



Criminal defamation and freedom of expression in Indonesia: A Legal and human rights analysis

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Abstract

The study critically examines Indonesia's defamation framework within the broader context of constitutional guarantees and international human rights standards. The problem lies in the continued reliance on colonial-era defamation laws originally designed to preserve authority and suppress dissent that remain embedded in the *Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana* (Criminal Code) and the Law on Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE Law). These provisions, characterized by vague and punitive language, often conflict with the right to freedom of expression protected under Articles 28E and 28F of the 1945 Constitution and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The objective of the research is to assess whether Indonesia's defamation laws align with international human rights norms and to propose justice-based reforms that balance the protection of reputation with the promotion of free speech. The methodology employs a qualitative normative legal approach, combining doctrinal analysis of statutory provisions and case law with a comparative review of international instruments and regional human rights jurisprudence. The findings reveal that Indonesia's defamation laws remain heavily influenced by colonial legal traditions, emphasizing control rather than justice, and are increasingly misapplied to limit media freedom and civic participation. The conclusion underscores that criminal defamation sanctions are inconsistent with democratic values and human rights principles. Consequently, the recommendations advocate for decriminalization of defamation, revision of the ITE Law, alignment with ICCPR standards, judicial reinterpretation in line with constitutional rights, and the establishment of safeguards for journalists and public discourse. These measures would transform Indonesia's defamation framework into one that genuinely upholds freedom, dignity, and democratic accountability.

Keywords: Defamation, freedom, expression, human rights, indonesia

Introduction

Defamation typically denotes the act of harming the reputation of an individual or organization through spoken words (slander), written statements (libel), or other expressive means. Its roots can be traced back to the legal traditions of Rome and Germany. In ancient Rome, verbal insults were deemed a grave offense that could result in capital punishment, whereas early English and German laws enforced harsh penalties, including the removal of the tongue for those who made derogatory remarks. By the late 18th century in England, the definition of slander was restricted to accusations of criminal behavior, contagious illnesses, or professional inadequacy. In Italy, defamation is still classified as a criminal act, and even the truth seldom serves as a legitimate defense. (Premkumar, 2023).

The roots of Indonesia's defamation law are intricately linked to its colonial history. The basis of the present *Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana* (KUHP), or Criminal Code, can be traced to the *Wetboek van Strafrecht voor Nederlandsch-Indië* (WvS), a criminal code established by the Dutch colonial authorities in 1918. This code was fundamentally a localized version of the Dutch *Wetboek van Strafrecht* (WvS) from 1886, adapted to fulfill the political and administrative needs of the colonial regime in the Dutch East Indies (Fatmawati, F., et al., 2023).

Throughout this era, the primary aim of criminal law, which encompassed defamation regulations, was to preserve colonial power and public order instead of safeguarding individual rights or promoting justice. Articles 310-321 of **the WvS** made it illegal to insult, slander, or libel both individuals and public institutions. Nevertheless, these statutes were often exploited by the colonial authorities to

stifle political opposition, silence indigenous intellectuals, and regulate the media (Mashdurohaturun et al., 2025).

Nationalist leaders who condemned colonial policies or promoted independence frequently faced prosecution under defamation laws and provisions for 'insulting authority' (*haatzai artikelen*). Consequently, defamation legislation functioned as a political instrument to protect the dignity of the colonial authorities, rather than serving as a mechanism to reconcile freedom of expression with the safeguarding of individual reputation. After Indonesia gained independence in 1945, the newly established republic incorporated the colonial criminal code through Article II of the Transitional Provisions of the 1945 Constitution, permitting existing laws to stay in effect until they were superseded. Consequently, the Dutch defamation framework, originally created for an authoritarian environment, continued to influence Indonesia's legal system following independence. Even with the transition from colonial governance to national sovereignty, the essence and intent of the law largely persisted (Reni & Renaldi, 2025).

This colonial legacy has resulted in a structural contradiction: although the 1945 Constitution ensures freedom of expression as stated in Articles 28E and 28F, the ongoing existence of colonial-era defamation laws has limited this freedom through extensive and ambiguous criminal penalties. As a result, defamation in Indonesia has traditionally served less as a protector of individual dignity and more as a tool of control, initially by colonial powers and subsequently by governments following independence (Putri, 2025).

Over the years, the disparity between freedom and authority has emerged as a persistent characteristic of Indonesia's

legal development. From the suppression of nationalist movements during the Dutch colonial period to the New Order's censorship of media and political adversaries, defamation law has consistently been employed to safeguard those in positions of power. This historical consistency highlights the necessity for a justice-oriented reassessment of defamation law, one that is in harmony with Indonesia's constitutional commitment to equality under the law and democratic expression (Emaliawat, 2024).

Definition of Defamation under Indonesian Law

Under Article 310 of the Indonesian Criminal Code, defamation is defined as any act intended to harm another person's honor or reputation by making an accusation meant to be communicated publicly. Such accusations may be expressed verbally, in writing, through images, or by any medium that allows public dissemination. In essence, the offense centers on acts of communication that unjustly damage an individual's social standing or integrity. This protection extends beyond conventional means of expression to encompass the modern digital sphere under Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE Law), which criminalizes defamatory content shared online or via electronic systems. Together, these two instruments establish a dual-layered framework that governs both traditional and digital expressions of defamation in Indonesia (Criminal Code, 2023).

The Indonesian Criminal Code distinguishes several types of defamation, each characterized by differing degrees of intent, gravity, and form of communication. These categories serve to delineate the boundaries of lawful speech while maintaining the state's interest in preserving personal dignity and social order.

1. Slander (Fitnah)

Slander constitutes the gravest form of defamation under Article 311 of the Criminal Code. It involves the intentional and malicious accusation of another person with false information, often made under the guise of defending one's rights or serving the public interest. When judicial proceedings determine that such an allegation lacks factual foundation and was made with harmful intent, the offense is classified as slander. This crime carries heavier punishment due to its deliberate and injurious nature punishable by up to nine months of imprisonment or a maximum fine reflecting the law's emphasis on accountability for false, reputation-damaging assertions (FajrinAch & Triwijaya, n.d.).

2. Simple or Minor Insult (Penghinaan Ringan)

Article 315 of the Criminal Code addresses acts of public insult, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal conduct that humiliates another person before others. These may include the use of abusive language, ridicule, or degrading gestures. Although considered less severe than slander, such acts remain punishable as they infringe upon personal dignity and disrupt public civility. Beyond interpersonal insults, the law extends heightened protection to state leaders under Articles 134, 136, and 137, which criminalize offensive expressions directed at the President or Vice President. Violations of these provisions can lead to imprisonment for up to six years, underscoring the symbolic importance placed on protecting national institutions. This tiered protection system illustrates Indonesia's layered approach to insult-related offenses, distinguishing between

harm against individuals and affronts against the state's highest offices (Pardosi & Rahaditya, 2022).

3. Libel (Pencemaran Tertulis)

Libel involves defamatory acts expressed through written, printed, or otherwise recorded materials, including digital publications, online posts, or visual images. Unlike spoken slander, libel is regarded as more serious because of its permanence and capacity for broad dissemination. Written accusations can easily circulate and persist, thereby inflicting more enduring harm on an individual's reputation. Article 310(2) of the Criminal Code recognizes this permanence by prescribing more stringent penalties for libelous acts, emphasizing the heightened responsibility attached to written communication.

4. False Reporting or Deceptive Complaint (Laporan Palsu)

Article 317 criminalizes the intentional submission of false information or complaints to authorities or public officials that result in damage to another person's honor or dignity. This offense includes both direct acts of deceitful reporting and indirect participation, such as directing others to falsify information or documentation. The provision seeks to prevent the misuse of law enforcement mechanisms for personal revenge or manipulation, ensuring that the justice system remains free from malicious exploitation.

5. False Allegation or Fabrication of Evidence (Rekayasa Bukti Palsu)

The final form of defamation is governed by Article 318 of the Criminal Code, which penalizes the fabrication of evidence or manipulation of facts intended to falsely accuse another person of a criminal offense. Unlike ordinary false reporting, this form of defamation involves a deliberate effort to construct or alter evidence to mislead authorities and the public. Because it directly undermines judicial integrity and can lead to wrongful prosecution or incarceration, this offense is treated with the utmost severity. By criminalizing such deceit, Article 318 functions as a safeguard against the intentional corruption of justice and the exploitation of legal institutions for personal vendettas.

In summary, Indonesia's defamation framework encompasses a spectrum of offenses ranging from verbal insult to fabricated accusations all intended to uphold societal order and individual dignity. However, critics argue that the broad and sometimes ambiguous formulation of these provisions, particularly when combined with the expansive reach of the ITE Law, risks curtailing legitimate expression and public criticism. As such, the continuing challenge lies in balancing the constitutional right to free speech with the legal protection of personal reputation in a democratic and justice-based manner (Guillén Nieto, 2020).

Indonesia's Defamation Framework in the Context of International Human Rights Standards

Indonesia is a State Party to all nine-core international human rights treaties, reflecting its strong formal commitment to uphold universal human rights principles within its domestic legal system. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (United Nations Treaty Body Database, n.d.).

In addition, Indonesia has acceded to several optional protocols, such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Indonesia is under obvious international duties as a result of its long ratification record to make sure that its domestic laws, including its defamation framework, adhere to international human rights standards, especially those pertaining to freedom of expression and the right to reputation. (The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Directorate, 2025) Every person is guaranteed the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate information and ideas of all sorts, as well as the freedom to hold opinions without hindrance, according to Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. However, the same article's third paragraph permits limitations only where permitted by law and required to preserve others' rights or reputations, national security, public order, or public health and morality (Bresner, 2014). This balancing principle is crucial for assessing the compatibility of Indonesia's defamation laws, both under the Criminal Code and the Law on Electronic Information and Transactions, with international human rights norms.

Indonesia's defamation laws, which were strengthened in the digital age and carried over from colonial law, have frequently come under fire for criminalizing speech that ought to be protected by civil remedies or protected speech. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has repeatedly stated that criminal defamation laws are incompatible with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights when they are applied in a way that stifles free speech or stifles criticism of public officials. This is in contrast to the ongoing use of criminal penalties for defamation, including imprisonment (Putra & Tomain, 2024).

As far as human rights are concerned, Indonesia's adherence to these nine accords requires it to gradually align its domestic legislation with global norms of fairness, equity, and freedom of speech. In addition to bringing Indonesia into compliance with its treaty duties, amending the defamation legislation in light of these international commitments will preserve individual dignity, advance a legal culture based on justice and human rights, and increase democratic accountability (Tampubolon, 2024).

a. The Universal Guarantee of Freedom of Expression under International Law

As will be covered below, freedom of expression is the foundation of democracy and human rights since it

guarantees open communication, accountability, and the free flow of ideas necessary for social progress and fairness.

1. Fundamental Right to Freedom of Expression

A democratic society cannot function without freedom of expression, which is a fundamental component of human rights. This idea is supported by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was approved by the UN General Assembly and states that everyone has the freedom to express their thoughts without hindrance (United Nations General Assembly, 1948).

Additionally, it ensures the freedom to search for, obtain, and disseminate information and ideas via any media and internationally. This clause highlights how important free speech and intellectual interaction are to both individual liberty and the advancement of democracy as a whole. It is widely accepted that this article has been incorporated into customary international law, which means Indonesia is subject to legal duties. (Voorhoof & Cannie, 2010).

A number of the rights initially stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are expanded upon and given legal effect by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In language that is quite similar to that of the UDHR, Article 19 of the ICCPR reiterates the right to freedom of expression, highlighting its worldwide significance. Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights, and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights are the three main regional human rights documents that also provide this right (Harland, 2000)

These international and regional norms clearly set the expectation that any limitations on the right to free speech, including criminal penalties for defamation, must be specific, reasonable, and in line with democratic values in the context of Indonesia's defamation legislation. To guarantee that reputation protection does not unjustly stifle free speech or public debate, Indonesia's legal system must be in line with these commitments (Erowati, 2019).

2. Freedom of Expression in Relation to the Media

As the primary means by which this right is actually exercised, freedom of expression is especially significant for the media. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has highlighted how the media spreads ideas and information that are relevant to the general population, turning the abstract concept of free expression into a concrete reality (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 1985). The public also has the right to obtain such information, and the press is responsible for disseminating it. The media would be unable to carry out its vital function as a 'public watchdog,' guaranteeing accountability and openness in governance, without this mutually beneficial partnership (Gascón Marcén, 2021).

This idea has been upheld all over the world, notably by the Supreme Court of Japan, which recognized that media coverage of politics is crucial to empowering citizens to exercise their right to information under Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution and make educated judgments (Jitsuvara, 2018).

This emphasizes the necessity for a careful legal balance that protects people's reputations without unreasonably limiting media freedom in the context of Indonesia's defamation laws. Defamation laws that are too harsh or

ambiguous run the risk of stifling journalists and restricting the media's ability to act as a watchdog, which would undermine democratic supervision and the public's right to information (Anshar & Ruslie, 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evolution of Indonesia's defamation law illustrates a continuing struggle between the preservation of authority and the promotion of fundamental freedoms. Rooted in the Dutch colonial legal system, the current framework under the Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana (KUHP) and the Law on Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE Law) reflects an outdated paradigm in which defamation was primarily a mechanism of control rather than a safeguard of dignity. Although Indonesia's 1945 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression through Articles 28E and 28F, the persistence of colonial-era legal concepts and their replication in contemporary legislation has produced a structural inconsistency within the legal order. This inconsistency allows criminal sanctions to coexist with constitutional guarantees of free speech, thereby weakening Indonesia's democratic foundations.

Historically, defamation laws in Indonesia have been instrumentalized by successive regimes to silence dissent and restrict criticism of state authorities, echoing the colonial function of maintaining public order and suppressing indigenous voices. The continuity of these punitive norms has hindered the realization of a justice-oriented legal culture, where law serves to empower citizens rather than constrain their civic participation. In the digital era, the expansion of defamation provisions under the ITE Law has extended this suppression into cyberspace, often resulting in criminalization of online expression and disproportionate punishment for individuals exercising their right to speak freely.

From an international perspective, Indonesia's obligations as a State Party to all nine core human rights conventions particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) require the state to ensure that restrictions on freedom of expression comply with the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality. Article 19 of the ICCPR allows limitations on expression only to protect the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, or public health and morals. The current use of criminal defamation sanctions, however, exceeds these permissible grounds. Both the United Nations Human Rights Committee and regional human rights courts have affirmed that imprisonment for defamation is inconsistent with the democratic value of open debate and that civil remedies should be the preferred means of redress.

Moreover, freedom of expression especially through the media remains a cornerstone of democratic accountability. The media acts as a public watchdog, facilitating transparency and enabling citizens to make informed judgments about political and social affairs. Overbroad defamation laws threaten this vital role, as journalists and activists often face legal intimidation or self-censorship. This undermines not only individual liberties but also the collective right of society to access information. Therefore, the persistence of criminal defamation provisions in Indonesia's legal system represents not merely a legal anachronism but a democratic deficit that weakens public trust, impedes political discourse, and limits journalistic independence.

To align with its constitutional and international obligations, Indonesia must transcend its colonial legal inheritance and reorient its defamation framework toward a rights-based model. The ultimate aim should be to balance the legitimate protection of reputation with the broader imperatives of free expression, transparency, and participatory governance.

Recommendations

The study also presents a set of recommendations and benchmarks to guide policymakers, legal practitioners, and scholars in reforming and evaluating Indonesia's defamation framework.

Decriminalization of Defamation: Indonesia should abolish imprisonment and other criminal sanctions for defamation, both under the Criminal Code and the ITE Law, replacing them with proportionate civil remedies. This reform would conform with international human rights standards and prevent misuse of defamation provisions for political suppression. Civil liability, mediation, or administrative sanctions can effectively address reputational harm without infringing on liberty.

Alignment with International Human Rights Obligations: Legislative reform must explicitly integrate Article 19 of the ICCPR and related General Comment No. 34 of the UN Human Rights Committee, ensuring that any restriction on expression meets the tests of legality, necessity, and proportionality. Indonesia's adherence to these principles would demonstrate its genuine commitment to upholding the international human rights framework it has ratified.

Revision of the ITE Law: The ITE Law should be revised to eliminate vague and overly broad clauses concerning online defamation and insult. Clearer definitions of 'reputation,' 'public interest,' and 'harm' are needed to prevent arbitrary interpretation and selective enforcement. Legal certainty is essential to safeguard digital expression and prevent the criminalization of legitimate criticism.

Judicial Interpretation Consistent with Human Rights Standards: The judiciary should interpret defamation provisions in a manner consistent with constitutional guarantees and Indonesia's international commitments. Constitutional and Supreme Court decisions should establish precedents limiting the scope of criminal defamation and protecting public interest speech, particularly in cases involving criticism of public officials or institutions.

Protection of Journalists and Media Freedom: Special legal safeguards should be introduced to ensure that journalists and media institutions are not subjected to criminal prosecution for reporting on matters of public concern. A press-freedom clause could be incorporated into the defamation law, affirming that good-faith reporting conducted in the public interest cannot constitute a criminal offense.

Public Awareness and Legal Education: The government, civil society, and academic institutions should collaborate to raise awareness about the difference between unlawful defamation and protected speech. Educating citizens on

their rights and obligations under both domestic and international law will promote a culture of responsible communication and mutual respect.

Institutional Reform and Oversight: An independent oversight mechanism comprising legal experts, journalists, and human rights advocates should be established to monitor the application of defamation laws and investigate potential abuses. Regular review and publication of enforcement data would enhance transparency and accountability in the justice system.

Balancing Reputation and Free Speech: Future legal reforms should adopt a restorative, rather than punitive, approach to reputation protection. Mechanisms such as the right of reply, public correction, or mediation could restore dignity to the injured party while preserving the speaker's right to express opinions in good faith.

In sum, transforming Indonesia's defamation framework from a punitive to a justice-based model is vital for consolidating democracy and protecting human rights. By harmonizing national laws with international standards, Indonesia can reaffirm its constitutional values, ensure media independence, and foster an environment where freedom of expression thrives alongside respect for individual reputation.

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