

Australian government tries to censor Indonesian film festival

Richard Phillips
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In a clear attack on democratic rights and freedom of expression, the Howard government has withdrawn a promised \$A18,000 grant to the Jakarta International Film Festival (JiFFest) because it disagreed with the Australian movies selected for this year's event. The grant was from the Australia Indonesia Institute (AII), which is part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It has sponsored the festival since it was established in 1999.

The popular event provides a rare opportunity for Indonesians, who have endured decades of government repression and tightly regulated censorship, to see award-winning foreign films and serious documentaries. Forty-five percent of the promised AII money was for documentary workshops hosted by the Australian directors Curtis Levy and Graham Isaacs, and Australian Broadcasting Corporation investigative journalist Chris Masters.

While the JiFFest is proceeding with the workshops and will screen the films as planned, it is the first time a foreign government has attempted to influence programming decisions.

The Australian films in question are: *The President versus David Hicks*, which exposes the illegal detention of Australian citizen David Hicks in Guantánamo Bay; *Garuda's Deadly Upgrade*, about the murder of Indonesian human rights campaigner Munir Said Thalib; *Dhakiyarr versus the King*, a documentary on the murder trial and subsequent disappearance of Aboriginal leader Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda over 70 years ago; and *We Have Decided Not To Die*, an 11-minute short about three individuals who escape death in a number of different and unusual ways. Indonesian censors had cleared all four films for the festival.

The President versus David Hicks, which won two Australian Film Institute awards last year, has been screened at film festivals throughout North America and Europe. *Garuda's Deadly Upgrade*, produced for the

"Dateline" on Australia's SBS television network, was shown earlier this year in Indonesian cinemas. Munir, a well-known critic of the Indonesian military, was poisoned while travelling from Jakarta to Amsterdam on state-owned national airline Garuda in September 2004. The documentary suggests high-level involvement of Indonesian police and military in Munir's death.

JiFFest organisers were informed about the decision in a letter from the Australian embassy's cultural attaché only 24 hours before the festival began on Friday. They were told that the films chosen did not fit the "guidelines or the objectives of the AII". But at no stage after AII promised the \$18,000 grant in July did it raise any questions or concerns about the films selected.

Festival organiser Shanty Harmayn told the media she was "bitterly disappointed" by the decision. "They [AII] never had any discussion with us that they would withdraw funding if they didn't like the films we selected. We never even got a proper explanation."

A defiant press release from festival management declared: "Now in its seventh year, JiFFest has gained a proud reputation as an independent festival dedicated to quality films and important messages they carry, particularly on the subject of human rights and social justice. We have therefore never allowed funding to influence our film selection, either as a carrot or a stick."

Orlow Seunke, JiFFest's director, said that despite the financial problems created by the funding withdrawal, the festival would screen the Australian movies "as a matter of principle".

"I am sure," he continued, "that audiences in Jakarta will now show up in even greater numbers to view what the Australian government is apparently so worried about them seeing. All four films will be screened free of charge".

An Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade spokesman told the media on Saturday that the grant had

been stopped because the movies chosen would not “promote greater mutual understanding between the people of Australia and Indonesia”.

These assertions are bogus and thoroughly hypocritical. The Australia Indonesia Institute is a government-controlled and funded agency whose central purpose is to defend and extend the political and business interests of Australian corporations. In fact, the decision to cancel the promised funds occurred a few days after Foreign Affairs Minister Downer visited Indonesia and before Australian participation in this week’s East Asian Summit meeting.

Established in 1989 by the Hawke-Keating Labor government, the AII is run by key Howard government appointees and business figures. AII chairman Philip Flood, for example, is a former diplomat and intelligence chief with close connections to sections of Indonesian’s military and political elite. He was director general of the Office of National Assessments, one of Australia’s key intelligence gathering agencies, in 1996.

Another leading figure in AII is Harold Clough, a Western Australian businessman whose engineering company has significant oil, gas and mining contracts in Indonesia and South East Asia and a major stake in the Timor Gap oil fields. Clough is a key financial contributor to a right-wing think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs.

The Howard government is obviously nervous that films such as *Garuda’s Deadly Upgrade* could disturb Canberra’s political relations with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s government. It is also no doubt concerned that Jakarta residents will have the opportunity to see *The President versus David Hicks* because it gives some indication of the Howard government’s criminal complicity in Hicks’ detention by the US military in violation of international law. Australia is the only country in the world that has refused to demand the release and repatriation of its citizens from Guantánamo Bay.

Canberra’s sudden withdrawal of funds demonstrates how sensitive the government is to any criticism of its domestic or foreign policies and how ruthlessly it will act against anything it believes threatens its interests.

Cancellation of the promised grant occurred a day after the Howard government’s new “anti-terror” and sedition legislation was rammed through parliament. These laws not only overturn the presumption of innocence but also give police and intelligence agencies wide-ranging powers, including surveillance and control orders and detention without arrest or trial, together with other unprecedented attacks on basic democratic rights.

Curtis The Levy, ~~President~~ of *Hicks*, told ABC radio on Saturday that while Indonesia was beginning to allow the screening of some controversial foreign films, the Howard government was “closing down freedoms” through its new sedition laws, which, he said, “cover all kinds of journalism and theatre and films”.

“[W]e’re not sure if there’s a link,” the award-winning documentary director continued, “but it does seem coincidental that only a few days after the sedition laws were passed through parliament, this ban on our films has happened.”

The sedition laws are aimed at silencing political dissent, with organisations outlawed and members jailed for “urging disaffection” with the government. Any film, broadcast or publication expressing sympathy or support for those opposing or resisting Australian military interventions can be banned and its authors jailed for up to seven years.

The last time anyone was imprisoned in Australia for sedition was in 1951. Bill Burns, a former journalist, waterfront worker and the nominal publisher of the *Tribune*, the Communist Party newspaper, was prosecuted for a series of articles opposing the Korean War. Burns was tried and sentenced to six months hard labour because the newspaper contained an antiwar demand: “Not a man, not a ship, not a plane and a not gun for the aggressive imperialist war in Korea.”

The Howard government’s arrogant cancellation of funds to the Jakarta International Film Festival is not just directed against festival organisers but clearly aimed at intimidating Australian filmmakers, journalists, television and local movie festival programmers. A precedent has now been set: to challenge the government and its right-wing social and political agenda, at home or abroad, will bring immediate reprisals.



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