

***Scandal & Democracy: Media Politics in Indonesia.* By Mary E. McCoy. Ithaca, New York: Cornell, 2019. Softcover: 208pp.**

In the digital age, when the press is dealing with unprecedented challenges posed by technological advancements and the rise of social media, Mary McCoy's *Scandal & Democracy: Media Politics in Indonesia* serves as a powerful reminder of why a democracy needs a strong press as a watchdog and ultimately a gatekeeper.

McCoy sets out to critically examine the role of the press in modern Indonesia, spanning from the authoritarian periods under the leadership of the country's founding president, Sukarno, and his successor, Soeharto, until the period of democratic consolidation, between 2004 and 2014. Framing her argument within political theorist Adam Przeworski's framework of the institutionalization of uncertainty, the book analyses the performance and the evolution of the media as an agent whose major tasks are to maintain the uncertainties surrounding competitive political contestation in a democratic setting and, by doing so, to avert a democratic reversal.

As the title of the book suggests, the transitional period in Indonesia was marred by scandals which could have been uncovered by the newly freed press. The media, as McCoy demonstrates, had contributed to the political and economic crises faced by the country in the late 1990s. McCoy contrasts the rather passive and submissive role of the press under the Soeharto regime with the more active and arguably critical role it played after the regime collapsed, during which the media helped "normalize" the uncertainties deemed necessary to ensure transparency and political competition (p. 12).

Soeharto emasculated the press—and to a large extent the whole of society—through "formal administration and ideological justification" which were used to legitimize control over the media (p. 24). The book further highlights the controversial Article 13 of the revised Basic Press Law (passed in 1982), which sought to ensure media compliance by requiring all publications to obtain a permit from the government and to uphold the nation's unity and political stability (which could only be achieved through compliance).

The implementation of media controls was so "successful" that McCoy attributes the regime's failure to survive the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis to the absence of critical media coverage of rampant corruption and abuse of power during the Soeharto era (pp. 30–31). Through McCoy's comprehensive observation and reflection over this critical period, the book captures well the media's struggle to define

itself as a watchdog while circumventing media controls to ensure a sustainable business model.

The litmus test arose when the successor to the Soeharto regime, the government of President B.J. Habibie, attempted to portray itself as a pro-democratic reformist force which promised to repeal repressive laws, including those restricting the media. McCoy's extensive research sheds light on how the press correspondingly attempted to test the boundaries by publishing critical reports unseen during Soeharto's New Order era. Such reports, McCoy argues, were crucial "to construct a legal framework defining speech that deserves legal protection from state agencies, enabling news outlet to predict, with some degree of certainty, the consequences of airing provocative content" (p. 73).

This form of reporting proved to be constructive, though not always successful. The media gradually bolstered its scrutiny over government and military officials' wrongdoing or incompetence and even managed to boost readership and media share, creating "a market incentive" for other media outlets to follow suit. Government and military officials sometimes held back, but at other times failed to curb physical confrontations between security personnel and student protestors or journalists covering key events such as rallies which called for the armed forces to withdraw from politics (p. 75).

Indonesia's newly found press freedom, however, did not translate into strong and rigorous political reporting. One good example was the news magazine *Panji Masyarakat's* reporting which was based on a wiretapped conversation believed to be between Habibie and then Attorney General Andi Muhammad Ghalib regarding the investigation into the Soeharto family's fortune. The report did not qualify as a standard investigative report but managed to "add a new element of unpredictability" surrounding the decisive presidential election which put Habibie as the frontrunner (p. 84).

Many might rightfully wonder whether the new media practices at that point signify an era of more credible and reliable journalism. According to McCoy, "at each stage, the media's performance was decidedly mixed—at times aggressively insistent on promoting fairness and transparency while at others self-consciously compromised in the name of stability" (p. 86). The case in point occurred around the 1999 elections, the first free and fair election in four decades, during which the media retreated (Chapter Five). This chapter attentively delves into dilemmatic circumstances which often face members of the press in the field and newsroom. For example, the majority of media outlets, excluding media organizations with political affiliations,

held back from reporting critical issues such as blatant vote-rigging, fearing that doing so would subsequently delegitimize the election results and lead to unwanted chaos.

In the final chapter, McCoy makes the case for the media to play a central role in efforts to ward off collusive and oligarchic politics. Drawing upon newer examples from later years and comparing them to cases in different democracies around the world, McCoy reiterates how political disruption created by the media's reporting over scandals can maintain uncertainties needed to avoid democratic reversal while simultaneously engaging society in the process. This is an optimistic conclusion which rather overestimates the press' ability to maintain independence and journalistic ideals in an era when most newsrooms are bound to be influenced—at least to a certain degree—by partisan media ownership, business competition and digital disruption, to name but a few.

Nonetheless, McCoy's extensive research and thorough observation of the process of news gathering, media reporting, editorials and commentaries during an important political period in Indonesia is a significant contribution to the never-ending debate and discussion among scholars and media practitioners over the role of the Indonesian press in the past, present and future.

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