

Power hungry media moguls could destroy Indonesia's transition to a pluralist democracy

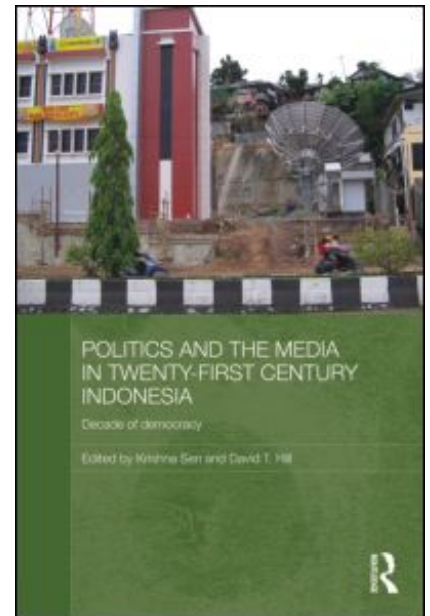
Aug 7 2012

*Every political aspirant and activist knows the media are important. But there is little agreement on how an increasingly diversified media operate in post-authoritarian transitions and how they might promote, or impede, the pathways to a sustainable liberal democracy in the 21st century. This book examines **the role of the media during Indonesia's longest experiment with democratisation**, addressing how the media is being transformed and what the potential impact this has for the development of democracy in Indonesia. Reviewed by **Yuki Fukuoka**.*



Politics and the Media in Twenty-First Century Indonesia.
Krishna Sen and David T. Hill (eds). Routledge. October 2010.

After nearly fifteen years since the fall of Suharto, the second President of Indonesia, the literature on democratisation in Indonesia is still divided over the nature of the country's new democracy. Some scholars argue that Indonesia has made a steady transition to a liberal democracy, though is still crippled by structural problems, money politics and political violence. Others see the presence of such problems not as a growing pain of juvenile liberal democracy, but instead as fundamental to the logic of illiberal democracy. The latter group of scholars also suggest that the oligarchic elites who controlled the old regime have survived regime change and continue to exploit the state for rent-seeking purposes. However, neither camp has paid adequate attention to the role of the media in Indonesia's political transition. This is somewhat puzzling given the increasing importance of the media in contemporary Indonesian politics.



So just how do the media operate in post-Suharto Indonesia? More importantly, how do they promote or impede the pathways to sustainable liberal democracy? These are the questions that media studies experts, led by Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, address in *Politics and the Media in Twenty-First Century Indonesia: Decade of Democracy*. Utilising micro-level empirical studies of

media structures, regulations and practices in post-Suharto Indonesia, the contributors investigate what remains of the old practices and what new practices are emerging in Indonesia's media. This book is relevant not only to Indonesianists who engage in the ongoing debate on the nature of Indonesia's new democracy but also those who are interested in the broader theme of the role of the media in transition politics, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

This book does not embrace the simple relationship between the opening up of the media and the establishment of a liberal democracy. While freedom of information and expression may now constitute part of Indonesia's democratic consensus, it is argued, "not all emergent structures and practices are necessarily democratic or even less odious than the practices of the Suharto era" (p. 5). Indeed, one of the strengths of this book lies in its attentiveness on nuances and specificities. Each contributor conducts a micro-level analysis of different forms of media, highlighting the new modes of speaking and silencing after the abolition of state censorship that accompanied the fall of Suharto.

The book also argues the removal of state censorship had some liberalising impacts. One notable change was the emergence of new forms of media, which aim to give a voice to those who were previously marginalised. For example, community radios have been established enabling local people access and creating a sense of democratic communication.

There has also been a proliferation of Islamic media, but the opening up of the media has at the same time given rise to new kinds of media texts. An increasing number of female film makers have begun to subvert the domination of male gaze in construction of women in Indonesian cinema, though they are still under the residual influences of Suharto's New Order gender discourse. Also, the attempt to enhance the public's media literacy has been made through critical discussion about media that takes place in talk-back radio and the plethora of media-watch type programmes.

As crucial questions remain as to whether these changes have facilitated the emergence of pro-liberal civil society forces that promote a transition to a pluralist democracy, little evidence of this is presented in the book. Indeed, some of the chapters suggest that the liberalization of the media has led to the concentration of media ownership in a small number of oligarchic elites, both in the national and local levels, who use the media as a commodity with which to secure their economic and political interests. While the book is not explicit about this, this observation indicates that the media could operate in ways to reinforce the existing oligarchic power structure that Indonesia inherited from the Suharto era. Equally important is the growing influence of conservative Islamic forces in media regulation, where religion increasingly plays a proscriptive role in determining what can and cannot be shown. The controversy over the [2008 anti-pornography law](#) is a good example of this. These developments certainly raise questions about the state of tolerance and freedom in Indonesia.

The weakness of the book is perhaps the lack of intellectual coherence, with each chapter analysing the role of the media in post-Suharto Indonesia from different analytical perspectives. While some chapters make some attempts to locate the media in the context of broader power relations with reference to, say, oligarchic power structure or the ascendance of political Islam, it is unfortunate that others engage little with the question of power. This is particularly so with the chapters that portray positive changes in the Indonesian media. For example, the democratising impact of the media, such as community radios or 'meta-journalism', is not demonstrated with solid evidence in terms of their impact on how politics operates. The impact of the media on the democratisation process can only be meaningfully analysed when it is discussed in the broader political context. In this respect, a greater engagement with the literature on Indonesian politics would have resulted in a deeper understanding of the subject.

It is also a shame that social media, which has become an important tool for mobilisation in Indonesia as well, is not covered in this book.

Nonetheless, this book presents a nuanced and an illuminating analysis of the working of various Indonesian media. It has certainly made an important contribution to our understanding of the media in post-Suharto Indonesia, providing us with a body of empirical knowledge about what has or has not changed. If this book, written mostly by experts of media studies, has engaged with the question of power insufficiently, it is now the turn of the political scientists to build on what is achieved by this book in search of a better understanding of the media and its impact on political transition in the country.

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