

Tributes : BBC journalist Ging Ginanjar: A giant of Indonesia's battle for press freedom

Thursday 31 January 2019, by [AFFAN Heyder](#), [HENSCHKE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2019).

The sudden death of BBC Indonesia's Ging Ginanjar at 54 has sparked many public tributes. The grief isn't just about the loss of a popular editor, Ging was known for the key role he played in bringing about press freedom for the world's largest Muslim nation, as his colleagues Rebecca Henschke and Heyder Affan write.

When Ging Ginanjar went for a job at the newly founded tabloid *Detik* in the early 1990s he was asked about his journalism experience.

"I have none, but that's not important," he replied. "The important thing is that I hate Suharto."

Suharto was Indonesia's military leader and ruled the country with an iron fist for 31 years from 1967, a time in which all dissent was brutally crushed. Under his government the media was controlled: journalists who challenged the state faced intimidation and potential jail time and independent media houses were shut down.



Indonesia's president Sukarno (right) was effectively ordered to cede power to Major General Suharto (left) in 1965, ushering a new era for Indonesia

The tabloid didn't last long; it was banned by the Suharto government on 21 June 1994 along with the investigative magazine, *Tempo* - a move which closed down a crucial avenue for holding the government accountable to the public.

But it was the very banning of these prominent independent publications that galvanised a new generation of young journalists to fight back against the blanket censorship that had been in place for decades.

Ging was at the heart of this resistance.

In August that year he co-founded the country's first independent journalists' association, the Alliance of Independent Journalists or AJI.

"To me it was very daring," says the acclaimed writer and founder of *Tempo*, Goenawan Mohammad.

"At that time no other organisation was allowed to compete with the government-sanctioned press organisations, so it was illegal. The new group stated they were against censorship and the state

publishing permits. This statement and the organisation itself were a rebellion that was unthinkable at that time.”

Along with other journalists from the group, he published an underground magazine - called *Independent Voices* - which reported critically and independently on the turbulent political and economic events of the time.

“He published that magazine when everyone else was frightened to do that. When most people had withdrawn, he stood up to fight back,” says Indonesian poet and author, Agus R. Sarjono.



Ging Ginanjar in the office.

“If there were attacks on press freedom he would be the first and the loudest to say we need to make a stand”

Actress Olga Lidya remembers running around campus as a university student trying to get her hands on that magazine.

“It was the only place we could read the truth,” she says.

“Ging was an extraordinary journalist, in terms of his fearlessness to speak the truth and criticise power. He taught me a great deal about being brave.”

She says that what Indonesia is losing most - with the passing of Ging - is his wonderful sense of humour and humble nature.

“He never wanted power. He was very stubborn but he had a very good heart and a way of talking about complex and heavy things in a witty, humorous and persuasive way. That’s an extraordinary skill that very few people have.”

Ging’s reporting about what was happening in the final years of the Suharto government pushed more students like Olga to join the people’s movement that forced him to step down in May 1998.

At that time and in those conditions, the line between journalism and activism had to be blurred. Two months earlier he had been arrested alongside other activists for his role in organising the Indonesian People’s Congress (KRI) which was organised as a symbolic vote for a so-called “people’s president”.

In a black and white photo taken in the court room, Ging stares defiantly at the judge. As usual there is a small smile playing about his face. Together with a number of artists and press freedom activists he was found guilty, but released later that day.

It was a momentous time. The next day Suharto declared he was resigning as president.

“Ging was a press freedom fighter at a time when it was a frightening battle to be part of. And now we can enjoy the results of that battle,” says Olga Lidya.

In the years after the fall of Suharto, Indonesia’s media blossomed and Ging remained part of that flowering. He worked at Indonesia’s first independent radio news agency, KBR, before joining

Deutsche Welle and then, finally, the BBC.

Today, Indonesia has a vibrant media landscape and arguably one of the freest press environments in Asia.

But in a recent report from the US-based democracy watchdog Freedom House Indonesia was rated as only “partly free”.

The remote province of Papua remains effectively closed to foreign reporters and local journalists face intimidation from the security forces when they try to report on the military’s attempts to suppress a long-running separatist movement.



Demonstration in Bali by pro Papua independence activists Image copyright GETTY IMAGES

Journalists are still not free to report in the Indonesian province of Papua. There is also concern from the very journalists who fought for this freedom in Indonesia, that the boom of online news sites and social media is undermining the industry’s reputation.

“The censorship and licensing restrictions have gone, there is no more monopoly of journalist organisations and now in theory everyone can produce news organisations.” says Goenawan Mohammad.

“But the quality and distribution ... has eroded the credibility and the weight of journalism.”

But Ging, he says, maintained his integrity in the face of all this and continued to fight for progressive values in journalism.

He was one of the first Indonesian journalists to talk about gender equality in sources in news articles.

In the face of rising intolerance in multi-faith Indonesia, Ging, who was brought up as a devout Muslim, always pushed in the newsroom for minority voices from all faiths to be heard.

“He was consistent till the end in his fight for human rights and press freedom, he never ever compromised,” says former AJI president Heru Hendratmoko.

One of the last press freedom protests he took part in was to demand the release from jail of the Burmese journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo.



Ging at demonstration

Freedom of the press was like an article of faith for Ging Ginanjar

“If there were attacks on press freedom in any form, in Indonesia or internationally, he would be the first and the loudest to say - this is dangerous we need to make a stand.”

As his colleagues and close friends, we obviously knew that his reputation preceded him, as a key figure in Indonesia’s press history but also as an incisive and critical mind.

Always fun-loving, he would often be the first on a dance floor and had the ability to make everyone laugh and smile with his goofy and at times irreverent humour.

He was a trained actor so Ging would not shy away from using our daily editorial meetings as his stage from which he would animate the bureau with his passion for journalism, an energy that served his country so well when it was needed.

Rebecca Henschke and Heyder Affan

P.S.

• BBC, 26 January 2019:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46997674>