

## Anti-corruption -- cheque book journalism

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When I did some work in Jakarta with LIPI a few years back, meetings they arranged were "catered" with food-boxes and drinks. Apparently press conferences are like this except their is the additional gift of cash. The following article is from the Sydney Morning Herald

It's a given that some people expect presents  
Mark Forbes Herald Correspondent in Denpasar  
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PRESS conferences in Indonesia tend to be catered affairs. Journalists usually receive a take-away box of food, and underneath is often slipped a brown envelope.

Inside the envelope will be a wad of banknotes, in appreciation of their attendance and expectation of a positive story.

They call it "envelope journalism", a custom not only practised by flash lawyers and dodgy developers: big corporations, government agencies and even charities regularly distribute cash to the local media. On a couple of occasions gifts have been given to foreign journalists but they have handed them back.

This week two government ministries admitted they continued to hand out envelopes of cash to journalists who attended press events, despite President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's campaign to eradicate corruption.

Insiders say the pay-offs have grown more sophisticated.

Press conference envelopes normally contain between \$10 and \$100, but many journalists have established bank accounts into which corporations can directly wire much larger amounts.

Tomorrow is expected to mark Idul Fitri, the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, a traditional time of gift giving when journalists expect and even demand contributions from the individuals and authorities they cover.

The editor-in-chief of The Jakarta Post, Endy Bayuni, admits the practice presents a serious ethical quandary.

"They don't say it, but there's an understanding they expect you to write positively," he said. "Normally people turn a blind eye to a small payment, but sometimes it's much more and can be an attempt to bribe a journalist.

"Around Muslim holidays it gets even crazier, because some government authorities and companies feel they have to give gifts to journalists."

This week, many local journalists were demanding an annual handout to celebrate the end of Ramadan, but some take the process a step further, Bayuni said. "They ask for money, threatening businesses with negative publicity. It's like extortion; it happens quite a lot."

Indonesian journalists' salaries are meagre, often exceeded by envelope income.

"Some organisations don't pay any salary," Bayuni said. "They just give the journalists a press card and let them raise money from news sources."

The issue received some coverage in the local press this week, but only because one provincial administration in the town of Semarang complained it was receiving too many requests from individuals posing as journalists.

Nearly 500 people had visited government offices demanding cash to celebrate the end of Ramadan.

The head of the mass media section at the provincial public relations and information agency, Agus Utomo, said all the "journalists" were required to produce identity cards. He said he did not know how much money they were given. A second official said it was about \$10 each.

A senior national government official confirmed he regularly made payments to journalists at press conferences. If they requested an Idul Fitri bonus they would also receive it, he said.

One journalist who covers the military happily admitted receiving payments from officials, up to and including the head of the Defence Ministry.

"Of course I have," he said. "I cover security affairs, so I often cover army issues. Usually the army provides envelopes. These people will think we're arrogant if we refused taking it. I always take the money and share it with the soldiers. That's the way."

Bayuni said several mainstream media outlets, including The Jakarta Post, had adopted strict rules against journalists taking envelopes. He said he had had to sack one reporter for demanding money from news sources.

"If the messengers themselves are corrupt, how do you trust the message?" he asked. "We need to address this problem seriously so we can be part of the campaign against corruption, but at the moment we are part of the problem."

With Idul Fitri looming, Dr Yudhoyono's administration banned gift-giving to senior officials and judges, but retreated in the face of complaints from officials and retailers. Instead, the value of the gifts should be limited, the Government announced.

The State Minister for Administrative Reform, Taufik Effendi, this week said small gifts such as batik shirts were OK, but "it is prohibited to give car keys, for instance". Previously judges and others have received keys as Idul Fitri gifts, keys that happened to fit the new Jaguar parked outside.