Pressing Challenges  DAVID T. HILL

The threats facing Indonesia’s print media

As Indonesia faces the end of the millennium, the hottest topic on the political agenda is how and when the three-decade rule of septuagenarian President Suharto will end. However, this conundrum facing the nation receives only minimal ventilation in the highly constrained press. President Suharto, who bears the dubious honor of being ranked eighth on the annual black list of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, has little interest in fostering an open media debate on alternative leaders. For their part, Indonesian editors display their honed sense of survival by either avoiding taboo subjects or handling them with utmost discretion. Apart from negotiating a minefield of editorial unmentionables, the Indonesian press is facing a string of new challenges as the state prepares for Suharto’s inevitable departure. Since the emergence of Suharto’s New Order in 1966, press bans have been a key mechanism of state control over the media.

In June 1994, the then Minister of Information, Harmoko, withdrew the obligatory publication permits of three popular news weeklies, Tempo (Time), DeTit (Moment), and Editor, effectively closing them down. Several incidents triggered the bans. Most significant was the ongoing criticism of presidential protege BJ Habibie, the influential Minister for Science and Technology, over his decision to purchase ships from the former East German navy. Public outcry at the bans was strident and prolonged. Instead of simply allowing the banned publishing companies to launch new, more compliant magazines after a period of public criticism, the government issued new publication permits to enterprises close to the president or the ruling Golkar political organization. For example, Minister for Labor Abdul Latief backed Titris (Circulation), presidential confidant and timber magnate Muhammad (Bob) Hassan bankrolled Gatva (Phrase), and Golkar functionary Agung Laksono opened Target. This inclination towards political and editorial control via ownership of the media means that applications for publication permits by non-aligned businesses or organizations may be rejected, whereas pro-Suharto interests have found their way cleared to invest heavily in the print media.

The past decade has seen a growing concentration of media ownership in the hands of a diminishing number of conglomerates, particularly those with impressive political credentials. While the trend is worrying (particularly to journalists suspicious of the growing editorial prerogative of owners over editors), the level of concentration is still relatively modest. A recent study identified about sixteen major press groups, nine of which were connected to the palace or the ruling Golkar organization. Nonetheless, this is a noticeable shift since the early 1980s, when there were only a few, very modest press agglomerations; almost all of Indonesia’s 260-odd newspapers and magazines were owned by separate business people and only a handful were directly controlled by government or military groups. A controlling interest in a media conglomerate with print and electronic offshoots is increasingly seen as a necessary acquisition for those who aspire to political influence or leadership.
When Minister Habibie, renowned for his uncompromising promotion of high-tech industries in Indonesia’s developing economy, suffered the indignity of having one of his locally-produced airplanes crash, he was offended at an inference that the fault lay in the plane rather than the pilot.

When Minister Habibie, renowned for his uncompromising promotion of high-tech industries in Indonesia’s developing economy, suffered the indignity of having one of his locally-produced airplanes crash, he was offended at an inference that the fault lay in the plane rather than the pilot. After such an unflattering report in the influential English-language daily, *The Jakarta Post*, Habibie engaged one of the country’s most prominent lawyers to commence legal action against the paper for damages exorbitant enough to bankrupt it.

*The Jakarta Post* had a solid reputation as a reliable, professional, and reasonably independent English paper. It had only two insignificant rivals until recent takeovers injected more competition into the English-language sector of the market. In September 1996, *The Indonesian Observer* came under the control of Peter Gontha, a close business associate of President Suharto’s son Bambang Trihatmodjo, head of one of the country’s most powerful conglomerates, Bimantara. Two months later the moribund *Indonesia Times* was acquired by the Indonesian-language daily *Republika* founded by Habibie in 1991 as a vehicle for his Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association. Therefore, if Habibie were to send *The Jakarta Post* into bankruptcy, the only extant English papers would be in the hands of members of the presidential inner circle.

Internet technology has opened up new possibilities for mainstream publications as well as for a burgeoning underground unlicensed media which spurns the legal obligation to obtain a government press permit. Cyber-pioneers include the electronic version of the banned weekly news magazine *Tempo* which now appears beyond the reach of authorities as “Tempo Interaktif.” Alongside mainstream cyberpublications, including a dozen of the country’s leading daily papers, are radical e-mail bulletins like “Kabar dari Pijar” (News from Pijar, organ of the Center for Information and Action for Reformation in Pijar) and the American-based mailing list “Indonesia-L” and archive “Indonesia-L.”

New communication technologies also enable large capital-city dailies to print simultaneously in provincial centers around the archipelago, thus posing a potential challenge to the livelihood of the local publications. Some small owners maintain a brave face against the affluent interlopers, arguing that the national papers cannot hope to cover grassroots news or woo local advertising. However, initial attempts by market leaders to forge national syndicates by incorporating small local papers through revenue-sharing and news-networking agreements have proved attractive to many struggling minnows in the national pool. Provincial journalists hope that financial injections by cashed-up national conglomerates will improve the pay and working conditions of regional workers, long regarded as the impoverished cousins of their capital-city colleagues.

However, statistics released recently by the Department of Information indicate that, while there was a modest 3.78% annual growth in the national circulation of newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals in 1996, circulation was concentrated in Jakarta. Even in 1995, the capital accounted for a staggering 70% of the nation’s print circulation despite having only about 6% of the total population. Provincial statistics hint at a gradual downturn in newspaper reading in the provinces, presumably due to the expanded reception of private television broadcasting. Of the eight newspapers which officially ceased publication in 1996, seven were languishing regional publications which failed to sustain their market.

Commentators in Jakarta have pointed out that the technologies which make it possible for Jakarta papers to print editions throughout the archipelago may eventually permit international giants like *The New York Times* to publish simultaneously in Jakarta or even allow Indonesia’s leading daily, *Kompas*, to print a US edition in New York. Indonesian government regulations, which currently prohibit foreign investment in the print media are likely to face international opposition in the free-wheeling, free-trading decades ahead. Such economic liberalization may politically weaken prevailing taboos and political strictures or possibly merely accommodate them.

Unfortunately, the challenges of the future are not simply to newspaper companies under increasing pressure from a changing market structure and authoritarian government; journalists are becoming the victims of violent attack.

The government-authorized Indonesian Journalists’ Association (PWI) is the only professional body permitted to represent press workers in Indo-
nesia. As such, it has long been regarded by many working journalists as an extension of government control. Not surprisingly, when a new and more radical organization, the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), emerged after the June 1994 bans, the authorities attempted to dismember it by jailing office-bearers, having rank-and-file members sacked, and most recently by jailing the printer of an associated unlicensed magazine Suara Independen [Independent Voice]. Although the magazine is officially sponsored by an Australian-based organization known as the Supporters of an Alternative Indonesian Press, it is nonetheless regarded as the mouthpiece of the Alliance. Print worker Andi Syahputra, arrested with 5,000 copies of the popular periodical, was charged with sedition and sentenced to 30 months imprisonment.

Intimidation of journalists by the authorities in Indonesia has long been common, but violence has been escalating. In August last year, an investigative journalist working for a small provincial daily paper, Beritas, was beaten to death with an iron bar by unidentified assailants at his front door. The murder of Fuad M. Syafruddin, known as Udin, sparked a national outcry, prompting both the PWI and AJI to dispatch fact-finding teams to investigate. Both deplored the government’s initial lack of action and subsequently criticized what journalists regarded as the cover-up framing of a convenient suspect rather than a full and unfettered investigation of evidence. The Alliance argued that Udin’s death was linked to his investigative articles criticizing financial maladministration by local authorities and particularly the mayor, Sri Roso Sudarmo.

Journalists’ outrage at Udin’s murder failed to stop the suspicious deaths of two other provincial journalists this year. In June, Muhammad Sayuti Bochari, known as Sanrego, from the Pos Makasar (Makasar Post) weekly on the island of Sulawesi, died of injuries consistent with a savage beating. He had written several leading articles alleging the embezzlement of funds by local officials. The police declared the fatality a traffic accident despite the fact that Sanrego’s motorbike, found nearby, was undamaged and that his wounds seemed inconsistent with a fall.

In other, less severe incidents, journalists have been beaten up, detained against their will or threatened with violence if they did not cease investigative reports. There is growing concern within the profession that such attacks will become more common and the consequences more frequently fatal. The deteriorating circumstances led one senior judge on a North Sumatra provincial High Court to suggest specific legislation to protect journalists.

Within months of coming to power in 1966, the New Order’s military leaders had closed down one-third of the country’s newspapers and magazines. As the aging head of state faces his final presidential term, the proclivity for control of the mass media through government bans remains. The grand stratagems of the future, however, will operate primarily through financial rather than military power. Until the crucial social benefit of the free flow of information is recognized, valued, and defended by the courts, by the law-enforcement system, and by society at large, individual journalists will labor under a darkening shadow of intimidation and violence.