

## Blocking Papua from the Truth



### Why have Jokowi's promises to open up Indonesia's "forbidden island" to journalists and rights monitors flunked?

On 20 December 2016, the [Legal Aid Foundation for Indonesia Press \(LBH Pers\)](#) staged a [press conference](#). It highlighted censorship by The Indonesia Ministry of Information and Communication (Kominfo) towards [Suara Papua](#), a local news outlet based in Abepura, Papua. With no prior notification, Suara Papua was silently [listed alongside 11 websites blocked by the government](#). Those websites allegedly violated principles of journalism by promoting hoaxes and hate.

Later that evening, Rudiantara, the Minister of Information and Communication called Asep Komarudin from LBH Pers, promising that the ban would be lifted the next day.

On 21 December, Suara Papua could be accessed again, but not for those using Telkomsel - the largest telecommunications service provider in Indonesia. In Papua, Telkomsel is the main player and controls more than 65 per cent of the market for mobile phone services users. [When I recently published an article with Suara Papua](#), dozens of people told me that they could not read it due to

the Kominfo block.

[Arnold Belau, Suara Papua's Editor-in-Chief says that there were no reasons given for the censorship.](#) There was no early warning or official letter of notification. He discovered the website had been consistently censored since 14 November 2016, based on screenshots sent by readers from different regions of Papua. Belau strongly believes that blocking the website and censorship represses freedom of press, and violates public rights to access information, particularly for Papuans.

[Franky Samperante, the Executive Director of PUSAKA Foundation says that](#) the censorship of Suara Papua shows how Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is once again following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He believes the censorship of Suara Papua is an act of repression against [alternative media that raises awareness regarding issues such as ongoing human rights violations, land grabs against indigenous people, massive environmental destruction, education and health problems, and poverty -- issues that are rarely mentioned by the mainstream Indonesian press.](#)

This mirrors concerns raised in a 2015 report from Human Rights Watch (HRW), [“Something to Hide? Indonesia’s Restrictions on Media Freedom and Rights Monitoring in Papua.”](#) The 75-page account outlines the government’s roles in obstructing access to the provinces of Papua and West Papua. Phelim Kine, the Asia Director of HRW [said that government access restrictions have for far too long made Papua Indonesia’s “forbidden island” for foreign media and rights monitors.](#) Foreign journalists describe an opaque and unpredictable permit application process in which they often never receive a final response. Many have waited fruitlessly for months – and in some cases years – for approval.

Journalists who enter Papua under a tourist visa face the threat of arrest by security forces, as [experienced by Thomas Dandois and Valentine Bourrat in 2014.](#) The pair -- who were working for Franco-German TV channel Arte -- was arrested by Indonesian security forces on 7 August while interviewing Areki Wanimbo, a local indigenous leader. Dandois and Valentine were sentenced to 2.5 months prison and fined \$US200. They were released on 28 October 2014. [But Wanimbo - who was charged with conspiracy to commit treason – had to wait eight months before release.](#)

[Suara Papua was one among few](#) publications regularly providing [updates on Wanimbo](#) when all eyes were focused on Dandois and Bourrat.

When Jokowi announced the opening of Papua to foreign journalists and monitors in 2015, it was met with [strong resistance from senior government and security forces officials.](#) The promise was never realised because Jokowi provide any specific written directives after the announcement. This opened space for non-compliance by state agencies and security forces opposed to loosening restrictions on foreign observers’ access to Papua.

Various senior officials have since publicly contradicted the president's statement. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, [has announced that the government will take serious action towards those who are trying to limit journalist access and work in Papua](#). However in contrast to this statement, HRW has discovered no changes on the ground. [Andreas Harsono, the Indonesian researcher of HRW, has confirmed that foreign journalists seeking to travel to Papua are still required to provide details of their likely sources and dates of travel in advance](#). Those details are believed to be used by the security forces to keep an eye on the journalists' work and to prevent negative press circulating out from Papua.

As of 10 March, Suara Papua is online once again. But, despite the grand proclamations from government ministries and Presidential pledges for press freedom, it is no surprise that an increasingly intolerant Indonesia continues to block West Papua from the truth.

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