

Identifying with Freedom

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Map of Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Identifying with Freedom



Tony Day

By now, Is knew the society she was entering. She had found a circle of acquaintances far wider than the circle of her brothers, sisters and parents. She now occupied a defined position in that society: as a woman, as a typist in a government office, as a free individual. She had become a new human being, with new understanding, new tales to tell, new perspectives, new attitudes, new interests—newnesses that she had managed to pluck and assemble from her acquaintance[s]. And all of this proceeded, untouched, amid the suffering of day-to-day existence.¹

The essays in this forum offer sharply focused and critical perspectives on the consequences, both intended and unforeseen, of reform in Indonesia since the resignation of President Suharto on 21 May 1998. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, a huge archipelago of fascinating diversity and complexity, is now poised to assume a leadership role in Southeast Asia, with China on the rise and the moribund Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN) coming back to life (Sheridan 2005). Until recently, little about Indonesia has been coming to the attention of North America and Europe, the heartland of colonial empires new and old, except when terrorists or natural disasters, such as the tsunami of 26 December 2004, strike with deadly and newsworthy effect. Now, as former President Jimmy Carter told the assembled mourners at the funeral of Coretta Scott King on 7 February 2006, an event watched by millions on television around the world, Indonesia is a democracy. It is on the front line of George W. Bush's 'war on terror'. Not coincidentally, the United States has resumed arming Indonesia's military, still fresh from its brutal war against an independence movement in the province of Aceh and its genocidal repression of freedom in East Timor.

The overriding issue in Indonesia today, therefore, as a new age of democracy, American militaristic intervention, and Chinese economic dominance begins to dawn in Southeast Asia, is 'freedom'—what it means, who defines it, how it is exercised, where it will lead. In 1945, young revolutionaries, like the character Is in the passage from a short story by Indonesia's most famous writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer ([1952] 1989: 182), quoted above, were "*gila-politik*" (politics-crazy), as they struggled for both personal and national "independence" (*kemerdekaan*).² More than half a century later, after 32 years of authoritarian rule under Suharto and his New Order (1966–1998), Indonesians are crazy about many kinds of freedom (*kebebasan*)—freedoms that are subjective and sexual as well as public and political.³ The essays in this collection examine some of the manifestations and paradoxes of *kemerdekaan/kebebasan* in Indonesia today. They suggest that Indonesians are endeavoring to show the world what democracy will look like in a uniquely plural, Asian nation, one in which Islam is dominant but not hegemonic, in which support is

strong for both a secular state and a society that is multicultural and free.

The forum opens with five essays that examine the cultural dimensions of freedom in Indonesia. The essays by Boellstorff, Brenner, and Robinson engage with the question of freedom in an area that is foundational to the construction of both individual and national identity in the globalized era generally: gendered subjectivity. Boellstorff argues that since the 1970s, *gay* and *lesbi* men and women have constructed Indonesian identities for themselves, with the help of the mass media, especially television and films.⁴ This process, he claims, might appear to work in opposition to the heterosexual norms propagated by the New Order state but is in fact deeply intertwined with these norms and their assumptions regarding identity, community, and national belonging. Boellstorff (2005: 87) calls this a process of “dubbing culture.” Although identifying with foreign examples of gay culture, *gay* and *lesbi* people “are completely Indonesian, but to be ‘completely Indonesian’ requires thinking of one’s position in a transnational world” (ibid.: 81–88). Indonesian gays, Boellstorff suggests, are not so much Southeast Asian participants in a global, middle-class gay movement fostered by the Western media as they are committed, cosmopolitan Indonesian nationalists who insist that gender freedom is fundamental to what being Indonesian actually means.

The question of Indonesian gay identity is linked to the struggle for gender equality in marriage. Under the New Order, heterosexual, monogamous marriage became the only form of marital union to receive the full blessing of the state, a strategy that facilitated the containment of an Islamic movement on the rise as well as the revolutionary potential of women’s emancipation. “[I]deological control over women and the family was vital to maintaining control over the nation,” writes Suzanne Brenner (2005: 96). Since the late 1800s, in fact, the marriage question

has been one of the most important and disputed areas of debate over how to construct a modern Indonesia. For the early nationalists, the struggle against arranged marriage and the social stigma attached to inter-racial unions was integral to the striving for emancipation from colonial rule (Foulcher and Day 2002: 49–60, 85–143; Siegel 1997: 54–114). Some also argued that a strong, independent Indonesian nation should be built on the foundation of secure, monogamous marriages and that the practice of polygamy would hinder its development into a modern society.⁵ For the majority Muslims of Indonesia, marriage has long been an issue where a battle line between religious law (*shari'a*) and the secular Indonesian state has been drawn. In the midst of this struggle, Indonesian women have become emblematic, not just of national and Islamic identity, but of what it means to be a modern individual of any gender (Brenner 2005: 116). With deft irony, Brenner's essay shows how democratization since 1998 has also stirred up new waves of patriarchy in Indonesia, as evidenced by resurgent support for polygamy. There is now also a strong possibility that conservative *shari'a* restrictions on women may be introduced at the local level in the newly decentralized archipelago. Brenner's most important point, however, is that, viewed comparatively against the histories of regime change elsewhere in the world, the resurgence of patriarchy in Indonesia has less to do with Islam than with the unintended social consequences of the destruction of authoritarian regimes. Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, like Christian fundamentalism in the United States, is in part a class-based reaction to new (im)moralities and social dislocations brought about by mediatized, global capitalism. Once again, as in the days of the New Order, the family has become a critical battleground in the fight for freedom.

Indonesian women appear to be in no need of paternalistic intervention, however. Robinson records and celebrates

the activism of Indonesian middle-class Muslim women who are themselves making use of the rich resources of the Islamic tradition, in all of its local and global expressions, to argue their own case for equality and freedom in the sight of men and God. Robinson's argument goes to the heart of what is wrong with 'the war on terror': its violent, radically freedom-destroying, neo-colonial reductionism. As many have argued, a healthy pluralism of Islamic views is alive and well in contemporary Indonesia, even in regions such as Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia, where long-simmering violence has been given reductive religious labeling linking it to 'terror'.⁶ Brenner and Robinson also implicitly raise a question. Will middle-class Muslim women continue to lead the way in brokering new freedoms for Indonesian women generally, or will they falter in the face of continuing, if not growing, social inequality in Indonesia, conditions that foster fundamentalist and paternalistic rejection of freedom around the world?

The essays by Errington and Garcia shed light on the crucial, ongoing role of language and print capitalism in the making of modern Indonesia, a subject that the writings of Benedict Anderson have made familiar to students of nationalism everywhere. While it is true that from the late nineteenth century onwards, the Malay language and its Indonesian variant, Bahasa Indonesia, have served admirably as a linguistic medium for the formation of a strong national identity, in which secular, Islamic, modern, and cosmopolitan elements have continued to be synthesized in dynamically creative ways (Anderson 1996; Laffan 2003: 142–180), Indonesian, as Errington suggests, is a problematic linguistic tool for the construction and maintenance of an independent identity in the global age. Errington argues forcefully that its very 'un-nativeness' is a strength, evidenced by the amazing role of Indonesian as a language of anti-Indonesian resistance and now as a lingua franca in multi-lingual Timor Leste, the former East

Timor. Yet this very strength may also contain a weakness. Indonesian's lack of any 'natural' connection with a powerful cultural center, either indigenous or foreign, makes it easy to colonize and dominate (Foulcher and Day 2002: 4–9; see Jennifer Lindsay's comments in note 9). As Garcia shows, the writings of the latest Indonesian literary movement, known as Generation 98, reveal that Indonesian, successively colonized by the Dutch and then the New Order state, is still being liberated for use by private Indonesians. It is hardly surprising that in tandem with their struggle for freedom in other areas of private and public life, women writers are the ones who are taking the lead in the process of literary emancipation (see Ayu 2005; Utami 2005). But how many other Indonesians are in fact participating in this ongoing revolution? How many readers worldwide are even faintly aware that it is taking place?

Increasingly more, but overall still very little, fiction or non-fiction moves either in or out of Indonesia via the medium of the national language, which until roughly the eighteenth century served as the major lingua franca for the trading world of all Southeast Asia. Today that lingua franca is English, and Indonesian gives its speakers only limited access to thought worlds beyond its own insular shores. Arguably, given the problems facing readerships and publishers examined by Garcia, radio and television, both now broadcasting programs in regional languages as well as Indonesian, are playing the leading role in stimulating Indonesians to 'dub culture', in ways that may also lead to the strengthening of regional as well as national and transnational identities (Jurriens 2002; Sakai 2004; Widodo 2002). Encouraged by political decentralization, the dissemination of rediscovered linguistic differences may encourage the formation of multiple regional nationalisms that will compete with a unitary Indonesia and its national language as primary sources of imagined community. Be that as it may, Garcia suggests that the right to

free expression in any medium or language is a fragile one, threatened by shadow economies and oppressive forces that subvert law and order, poorly guaranteed in any case by Indonesian law, in an increasingly politically decentralized and culturally fragmented nation-state.

Just what the words 'nation', 'state', and the hyphen that connects them might now mean is the central theme in the last five essays in our collection. Dove examines a nation that appears to be fragmenting, violently, into warring ethnic communities, a process that is being encouraged by political decentralization, legislated into law in 1999. Ethnicity was all but ignored in analyses of Indonesian politics prior to 1998, even though ethnic categories, 'reinvented' and elaborated into 'customary laws' (*adat*), were an important tool of Dutch colonial rule, and the dominance of the ethnic Javanese during Suharto's regime was widely resented by other ethnic groups (Suharto was himself Javanese, as was most of the military and government elite). But Dove shows how the Dayak of Borneo have turned to ethnicity to account for their violent actions, for many of the same reasons that nationalists everywhere have identified themselves as members of what Anderson has famously termed an "imagined community" (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 57). By forming a community based on ethnicity, Dayak empower themselves to act as free agents rather than remain victims of neo-colonial control and objects of ethnographic (mis)interpretation. In adopting a cultural 'counter-narrative' to explain and take responsibility for their own violence, Dayak exercise a freedom of self-definition that may ultimately strengthen, even though it appears to threaten, the basis for national community, one that becomes truly plural in its unity, as expressed by the national motto in the Old Javanese language, "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika," literally, "Divided into parts, it is united." From the days of colonialism until the end of the New Order in 1998, cultural pluralism, like the national language