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Economic crisis that hit Asia in 1997 brought about the collapse of the Indonesian economy. The prolonged crisis triggered the Indonesian people to demand for political reform, which later forced President Soeharto to step down in 1998. Since then the word 'Reformasi' (or reform) has become very popular in this country.

The role of the media has been very significant to keep the process of reform rolling until now. A crucial factor that has enabled the media to play its role is the Law No. 40 on the Press, which was issued in 1999.

Thanks to the press law, which guarantees freedom of the press, the media have no hesitation to expose used-to-be 'sensitive' cases such as corruption and violence involving military officers. Those media exposures have improved the awareness of the public and inspired them to pursue further reforms including political, financial, and administrative reforms.

Indonesia has since taken a number of steps, such as four constitutional amendments and direct legislative and presidential elections to build thriving democracy. To the astonishment of the international public, Indonesians managed to conduct an open and democratic direct electoral process in 2004 that resulted in the election of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as the sixth president of the Republic.

Another significant step is the establishment of the Constitutional Court and Judicial Commission, which are pivotal in the structural development of Indonesia's legal institutions. However, there are criticisms saying that law enforcers and the judiciary are frequently hampered in their professional independence, among other things due to political interferences.

A recent survey done by TNS-Indonesia of the Jakarta Post readers showed that although seven years have passed since Indonesia has undergone reform movement, the majority of survey respondents said they had seen not much improvement in law enforcement, human rights protection and public service.

In the water sector, a number of laws and regulations have been issued to improve the management and development of water resources on a sustainable basis.

In February 2004, the Parliament, despite strong opposition from NGOs, approved the Water Resources Law No.7/2004, which provides for the decentralization of control over Indonesia's water resources to regional entities and water user associations, and opens a door for the private sector participation.

A number of Indonesian NGOs demonstrating their opposition to the law, filed a judicial review to the Indonesian Constitutional Court. They argued that some articles of the Law were unconstitutional and would turn water into a profit-oriented business and possibly threaten people's access to safe and affordable water.

However, on July 19, 2005, the Indonesia Constitutional Court upheld the constitutionality of the Water Resources Law No.7/2004. Out of nine judges, two issued dissenting opinions based on fears that the legislation could cause the possible commercialization of the water sector. The Court ordered the government to issue ancillary regulations for the legislation and must ensure affordable access for the public to water resources. In March 2005, Indonesia issued a government regulation PP No.16/2005 on the Development of Drinking Water Supply System to follow up the law no. 7/2004. However, there were not much socialization and the involvement of the community in drafting the new regulation, as it was rarely reported in the media.

Perhaps there should have been more socialization and active participation of the community in the drafting process of the law and regulation. The general public has the right to be involved in issues that concern them most.

An active and involved community is crucial because it allows for a broader public support. Therefore, the success of a water management program depends among other things on the people's active involvement. Public participation and open processes could ensure decisions are based on realities and could help obtain public trust on the legitimacy of decision-making processes.

“When legitimacy diminishes, so does the ability of legal and political authorities to influence public behavior and to function effectively,” said Tom Tyler, psychology professor at the New York University on “Why People Obey the Law (1990)”.

There are many ways to involve the public, such as through the media, the educational sector, Internet, youth involvement, advocacy, large public events, meetings, and discussions. The media can help bring policies to the people and convey inputs from the public to the decision makers.

For most media, however, water is not a ‘sexy’ topic, unlike political and economic issues, which often become top of the news agenda. As long as I remember, water-related news became headlines in the past few years only when big floods hit Jakarta in 2002 and when Aceh and Nias were hit by the tragic tsunami in 2004.

According to data from WHO/UNICEF, 65 percent of Asia's population are not served by water supply and 80 percent are deprived of sanitation. Up to 3,000 children under five years die every day in the East Asia and Pacific region due to water-borne diseases. Those saddening facts are rarely printed on the front page of newspapers.

The media should focus on the poor, who have no access to potable water, on tariffs, on government's policies and private sector involvement in water management. To be able to present these issues accurately and clearly to the public, journalists must first be well informed on water problems.

Given the fact that water issue is not yet considered a priority or ‘saleable’ item, so it is quite normal that not all media owners would likely be willing to invest in educating their journalists about water-related issues.

Therefore, any party – government, NGOs or companies - would be very much appreciated if they care for journalists training in order to promote wider media coverage and better quality of writing on the subject .

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), for example, has conducted one regional and nine national media workshops for journalists, including the one that was held in Indonesia in December 2004.

Principles for effective water governance include openness and transparency, inclusion and communication, coherence and integration, equity and ethic. Pro-poor policy needs a strong political will to achieve a just solution in water management.

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ANTARA News Agency of Indonesia
August 29, 2005