



Political Public Relations in Indonesia: A History of Propaganda and Democracy

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Abstract

As an independent state once under Dutch and Japanese occupation, the forms of government communication in Indonesia range from using conventional and colonial propaganda to the professionalisation of political public relations. This paper offers a brief history of how Indonesian leaders used propaganda and public relations strategies in order to understand the social and political contexts underpinning the development of political public relations in Indonesia. It argues that the expansion of political public relations in Indonesia coincided with the country's political reform, including liberalisation of the press, freedom of speech and expression, as well as advances in information and communication technologies. The findings reported in this paper confirm that the emergence of modern political public relations in Indonesia is closely linked to the broader democratisation of the country, including significant shifts in the electoral process. In its analysis, the paper offers new insights into the development of political public relations in Indonesia.

Keywords: propaganda, political public relations, government communication, Indonesia

Introduction

Public relations is often equated with propaganda and therefore tends to be associated with negative connotations, such as lies, spin, deception, and manipulation (see, for example, Kuitenbrouwer, 2014; McNair, 2004; Miller & Dinan, 2008; Moloney, 2006; Myers, 2015; Robertson, 2014). Many scholars believe that public relations is an unseen power (see, for example, Cutlip, 1994; Heath, 2009) and therefore profoundly undemocratic (McNair, 2004; Miller & Dinan, 2008). In Indonesia, presidents Soekarno (1945–1967) and Soeharto (1967–1998) are closely associated with propaganda in that they asserted significant control over the media. After Soeharto was ousted from power in May 1998, the next three presidents, B. J. Habibie (1998–1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001), and Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001–2004), were not as successful in managing political communication, nor were they as effective in gaining public trust (Dhani, 2004). In part, this was due to the political and economic instability that coincided with and contributed to the Reformation era in Indonesia (1998–) as the authoritarian regime transitioned to a more democratic government (Dhani, 2004). In contrast, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) developed a stronger public image and gained the trust of the public as the professionalisation of political public relations emerged during his administration.

The aim of this paper is to critically analyse propaganda and political public relations in Indonesia from President Soekarno to President Yudhoyono. The paper is structured in three sections. We first review the concepts of propaganda and public relations before we consider contemporary understandings of political public relations. We then investigate propaganda and political public relations in Indonesia during three distinct eras associated with different presidents: the Soekarno era (1945–1967); the Soeharto era (1967–1998); and the Reformation era led by four presidents Habibie (1998–1999), Wahid (1999–2001), Megawati (2001–2004), and Yudhoyono (2004–2014). Finally, we discuss the significance of political public relations in the context of changing political and social structures in Indonesia. The ongoing political sensitivity around the 1965 massacre that contributed to the recent cancellation of related events at the Ubud Readers and Writers Festival (see, for example, Brown, 2015; Cochrane, 2015; Topsfield, 2015) confirms the need for a stronger understanding of political public relations in the Indonesian context.

Theoretical concepts and contexts

Propaganda and Public Relations

The twentieth century is described by Welch (2013) as the propaganda century, with the emergence of mass media (and therefore mass audiences) and technological advancements, which allowed film, radio and other forms of media production to play a significant role. Welch describes propaganda as a ‘distinctly political activity’ (2013, p. 2) and identifies ‘legitimate and functional uses’ for propaganda, including informing citizens and explaining government policy and

decision-making (2013, p. 29). In tandem, Welch acknowledges the role of censorship, that is 'the suppressing of information or opinion offensive to the values of the authority' as 'a negative form or propaganda' (2013, p. 25). Welch defines propaganda as:

the deliberate attempt to influence the public opinions of an audience, through the transmission of ideas and values, for a specific persuasive purpose that has been consciously thought out and designed to serve the self-interest of the propagandists, either directly or indirectly (2013, p. 2).

Wartime propaganda, and in particular the association of propaganda with the Nazi regime and social control, has tainted the field of public relations among communication and media scholars (Myers 2015; Weaver, 2016). Bernays (1928) attempted to explain the link in terms of manipulation and control of the public's mind in order to create acceptance of an idea or commodity. In contrast, in developing an early theoretical model of public relations, Grunig and Hunt (1984) sought to distance ethical and professional public relations from propaganda. The dominance of the Grunigian paradigm together with the strong vocational orientation of public relations education have contributed to the framing of public relations by scholars outside the discipline as spin, manipulation and deceit (McNair, 2006; Weaver, 2016). However, these models have been profoundly criticised by critical scholars within the public relations discipline, in part because of the failure to consider power and the privileging of organisational and corporate interests but also because of the failure to address the particular social, cultural and political contexts of public relations activity (see, for example, Edwards & Hodges, 2011; L'Etang, 2008, 2009; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Moloney, 2006; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005). Weaver argues 'sweeping and dismissive generalisations about the unethical nature of public relations and propaganda' are problematic and identifies the need for research that offers a better understanding of the role of public relations in 'shap[ing] social culture, public opinion, political processes and globalisation' (2016, p. 268).

Political Public Relations

Political public relations is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses political communication, political marketing, public affairs and persuasion (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). Typically, political communication scholars understand public relations primarily in terms of media and image management (Moloney, 2006). For example, writing in relation to the UK's New Labour movement in the 1990s, McNair identified a shift in political public relations activity that contributed to the framing of such activity as 'spin':

the management of public opinion—the attempt to persuade, influence and manipulate others' views on the meaning of an event or issue—is as old as the political process itself. What *is* new is the intensity and the degree of

professionalism with which it is conducted by all social actors, from terrorist to trade unions, and prime ministers to pop stars (2004, p. 327).

This spin became synonymous with manipulation and 'lacking truthfulness' (McNair, 2004, p. 328). At the same time, through journalism and popular culture, the processes associated with political public relations have become widely recognised by the general public (McNair, 2004).

There is limited scholarship that investigates political public relations from public relations perspectives; indeed Strömbäck and Kiousis note that much political communication research is 'decoupled from public relations' and tends to be researched by political communication scholars who frame such activity primarily as spin (2011, p. 6). Even public relations scholars construct political public relations primarily as media management; Froehlich and Rüdiger, for example, define the main goal of political public relations as 'the use of media outlets to communicate specific political *views, solutions and interpretations* of issues in the hope of garnering public support for political policies or campaigns' ([emphasis in original] 2006, p. 18). Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011) maintain political public relations differs from political communication in that it is purposive and identify the need for more research into the field. To be more specific, Strömbäck and Kiousis offer a definition of political public relations as:

the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals (2011, p. 8).

Governments routinely use public relations and, as such, political public relations is simply 'part of the infrastructure of modern political communication' (McNair, 2004, p. 337). Ward (2003), for example, points to a growing institutionalisation of public relations in the Australian government sector with the appointment of ministerial media advisors and the establishment of media units and public affairs teams throughout the 1980s and 1990s and L'Etang (2004) links the development of public relations in the UK closely with government. It is therefore important to understand the role of public relations in political processes. Taylor and Kent argue that to various degrees, all governments use both political public relations and propaganda: 'Persuasion becomes propaganda ... when citizens are systematically deprived of competing messages, fed lies and deception, and not given the opportunity to voice competing positions or seek alternative solutions to problems' (2007, p. 146). To distinguish political public relations efforts from propaganda, Taylor and Kent simply suggest looking at the means of communication and the intent. In their own words, Taylor and Kent explain,

Propaganda typically involves attempts to generate conditioned reflexes that replace reasoned actions, employing controlled use of the media and unethical rhetorical techniques (appeals to authority, bandwagon appeals, fear,

glittering generalities, name calling, 'plain folks' appeals, testimonials, transfers, slippery slope argument) (2007, p. 146).

Public relations history in Indonesia

The impact of Indonesia's colonial past is rarely acknowledged in contemporary histories of Indonesian public relations, which tend to link the development of modern public relations closely with the declaration of independence in 1945. The Dutch colonised Indonesia in the sixteenth century and their administrative system was retained by the Japanese during their occupation (1942–1945) and influenced the national system (Ananto, 2004). In the first decades of the twentieth century, and particularly between the two World Wars, the Dutch used propaganda to address two concerns: international public opinion and the growing Indonesian independence movement (Kuitenbrouwer, 2014). The authorities worked closely with private organisations, including information services and press agents, to promote support for the colonial authority in the foreign press through a controlled media environment (Kuitenbrouwer, 2014).

However, the few Indonesian public relations histories begin with the modern nation-state and link the development of public relations firmly with political developments. To offer one example, Yudharwati (2014) links the emergence of modern public relations in Indonesia with the emergence of a national (Indonesian) identity in the growing resistance to Dutch colonialism. She identifies five distinct eras pivotal for understanding the development of public relations in Indonesia:

1900–1942	Nation identity era;
1942–1945	Japanese occupation;
1945–1967	Soekarno era;
1967–1998	Soeharto era; and
1998–onwards	Reformation era.

Yudharwati (2014) draws on the Grunigian paradigm to discuss Indonesian public relations, assuming that only with the modern, democratic, Reformation era of greater transparency and a free press can public relations flourish, in clear contrast to the one-way communication style and nation-building propaganda of earlier periods. At the same time, Yudharwati (2014) maintains that one-way communication dominates media relations and issues management practices in Indonesia. Other research on public relations in Indonesia explores the impact of its feminisation and argues that feminisation results in a lower status, poorer pay, encroachment from other fields, and an emphasis on personal appearance (Simorangkir, 2011). However, this research also draws heavily on US research into women and public relations. There is little research specifically on the institutionalisation of public relations in Indonesian government (although every

local and national department and government employs public relations staff [Putra, 2008]) or on political public relations activity in Indonesia. In this paper, we focus on political public relations in the three periods since Indonesia gained independence: Soekarno era (1945–1967), Soeharto era (1967–1998), and Reformation era (1998 onwards).

Political Public Relations in Indonesia

Soekarno era (1945–1967)

Indonesia's first president, Soekarno, is well known as a great orator and a popular leader. Under Dutch occupation, Soekarno was involved in political organisations, writing his own speeches, communicating his political views, and leading the independence movement (Dhani 2004). Soekarno was arrested on 29 December 1929 by colonial authorities and exiled; his inspirational 'Indonesia Accuses' speech at his trial is 'one of the great works of anti-colonial rhetoric' (Vickers, 2013, p. 84). His wartime speeches were pure Indonesian nationalism (Tickell, 2001). In 1945, Soekarno became president the day after proclaiming the nation's independence. He soon established the Ministry of Information and Radio Republic Indonesia. Initially, Indonesia entered a period of press freedom. However, in response to political instability and widespread rebellion in the late 1950s Soekarno changed to a more authoritarian and repressive style of government, known as 'Guided Democracy' (Tickell, 2001). Soekarno declared martial law and controlled the media and opposition by arresting journalists, banning newspapers, and jailing journalists, writers and political opponents (Tickell, 2001). Military authorities were given full authority to censor newspapers if they wrote about rebellions in Sumatra and Sulawesi and revoke newspaper licenses for violations (Dhani 2004; Maters, 2003).

To unite diverse elements of the nation that are easily played off by foreign powers, Soekarno's propaganda promoted the spirit of Indonesian unity (Dhani 2004). According to Rossa 'Sukarno tried to embody the entire nation in himself' (2014, para. 17) and promoted national unity to the masses through radio and television. Soekarno was keen to establish television in Indonesia, which he saw as more effective than radio in communicating with a largely illiterate population (Kitley, 2000). In 1962, Soekarno decided that all government agencies must have a public relations or public affairs department to manage the relationship between the government and the public and support decision-making processes (Ananto, 2004). As president, Soekarno not only communicated his extraordinary vision, such as national character building, but he also urged Western countries to stop imperialism and colonialism (Vltchek & Indira, 2006). According to Pramoedya Ananta Toer,¹ Soekarno was considered as an enemy by almost all Western capitalist countries, who wanted to depose Soekarno from the mid-1960s (Vltchek & Indira, 2006, pp. 61, 68).

¹ Pramoedya Ananta Toer was a prominent Indonesian novelist who spent years in prison (Vickers, 2013).

On September 30, 1965, the PKI, the Indonesian Communist Party, was involved in an attempted coup d'état. The government response, driven by Soeharto although Soekarno was still president, to that coup resulted in thousands, possibly millions, of Indonesian people losing their lives.² Because of the ensuing political instability, Soekarno issued a warrant, famously known as *Supersemar*, that instructed Major General Soeharto, as the Commander of Army Security command to take all necessary action to restore order and security (Kristiadi, 2001). Soeharto dismissed PKI and its associated organisations, undertook a massive propaganda campaign, and started to ban newspapers belonging to PKI and other media outlets linked to the communist party. Misleading information about the coup attempt and the torture and slaughter of six army generals was disseminated through the news media. Soekarno demanded journalists write only about true events and to consider their role in building the nation; however: 'the great orator was rendered voiceless: his speeches rarely entered the media. The army not only had the guns, it had the newspapers and radio' (Rossa, 2006, p. 200). The dissemination of propaganda and misinformation by the military and anti-communists led to the massacre in the already polarised society in Indonesia.³

Soeharto era (1967–1998)

Although Soekarno remained president until 1967, Soeharto had effectively taken control over the military. In March 1967, Soeharto was appointed acting president by Indonesia's super-parliament (M.P.R.S., the Interim People's Consultative Congress), and within the year effectively controlled the country (Feith, 1968). During his presidency, government propaganda maintained the public's fear of communism and prevented PKI from rebuilding. Soeharto's *Orde Baru* (New Order) regime manipulated the nation's history to justify the regime (Krisnadi, 2010). Government-made movies, such as *Janur Kuning* (1980), *Serangan Fajar* (1982), and *Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (1984), created a heroic image of Soeharto (Krisnadi, 2010). Of these films, *Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (1984) could be considered the most propagandist. The four-and-a-half-hour movie depicts action from the September 30 movement (G30S), ranging from Soekarno in a seriously ill condition and the kidnapping, torturing, and slaughtering of six army generals to Soeharto's rapid defeat of the coup attempts. The movie was used as a propaganda vehicle by Soeharto; it was televised annually on 30 September, and until 1997, it was mandatory viewing for all school children.⁴ The New Order regime deliberately depicted violence and torture in the film to elicit public fear of communism. The

² Robert Cribb (2001) estimates the death toll ranges from 100,000 to 2 million, with a figure of 500,000 as the most plausible.

³ There is much that remains unknown about the 1965 coup d'état attempt. At the time of going to press, an International People's Tribunal is underway in the Hague (see <http://1965tribunal.org/>).

⁴ The Minister of Information Yunus Yosfiah decided to stop broadcasting *Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* movie in 1998 as it was no longer relevant to Reformation era (Rini & Evan, 2012).

effects of these propaganda movies remain etched in the minds of both army personnel and members of the public.

After banning 31 newspapers following the coup attempt in 1965, Soeharto's New Order regime began to loosen media controls in the late 1960s. However, following student demonstrations in 1973 the regime restored strong control on the media, threatening licence cancellations and using inherited Dutch laws to threaten to imprison the journalists, and obligate them to develop a sense of self-censorship (Dhani 2004). In 1978, *Kompas*, *Sinar Harapan Daily* and five other newspapers were banned for six months due to 'exaggerated' reports of student protests. Prior to allowing these newspapers to reappear, the media owners were asked to sign a declaration that 'they would put the public and state interests above their own and those of the newspaper; and they would maintain the "good reputation and authority of the government and national leadership"' (Tickell, 2001, p. 1181). Thus, the Minister of Information and State Secretary, who was usually the president's spokesperson, could deliver all government propaganda without significant challenge until the last years of Soeharto regime in the late 1990s.

During the Soeharto presidency, the government employed political public relations specialists from the US to assist the Indonesian government in developing a positive image and reputation in the world community, as well as securing Indonesian foreign policies. In the 1990s, Soeharto disbursed millions of dollars to leading US public relations firms (Pilger 1994; Cohen 2000; Leith 2003). The Soeharto regime paid Hill & Knowlton to promote a respectable image for Indonesia internationally in economic and trade matters (Pilger, 1994). The government then turned to Burson-Marsteller, signing a contract worth US\$5 million, to take a more aggressive stance in defending its East Timor policies (Cohen, 2000; Pilger, 1994). The promotion of Indonesia's international reputation extended to corporations. The parent company of Freeport Mining played 'a vital political role' for Soeharto, acting as 'a high-profile PR agent' and becoming one of the most outspoken and successful lobby groups for Indonesia in the US (Leith, 2003). These public relations efforts were intended to address criticisms from many countries in response to Soeharto's invasion of East Timor in 1975. For the first five years of invasion, as many as 80,000 people died due to violence and as a result of poor conditions, especially in detention camps (Cribb, 2001). Initially the invasion was backed by the US and Australia in order to deter communist influences in the region. But, despite the public relations efforts, Indonesia often received protests to what was called an extraordinary crime against human rights in many international forums.

Reformation era (1998–)

The transformation from an authoritarian regime to a more democratic government challenged Soeharto's successors. These challenges were exacerbated by the economic crisis of the late 1990s, which had implications for gaining public trust (Ananto, 2004). President Habibie, for example, failed to

establish himself as a new leader without ongoing links to the New Order regime or Soeharto and his allies.⁵ Between 1998 and 2004, Habibie, Wahid, and Megawati were inaugurated consecutively as presidents. Habibie's administration lasted only 17 months. Dhani (2004) concluded these presidents were not sufficiently equipped with public communication skills and strategies to negotiate the demands of a free media. In 1999, for instance, Habibie failed to persuade the public of his controversial policy to let the East Timorese decide their own destiny via a popular referendum and struggled to persuade parliament to support his policies. The lack of communication management, particularly in terms of media relations, also surfaced during the Wahid and Megawati administrations. President Wahid often spoke too much and made unnecessary remarks to journalists. One of Wahid's favourite events was a weekly discussion with people in a mosque after Friday prayers. This event was meant to bring the president closer to the public, but this uncontrolled communication and free discussion sometimes ended with a controversial statement from Wahid. According to Dharmawan Ronodipuro, one of the President's spokespersons, Wahid frequently refused to follow protocol, including when a formal press conference was conducted in the presidential palace (Dhani, 2004). Ronodipuro said that on many occasions, Wahid asked his staff to collect a number of journalists just to talk about things that happened to be crossing his mind (Dhani, 2004).

Conversely, Megawati rarely spoke to the media throughout her administration, even on important issues (see for example, Dhani, 2004; *The Jakarta Post*, 2001; *The Washington Times*, 2002). Megawati did not immediately make a direct statement in response to the first Bali bombing of October 12, 2002, which killed 202 people from 21 countries (BBC News, 2003), despite visiting the site the next day. Megawati's silence was perceived to be less assertive in dealing with radicalism and her lack of response to the Bali bombing was widely criticised. On October 29, 2002, after attending the APEC summit in Mexico, Megawati made an unscheduled second visit to Bali. The president, whose presence at the site had been anticipated by journalists, did not use that occasion to deliver any statement to the media. As a result, she was criticised by politicians and both local and foreign media because of her perceived weakness in handling the crisis: 'The president's aloof and uncommunicative style has failed to inspire her nation as it cries out for inspirational leadership in the aftermath of the bombings' (ABC Radio Australia, 2012).

The year 2004 can be regarded as a major milestone in the development of modern political public relations in Indonesia, with the introduction of direct presidential elections and a new electoral system. The need for public relations was triggered by the shift to direct general elections, not only for the president but also for mayors, regents and governors throughout the country. Yudhoyono,

⁵ In an interview with Dhani, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, spokesperson for President Habibie, stated close friends and assistants often suggested Habibie cut his ties with Soeharto and his allies, but Habibie refused.

a three-star army general,⁶ ran for president and hired a public relations firm, Inke Maris & Associates, to coordinate his campaign (Maris, 2007). The impact was significant. The media portrayed Yudhoyono as a rising star and a reformist general and he quickly acquired an image as a smart and thoughtful general as well as a strong leader (Harvey, 2004). Even though his political party only received seven per cent of the vote in the legislative elections, Yudhoyono cruised to a convincing victory over the incumbent President Megawati with 60 per cent of votes in the 2004 presidential election (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, n.d.). Yudhoyono was president for ten years (2004–2014) and maintained a high level of popularity despite social, political, and economic problems as well as criticism from his political opponents and from the media. During his administration, Yudhoyono employed public relations consultancies for various events and campaigns, and this activity helped maintain his popular appeal, with his public approval rating hovering mostly above 55 per cent during his tenure as president (Wardhani, 2014).

Discussion and significance

Soekarno was a charismatic media performer and always concerned with his good image, while Soeharto was charming and known as the 'smiling general' (Roeder, 1970). For three decades, Soeharto spread fear in society and thus justified the need to rely on the government, especially the army, to protect the public. Soeharto's regime exaggerated communist activities and crimes through national broadcasts. By using fear strategies, Soeharto maintained power for more than 30 years. Fear and media control are powerful propaganda techniques. Soeharto manipulated the nation's history with movies, books, and many other kinds of media. At the same time, the Soeharto regime also maintained political public relations in order to create an image of himself as a national hero. Likewise, Soekarno also heavily used propaganda, including media control, during his presidency. Soekarno was not only an expert in public speaking, but he also maintained his power and public trust with well-prepared political public relations strategies.

In the Reformation era, the professionalisation of political public relations marked an important step towards democracy. Particularly under Yudhoyono, the practice of political public relations in Indonesia intensified rapidly. The growth in the employment of public relations practitioners coincided with increased democratisation, liberalisation of the press, freedom of speech and expression, as well as advances in information and communication technologies. However, in the transitional period, Habibie, Wahid, and Megawati failed to capitalise on the potential of public relations.

Yudhoyono was more successful in building his image as a leader, rather than in persuading the media and the public to support government policies.

⁶ Yudhoyono was awarded a four-star General when he left the army to join the government of Abdurrahman Wahid in 2000 (see Harvey, 2004).

Although Yudhoyono was elected convincingly in direct presidential elections, the media's support of him did not last long. The news media and opponents no longer tolerated mistakes, despite his success in bringing stability to Indonesia's new democracy and maintaining an impressive rate of economic growth:

Every time the president or his supporters pointed to an achievement, his critics were ready to identify a contradiction, failing or shortcoming. With regard to his democratic record, for example, some observers have characterised the Yudhoyono period as being marked by stagnation rather than progress (Aspinall, Mietzner, & Tomsa, 2015, p. 2).

Despite many criticisms from the media and civil society, his rhetoric aimed to demonstrate that he was the most democratic Indonesian president who was able to maintain his (polite) behaviour, humanity, and ethics. As Aspinall, Mietzner, and Tomsa have assessed, 'Yudhoyono will most likely be remembered as a president who used democratic means to bring Indonesia stability for the decade he governed—which is a better record than any of his predecessors can claim' (2015, p. 19). Yudhoyono's often-criticised slow decision-making style (Kartasasmita, 2013) arguably attributed to his employment of democratic principles in that he preferred to engage in public discourse and consultation – therefore elements of political public relations – as much as possible before making a decision.

Conclusion

Both Soekarno and Soeharto maintained presidential hegemony and authoritarian regimes through fear campaigns, censorship, media controls, and nation-building rhetoric. Soekarno's use of propaganda was aimed at 'uniting' the nation, rejecting imperialism and capitalism. But at the same time, Soekarno was a dictator who suppressed press freedom as he sought to avoid the influence of capitalism from Western countries and to suppress dissent. Soeharto also used propaganda to justify his rule by rejecting communist ideology and spreading misleading information. Today, Indonesia is a much more democratic country, but its government still utilises a mixture of propaganda and public relations to strengthen and to improve the efficacy of political communication. The use of propaganda and political public relations has become integral in modern democracies. Although Indonesia has only recently embraced democratic political values and practices, and has had a chequered history in this regard, it is no exception.

The process of the professionalisation of political public relations in Indonesia, therefore, should be understood as part of democratisation, liberalisation of the press, freedom of speech and expression, and advances in information and communication technologies. In part, it was triggered by the shift towards direct general elections for president, legislative members, and heads of regional government that led to the need for public relations specialists and

services to assist the candidates. These factors significantly contributed to changing political public relations in the Reformation era.

Acknowledgment

Rendro Dhani is a senior lecturer at the London School of Public Relations, Jakarta, Indonesia. His doctoral research at Murdoch University is funded through the Ministry of Research and Technology and Higher Education of Republic of Indonesia.

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**Political Public Relations in Indonesia: A History of
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