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Press Freedom, Free Expression Still Under Threat in Indonesia

An international delegation visiting Indonesia last week raised concerns about the current state of media freedom in the country, calling on the Widodo administration to take a new approach towards freedom of expression. Criminalisation of online speech, a climate of impunity for attacks against journalists, the concentration of media ownership among five moguls and the politicisation of media outlets are all current areas of concern.

“This is a window of opportunity for the new Widodo administration to consolidate the position of Indonesia as a regional leader on freedom of expression. The time for action is now”, the mission said. “Important gains have been made in terms of media freedom but there are major issues that will continue to hold the country back if not given due priority”.

The mission met with journalists and freedom of expression groups in Jakarta and Bali as well as Indonesia’s Minister of Communications and Technology, Rudiantara. While the Minister expressed a commitment to continue the public dialogue on broadcast regulatory reform, he indicated that state-sponsored filtering of Indonesia’s internet would continue.

Journalists from across the country reported continued acts of intimidation, threats and killings by both state and non-state actors, such as police, religious hardliners, and organised violent groups, described as “thugs”, which are affiliated with political and business interests. This puts enormous pressure on journalists to self-censor.

The successful prosecution in the 2009 murder of Anak Agung Prabangsa, while welcome, is unfortunately an exception to the ongoing culture of impunity in the country. Many cases remain unsolved, notably the 1996 murder of Fuad Muhammad Syafruddin, known as “Udin”.

“The failure to hold Udin’s murderers to account, nearly twenty years on, continues to cast a pall over Indonesia’s justice system”, the mission said. “We urge President Widodo to renew efforts to find the killers”.

Authorities also deliberately obstruct international journalists’ access to sensitive regions through an opaque and overly bureaucratic process of applying for visas. In the rare instances where access is granted, journalists are accompanied by government and security officials.

Several elements in Indonesia’s regulatory framework also fall foul of international human rights standards, such as the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law and oversight of the broadcasting sector. Political domination of media outlets, which undermines editorial independence, is also a cause for concern.

The mission’s observations and recommendations are available at: <http://www.law-democracy.org/live/press-freedom-free-expression-still-under-threat-in-indonesia/>.

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