

Civil Voices and Military Echoes: Media Responses to the Army's Political Intervention In 1952

Arifin Suryo Nugroho^{1,2}

¹Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Purwokerto, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: arifinsuryonugroho@ump.ac.id

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Abstract

This article examines the responses of the mass media to the Indonesian Army's political intervention during the 17 October 1952 Incident, employing a historical research method that includes the stages of heuristics, source verification, interpretation, and historiography. The incident not only shook civil–military relations but also ignited fierce debates among the Indonesian press in the early 1950s. The mass media, serving as the main instrument of public opinion formation, were divided into two major camps: the Merdeka newspaper on one side, and Indonesia Raya and Pedoman on the other. Under the leadership of B.M. Diah, Merdeka firmly condemned the Army's actions, viewing them as a coup attempt against the constitutional government and warning of the dangers of military authoritarianism to democracy. Conversely, Indonesia Raya and Pedoman perceived the military intervention as a reaction to an unstable parliamentary system plagued by political intrigues. Through an analysis of editorials, opinion pieces, and the personal connections between press figures and the military, this study reveals that the divergent stances of the media reflected ideological tensions between civil supremacy and military political legitimacy—serving as an early mirror of civil–military dynamics in Indonesia's post-independence political history.

Keywords: 17 October 1952 incident; army political intervention; media response



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1. Introduction

The 17 October 1952 Incident not only reflected the emergence of factionalism (McVey, 1971: 143–152; Feith, 1962: 246–273) and a shift in the military's role (Cribb, 2001; Turner, 2018), but also triggered a strong wave of reaction among the mass media. The press, which at that time played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, quickly split into two opposing blocs: the *Merdeka* camp and the *Indonesia Raya–Pedoman* camp (Hill, 2011: 52; Said, 1988: 94–95). This division reflected the broader tension within Indonesian society between supporters of civil supremacy and advocates of military demonstration.

The newspapers published in Jakarta during this period were among the most influential in early 1950s Indonesia. They had significant print circulations and played a major role in molding public opinion. *Merdeka* had an estimated circulation of around 10,000 copies during the 1950s. Meanwhile, *Indonesia Raya* reported a circulation of 5,000 copies in 1950, which declined to 3,500 in October 1951, rose again to 10,000 in 1954, and exceeded 20,000 by 1955. At the same time, *Pedoman* recorded an impressive circulation of 48,000 copies (Said, 1988: 94-95).

Studies on post-independence and transitional societies elsewhere have shown that the mass media often plays a decisive role in mediating military intervention and political change. In postwar Europe, Latin America, and parts of Asia, newspapers and journals frequently acted as vehicles through which civilian elites articulated resistance to military authoritarianism or, conversely, legitimized military rule (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In countries such as Argentina, Spain, and South Korea, media responses to military interventions became central to the formation of democratic discourse and the reassertion of civilian supremacy during periods of political transition (Lawson, 2002; Voltmer, 2013). These studies underline that media reactions are not merely reflective, but constitutive of political outcomes in moments of civil–military tension. *Merdeka* newspaper began publication on 1 October 1945 after B.M. Diah and his colleagues failed to take over *Asia Raya* (Said et al., 2021: 6; Serikat Penerbit, 1971: 187). This capital-based daily, published seven times a week under the motto “*Berfikir Merdeka, Bersuara Merdeka, Hak Manusia Merdeka*” (“Think Freely, Speak Freely, Human Rights for the Free”), took a firm stance against the military demonstration on 17 October 1952, highlighting the dangers of military intervention in politics that could lead to a coup.

Under the leadership of B.M. Diah, *Merdeka* stood as one of Indonesia's most prominent newspapers of the time. As the *Pemimpin Umum* (Chief Editor and Publisher), Diah oversaw both administrative and editorial operations. Born in Banda Aceh on April 7, 1917, Diah was educated at HIS Kotaradja (1921), Taman Siswa Medan (1934), AMS for one year, and later at the National Handels College Douwes Dekker in Bandung in 1937. After completing his studies, Diah entered the world of journalism. A vocal and critical journalist, he used his newspaper as a platform to criticize military actions and to support Sukarno's political stance.

2. Method

This research applies the historical method, encompassing four main stages: heuristics, source criticism (verification), interpretation, and historiography or presentation (Notosusanto, 1971: 35; Kuntowijoyo, 1995). It offers a revised perspective by analyzing the mass media not merely as a recorder of the 17 October 1952 Incident, but as an active political actor shaping public discourse on civil–military relations in early post-independence Indonesia. The research focuses on *Merdeka*, *Indonesia Raya*, and *Pedoman* as the principal press camps of the period.

During the heuristic phase, the researcher makes optimal use of relevant documentary sources, including autobiographies, newspapers, and official government records (Kartodirdjo, 1982: 101–112). Primary sources include editorials, news reports, opinion columns, memoirs, and official documents (Kartodirdjo, 1982). Source criticism is applied to assess bias and reliability, particularly in newspapers with strong political stances, such as *Merdeka*'s opposition to military authoritarianism, through cross-reading and corroboration with non-press sources. Interpretation emphasizes patterns of media polarization and narrative construction. The verified data are then organized into historical facts and ultimately presented as the written outcome of the historical study. Methodologically, it underscores the importance of treating the press as an active political institution in studies of civil–military relations. Substantively, the findings invite further comparative research on media–military interactions in other postcolonial and transitional societies. For contemporary policy and media studies, this research highlights the enduring significance of press independence and editorial responsibility in periods of political crisis and democratic vulnerability.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Ideological Position and the Narrative of *Merdeka*

BM Diah's closeness to several officers who opposed Colonel A.H. Nasution—such as Colonel Bambang Supeno, Colonel Zulkifli Lubis, and Lieutenant Colonel Sudirman—reflected his firm stance against the October 17, 1952 Affair. This relationship was not merely personal; it also influenced the editorial direction of *Merdeka*, the newspaper he led. The paper consistently voiced criticism of the Army's actions, which it viewed as overstepping its authority by pressuring the President to dissolve parliament (Kakiailatu, 1997: 148–151).

In its various editorials, *Merdeka* strongly denounced the military's attempts—especially by the Army—to take over the government, warning of the dangers of military authoritarianism that could threaten democracy and civil rights. Its writings often touched upon the importance of civilian supremacy and the need to maintain a balance of power between military and civilian institutions.

Responding to the October 17, 1952 incident, BM Diah wrote in his editorial column that the event was an attempted coup carried out by the Army. In a satirical tone, he began his piece as follows: “Anyone who observes how *Indonesia Raya* and *Pedoman* try to divert public attention by spreading news that ‘there was no coup,’ and after that failed, proclaim that the way out of the crisis is to freeze parliament, annul the Manai Sopian motion, and immediately hold elections—can see that the groups behind the failed coup have succeeded in pulling up a smoke screen to conceal their true intentions, at least for a while.” (*Merdeka*, November 13, 1952)

In his writings, BM Diah argued that the denial of a coup had been contradicted by the testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Sutoko. With biting sarcasm, he noted that Sutoko and several military officials seemed unwilling to acknowledge that the demand for the dissolution of parliament was part of a larger coup plan. According to Diah, the demonstrators who gathered in front of the parliament building were not there by chance—they had been deliberately mobilized to demand its dissolution.

If that plan had succeeded, Diah argued, its main purpose would have been to create a political vacuum. He also noted that after the October 17 incident, the Army took several coup-like measures such as cutting communications, banning public gatherings, and arresting political opponents—apparently to create the impression that power had shifted to the Chief of Staff of the Army (KSAD) and Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces (KSAP) in order to “maintain stability” across Indonesia.

In another editorial, BM Diah mentioned plans to elevate Sukarno, Hatta, and Sultan Hamengkubuwono into a “*Triumvirate*” to fill the power vacuum following the dissolution of parliament and cabinet. Diah compared this coup scenario to what had happened under Naguib in Egypt, where three figures were installed during the early phase of a power takeover. In the context of October 17, 1952, Diah believed this *Triumvirate* was meant to serve as a façade of legitimacy for the people, designed by pro-coup groups.

BM Diah also launched sharp criticism at Sutan Sjahrir, the prominent PSI leader, whom he accused of failing to take a clear stance on the October 17 Affair. According to Diah, through PSI, Sjahrir had in fact supported the military's actions that opposed both the cabinet and parliament. In a particularly caustic comparison, Diah likened Sjahrir's book *Perjuangan Kita* (*Our Struggle*) to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, implying that Sjahrir's political maneuvers—including efforts to alter the KNIP and establish a presidential cabinet—were intended to sideline Sukarno.

BM Diah's critique of PSI and Sjahrir continued in *Merdeka's* editorials, where he sometimes wrote under the pseudonym “Pembantu Istimewa” (*Merdeka*, November 7 and 15, 1952). He also condemned newspapers such as *Pedoman* and *Indonesia Raya*, accusing them of defending the military's intervention. These papers, according to Diah, helped legitimize the power seizure by promoting the narrative that the October 17 event was not a coup but a lawful political act. In doing so, these media outlets implicitly supported the military's political influence by shaping public opinion in its favor (*Indonesia Raya*, October 20, 1952).

BM Diah's reporting on the October 17, 1952 event also sparked political controversy, including a dispute with Mr. Mohammad Roem, then serving as Minister of Home Affairs. Roem, a Masyumi politician who initially supported military reform, publicly declared that “the situation is under control. I can also affirm here that no coup d'état has taken place” (*Indonesia Raya*, October 20, 1952).

In response, Diah published a critical piece that prompted Roem to sue him for defamation (*Merdeka*, October 31, 1952). Roem claimed that the article damaged his reputation as a senior government official. The offending passage read:

“Mohammad Roem, a jurist who is now Minister of Home Affairs and was once Minister of Foreign Affairs, upon leaving his ministerial post went on to defend certain Indian nationals accused of defrauding the state. And this same person is now being used to defend a situation that everyone knows did occur but failed—a coup d’état. If someone like Mohammad Roem is not ashamed to act as a ‘bamboo lawyer’ after leaving his cabinet post, disgracing the dignity of a minister who should know political and diplomatic decency, then it is no surprise that this same man would be used to defend one of the gravest dangers ever faced by the Indonesian nation.” (*Merdeka*, November 17, 1953)

This article was later cited in court proceedings when BM Diah stood trial for defamation. However, the case between Diah and Roem was eventually settled amicably. Although Roem felt personally harmed by *Merdeka*’s reporting, he chose not to prolong the dispute.

In the broader context of the October 17, 1952 crisis, the relationship between Roem, Natsir, and Nasution was politically complex. Both Roem and Natsir—leading figures in Masyumi—were cautious in their approach. While they supported Nasution’s earlier military reform proposals, they refrained from endorsing the Army’s political intervention. Within Masyumi itself, divisions arose: Natsir and Roem took a neutral stance, viewing the issue as internal military affairs, while Sukiman adopted a more critical, openly oppositional position toward the Army.

These differing views reflected internal tensions within Masyumi—between those seeking to maintain distance from the military and those advocating open criticism of its political involvement (*Merdeka*, October 8–9, 1952). Thus, by the time of the October 17 incident, Roem already had a professional relationship with Nasution, though he did not support military intervention. This political nuance was what BM Diah perceived and criticized in his writings about Roem.

By 1954, BM Diah and *Merdeka* continued to publish articles reaffirming their editorial stance toward the October 17 Affair. These writings urged the military—particularly the Army—to focus on its core duty: national defense and security. Diah stressed the importance of keeping the military out of politics to preserve stability and maintain civilian supremacy. His journalism, in turn, strengthened Sukarno’s position and helped shape the national narrative opposing military authoritarianism.

3.2. Military Networks of *Indonesia Raya* and *Pedoman*

On the other side, the newspapers *Indonesia Raya* and *Pedoman* took a different stance. *Indonesia Raya* was one of the media outlets that supported a greater political role for the military and often gave voice to opinions that favored military intervention at the time. Beyond ideological alignment, *Indonesia Raya*’s support for the Army’s actions during the October 17, 1952 incident was inseparable from its close ties with Army officers during the paper’s early establishment. The newspaper was officially published by the National Publishing Company (NPC), which had previously produced the magazine *Mutiara*, where Mochtar Lubis served as managing editor. The idea to establish *Indonesia Raya* originated from officers of the Siliwangi Division of the Indonesian Army (Hill, 2011: 46–56).

In mid-1949, several officers considered launching a newspaper and approached Mochtar Lubis to take charge of it. The military relied on Major Bachtar Lubis—Mochtar’s elder brother and spokesperson for the Ministry of Defense—to persuade him. Mochtar Lubis was chosen because of his reputation as an experienced journalist sympathetic to the Army’s historical role, particularly the Siliwangi Division, and for his wide connections with national political figures. According to Lubis, military officers involved in founding *Indonesia Raya* included Major Brentel Susilo (Army), Military Governor Daan Jahya (acting Siliwangi commander until the end of 1948), Basaruddin Nasution (Director of the Army Law School), Colonel T.B. Simatupang, Colonel Abdul Haris Nasution, Lt. Col. S. Parman (staff officer to the Jakarta Military Governor), and Lt. Col. Sutoyo Siswomiharjo (Commander of the Military Police Battalion). *Indonesia Raya* debuted on December 29, 1949, from its

office on Jenderal Suprpto Street, with four pages per issue and a monthly subscription price of Rp. 275 (Atmakusumah, 1992: 65; Serikat Penerbit, 1971: 185).

Technically, Major Brentel Susilo played a central role in the paper's early years. He also appointed Hasjim Mahdan—one of his staff members and former spokesperson for Military Governor Daan Yahya—to manage *Indonesia Raya's* finances. Initially led by journalist and intelligence officer Jullie Effendie, the paper came under Mochtar Lubis's editorial leadership in August 1950 at Brentel's request. Thus, the Army's involvement was evident from the outset, especially in appointing journalists and administrators sympathetic to military ideals. The close relationship between *Indonesia Raya* and the Army even earned it the nickname "the soldiers' newspaper" (Atmakusumah, 1992: 64–65).

Mochtar Lubis sympathized with the Army—particularly the Siliwangi Division—for its role in securing independence and crushing the leftist movement in Madiun in 1948. Politically, he leaned toward Sutan Sjahrir and the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI). Although the paper was closely tied to the military, key officers wanted *Indonesia Raya* to appear as a pro-Army yet independent paper, not officially labeled a military mouthpiece. Its motto—*Dari Rakjat, Oleh Rakjat, Untuk Rakjat* ("From the People, By the People, For the People")—reflected that aspiration (Serikat Penerbit, 1971: 185).

Even before the October 17, 1952 incident, *Indonesia Raya* had shown support for Nasution's faction, sharing its concern over growing political instability. The paper lamented the undisciplined and fragmented parliament and the cabinet's inability to take firm action on military reorganization. On October 16, its editorial sharply criticized the government's inefficiency and urged decisive measures to resolve the crisis.

That same day, *Indonesia Raya* published an editorial titled "The Parliament Should Be Dissolved," arguing that a parliament filled with self-interested politicians made effective governance impossible. The paper warned that the current parliamentary system was leading the nation toward chaos and proposed a drastic solution: dissolve the parliament and hold new elections immediately (Indonesia Raya, October 16, 1952). This editorial reflected public frustration and amplified military demands for political change.

On October 17, 1952, *Indonesia Raya* headlined its front page with "People Demonstrate, Demanding Parliament Dissolution." It portrayed the mass protest as a spontaneous public movement, largely omitting the Army's orchestration of the event. By framing the demonstration as a people's reaction rather than a military maneuver, *Indonesia Raya* legitimized the Army's political initiative and presented it as a reflection of popular will.

3.3. The Role of Mochtar Lubis and Rosihan Anwar

Mochtar Lubis recalled that *Indonesia Raya* supported the colonels because the liberal party system at the time made it difficult for Indonesia to progress. Cabinets often collapsed within a few months—sometimes lasting only two or three. Lubis was sharply critical of this increasingly chaotic political situation. When the October 17, 1952 incident occurred, he expressed his support, stating that Indonesian politics needed more order than what had been seen in the past. *Indonesia Raya* criticized the parliament for being ineffective and for interfering too much in military affairs. In its editorials, the paper often voiced the view that the military—having fought for the independence revolution—deserved a greater role in governance. According to Lubis, the military had an equal right to speak as the politicians, whom he viewed as irresponsible in shaping the nation's future.

These reflections were shared by Mochtar Lubis and Brentel Susilo in an interview with David T. Hill twenty-nine years later. Both shared the belief that the political disorder of the time could not be tolerated and that the military needed room to restore stability (Hill, 2011: 55).

Out of concern for potential public unrest, Mochtar supported the military as a bulwark to prevent turmoil. He even advocated for dissolving parliament and imposing stricter requirements for forming political parties, aiming to stop the proliferation of small parties driven by narrow interests. Mochtar had close relations with Colonel Nasution and several commanding officers around the presidential palace. Knowing their intentions beforehand, *Indonesia Raya* offered its support. Brentel

Susilo even claimed that he tried to influence the newspaper's coverage so that it would reduce emphasis on military strength and confrontation with Sukarno, and instead highlight the people's will.

Mochtar Lubis wrote about this in two consecutive columns published over two days in *Indonesia Raya*, under the pseudonym *Pembantu Istimewa* ("Special Assistant"). In a column titled "History and Background of the Three Motions in Parliament," Mochtar sought to shape public opinion by suggesting that the political situation reflected the people's frustration with the endless political drama in parliament, which he mockingly described as being filled with "people and parties suffering from the *suka-ngatjau* disease" (meaning restless or fickle) (*Indonesia Raya*, October 21, 1952).

Another famous satirical column by Mochtar, *Di Pinggir Jalan* ("By the Roadside"), written under the pseudonym *Mas Kluyur*, recorded the suspicion of the Minister of Information from the Indonesian National Party (PNI) toward *Indonesia Raya*, especially after the newspaper published a striking editorial on October 16 titled "It Would Be Better If Parliament Were Dissolved." The Minister accused the newspaper of orchestrating the demonstrations, though Lubis only admitted to being aware of the officers' plans (*Indonesia Raya*, October 17, 1952). *Indonesia Raya's* support gave legitimacy to pro-military perspectives among the public. The newspaper served as a platform to express military dissatisfaction with civilian government policies and to advocate for a greater political role for the armed forces.

Rosihan Anwar, as the editor of one of Jakarta's largest newspapers at the time, *Pedoman*, also responded to the October 17, 1952 incident. His response was closely tied to the newspaper's alignment with the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI). Rosihan and PSI leader Sutan Sjahrir in the early 1950s supported efforts to reorganize the Indonesian army and voiced criticism toward the parliament, which they saw as ineffective in maintaining governmental stability.

The PSI parliamentary leader, Soebadio Sastrosatomo, lamented that the DPR (House of Representatives) interfered excessively in the affairs of the Ministry of Defense and the Army—areas outside its legitimate authority (*Pedoman*, October 9, 1952; *Pedoman*, October 2, 1952). Through *Pedoman's* columns, Rosihan provided a platform for PSI and Sjahrir's perspectives, which argued that the Indonesian military needed to be strengthened through structural reforms to become a professional and disciplined force.

Regarding the Defense Ministry's policy on the Dutch Military Mission Program—which was frequently criticized by parliament—*Pedoman* defended it as a reasonable government effort to improve the army's quality. According to the newspaper, such efforts were essential for the military to sustain the newly independent nation without being dragged into destructive political struggles.

One editorial observed:

"Parliament has long discussed the essence of the army without giving clear guidance on how to solve the difficulties. We can take the example of the Russian army's development—it proceeded precisely and dynamically. If we wish to build a strong army in the future, we need a core of national instructors. And for this, we need the help and advice of foreign experts, as the government has already determined. Only then can the planned mass training achieve results in a short period." (*Pedoman*, October 5, 1955)

However, the situation became more complex after the October 17, 1952 incident. Through *Pedoman*, Rosihan Anwar expressed open support for the action, viewing it as a military effort to voice public frustration toward an unstable and sluggish parliament. Rosihan's writings in *Pedoman* reflected PSI's position, which supported the military taking a firm stance toward parliament. They argued that a fragmented parliament, divided into small factions, made it impossible for cabinets to last long, worsening political uncertainty.

In *Pedoman's* reporting, the October 17 action was depicted as an expression of widespread public unrest over the political instability caused by factional rivalries in parliament. Although the action was initiated by the military, Rosihan interpreted it as a manifestation of public anxiety, suggesting that parliament needed reform so democracy would not remain a mere arena of partisan struggle. An editorial published on October 17, 1952, stated:

“Today, the Wilopo Cabinet—having earned public trust in such a short time—is being undermined by issues surrounding the Defense Ministry and the Armed Forces. These matters should have been settled through proper administrative procedures, not by filing endless no-confidence motions. As long as we have parliaments filled with individuals driven by self-interest and personal ambition, no cabinet will ever be able to govern this nation.” (*Pedoman*, October 17, 1952)

Pedoman openly supported the Army’s demand to dissolve parliament. This stance was clearly reflected in a column published on October 28, 1952, where the editorial board described the parliament as an obstacle to governance and even a potential threat to the state.

The newspaper argued that many had misunderstood the call to dissolve parliament as anti-democratic or even fascist. In contrast, *Pedoman* asserted that the existing parliament had become a burden on healthy democracy. Even the Wilopo government admitted this problem, referring to it as “parliamentarism that makes governance impossible,” while others more harshly described it as a form of parliamentary domination that hindered national progress (*Pedoman*, October 28, 1952).

In its editorial, *Pedoman* emphasized that dissolving parliament was not an act of affection for dictatorship but rather an attempt to save democracy from a dangerous imbalance of power. Parliament was seen as having lost its function as a supportive legislative body and had instead become an arena of unproductive political tug-of-war. Therefore, *Pedoman* argued for the need of a strong and trusted government—“a firm or even iron hand”—to ensure the nation’s development could proceed without excessive political obstruction (*Pedoman*, October 28, 1952).

Supporting this action did not necessarily mean that Rosihan approved of direct military intervention in politics, but rather reflected his belief that structural reform, including in parliament, was essential. Rosihan saw the military’s move as a signal that firmness in governance was necessary, while an undisciplined parliament would only perpetuate instability. *Pedoman*’s articles sought to legitimize the military’s stance as part of a broader reflection of the urgent need to restore governmental effectiveness and national stability.

4. Conclusion

The division among the press reflected a broader split within Indonesian society. The public became polarized into two opposing camps: those who supported civilian supremacy and those who advocated for a greater military role in politics. The mass media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing the nation’s perception of the October 17, 1952 incident and its aftermath.

Focusing on *Merdeka*, *Indonesia Raya*, and *Pedoman* as the principal press camps of the period, the article examines editorial framing, opinion discourse, and the political alignments of key media figures. The findings demonstrate that media responses to the incident were deeply embedded in competing conceptions of civilian supremacy, political stability, and military legitimacy. Rather than reflecting events neutrally, newspapers played an active role in defining the meaning of military intervention and its implications for democracy. By situating Indonesian media debates within broader discussions of press, power, and civil–military relations, this article contributes to the historiography of post-independence Indonesia and to comparative studies on the role of mass media in moments of political crisis and democratic vulnerability. The division within the national press after the October 17, 1952 incident had long-term implications for Indonesia’s media and political landscape. It mirrored the ongoing tension between the military and civilian government that persisted for decades. Within the press itself, this division created a complex dynamic, as different newspapers pursued distinct political agendas.

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