

***The Internet in Indonesia's New Democracy.* By David T. Hill and Khrisna Sen. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Hardcover: 204pp.**

One day in February 1998, during the *reformasi* movement which demanded President Soeharto to step down, there was a sudden message e-mailed to me. The message was short, “*Hanya ada satu kata: Lawan!*” (“There is only one word: Oppose!”). The sender was Wiji Thukul, an activist, idealistic poet, and head of the PRD (Democratic People’s Party) cultural department. That short poetic line became very popular in May 1998. It had strengthened the spirit of students and activists to oppose the authoritarian Soeharto government.

This little event which took place eight years ago has returned to my memory, triggered by David T. Hill and Khrisna Sen’s new book about the role of the Internet in the political dynamics of Indonesia. It seems that this book goes into greater depth than their earlier book published six years ago in 2000 entitled *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. It had a brief mention of the Internet which, in the latest book, becomes the focus of their study. This is not to say that a focused discussion is too micro or boring but on the contrary is indeed interesting.

This book has eight chapters, which can be divided into three sections, namely: (a) chapters on the role of the Internet in Indonesia’s democratization process (Chapters 1 to 5); (b) chapters on the role of the Internet in national freedom (in the case of East Timor); and (c) the role of the Internet in communal conflict (the case of Maluku). The final chapter is basically both authors’ re-emphasis on the capability of the Internet in delivering social, economic, political, and cultural advantages to its users. One emphasis is that in Indonesia’s contemporary democratic literature, it is not just a matter of balance of forces between state and society or the issue of representation in government and the division of party politics that is important to the discourse but also the role of the Internet in the republic’s democratic transition.

For readers who are not familiar with the studies on media and politics, the first part of this book will make them aware of the differences between other media (print media, radio and television) which can be controlled by the government and the Internet which cannot be easily controlled. The role duplication of each Internet user, as simultaneous user and producer of messages, in effect renders all media control agencies to be non-existent (p. 13) as they are incapable of censoring the messages circulating in the virtual world.

In the context of the *reformasi* era, the inability of control agencies to censor Internet made them answerable for the spread of democratizing movements to challenge the authoritarian Soeharto regime. Internet (in the form of e-mail news groups, websites, and e-mail) already became the potent weapons because of real-time characteristics resulting in opposition forces (activists and students) being able to exchange information and hasten consolidation. It is not surprising if the conclusion was reached — whether by anti-Soeharto forces or by pro-New Order supporters — that the Internet played a central role in the downfall of the Soeharto dictatorship (p. 53).

After Soeharto's fall and Indonesia entered the *reformasi* era, the political role of the Internet changed: it is no longer the weapon of activists to smash the network of authoritarian forces but serves as a catalyst for the consolidation of the democratic process in the republic. This function becomes increasingly significant in view of the fact that a large number of ordinary Indonesians can access the Internet thus causing it to expand exponentially. Internet kiosks are set up and from year to year have increased in numbers (p. 57), while the users themselves no longer reflect the monopoly of the highly educated (p. 71).

In such a situation, the Internet slowly but surely enters a widened public space. It enters the new democratic realm in Indonesia. All the political activities, like campaigning and general elections, cannot be separated from the Internet presence. Even the new campaign approaches went online, conducted by almost all political parties. But among the parties which benefited from the Internet during the 1999 campaign, the PRD was the most active (p. 81). This proved that party activists here were also active in the 1998 *reformasi* movement: they were already using the Internet to support their activities.

Other public spaces which the Internet penetrated include the Parliament and government office, whether central or regional. Alongside this spirit of *reformasi*, the Internet became the means to engage the public and advertise the potency of their realm. But because the Internet is a "new product" for them, they are unable to benefit from the Internet function in an optimal way as they are lacking in computer literacy. Among many of the elected parliamentarians, for example, only a few have email addresses that are accessible only by their secretaries.

After discussing the role of Internet in toppling the New Order and its usefulness in the *reformasi* era, the second part of this book discusses the case of East Timor. After the Indonesian military's formal occupation of East Timor on 7 December 1975, they crippled

the East Timorese communication technology like the Marconi Centre, which was the main communication hub in Dili. Consequently, pro-independence forces faced difficulties in communicating with the outside world.

In January 1989, the Soeharto regime began to open up East Timor. For the first time, East Timor gained international attention when banners were unfurled in the open air to welcome Pope John Paul II's visit to Dili in October 1989. After that, slowly but surely, the flow of information began to channel out of East Timor. Benefiting from the Irish Internet Services Provider, East Timorese reached out for independence in cyberspace. In 1997 the Internet usage intensity in East Timorese activist circles was noticeably high. The Internet became the new weapon for the pro-independence activists to oppose the Indonesian government.

By the late-nineties, the Indonesian government had apparently lost the war in cyberspace. The pro-independence campaign to highlight the negative actions of the Soeharto regime spread throughout the world. Their cyberspace campaign had virtually obliged Jakarta to conduct a referendum in East Timor. Finally, East Timor became independent in cyberspace and also in reality.

In contrast to East Timor — where the Internet played an important role in supporting the birth of the new nation — the third part of this book discusses the negative aspect of the Internet. It took place in Ambon, Moluccas. Here, Internet deepened the segregation of the Ambon community. The cleavage between Christians and Muslims has widened, and the conflict between the two groups, which took place since January 1999, has not really been resolved.

Using the most popular site, Ambon Berdarah On-Line (Bloody Ambon Online), a site dedicated to “News and Pictures about Ambon/Maluku Tragedy”, Christians deepened their anti-Muslim sentiments. On the contrary, Muslims, coordinated by Laskar Jihad of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah, opened Suara Ambon On-Line. Here, they posted a photo gallery of ruined mosques, Muslim refugees, and slain Muslims swathed in white bandanas. In short, in the case of Ambon, the Internet did not become a peaceful bridge among the two groups but a deadly weapon.

The Ambon scenario proved that the Internet does not always act as catalyst to shape a better future world, but can produce counter-productive outcomes. It can strengthen political identity and perpetuate conflict. Therefore, this study will be even more interesting if the negative effect of Internet usage is given more proportional treatment in the discussion. Nevertheless, Hill and Sen have done

a commendable job in highlighting the political role of the Internet. Their book is not only interesting, but is also recommended reading for those interested in acquiring a deeper understanding of the inner dynamics of Indonesia's democratic transition.

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