he liked such as azas tunggal (sole ideology), pembangunan (development), UUD 1945 (1945 Constitution), stabilitas nasional (national stability) or pers bebas dan bertanggung jawab (free and responsible press). For many state's officials, repeating those terms in their speeches symbolises their self-identification even loyalty to Suharto's regime.

Controlling national press or information flows is a way to control people's ideas consistently practised by the regime. The control policy was not only aimed to prevent the spread of communism, but also for disagreement or criticism to Suharto's and his family's actions[3] . Press reports about riots or military violence, for instance, could be regarded as efforts to spread hatred out to Suharto or his regime and to shake national stability. In 1974, Suharto's regime closed eleven newspapers and a magazine because they reported a big riot in Jakarta called Malari (The Fifteen January Disaster) (Atmakusumah, 1981). Ideas behind the TV-Pool seem not too different with those used by the regime in 1974.

The issue of national stability was predominantly employed by the regime to oppress opposition movements, including disobedience press. The term of national stability refers to the Trilogi Pembangunan (the basic strategy of Indonesian development) which contains three elements: growth, distribution and stability. Suharto's regime strongly argues that national stability must be kept as a prime condition in running the development wheel. Thus, the

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[3] It has broadly known that all Suharto's sons and daughters are porsh and control many kinds of industries and large scale development activities. His son Hutomo Mandala Putra, for instance, obtained monopoly right import South Korean cars and clove distribution. His elder daughter, Siti Hardiant) Rukmana, is famous for her highwa projects.

government must eliminate any kind of 'destructive actions' toward the development.

However, the regime monopolised and unilaterally defined the meaning of 'destructive actions' and 'national stability'. As a result, honest and frankly criticisms addressed to Keluarga Cendana (Suharto's family) behaviour would not be accepted as 'constructive criticism'. In contrast, it would be regarded as 'destructive actions' or 'harming the national stability', whereas he and his family had been publicly known to commit miscellaneous collusion and utilise political power for their personal economic purposes (see Vatikiotis, 1993, Schwarz, 1994).

In responding the regime's negative outlook on criticisms and difference ideas, Indonesian press developed prudent attitude and self-censorship. The press must, like or dislike, show its accommodative manner toward Suharto's policies or his children's behaviour in using cruelly their father's status. Accordingly, the press positioned themselves no more than message courters for Suharto or his children's business activities, even some of them seemed to be campaign media of the family.

Media and Manipulation

Manipulation of facts may be done by the press unhappily, but they must do it to save themselves. In such circumstances, obviously, mass media could not be expected to draw events or reality as accurate as possible. Many facts and opinions must be hidden for those were a disadvantage to the government. Some brilliant journalists obtained many saleable but 'dangerous' stories and they only had to keep it in their pocket, or they individually used silently the information for making money[4].

Hiding facts or dishonesty was not only practiced by journalists. Anybody who spoke to public should change some particular words or use euphemism to avoid contrast appearances with the mainstream (read: the regime preferences). For example, the regime did not like to use kelaparan word for expressing a condition of food scarcity or starvation, because the word pointed the carelessness of the government apparatuses or 'undermined the charisma of the government'. They like to pronounce such a condition as rawan

[4] It has been widely known that some Indonesian journalist use improperly their profession to get 'black' mone. Some of them do it for additional revenue because they earn very low salary from their employers. The operation mode of them is mainly by asking for 'transfortation funds' to their news subject whom expecting the new being published. 'The transportation fund' is usually submitted within an envelope, so it then called as 'an envelope mone' or *ueng amplop*.

pangan, a phrase that actually fails to appropriately illustrate the reality. To follow and to please the government, many newspapers or individual speakers used or quoted the terms.[5] Vatikiotis says,

> A style of writing has developed which accommodates the establishment's rejection of direct criticism of its policies and practices. Thus the report on the problem of development in a certain province is more likely to lead off with the line... (Vatikiotis, 1993: 107).

To put the press as a mirror of a society, the press's soft reactions to the government's pressures were disadvantageous to the people's political morality, even spread out anxiety. It because the press failed to reflect the real situation of the state or the regime's performance as well as to interpret the situation in a truth context. The audiences ultimately lost their moral guidance, moreover as the press often exposed the intellectual groups' or religious leaders' supports to the government, but hid their strong criticisms. As a result, the press created an image that the regime was too powerful, so it was impossible to be overthrown. Most of the people then preferred to obey or hide their hatred to the regime rather than to oppose it openly.

Dishonesty then developed wider than for speaking and expressing political aspirations. Corruption, a behaviour rooted from hypocrisy and dishonesty was also amazingly developing : it happened at any level of the New Orders' bureaucracy. Culture of corruption develops in line with the absence of freedom to convey the truth. Schwarz says in his book,

> Petty corruption is an unfortunate fact of life in Indonesia. More serious, however, are the much larger under-the-table payment made by companies to senior officials to win major government contracts. Or, the sums that foreign and domestic companies pay to politically well-connected private businessmen who obtain contracts on their behalf. This can involve a straight payment of free equity in a join venture company (Schwarz, 1994: 36).

However, Suharto did not acknowledge the corruption as the product of corrupt mind. It is the result of economic pressure. Schwarz quotes Suharto,

> 'Eventually, when economic development has gone so fat as to produce a good overall standard of living, government employees will receive adequate salaries and have no reason to practice corruption.

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[5] Since Suharto was in office, hypocrisy had been widely spread amongs the people, even up to the parliament members. None of the members braved to criticise Suharto's policies or his family's corrupted behavior. Conversely, they often praised the president, althought the publik became anneyed listening their statements.

[But] no corrupt act.....even under the pretext of helping people, can be justified'(Schwarz, 1994: 36).

Road to Capitalistic Press in the New Order Regime

Although Suharto's regime limits the freedom of Indonesian press, the Press Act 1982 produced by the regime endorses the rise of capitalistic press in the country. Indeed, the Act abolishes censorship and interminable closure as formal control mechanism of the press contents[6], but requests anyone who wants to publish press to get a SIUPP (the Permission Letter for Press Publishing Enterprise) from the government (Article No. 1, clause No. 13). The SIUPP is meant to administratively regulate the press organisation and management. Therefore it is related to the minimum share belonging to the publisher, its possessive share composition, labour relations, bank guarantee, etc. The administrative regulations request a minimum capital for any press enterprises, therefore only rich investors can establish the press company. The SIUPP facilitates rich investors freely to enter press business.

As a newspaper reports a news annoying the government, it may easily lose its legal right to continue its operation because the government will annul the SIUPP without court verdict. Such a punishment had been applied to some news magazines such as Tempo and Editor and some newspapers.

The SIUPP then endorses the press enterprises to develop as money making machines only. The capitalist press conducts very carefully, avoiding risks by minimising controversial issues, and practising self-censorship because the press investors were afraid of the SIUPP cancellation. As a result, the journalists lose their real function as a watchdog for the government, and the investors treat them no more than professionals even normal labours.

Besides, the SIUPP was employed as a strategic point of Suharto's family or his cronies to control the press enterprises. To them, having press enterprises was not only advantageous in terms of politics, but also economy since the press can be utilised easily to create positive images on their business performance.

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[6] Formall, the goverment had acted in accordance with the act. However, the authorised officials employed an informal mechanism called *lembaga telepon*. Here the officials called the chief editors to appeal or half-force him to stop publishing sensitive or controversial news. Yunus Yosfiah, the Information Minister of Habibi's regime then forbids the officials of the Ministry of Information to practice the such a mode of control. See 'Menpen Larang Budaya Telepon ke Media Massa', *Media Indonesia*, 18 May 1998, p.6.

Pressure to Changes

Great pressures given by Indonesian students pressed Suharto to step down at 21 May 1998. The vice president Baharuddin Jusuf Habibi was appointed by Suharto to replace his presidential position. The new president leads a cabinet called Kabinet Reformasi Pembangunan (Reformed Development Cabinet), where Muhammad Yunus Yosfiah is in charged as Minister of Information.

The new regime appears with a more populist face that produces some new regulations to serve people's demand for a more democratic life atmosphere: any citizen frees to found political party, oppressed policies on university student's right to develop its organisation was abolished, releasing political opponents from prison and so on. For Indonesian mass media, the most important policy is on the change of SIUPP regulation, even though it is still unsatisfactory.

Minister Yosfiah produces a simpler regulation on SIUPP, mainly on the technical procedure of proposing the permission letter. Some requirements that decrease people's access to media production are erased, so by the new regulation the element of capital and recommendation from authorised journalist organisation (PWI) are no longer important. In conclusion, Yosfiah cut down bureaucratic procedures that may cause political and economic discriminations in issuing the license.

However, Yosfiah's policies do not change fundamentally the government's obsolete assumptions on press: press is dangerous and anarchic potential, so the government must control the press organisation. In other words, the new regulation on the SIUPP expresses that the Habibi's regime does not substantially change the previous regime's point of view on press. The assumption is erroneous since the New Order regime was paralysed by students' movements, not by the press (Chatra, 1988). Indonesian press' contributions for the movement were meaningful, but were not as much as that of alternative communication media such as internet and underground pamphlets.

CONCLUSION

The history of Indonesian press is a history of suppression and the government interventions. Oppression to the press, in fact, is not only characteristic of the New Order or Suharto's regime, but also that of its predecessor. At the end of his regime, Sukarno did the same thing (Smith, 1983).

Oppression to the press results in the press can not control the government or tell the truth, but in contrast, it let the government neglect its weaknesses and to fertilise obsessions among the people. By limiting the press freedom, the Suharto's regime distracted its reflective mirror. Moreover, the regime socialised the people to marginalise the value of transparency and honesty, and let the people keep hypocrisy traits.

Reformation, a word that had been used effectively to force Suharto stepped down, indicates a new spirit to leave anything disadvantagou to the nation: to deeply bury all types of oppressive actions, including that was addressed to the press, in history. However, the freedom given by BJ Habibi's regime for the Indonesian press can be regarded as a short time political movement only, because the regime still maintain the Act no. 21/1982. As mentioned above, the act is the sole reference and a legal base for the government in intervening the press.

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