

# Bringing Indonesian media history to life

- Steele, Janet. 2005. *Wars Within: The story of Tempo, an independent magazine in Soeharto's Indonesia*. Jakarta and Singapore: Equinox Publishing and ISEAS. xxxiv + 328 pp, appendices, index, ISBN 979-3780-08-8
- Tesoro, José Manuel. 2004. *The invisible palace: the true story of a journalist's murder in Java*. Jakarta: Equinox Publishing. 326 pp, maps, sources, ISBN 979-97964-7-4

David T. Hill

The appearance within the past year of these English-language books about the Indonesian press says a lot about both the vibrant state of the publishing industry in Indonesia and the burgeoning international interest in – and increasing quality of research about – that country's media. From the same innovative English-language publisher in Jakarta, the books focus on different, if overlapping, aspects of the Indonesian press. Importantly, each offers a new and exciting approach to the writing of media history, setting them apart from previous studies.

Steele, a specialist in Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University, came to Indonesia in 1997-8 as a Fulbright professor. While teaching about American mass media at the University of Indonesia during the final assault against the New Order, she was drawn inexorably to that community of activists involved in the Indonesian media's struggle against government constraints, an agglomeration of media workers that gravitated around the memory of Indonesia's most prominent newsweekly, *Tempo*. When *Tempo* was banned by the Suharto regime in June 1994 (together with two other weeklies, *DeTik* and *Editor*) it spawned waves of protest around the country, and came to symbolise the middle-class' broken hopes for political openness. Ex-*Tempo* staffers mobilised above and below ground against the New Order, and generated a substantial part of the agitation that was to bring the regime down in May 1998.

Steele's engagement with the spirited staff of *Tempo* through this period led her to delve more deeply into what made them tick. She pushed back into the history of the magazine's establishment, ranged over its various crises and bans, through to its resurrection after the eventual fall of Suharto. Returning regularly to Indonesia, spending extended periods living, researching and teaching in the capital, Steele acquired a valuable insight into the ethos and camaraderie of these media workers and the principles around which they coalesced. *Wars Within* opens up this circle of journalists, their motivations, their conflicts, and their commitments.

For Steele, as for a generation of Indonesians, *Tempo* had come to symbolise the best of Indonesian journalism; it was passionate, probing, innovative, articulate, upfront, and prepared to take the consequences. Yet *Tempo* was also, in some senses, politically compromised; a product of the early New Order's alliance with the anti-Sukarnoist student movement in eliminating the Left, the magazine enjoyed the backing of figures such as Golkar's treasurer Eric Samola, who became *Tempo*'s publisher. Steele writes with great sympathy of the complexities of operating a news publication in an authoritarian political environment, in which the cultivation of close relations with power-brokers was part of a necessary balance between idealism and pragmatism.

*Wars Within* is more than an academic account of the rise, fall, and rise of one Indonesian newsmagazine. Based on thorough research, it is engagingly readable, with characters – both well-known and those behind the scenes – emerging from the pages with the texture of well-crafted fiction. Steele eschews the conventional unfolding of arms-length history to tell the reader of her own interactions with, and attempts to understand, the community and events she unravels for us. Yet the text never lapses into name-dropping. Her insights provide an entrée into the *Tempo* community, and, through it, a broader understanding of the cultural politics of the New Order.

## State terrorism

If one can read *Wars Within* for all the pleasure of a tale well-told, *The Invisible Palace* takes us a step further to a re-telling of history as 'faction'. Steele's account of *Tempo* is one of uplifting spirit and determination in the face of a repressive state; Tesoro's subject matter is the gruesome underbelly of state terrorism. He lays bare the circumstances surrounding the murder of Indonesian journalist Fuad Muhammad Syafruddin in August 1996, and the cover-up of the state's involvement.

Syafruddin, known commonly as Udin, was a journalist with the local Jogjakarta daily paper *Bernas*. He had stirred the ire of local political figures including the regent (*bupati*) Colonel Sri Roso Sudarmo with his forthright exposure of corruption and malfeasance. After the more routine forms of verbal intimidation failed to silence him, this unassuming small-town reporter was beaten to death one evening at the door of his modest home. Government investigations ignored evidence pointing to the involvement of political figures and instead framed a scapegoat in an attempt to deflect public criticism and close the case. Despite tireless efforts by journalist colleagues and press organisations to focus evidence upon more credible culprits and to press for their conviction, no one has been found guilty of the murder, nor have any officials been jailed for the miscarriage of justice which accompanied the state cover-up.

Tesoro's goal was to examine 'how *injustice* functions: What happens when, in the wake of a crime, the authorities seek not to punish the perpetrator but to hide him and not to discover the truth but to bury it' (p.25). Despite the separation of the Indonesian Police Service from the Armed Forces after the fall of Suharto, Tesoro's account of the botched police investigation, including the failure to protect evidence, may be of added interest given heightened curiosity about the conduct of recent high profile arrests in Indonesia.

A Philippines-born journalist and Yale-graduate, Tesoro was based in Indonesia for *Asiaweek* from 1997 to 2000, when he resigned to write *The Invisible Palace*. In it, he has attempted to unravel hundreds of pages of court transcripts, legal mem-

oranda, witness testimony, police reports, and personal interviews, to present these to the reader as creative non-fiction – an account of the events prior to and after the murder, more in the genre of novel than of history or reportage. He begins, 'This is a work of non-fiction. But, like all true stories, not everything found within is fact.' While this treatment may seem a touch strained in places – such as when he recounts mystic encounters with Javanese *dukun* (seers) – the technique is vividly successful as a general strategy to bring the complexities of the case to life. *The Invisible Palace* opens up the New Order's media and system of 'justice' to informed scrutiny, and the tale is a powerful one.

There is much common ground in these two books: the split between the official journalists' association PWI and the activist Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI); the forms of intimidation used against Indonesian journalists, and their strategies for resisting; the craven behaviour of authorities bowing to the dictates of the regime. Though the analytical approach, style and focus of the books vary greatly, together they flesh out, in the lives (and deaths) of the journalists they feature, the fate of the profession in an authoritarian state. In making such history so readable, the authors – and their publisher – are to be congratulated. ◀

David T. Hill is Professor of Southeast Asian Studies and Fellow of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, Western Australia. He was a Visiting Fellow at IIAS in November 2004, researching local media in post-Suharto Indonesia. [dthill@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:dthill@murdoch.edu.au)