The Press in a Squeeze: Operating Hazards in the Indonesian Print Media

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Introduction

Over the past two decades the press industry in Indonesia has been dramatically transformed. Sales figures and the capital required to establish and run a sustainable publication have risen rapidly. Publications look smarter and more attractive, as full advantage is taken of improving technologies. The entry into the industry of heavy-weight investors during the late 1980s changed the patterns of press ownership and broadened the range of publications produced. This investment significantly improved the salaries and general working conditions of journalists as 'head-hunting', entered the industry, perceptibly altering the ethos of the profession.

At the end of the 1980s the Indonesian press industry was riding the crest of a boom. The new decade promised continued growth, flux and change. The prognosis, however, has become considerably more gloomy of late as the big borrowers and investors of the late 1980s have become caught in the squeeze of the government's much-discussed 'tight monetary policy' after apparently over-extending themselves in the 1980s boom. Even companies in strong financial shape are facing increasingly vigorous competition, both from within the print industry and from an expanding electronic media. A leaner economy, languishing advertising budgets draining away to a booming private television sector, sharpened competition from new stables of publications using bolder marketing methods have all combined to inject a new level of uncertainty in the 1990s.

This paper will endeavour to trace these changes and others within the context of relations between the press and the state. It will argue that while the early years of the 'New Order' of President Suharto were marked by sweeping mass bans, the industry's response has been largely to 'self-regulate', letting capital accumulation and market pressures primarily determine its mode of dealing with the state. Our focus is on Jakarta-based daily newspapers, although reference will be made to major news weeklies and periodicals together with selected regional publication. Along with the emergence of burgeoning press empires, the recent interests of people close to, and in, the presidential family will be examined. In detailing the expansion and contraction of the industry, an analysis is attempted of the markets targeted and strategies employed by the press as it facing the tough decade ahead.
The Early Years: Mass Bans

1965 was the worse single year in the history of the press in independent Indonesia. In February and March 29 papers were closed for their support for an anti-Communist (and opponents argued, anti-Sukarno) bloc, called somewhat ironically the Body for the Support of Sukarnoism (BPS). In the backlash that followed the political chaos of 1 October 1965 within months 46 of Indonesia’s 163 remaining newspapers were banned indefinitely because of their presumed association with, or sympathy for, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and its allies. (Surjomihardjo, 1980). Many (clearly hundreds of) staff were arrested. Leftists were expelled from the Indonesian Journalists Association (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, PWI) and the semi-official ANTARA news agency. The arrests and purges of communist and sympathising journalists in 1965-66, carried out against a background the large-scale massacres in the countryside, cast a very long shadow over the press for subsequent decades, highlighting the hazards of being dubbed ‘communist’ in Indonesia.

The letter of Indonesia’s 1966 Act (No. 11) on the Basic Principles of the Press declares that “No censorship or bridling shall be applied to the National Press” (Chapter 2, Article 4), that “Freedom of the Press is guaranteed in accordance with the fundamental rights of citizens” (Article 5.1) and that “no publication permit is needed” (Chapter 4, Article 8.2). The reality was that during an unspecified “transitional period” (Chapter 9, Article 20.1a) two related permits had to be obtained by newspaper publishers: the Permit To Publish (SIT) from the ostensibly civil Department of Information, and the Permit To Print (SIC) from the military security authority, KOPKAMTIB.

In 1966, the government granted a large number of these obligatory dual permits to papers such as Harian KAMI [KAMI Daily] and the Mahasiswa Indonesia [Indonesian Student], both associated with the militant student movement whose anti-PKI and anti-Sukarno posture supported the army leaders gaining power. Some pro-Sukarno papers survived, either because of military allies or by accommodating themselves to the changing circumstance. El Bahar [The Sea], for example, was protected by influential Navy and marine officers. But generally, in the words of one editor, the press wanted to be regarded by the government as “a good partner in accelerating development.” The press wanted to be regarded by the government as “a good partner in accelerating development.” In the parlance of the ‘New Order’, the Indonesian press was ‘free but responsible’. Journalists and critics, labouring under the constant threat of bans, rejoined ‘free to do what, and responsible to whom?’ As former Jakarta correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald Peter Rodgers has observed, “There is a striking disparity between the legal basis for domestic press operations and what happens in practice.”

By the early 1970s the range of major newspapers could be classified into six (partially overlapping) types. There were the New Order radical press, typified by student papers which had spilled out of the campuses and into the streets, such as Harian KAMI and Mahasiswa Indonesia, to which could be added Nusantara [Archipelago], and the revived papers Pedoman and Indonesia Raya [Glorious Indonesia], both oriented to the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI). Secondly, there were politically cautious, high circulation prestige journals, notably the Protes-