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## **PART 1**

### **CENSORSHIP IN INDONESIA: A HISTORY**

To understand the current state of censorship in Indonesia, we first have to consider the volatile history of media power in the country. What does freedom of speech mean in this specific, post-colonial context? What is the experience of dissent in mainstream media, and how does this extend to politics? Who controls the news?

In Western contexts, the right to free expression is well established as one of the most important tenets of democracy, and of the notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). In contrast, the role of media freedom in Indonesian civil society remains unsettled and regularly contested (Steele in Sen and Hill, 2011). In the last century alone, opponents included the Dutch and Japanese colonial powers which were finally ousted during Indonesian independence in 1945, and the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, who took government control in 1966 and retained his position for more than thirty years (Ricklefs, 1993). Throughout these critical times in Indonesian history, censorship was actively exercised by the state across political, legal and psychological dimensions. Under these pressures, it's unsurprising that mainstream Indonesian media has tended to serve the interests of the state, doing little to challenge prevailing social or cultural hegemonies. To place our discussions on freedom of speech in context, this section will examine some of the political and cultural events that have brought us to where we are today.

#### **NO OPPOSITION ALLOWED**

First, it's important to take a close look at the role of mainstream media in President Suharto's Indonesia. A strong and respected military figure, Suharto became President amidst extreme social upheaval in 1966, and remained unchallenged in office until 1998. In his three decades of uninterrupted rule (an era known as the 'New Order') he sought to unify the country, and was successful in bringing about a period economic prosperity and political stability (Elson, 2002). But the price of success was high, and in strong contrast to his predecessor, Soekarno – who is widely seen as both a freedom fighter and a national hero – Suharto's legacy is one marred by violence, corruption and extensive human rights abuses (Shubert, 2008). Nicknamed 'The Smiling General', he was charming but lethal, and actively censored dissent in the Indonesian press. Writing about that time, journalist Andreas Harsono says: *"No opposition was allowed. Disagreement usually ended up in violent crackdowns, like those that have occurred in East Timor, Irian Jaya, Aceh, and other disputed territories."* (1996) One editor recalls ordering an entire page of his newspaper to be blacked out because government officials objected to an article and it was too late to change or replace it (Dhyatmika, 2014). By treating public criticism of

his government as a direct threat to national security, Suharto was able to present any act of retaliation as both valid and necessary. And for millions of Indonesians, anxious to protect their hard-won sense of sovereignty, this was a reality that they were willing to accept.

One of the New Order's main weapons in maintaining legitimacy and spreading propaganda, was the so-called Ministry of Information. Through this governing body, Suharto was able to closely monitor and restrict both domestic and foreign media (Aspinall, 2010). As a result, while living standards in the country rose, media freedom dwindled. To keep up appearances, the regime fiercely circumscribed all reference to any civil or political conflict both in news and entertainment media (Sen, 2011). In fact, whenever citizens protested, the state would respond by extending its censorship policies. In 1984, a law was passed requiring all publishing bodies to possess a press operating license which could be revoked at any time by the Ministry of Information (Aspinall, 2010). Over the next decade, the government used this legal precedent to scare private media owners into submission and to close down dozens of newspapers (Sen, 2011). Playing into cold-war tensions, subjects like communism and – to some extent – feminism, was made taboo. Over many years, Indonesians learnt that to act in demonstration, whether in the papers or in the streets, was to put oneself in danger. But by the 1990s, the growing Indonesian middle class was becoming restless with Suharto's autocracy, and, buffeted by the winds of globalisation, the government's grip on both politics and social issues was loosening. Still, Suharto tried to hold on to power, using the same tactics of bureaucratic interference and violent intimidation. In one of the most recent and heated episodes, in June 1994, the government shut down the prominent news weeklies TEMPO, DeTIK, and Editor, after they published critical reports on his military spending (Harsono, 1996). In the aftermath, journalists and protestors were even jailed. Looking back, it is clear that under Suharto's leadership, entire generations were brought up in a media culture where free speech had become more of a risk than a right.

Next to editorial control of what was being reported over the news, the New Order also exercised economic control of domestic media industries. Suharto's regime is widely known as one of the most corrupt in recent history, and for much of his rule, media ownership in Indonesia was dominated by just a few names in his elite political circle. Television in particular became an influential tool for controlling public opinion and nation-building, favored by Suharto for its reach and velocity (Kitley, 2003). From its first transmission in 1962 until 1989, the state-owned service TVRI enjoyed a total monopoly over television broadcasting in Indonesia. Many of these industries were finally diversified in the 1990s, but unfortunately, money has turned out harder to move than even policy. This means that even though Suharto's government collapsed in 1998, many of the same old faces continue to dominate Indonesian news and television industries today (Ida in Sen and Hill, 2011). In fact, mainstream media ownership in the country is concentrated in only 12 large groups, and about half of them are controlled by oligarchs with *“direct affiliations with political parties, and having been appointed positions in the government”* (Tapsell, 2017). Though

this has become a global issue as much as an Indonesian one, it is worth questioning especially in a country with such a short history of democracy, and such a long heritage of media control.

### **ONE NATION, ONE IDENTITY**

Besides the legal and the political, we must also consider the psychological dimension of censorship. Suharto in particular was adept at not just swaying public opinion; but at shaping collective memory – and to some extent – revising history. The most striking example of this is the media blackout of the 1965 anti-communist purge, in which an estimated 500,000 to 1 million Indonesians were systematically and violently murdered by the state (Kwok, 2016). The massacre occurred at the height of the Cold War, triggered by the murder of six officers in a so-called ‘attempted coup’ of President Sukarno’s government. It was this event which allowed General Suharto to declare a state of emergency, put the blame on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and effectively take control of the country (Heryanto, 2018). Backed by the U.S. government – who were happy to see the communist-sympathiser Sukarno ousted – Suharto’s army proceeded to imprison and kill every PKI party member and suspected leftist in the country. This state-sponsored witch-hunt resulted in the elimination of every communist faction in Indonesian politics, and the decimation of the country’s ethnic Chinese minority (Wieringa, 1995). Though today, this episode has been declared one of the bloodiest mass killings in modern history, Suharto’s tight control of the media means it has been all but erased from the nation’s collective memory. Instead, the public were only served the official version of events, which capitalised on sentiments of nationalism and fears of communism (Heryanto, 2018).

In this context, it was cinema which became the most popular and influential medium in Suharto’s propaganda machine. Throughout the following decades, the state sponsored the production of dozens of films on the 1965 tragedy, including the wildly successful *Pengkhianatan G30 September* (Noer, 1984), a 4,5 hour epic which glorified the actions of the military and vilified their opponents. According to media theorist Ariel Heryanto, “*There is no other example of propaganda, on or off the screen, which has had as much of an impact on Indonesian society as Pengkhianatan G30 September.*” (2018, p. 120) For most Indonesians, this film became the primary – perhaps the only – source of information on what happened during the events of 1965. Every television station in the country was required to broadcast the film on each anniversary of the event, and it became mandatory viewing for every middle-school student until at least 1999. At the same time, history textbooks were rewritten; edited by the same pro-Suharto historian who penned the original inspiration for the film (Renaldi, 2018). In this way, media censorship in the time of Suharto was not merely a tool for erasing certain narratives, or even whole segments, of Indonesian society. It also allowed the state to replace these narratives with propaganda, and proscribe any kind of social criticism as subversive and Communist (Wieringa, 1995).

Indeed, post-colonial scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains that “*silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources);*

*the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).*" (1995, p. 26) For a country so vast, and so diverse as Indonesia, these silence-making mechanisms were exceptionally powerful in establishing (and maintaining) a singular identity for the nation and its citizens. While this may have helped create political stability at one time, it has also resulted in some deep-seated social issues. To this day, the events of 1965 remain one of the most sensitive in Indonesian history, and the public discourse around it is marked with both wilful amnesia and misinformation (Renaldi, 2018).

## **CULTURAL CONTROL**

The tendency to forget rather than confront certain parts of our history, adds another dimension to the impact and effectiveness of censorship in Indonesia. Practiced for long enough, repressive policies become quickly assimilated into our culture, which is traditionally hierarchical to begin with (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Following this, it's important to note that when it comes to freedom of expression, state control represents only one facet. Both religion and tradition have always played an important role in the public life of Indonesians, and it's useful to look at how power and censorship manifests itself in our indigenous social and cultural values.

First of all, it's important to note that Indonesia consists of hundreds of distinct native ethnic groups, spread across some 16,000 islands (The Jakarta Post, 2017). The largest group – and the most politically dominant, by far – are the Javanese, who make up some 40% of the entire population (Philpott, 2000). Like so many other South-East Asian cultures, Javanese can be described as a shame society, as opposed to a guilt society (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Popularized by cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict, the distinction lies in the way that morality is constructed and used in society. In guilt societies (which are often Western), internal structures take precedence: like that of individual authority and conscience. In shame societies, external factors are more important: how does your community see you? In Indonesia, this manifests itself in social structures in which pride, politeness, honor and collectivity are central cultural values – shaping everything from practices in conflict-management to politics and art (Vanhoe, 2016). Under the New Order, the concepts of honor-shame were hijacked and mobilized to support relations of hierarchy and deference, and constrain individuality (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Suharto's rhetoric was powerful and simple: if 'being Indonesian' meant a return to traditional values, then to speak out in any kind of insubordination made you *un-Indonesian*.

It's also worth looking at the ways that traditional beliefs and customs affect the expression of gender roles in Indonesia. Censorship, whether formal or informal, is always attached to dynamics of power, and in a patriarchal society, they tend to disproportionately affect women: limiting their public activity, voice and agency (Collins & Bahar, 2000). In a series of letters written at the turn of the twentieth century, R.A. Kartini, considered Indonesia's founding feminist, laments the rigid structures and institutions of Javanese womanhood. As both a member of local

aristocracy and a subject of Dutch colonialism, her freedoms were heavily restricted: “*All our institutions are directly opposed to the progress for which I so long for the sake of our people (...) But we Javanese women must first of all be gentle and submissive; we must be as clay which one can mould into any form that he wishes.*” (Kartini, 1921) During her time, practices like polygamy and child marriage were customary in Indonesia, while girls’ education was practically nonexistent. Kartini herself was placed into seclusion at age 12, prohibited from leaving her family home (and of engaging in any kind of public life) until she was ready to be married (Woodward, 2015). While many of these customs have evolved or disappeared with time, gender roles in Indonesia – and specifically, women’s freedom to control their voice and image in society – continue to be impacted by the whims of politics and religion.

Ultimately, all of these actors combined make for a complex media landscape. Throughout the periods of Dutch Imperialism, Indonesian Independence, and the New Order, censorship has clearly played a fundamental role in supporting political power in the country. But after decades of repression, the mid-90s in Indonesia was a time of mass public discontent (Philpott, 2000). This was the stage on which, in 1998, Suharto was finally forced to resign from office; and the country entered a new era of democracy. At precisely the same time, a digital revolution was brewing in the region (Heryanto, 2018). Knowing this, my next question as a publisher is, how did the arrival of internet culture affect media power in Indonesia? In the next section, we will look at the ways in which new and networked media have amplified the public voice in Indonesian society, and created new modes for political and personal expression.

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