

Underage drivers rule the road by night

“It’s not that hard once you’ve got it moving,” says Andi Ilham as he powers a lurching Metro Mini at high speed down a Jakarta street late at night.

The No. 75 bus that he drives most nights, plying the popular route between Blok M and Pasar Minggu in South Jakarta, is one of a fleet of 13 that belongs to a distant relative, through whom Andi got the job. He says he started out as a conductor on one of the Metro Minis, and gradually learned how to drive the heavy, smoke-belching bus.

Neatly dressed in a button-down checked shirt and jeans, and wearing closed shoes, Andi is not your typical Metro Mini driver. That’s because he’s only 16 years old.

Too young to apply for a driver’s license or even an ID card — the minimum age for both is 17 — Andi has been driving Metro Minis since he was 15.

He claims to be one of a growing number of underage sopir tembak — illegal drivers who fill in for the regular drivers, usually at night, when the streets are less crowded and the police not as likely to pull buses over for traffic infractions.

While no government figures are available, the claim may hold water. When the Jakarta Globe visited Blok M, Senen and Manggarai bus terminals over several nights last week, many of the Metro Mini and Kopaja drivers admitted to being between 14 and 17 years old.

These drivers, none of whom had a license, operate buses serving some of the most frequented routes, including Blok M to Ciledug, Manggarai to Pasar Minggu and Senen to Lebak Bulus.

Powerless to act

Andi sees no problem with being both an illegal and unlicensed bus driver, saying it has provided him with an occupation ever since he dropped out of school at 14.

He now makes Rp 60,000 to Rp 170,000 (\$6 to \$17) a night, depending on how many passengers he picks up and how many trips he can make.

No matter his take, though, he still has to kick back a fixed sum of Rp 120,000 to the bus’s regular driver, which he says is why he has no qualms about speeding or packing the bus beyond its stated capacity of 37 passengers in order to maximize his earnings for the night.

He has vague plans to enroll in a vocational school this year or next, but in the meantime is content with driving a bus.

Another driver, Roy, now 17, has been driving the No. 75 Metro Mini since he was 15. He occasionally also moonlights on the No. 20 bus, running from Blok M to Lebak Bulus in South Jakarta.

Unlike Andi, Roy is still in school, and says he only drives during school holidays to earn a bit of money. Tri Unggul, the Jakarta Transportation Office supervisor at Blok M Terminal, says the authorities are well aware of the presence of underage drivers, but can do very little to stop them.

“We’re supposed to crack down on them, but they just keep popping up again, so what can we do?” he says with a gesture of exasperation.

Feigning ignorance

The police also know about the problem, but choose to look the other way and profit by it, says Bajul, 22, who has been driving the No. 75 bus since he was 16.

Every day, he says, the officers patrolling Blok M Terminal can see the underage drivers at work, but let them keep driving in exchange for Rp 5,000 for every trip they make from the terminal.

"The cops are in it for the money too, in their case just a few thousand," he says.

"They know that a lot of drivers are underage and used to be conductors."

Sulaiman, a patrol officer at the terminal, declined to comment about the issue and instead referred the Jakarta Globe to a police post outside the nearby Blok M Square shopping arcade.

Over there, Marsono, the duty officer, claimed he was unaware that underage drivers were being allowed to operate out of the terminal.

"I didn't know that. All I know is that you have to have a driver's license and an ID card in order to be allowed to drive a bus," he said.

He added that he spent most of his time inside the police post, and that Sulaiman, the patrol officer that the Jakarta Globe spoke to earlier, would know more about the issue.

"I don't spend a lot of time in the field, and all I can say is that if there are underage bus drivers around, then they should be stopped because it's dangerous," Marsono said.

Risking public safety

Officials much higher up than the two police officers appear to be just as clueless about the problem.

Linda Amalia Sari Gumelar, the minister for women's empowerment and child protection, expressed shock when asked about the growing number of underage bus drivers operating on some of the busiest routes in Jakarta.

"I didn't know about that," she said when asked for comment.

"I hope those kids aren't being made to do very risky work."

She added that under a 2007 government regulation, it was up to each provincial administration to be responsible for child protection policies in their respective jurisdictions.

Seto Mulyadi, head of the board of patrons of the National Commission for Child Protection (Komnas PA), concedes that addressing the problem requires dealing with highly complex social issues including poverty and lack of education, but stresses the importance of immediate law enforcement measures to ensure the safety of commuters riding the buses.

"It's high time that the local administration, in this case the transportation office, worked with the police to act seriously on this matter," he says.

"There needs to be stringent law enforcement so that we don't see more underage drivers risking people's safety, which should be the No. 1 priority."

For Icha Rastikan, 23, who takes the Blok M-Lebak Bulus bus daily, the problem of underage and often reckless drivers is a very real one.

"I tend to be uneasy when I see a clearly underage guy at the wheel, because they're very volatile on the road," she says, adding that she often sees them after 9 p.m.

"They tend to weave in and out of traffic, and they're always speeding."

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