WHEN MEDIA AND POLITICS COLLIDE: THE INVOLVEMENT OF INDONESIAN MEDIA PRACTITIONERS IN POLITICS IN THE WAKE OF DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRAK

Keterlibatan praktisi media dalam politik adalah topik yang kontroversial, khususnya sejak Indonesia menginjak era demokratisasi. Banyak yang beranggapan bahwa pemilik media dan jurnalis seharusnya dilarang untuk memasuki politik, apalagi untuk memegang jabatan di pemerintahan. Masuknya mereka ke dalam politik memperkuat pendapat bahwa politik hanya menguntungkan kaum yang berkuasa. Pada penghujung tahun 2004, ketika Indonesia mengadakan pemilu langsung yang pertama sepanjang sejarah pasca-kolonialnya, timbul sebuah fenomena di mana jurnalis dan pemilik media merambah ke dalam kancah perpolitikan. Hal ini membentuk simbiosis mutualisme yang bermanfaat bagi tokoh-tokoh media dan politik namun acap kali merugikan rakyat. Artikel ini diawali sebuah tinjauan teoritis mengenai demokrasi dan publik ketika berhadapan dengan media dan kekuasaan. Di sini model hubungan media dan politik dalam konteks Barat yang kerap digunakan sebagai standar (teoritis) jurnalisme di seluruh dunia dikontraskan dengan model hubungan jurnalisme dengan politik di Asia dan negara-negara dunia ketiga. Tidak adanya batas pemisah yang tegas antara jurnalisme dan politik yang umumnya didapati di negara-negara Asia didapati pula di Indonesia. Kemudian kasus-kasus praktisi media (jurnalisme) yang memasuki dunia politik di Indonesia pasca Orde Baru dipaparkan. Esei ini berargumen bahwa masuknya praktisi media ke dalam kancah perpolitikan di tengah era demokrasi dan kebebasan media menyebabkan sebuah langkah mundur dalam proses demokrasi dan mengancam kebebasan pers. Apabila praktisi media berkecimpung dalam kekuasaan politik dan media pada waktu yang bersamaan maka independensinya akan terancam. Dengan demikian terancam pulalah pelayanan masyarakat yang seharusnya menjadi fokus seorang pejabat publik.

Kata kunci: *praktisi media, politik, jurnalis*

INTRODUCTION

When referring to the entering of media people into politics, the earliest and arguably most daring depiction is perhaps in the seminal movie, *Citizen Kane*. William Randolph Hearst, the media mogul that director Orson Welles reportedly based his main character on not only aspired to own his own media empire but also had the determination to be the number one person in the United States of America. This age-old story of a politically ambitious media magnate can still be discovered

even in this day in age. Well-known figures such as Thaksin Shinawatra, and Silvio Berlusconni, each epitomizes how a media personality not only crosses over to politics but also manages to use the fourth estate to meddle with one or more of the other three estates. Notwithstanding existing disagreements on the merit that such effort brings to the people, Shinawatra and Berlusconni remain as people who carried success stories of how the media managed to catapult people to political power.

In Indonesia, one can only see the exemplification of such ambition in Surya Paloh who owns Media Indonesia and MetroTV, the only television news channel in the country. A member of one of the biggest political parties, Golkar (*Golongan Karya*), and one of the richest man in the country, he ran for public office and entered the bid to become Golkar's presidential candidate in 2004. However, seeing that he stood little chance against other candidates in his party, he finally retreated. As the Italian and the Thai media have done respectively to Berlusconni and Shinawatra, *MetroTV* and *Media Indonesia* also became the "promotional vehicle" of Paloh, as he himself had repeatedly stated. In fact, he was featured so frequently on MetroTV in the weeks leading to the "primary" elections that the rate of recurrence of his television appearances exceeded the number of times regulated by the Indonesian Election Comission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU)* as well as the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (*Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, KPI*) (e.g. Sriwijaya Post, March 19, 2004; Detik.com March 18, 2004, Waspada Online March 18, 2004). Another media strongperson who demonstrated her (one too early and hasty) ambition was Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana (nicknamed Tutut) during the 2004 election. Daughter of the former dictator Suharto, she had enough financial resources that were more than enough to cover for her comeback in politics. She is also a major shareholder of TPI, one of the national private televisions. Reviews had it that she could have been the "black horse" of the election with her prospective power to influence the public through the media in the attempt to refine and stage her image (e.g. Samego, in Pradityo, 2003). These predictions, however, were not proven. Her Party the PKPB made a thin pass through the electoral threshold by earning only 2 chairs at the House of Representatives.

Do these two instances show us that there is no threat in staging media owners as politicians in Indonesia? Do they prove that Indonesians are able to discern media functions from political functions in a public figure? In a nationwide scale and at that particular moment in time, the answers to those two questions appeared to be affirmative. The nationwide popularity and political support for either Paloh or Hardiyanti Rukmana, were nowhere near the other presidential candidates who made it to the top five[1]. Nonetheless, the smaller, yet significant threats that *may* lead to the demise of the independence of the nation's fourth estate lie in the relatively nationally underexposed cases that happen throughout the country where increasingly, media people are crossing into the realm of politics.

It is certainly accurate to say that Indonesian media moguls have—in a manner of speaking—never been entirely detached from politics. Long-established media

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[1] The top 5 presidential candidates of the 2004 election are: Megawati-the incumbent president, Amin Rais-"father of the Reformation", Wiranto-the Golkar convention winner for presidential candidate, Hamzah Haz-the incumbent vice president, and of course, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono-for want of a briefer description— the sympathetic "victim of Megawati"

conglomerates, a great many of which either emerged or thrived under Suharto's regime, had to operate under the shadow of the regime's control over the free-flow of information in order to survive. Moreover, the media companies could only stay in business under the strict condition that they obtained a government license that sanctions their establishment and subsistence. After the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, however, the theoretical independence of media practitioners, especially in journalism (e.g. reporters, editors, etc.) had been developing as an oft-espoused rhetoric. Media are supposed to be independent from the political establishment. After decades of being under severe constraints against freedom of speech, the Indonesian media experienced a radical shift towards the independence of the media against the powers-that-be. However, Indonesia has also seen the current of media practitioners such as Paloh and Hardiyanti Rukmana who are increasingly involving themselves with politics. This is an irony given that acquiring press freedom means that media practitioners now—more than ever before—has the chance to become a real watchdog of the politicians.

I begin this essay by exploring democracy and the public vis-à-vis media and power from a theoretical perspective by drawing it closer to an Asian/ Third World setting, anchoring it to Indonesia. Then, I will expound on cases of media people crossing into politics after the Reformation movement[2]. Subsequently, I shall argue that the entering of media people into politics in the midst of the country's media and political landscape would lead to a setback in democracy and pose an imminent danger to press freedom. Finally, I will address the issue on the "banning" of media people from entering politics.

DISCUSSION

Media and politics in the "East" and the "West": a theoretical perspective

Kovach and Rosenstiel, in their seminal work Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect argue that there should a clear distinction between how media and politics treat the public: the first uses information to endorse democracy, making people think on their own, while the latter uses information to sway people to their sides. They also assert that journalism's distinct characteristic is that it does not struggle to gain power; instead, it obtains power from the public that trusts in it (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). This is clearly a principle that is inherently at odds with the factor of "power struggle" that is intrinsic in a political position of any kind.

Ideally speaking, media, taking after the model of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962), should reflect plurality of news and viewpoints in society and convey it back to the society (Siebert, et al, 1956, Schramm, 1964). The aim, as such, is to ensure that the public gains necessary information to empower them to take a stand either for or against a particular political power. In order for the public to be adequately involved in a democracy, it needs to be well-fed with the kind of information that is

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[2] I wanted to use the phrase Post-reformation, but there has been uncertanties as to whether or not we are still in the reformation era. Besides, the phrase "reformation era" has picked up too much political load into it, I hate to sound like a jargonite politician

"explanatory, adequately contextualized, politically heterogeneous, heterodox and challenging" (Murdock 1992, p. 19, as cited in Smith, 2000).

Nevertheless, in practice, media are often on the side of politics. For J. Herbert Altschull (1995), the media posses a potential to be independent, but they often work as the agent of economic or political powers—deliberately or otherwise— by reporting what pertains to the interest of those who finance them. Here, media and politics serve a similar end: to influence the public with preferred perspectives. In this manner, they serve the adverse function of curtailing democracy. Although it is possible for media and politics to serve a similar end, Altschull's model still presupposes that politics and the media are two disparate entities. From the Western point of view, the notion of the "marketplace of ideas" has always been prevalent.

In Asian settings, on the other hand, the distinction between politics and media is not always clear cut. Studies have substantiated that the relationship of media and power ought to be understood through a historico-political and cultural perspective (Smith, 2000; Romano, 2003; Hidayat, 2003) which pertains to the fact that concepts of media freedom, ownership and "media ideologies" are predominantly constructed not only by market interests but also by the cultural values that surround them. The significance of this viewpoint in understanding the nexus between politics and the media in Asian countries is ostensible in many countries in Asia, even those with longstanding media traditions.

In Singapore, the press is highly regulated by the state, a practice that derives from the Confucian belief that the state should function as a parent who has the right to control the aspects of life of their citizen as their children, including the media (Juan, 2000; Yin, 2003). In China, moreover, the government owns and, hence, controls the media. It is widely known that, exclusive of several internet websites, news reports that circulate among the populace are under tight government supervision. In Japan, the press even keeps a cozy relationship with the government by employing self-censorship to make sure that they do not convey overly critical views of government officials (Yin, 2003). Another example is the Philippines, whose politico-cultural background in relation to the press and the media in general bear remarkable resemblances to that of Indonesia. Once hailed as the "freest press in Asia, if not the world" (Rosenberg, 1973; Lowenstein, 1976; Lent, 1978; Shaffer, 1991, as cited in Smith, 2000), the freedom of the media was later on intensely curtailed by the Marcos regime from the 1960s until 1986 when the country experienced a democratic revival after the EDSA revolt[3]. Despite the thriving of the media, media ownership still has its share of oligarchy, even with cross media holdings—that supposedly violate the new constitution (Smith, 2000). Furthermore, politics there had had more than a few media people. To name but a few, Teodoro "Teddyboy" Locsin, Jr, a member of a newspaper-mogul clan became Cory Aquino's information minister and presidential speechwriter. Senator Loren Legarda, a television anchor/talk-show host of the ABS-CBN network has been sitting in the legislative for multiple terms. Noli de Castro, a television anchor/broadcast journalist in the same

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[3] EDSA stands for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the longest street in Metro Manila, and in the Philippines. The people-power revolution in 1986 came to be called EDSA I because over a million people marched peacefully along the length of EDSA during the course of the event that overthrew former Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos and his regime.

network became a senator and then elected into public office again as the vice president for the present administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Mehra (Hamelink and Mehra, 1990) states that for Asian countries, consensual and communal values results in the obligation believed to be assumed by the state in advancing the economic, social and cultural well-being of their peoples. This line of reasoning is used by the "Asian values" school of thought in equating press-freedom with harmony between the press and the government. Aligned with this view, Menon states:

It is obvious that indigenous philosophies have a greater bearing on press systems in [South Asia] than any scales of values based on Western communication theories and there is a real need to re-examine Western theories and practices in the light of Asian cultures and traditions. However, the search for an Asian perspective does not imply rejection of the Western perspective. Is should take whatever is useful and put this in the context of that society's social structure, cultural values and religious beliefs (Menon, citen in AMIC, 1994, p. xi-xiii).

Further, Heuvel and Dennis (1993) assert that media in most of East Asia "stand in harmony with confusion philosophy, which stresses consensus and cooperation". This differs from the Western media's "dedication to individual freedom and rights" (p. iii.). The epistemological difference between how the West and the East views the relationship between media and the state makes the issue of media and politics in Asia more complex than the Western model of having the media as a part of general public that assumes a critical position against the government.

Journalism and politics: the Indonesian cases

It is no surprise, therefore, when media and politics in Indonesia often intermingle. Maintaining the Western framework that the media are to be non-partisan, fair, detached, and impartial in their reporting to support and uphold democracy for the public in Indonesia is not an easy task. In post-Suharto Indonesia, the longstanding relation between the media and political power, even in the absence of repressive or authoritarian government, intercepts the concept of media as an independent watchdog that is supposed to be controlled by the market.

The involvement of media people in politics is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. In fact, in Indonesia's history, closeness with politics was often seen as a privilege, either overtly or covertly. The integrationist concept regarding media and politics that have proceeded since the Suharto era inevitably plays a part in how media people view a connection with power (Romano, 2003). Evolving as they are, the news media are still affected by paternalism, integrationism, corruption, and are still evolving from the prevailing political culture. Under Suharto's repressive policies against the freedom of the press, the involvement of media people in politics was in fact a norm, not an exception. The Indonesian journalist association (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, PWI) was under the auspices of the Information Department (Departemen Penerangan[4]). Evidently, journalists, left with little options, backed

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[4] There is no direct translation to the term "*penerangan*". It could mean both "enlightenment" and "information". Under the New Order regime, the now-defunct *Departemen Penerangan* functions, mostly as the government's agent to supervise the media and to control the flow of information in the country. More often than not, it carried the role of censuring the Indonesian media to serve the political purposes of the regime.

Suharto and his party, Golkar. Even shortly after the fall of Suharto, Indonesian media's renowned figures Jacob Oetama of Kompas Group, Dahlan Iskan of Jawa Pos Group, Parni Hadi of Antara and Republika, and Surya Paloh from Media Indonesia Group, were reportedly still members of Golkar—at least on paper (Lho, Jurnalis, 1999)[5]. It is not until recently that the involvement of media figures in politics seen as a problematic issue. It is important to emphasize, though, that there is an imperative difference between being registered party members and being active in political tasks while simultaneously being active in journalism.

Partly due to the nationwide media hype—especially television—that occurs for celebrity candidates from the entertainment world, people often overlook the fact that people from the news media are entering politics as well. Moreover, media scholars, most of whom are stationed in big cities or the capital Jakarta, rarely looks into such phenomenon because it occurs in the grass-root level, among local media people in the provincial or lower level. Ever since the first direct election was held in 2004 and the regional autonomy was set in motion, the regional populaces of Indonesia have enjoyed more political rights than they had had throughout Indonesia's history. The byproduct of this phenomenon is the fact that regional politics, more than ever before, operates more actively than under the previously centralized government. Local media is also certainly more influential among the public and public figures. On the one hand, there is an assumption that the local press is more capable of being objective, independent and neutral compared to the national media that are controlled by big businesses (Lukmantoro, 2005b). This notion becomes more intense as in the post-New-Order era local media have burgeoned and have grown out of a public that enjoys the benefit of a newly founded press freedom. On the other hand, as the media develop and participate more actively in the public sphere, more and more local media people are becoming politicians, using media to spin their images or the candidates they support. As such, the role of local press in shaping political images becomes indispensable not only as impartial transmitter of news but also as potential political vehicles.

As early as 1999, Herry Komar, the former Tempo reporter who established Gamma magazine, a Jakarta-based magazine where Komar became its first editor in chief, was one of the top 10 candidates for the Governor of West Sumatra[6]. Komar managed a very good image of himself in the media. His public-relation efforts are also reportedly carried out by other journalists in the province, where he frequently gave pro-bono media trainings. The West Sumatran media defended, praised, and supported Komar, almost in unison. Along with positive reports for him, many media engages in a practice that helps garner votes for Komar. During this time, Basril Jabar, the owner of Harian Sinanggalang newspaper was also one of the candidates for the seat of the provincial head. Unfortunately he did not enjoy as much wide media support as did Komar. The media saw him as a mere businessman instead of a journalist (Lho Jurnalis, 1999).

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[5] The data I got was from 1999. Unfortunately, I was unable to unearth the data of their membership until today. Only Paloh is known to be an active member, since he is very open about his political activities.

[6] Just to point out a scent of oligarchy here, Alwi Hamu, the owner of a newspaper group in Makassar, also has a 15 percent share of Gamma (Kompas, Feb 15, 1999).

In Makassar city in the province of South Sulawesi, Alwi Hamu, the owner of Fajar , the newspaper with the highest circulation in the province (Harsono, 2004), as well as Ujung Pandang Ekspress and Berita Kota used his newspapers as campaigning tools when he was running for membership in the DPD in South Sulawesi (Haryanto, 2004). Upon his unsuccessful attempt, he joined the campaign team of the current president-vice president pair, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono-Jusuf Kalla. The Jakarta Post (August 20, 2004) reported on how Hamu openly admitted that Yudhoyono-Kalla's team enjoyed a considerable amount of discounts when placing their ads. Aside from favorable reporting, they candidate enjoyed a more than 80 percent discount for their political advertisements in the said newspapers. Moreover, there were several reporters in the provincial areas who wrote articles and columns in favor of Jusuf Kalla, under various pen names (Harsono, 2004).

Furthermore, in the SBY-Kalla circle, many figures in his campaign team are those who are closely related to the media. I came across an unpublished information that one of SBY's unregistered success team member, Muhammad Luthfi, is the head of PT. Mahaka, which owns 50 percent share of the publisher of Republika one of the major national newspaper. Also, the media watchdog, Pantau magazine, reported that PT. Mahaka owns Videotron, a media company that produces television commercials for the candidates.

Budi Santoso, the owner of local dailies Suara Merdeka and Wawasan used the newspapers as his campaign vehicles when he was running for membership in the Provincial Parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Daerah) of Central Java in the 2004 legislative election (Haryanto, 2004). Santoso used his newspapers as his "image-making machine". He was successfully elected into the parliament (Lukmantoro, 2005a). In a nationwide scale, Cyprianus Aoer, the editor of Suara Pembaruan newspaper became a candidate for Megawati's party, PDI-P in the 2004 legislative election. He succeeded into becoming a member of the national House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat) (Harsono, 2004). Panda Nababan, one of Megawati's trusted people was a reporter in the newspaper Sinar Harapan.

Democracy undermined

These cases reinforce the Asian model of the relationship between media and politics. The line between journalism and public relations has in fact blurred in Indonesia. Media people are using the media as a vehicle to serve their political interests. Ironically, the result of a survey towards Indonesian journalists indicated that in their line of work in journalism, they do not think of themselves as political actors but more as mere disseminators of information (Hanitzsch, 2004). However, as the above cases suggest, many Indonesian journalists and media owners are increasingly assuming political positions, while being, at the same time, a part of operating media organizations. The tie between politics and the media in the country is indeed not easy to break. In a subtler form, even journalists themselves have their own "favorite parties" (Hutabarat, 2002, as cited in Balgos, 2002). It proves that in the euphoric state of media freedom, following political freedom, our media is still incapable of taking an impartial political stance.

To quote Hutabarat (2002), Indonesia is "not yet a society that trusts in its social, cultural and political institutions" after being under a dictator that had detained our freedom and our rights for valid, fair information for decades. We had been

manipulated, so to speak, by all the partisan, euphemistic media that served nothing but the prevailing power. The biggest "temptation" for the press is to (again) fall into the arms of politics and be "agents of power" instead of rivals of power to empower the public, since it is—to a large extent—a more comfortable choice.

The muddling up of media people into politics proves that they fail to take account of the fact that "journalism's first loyalty is to its citizens" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). I believe this principle does not apply in the Western frame only. Even in Indonesia, media is virtually the only source of political information that our citizens rely on that has the potential to be fair. They rely on the media to provide information that will help them determine who are going to represent and lead them. The crossing of media people to politics will debilitate the power of the media in its essence as the monitor of power. It betrays the citizen as their audience, and it betrays the essence of journalism as the fourth estate of democracy.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that there are a great many cases of media people using their media and image for political purposes outside the capital Jakarta. Statistics shows that 60 percent of print media circulation is in the capital, while the other twenty percent spreads all over Java and another 20 percent all over the rest of Indonesia (Siregar, 2002). On a general scale, 75% of all media organizations operate in the capital (Hanitzsch, 2003). In this condition, we can only imagine how narrow the media options are in the provinces. In the midst of such narrow option, if the media is clouded by political propaganda, democracy in the state will have to face a very grim picture. In addition, the local media are very dependent towards the dynamics of politics that local media practically depends on political news in their headlines to attract readers.

It is true that in an Indonesian setting, there is an unfair play going on when media people enter politics. Money is not as much an issue as image making, though. Bahtiar and Hatmanto (2004) even call the media a "kingmaker". However, to rely on a banning of media people entering politics would be literally impossible, since political parties whose members are in the executive and legislative bodies are enjoying the "privilege" of having media people with them. It is even so with our current president. Public's need for fairness of information is certainly on the bottom of their agenda.

What must be done, therefore, is to exert pressures from other "impartial" medias to censure media people who are using their advantages to attain or support political positions and to use the media to maintain them. On another note, there are also media people who enter politics because of a "noble cause". Cyprianus Aoer, for example, became a member of the House to struggle to gain government attention for his province, Flores' condition that was constantly neglected during by the previous governments. I cannot simply say that it is ultimately wrong for media people to enter politics, but if they do, I agree with Andreas Harsono in one of his articles, that it has to be a one-way ticket. Once they decide to be a politician, they should be out of the media, and should remain there as long as they are in politics.

It all boils down to a reality that we cannot deny, as Jimmy Carter said in a conversation with Bill Kovach, that power uses information to make people follow the leader, while journalists (i.e. the media) uses information to help people make up their own mind. When a media practitioner breach their original task to endorse people's independence of mind with the information they disseminate, they are not media people anymore, and thus do not deserve to be in the media anymore.

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