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▷ South-South Exchange Programme for
Research on the History of Development

Goenawan Mohamad

On the Idea of “Indonesia”

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1. ON THE IDEA OF “INDONESIA”

It has been more than a year, since I spoke in Tasmania, of all places, about what it means being Indonesian, living in a cataclysmic time, a time when different religious groups committed large-scale atrocities against each other in several islands of the Malukus, when gruesome TV footages told stories of native Kalimantan *sukus* slaughtering Maduranese immigrants, when government soldiers shot a great number of angry citizens in Aceh and in West Papua, labelling them, or not labelling them, as “separatists”. The frenzy has generated widespread feeling of hatred and sense of loss among people at large. The nation’s mood was grim, and sad, and indignant. The Yugoslavian break-up, with much blood and iron (and Yugoslavia was always closer to the Indonesian understanding of the world than say, France) was sitting like a nightmare in the mind of many concerned people in this vast, intricate, perpetually precarious, archipelago.

During this period I met with some members of the Free Aceh Movement, as part of my job to disseminate stories of Indonesian military’s violation of human rights in various places in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh. During these meetings I learned about their harrowing, drawn-out struggle to have their own country, I learned about their pain, their hope and their ideas, and I began to have the feeling that someday these people will carry the day, and Indonesia will have no more Aceh – something which somehow made me very, very sad. Months later I went to Wamena, a beautiful but listless, cheerless frontier-town in West Papua. Disguised myself, oddly, as a Jesuit, I met with a group of people jailed and tortured by the police – people, some of them are educated members of the local community, whose only crime was trying to hoist their flag, their Papuan flag, next to the red-and-white, the national flag, my flag, on a day they wanted to commemorate. Talking with them in a the small, quiet, Wamena prison, I noticed how strong was their belief in what they were doing, a belief uttered in the thick of their low-voiced expressions of rage, a rage that called their ‘them’ ‘Indonesia’, instead of ‘the

government.’ On my return, I began to wonder why should this piece of geography, called “Indonesia”, which was essentially a historical accident, cover this area, so distant from, and so ignored by, the rest of the country where most people live. It was a disturbing piece of thought, I must say, especially because Papua, the land where my parents were interned as political exiles in the 1920s, and where one of my brothers was born, has always been a part of my family history.

But what is “Indonesia”, anyway? For decades it has become a self-naturalizing border of ideas, practices, desires, symbols. But my impression is that it is an idea that members of the Free Aceh Movement whom I met, and the Wamenese political prisoners who told me of their dream, do not believe.

It is an idea that began with, to use the famous Renan’s maxim, “forgetting.” “Forgetting”, Renan said in his famous lecture of 1882, “is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.”¹ As I pointed out in my Tasmanian talk, Renan’s argument takes a point, like Anderson’s more elaborate thesis after him, that nations are not determined by language, race, geography, or religion. “A nation is... a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future”, he said.

Any Indonesian who remembers the 1928 “Sumpah Pemuda” (the Pledge of Indonesian Youths) and solemnly sings the *Satu Nusa Satu Bangsa* (One Country, One People) hymn would readily acknowledge this. As the legend has it, on October 28, 1928, young people from different *daerahs* and different *sukus* became proponents of Indonesian nationalism by “forgetting” their primordial heritage, or, to be more precise, by putting it under the rug for a significant while. They pledged to make themselves parts of a new entity, or an “imagined community”, called “Indonesia”. This bracketing of their old locality of the self was the beginning of a myth and a power.

¹ The lecture, “What Is a Nation?” is one of the essays published in Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-22.

But whose myth, and whose power? The Acehnese and the Papuanese whom I met do not think they are theirs. In fact, in a meeting in Stockholm, where the Free Aceh Movement has its most important foreign base, one of its leading supporters confided to me that Indonesia should first break up in different countries, and later these new countries could negotiate to form a new union, as a way to create peace and justice in the archipelago.

To my regret, I forgot to ask, and he did not volunteer, how their borders should be drawn, or how each country, particularly Aceh, will define its "nation", or its citizenship, and how it will avoid reproducing Indonesia's *bhineka tunggal ika*, or "unity in diversity", formula. In the village of Tablanusu, a small island several hundred kilometres away from Jayapura, West Papua, I heard an answer that could well be the leitmotif of many "separatist" movements, probably including the one in Aceh: i.e. a deep resentment against the "Javanese" – whatever the word means: "Yes," said the village chief, "the *pendatangs* (should I translate them as "immigrants"?) are welcome to stay. But they should respect the culture of the indigenous people, and they should not stay for an unlimited time."

**

Sometimes I wonder what should the alternative of 1928 *Sumpah Pemuda* be. Nationalism has its pathological bent, part of "darker modernity" as Anderson puts it. Both the "broom" and the "theme-park" allegories, prevailing especially during the New Order – allegories that I described in the paper that has been distributed to you — share something "nationalist" in common: they disguise indeterminacy. They tend to justify the desire to view a community as an architectural edifice, and end up practising exclusion of "the parasite", of divergences, contaminations, impurities. I think it is against this trend that Hatta, the first Vice President of the Republic, warned the nation from turning the ideology of *persatuan* (national unity) into *persatean* (treating every one like pieces of meat held fast together by a satay stick).

But to view the idea of *persatuan*, or Indonesian nationalism synchronically, as something with a linear and single genealogy, is to lose sight of the contingent nature of its history. To put the idea of "Indonesia" framed in the earlier part of the 20th century merely as an intellectual project of forgetting, or a dream hatched in the mind of ideologues of an empire without history – an empire designed to homogenize the national future, and obliterate the national past – is to leave behind the poisoned soil that nurtured the dream.

A large number of literature about the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century are stories of the way the Dutch colonial administration set down its policy of cultivating "bourgeois bodies and racial selves," to borrow Ann Stoler's words in her excellent study of "the colonial order of things."²

To be sure, this was more an expression of vulnerability than of omnipotence, and the outcome was not always coherent. All the same, the colonial society that was created was not only marred by "visual markers of difference", but also impaired by "the relationship between visible characteristics and invisible properties, outer form and inner essence."³ It was reduced into entities wrapped up and segregated by categories decided by the authority.

In the meantime, native elites, trying to put right their deflated prestige, asserted their version of identity politics, and by doing so, legitimised the colonial politics of exclusion: thus, as Pemberton points out, a discourse on "Java", promoted by one of the noble houses of Surakarta, in Central Java, began to flourish in Javanese texts, and as Florida suggests, Dutch Javanologists and conservative native elites produced the idea of "pure high Javanese culture"⁴ – something that was not always

² Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 95-136.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ John Pemberton, *On the Subject of 'Java'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Nancy Florida, *Writing the Past, Inscribing the Future: History as Prophecy in Colonial Java* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995). See also Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire, Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 9.

acceptable to Javanese from different places and different, lower, classes.

Against such a mottled background, afflicting the colonized with day-to-day wounds, the Indonesian nationalist movement was born. It was, and still is, a creature with a medley of voices. But all share the conflicts and the tension of the colonial discourse: while one side tried to impose, to use the words of Edward Said, the “panoptical vision of domination,” demanding for identity; the other side formed a counter pressure insisting on difference; while with a zeal to classify the colonizer wanted to construct authorized versions of otherness, implying control and conquest, the colonized opted for change, emphasizing the freedom of the particular. The idea of modernity, of progress, and the desire for “forgetting” – you can discern them in educational texts published in the 20s, intellectual and political arguments of the 30s, and the lyrical poetry of the late 40s and early 50s — are basically expressions of desire for this freedom.

The outcome of these conflicts and tension was not necessarily a stark dichotomy; there were negotiations and compromises that Homi Bhaba calls “the ambivalence of mimicry.”⁵ In fact, many expressions of nationalist project of modernity have noticeable traits of this ambivalence; you can find them in the use of Kartini’s letters in the nationalist discourse, for example, or in the promotion *kroncong* musical performances instead of the *gamelan*, or in insistence of using the Indonesian language at schools and in the popular media. They all articulate “those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority.”⁶

Somehow, this reminds me of Nyai Ontosoroh, the heroine of Pramudya Ananta Toer’s *Earth of Mankind* (*Bumi Manusia*). Her story is the story of Indonesia, which is about a struggle to overcome various kinds of domination in a colonial space: the race-based hierarchy imposed by the white, the ancient familial

⁵ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man”, in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, pp. 153-160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

patriarchy of the Javanese, and the ideology of submission of the lower orders. In her case, the whole quest is tantamount to forgetting, with vengeance, her subjugated past and her previous site in the colonial environment, by learning to write and read, acquiring Dutch, mastering the skill of trade, accumulating wealth, sending her children to good school, and remaining aloof to the claims of society. In a way she succeeded; she gained a certain degree of privilege, and maintained an interiority that allowed her to be herself most of the time. In short, a self-respect, or it could also be a half-concealed grudge about the way the colonial world created her.

But who was she or what was she? She was a *nyai*. And *nyais* or concubines were not *totok* (pure white), not mestizos, and could even be said not to be native. "They are secret mountains", the hero of the novel says, which could well be a short description of people who lived (either by design or by default) on the shifting cultural and social borders.

Therefore a nation is a mixed bag, and basically it is a process of commutation of different agencies. To be sure, there are voices refuting this metaphor, not only in Aceh, West Papua, Java, Bali and other Indonesian localities, but also in other parts of the world, voices like Solzhenitsyn who wants Russia and France to switch the national emphasis from "forgetting" to "remembering" – insisting on the respect for traditions and orthodoxy, a longing to return to the land, a privileging of "below" against a disfiguring and artificial "above".⁷

The Solzhenitsynian appeal (like that of Johann Gottfried von Herder in the 18th century) has its attractive side, especially in a time when there is little confidence in the universality of things, in the project of modernity, and in the virtue of strong, homogenizing, state. However, the Solzhenitsynian appeal writes off the legitimacy of viewing a nation as a process, something like an "empty signifier," and not as something with a definite identity or presence. To fill in the "empty signifier" is where the

⁷ In Pierre Birnbaum, *The Idea of France* (New York: Hill and Fang, 2001), pp. 3-24.

political, meaning a democracy with an acute sense of limitation, takes place; this is perhaps the best way to make a nation survive.

Will it make Indonesia survive? Today, under Megawati's presidency, the mood is a little bit different. In Aceh, murderous struggle for control is still going on, and in many other *daerahs*, assertive local voices remain clamorous. But Indonesia, more or less in its old, bulky shape, has "lumbered along... a bundle of parochialisms that somehow adheres."

The words belong to Clifford Geertz.⁸ It is interesting to note that he describes Indonesia's survival, if you will, as the outcome of its own curious form of "cultural politics": It is "less consensus that is at issue than a viable way of doing without it", Geertz says. It is a "working misunderstanding". You may suspect that Geertz, who has always a fascinating way to articulate his thinking, is trying to be elegantly optimistic. But I would like to interpret him as endorsing what I would like to see as a legitimate vision: a process of creating a community that can remain a place of commonality and yet lacking, wanting, and therefore stay open.

In short, it is an Indonesia with a large measure of humility.

⁸ In *Available Light, Anthropological Reflections in Philosophical Topics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 255.

2. LOOKING FOR LIBERAL ISLAM: AN INDONESIAN STORY

I was in New York on September 11, 2001. I was still in New York in the wake of The Attack – some five days after they destroyed the Twin Towers and killed more than 4000 people. I saw how the City suffered, and felt its agony. But during the terror, the grief, and the anger pervading the rest of the country, I was particularly struck by what I saw as God’s return to the public arena. People spoke, sang, or scribbled words calling His name, trusting His mercy, affirming His power. Religion is no longer a mere “experience”, something related to, as Williams James puts it, “the individual pinch of destiny”. Religion has become, once again, a restorative site of social solace, and a rallying cry among the indignant. And this applies to countries far away from the United States, countries in which God has different names and is beseeched for different aims. I think it is about such phenomenon that Clifford Geertz, modifying James’s thesis, speaks of “personal inflections of religious engagement that reach far beyond the personal into the conflicts and dilemmas of our age.”¹

This may tell us something about our time. Probably for this reason, the anthropologist persuades us to learn more about this “vast remaking of judgment and passion.” This “vast remaking,” however, can blur one’s view of different “personal inflections of religious engagement.” On that account, Geertz suggests that we need “the sort of inquiry” that James pioneered, i.e. “the sort of openness to the foreign and unfamiliar, the particular and the incidental.”

I cannot agree more. In this belligerent time, when words like “clash of civilizations” are running amok from the academia to the market place, “the particular and the incidental” are lost. One’s structure of perception grows more simplified. To sharply mark the “us” and the “them” is part of one’s defence mechanism.

¹ In *Available Light, Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton and Toronto: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 185.

Some people even have had an apology for it; they call it “strategic essentialism.”

Today, such “essentialism” is not only conceived and forged by a knowledge/power nexus running through established centres of discourse. More than three decades after the publication of Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, we have begun to notice that the desire to comprehend (thus to master) the Other is as acute as the urge to identify oneself. Today, the “Orient” is not only a product of a Euro-centric vision. The celebration, albeit short-lived, of “Asian values” is a case in point. The notion of “Islam” as an imposing, immutable, coherence is not necessarily something imagined by a Samuel Huntington. The credo extolling the *ummah*, or the great trans-historical community of the faithful, as a single voice, seeps through a vast range of Islamic thinking. You can discern it in the works of Mohammed Iqbal in India before the Partition as well as in the ideology of al-Qaeda, the 21st century fighters and assassins. The suppression of difference by identity takes place in every stage of today’s politics of representation, regardless the actors and their geography. “Gone is dispersion, gone are the byroads! All things will come back to their essence,” said the preacher of the Community in the Faith in *The Last Summer of Reason*, a posthumous work by the Algerian poet and novelist Tahar Djaout.² (Djaout, by the way, was reportedly assassinated by an “Islamist” group in the spring of 1993; his was most probably a voice of “dispersion.”)

The purpose of my talk today is to look into cases, or moments, of such “dispersion” – things that have been resisted

² Tahar Djaout, *The Last Summer of Reason*, a novel (St. Paul, Minnesota: Ruminator Books, 2001), p. 4. Djaout was killed as he was leaving his home in Bainem, Algeria. His death was attributed to an Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ group. One of his attackers said that he was murdered because he “wielded a fearsome pen that could have an effect on Islamic sectors.” His posthumous novel is about Boualem Yekker, a small bookshop’s owner, who loves the beauty of people and things and works of literature; the novel begins and ends with Boualem feeling terrorized by Taliban-like “inquisitors” of the ‘Community in the Faith’ who “broke musical instruments, burned rolls of film, slashed the canvases of paintings, reduced sculptures to rubble....”

and repressed by the ideology of the *ummah* (allegorised in the novel as “the Community in the Faith,”), for centuries. My emphasis will be more on the act of “dispersing” than on the forms of the “dispersion,” or to be more precise, on how Muslims, or scattered clusters of Muslims, try to deal with the oppressive nature of the idea of the [Islamic] “essence”. This is an Indonesian story, to be sure; but I believe it has some relevance to broader sphere of experiences, Islamic or otherwise. As I see it, the quest for “liberal Islam” in Indonesia informs us of the difficulty in coming to terms with the Janus-face of modernity, as well as with issues related to contingency and universality; it also tells us something of the politics of faith in a plural world.

But there are two things I would like to clarify before I move further into the subject of my presentation. First is the word “liberal” in the title. Obviously, I put myself more or less on the footsteps of Charles Kurzman, who, following the suggestion of the Indian legal scholar Asaf Ali Asghar Fyze (1899-1981), uses the word and enlarges upon the pioneering works of Binder and Laroui.³ Attentive to Kurzman’s caveats in his excellent introduction to the book (which is a collection of writings by 32 Muslim intellectuals), I will use the concept of “liberal Islam” ‘as only a heuristic device, not a hard-and-fast category.’

Nonetheless, to me, this is different from some of Kurzman’s sources, the people in my story call their views “liberal” with no qualms. The Website of ‘Paramadina’, a Jakarta-based institution chaired by the leading Indonesian Muslim thinker Nurcholish Madjid, announces that theirs is “a liberal Islam discourse.” A group of Muslim writers and activists extensively using the Internet, radio talk shows, syndicated columns and weekly circulars to disseminate their views also call themselves “liberal”; and they confidently explain why they choose the label.

The second thing I think I should explain by the way of my presentation is that what I am going to do is to give you more or less a string of unfinished sketches, since what I am dealing with

³ Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 4.

is a constellation of moving objects. Half of it is basically a journalistic story of “varieties.” Therefore I will try —with no guarantee of success – not to ensnare you with run-of-the-mill Indonesianist’s jargons (*abangan*, *santri*, etc.) and not to swamp you with Indonesian names and acronyms. At the risk of not giving appropriate credit to a number of people who should be mentioned here, for their past and present roles in this story, I prefer to limit the number of heroes and villains, if any, in my presentation. I am not a Tolstoy, and I am not going to deliver you an Indonesian response to *War and Peace*.

It follows that another half of my lecture will be like a cursory reading of predominant issues involving the quest for a ‘liberal Islam’ in Indonesia. For what it’s worth, I believe this is the closest way to grasp, in Geertz’s words again, “the particular and the incidental.”

Let me begin with the story of a young man who got hit, and killed, by a passing motorbike, and left 17 books of dairies in his rented room. His name is Ahmad Wahib. He died in a Jakarta street in 1973. He was a *Tempo* new recruit. As the editor of the magazine, I was among those who arranged his funeral, etc. When we went to his place, to collect and take care of the meagre belongings he left behind, we found the thick diary-books, neatly packed on his table – as if Wahib had prepared a consoling gift for us, in the wake of the tragedy. As things go, it was truly a gift, and not only for his friends. His private notes, all written in long hand, were not just another record of a private life.

Born in 1942 in the island of Madura, east of Java, where traditional Islam found a strong root, Wahib, thanks to his independent-minded father, was the first member of his family sent to the public school of his hometown. In 1961, he left Madura and moved to Central Java, and enrolled in the Department of Physics and Sciences of the Gajah Mada University, in the old town of Yogyakarta. In 1970, he went to Jakarta, for the first time in his life. Months before he died, he worked, unhappily, as a *Tempo* journalist.

As early as 1963, Wahid shone through among his peers. As a university student from a pious Muslim family, he joined HMI (*Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam*, or Muslim Students Association, established in 1947), which was politically one of the most active and most influential student organizations in the 1960s. In no time, Wahib was involved in various, often intense, in-house ideological debates. Ideological and political discussions were then a normal routine among Indonesian students, both on and off-campus. It was the time when Indonesia, under Soekarno's 'Guided Democracy,' was made to follow the road Sukarno chose, which was the Indonesian brand of nationalism-*cum*-Marxism.

It was a very different Indonesia. With a refreshed revolutionary fervour, an all-embracing doctrine of 'Indonesian socialism', an intense political life somewhat similar to Orwellian depiction of 'continuous frenzy', and a state machinery that organized regular sessions of 'indoctrination', Sukarno's Indonesia looked a little bit like Mao's China – just a little bit, since it was arguably much milder and more erratic. All the same, it purged any kind of 'dangerous' thinking. The idea of promoting Islam as an "ideology" was a taboo. The aspiration to create an Islamic state – a long-standing agenda among political Muslims – was illegal. Soekarno and the military banned Masyumi, the biggest Muslim party and the No. 2 winner of the free election of 1955. He put the party's leaders in jail, and the 'modernist' Islam⁴ it represented became a political stigma. The regime labelled Masyumi-kind of people "counter-revolutionary" and "rightist". Naturally, HMI, closely associated with Masyumi and the 'modernist', had to suffer the tag. Constantly harassed and threatened by the politically powerful left-wing student organizations, it had to do a lot of negotiation, and of rethinking — which required a sustained and rigorous theoretical argument.

Wahib, always a thinker, was all prepared to help HMI in the rethinking process. Gradually, with a few other HMI cadres,

⁴ On the historical background of 'modernist' Muslims and their politics in Indonesia, see Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973).

he discovered serious flaws in the idea of Islam as a totalising ideology and as a complete guide to establish a 20th century Islamic state. What made Wahib special was that he allowed himself to grow into, as it were, a “dissident”—or someone who dared to question the inner layers of Islamic system of belief. He was increasingly known as a brilliant, albeit controversial, young intellectual in HMI circle. He was no longer a non-entity. I remember that it was a time when ideas were absolutely important, indeed crucial, and often painful.

During this period Wahib – a short, frail, unassuming, sensitive, young man who always spoke with a polite smile – scribbled down his pain, his doubts and his ideas in diaries. Djohan Effendi, his close friend and ally who was one of the earliest persons who dared to debunk the basic tenets of HMI’s political thinking, knew about the existence of the diaries; he knew that they would make a rich and important text documenting a young Muslim’s mind struggling to overcome the embarrassing inertia of Islamic thinking after decades of ‘modernist’ discourse. He wanted to make them accessible to the public.

After discussing the plan with Wahib’s family, he sent the dairies to an editor and a publisher. It took eight years to get them published in a book form, but apparently the delay did not really matter.⁵ Heffner, who, in his *Civil Islam*, gives a good summary of Wahib’s behind-the-scene role in the new ‘Reform’ (*Pembaharuan*) movement, informs us that the dairies remain ‘a best seller to this day in Indonesia.’⁶ Maybe they do, though I am not so sure. The book certainly had provoked all kinds of response. In mid-1980s, there was reportedly an attempt, by the Department of Religious Affairs, to pressure the publisher not to reprint it; I have not seen it in bookstores since its third print in 1983. But

⁵ The book, edited by Djohan Effendi and Ismed Natsir, titled *Pergolakan Pemikiran Islam, Catatan Harian Ahmad Wahib* (Upheaval in Islamic Thought, Diaries of Ahmad Wahid), was first printed in Jakarta by LP3ES, a non-governmental institution for social and economic research run by former HMI cadres, in 1981.

⁶ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 254.

while there was an influential group portraying Wahib as a heretic,⁷ the book has obviously reached a significant number of interested readers. Two leading members of the new generation of liberal Muslims, who were not even in their teens when Wahib died, told me that Wahib's book was among their earliest introduction to a wider world of literature.

As a record of diverse thoughts and notes, it covers a wide variety of topics. However, it has one underlying élan: it is an expression of an intensely questioning mind that breaks every taboo, and by doing so, breaks a new ground for further debates on the idea of 'Islam.' Wahib was not without inner turmoil. In an entry dated May 18, 1969 he wrote: "Lord, I come to Thee not only in moments when I love Thee, but also in moments I am not faithful to Thee and misunderstand Thee, in moments I seem to rebel against Thy Power. In doing so, Lord, I wish my love for Thee return as it was before."⁸

However, Wahib's dairies are by and large not poetic paragraphs conveying his private struggle with the faith. What is most fascinating about the book is that it is a first-hand account of how an idea so novel gained a foothold and won new supporters through basic organizational politics. Despite Wahib's later disillusion with HMI, he and his friends, especially Djohan Effendi, succeeded in disseminating their ideas by lobbying for support, making use of available HMI cadre training sessions, taking the lead in in-house discussions, and competing for strategic positions.⁹

In September 1969, exhausted and disillusioned, Wahib and Djohan quitted the organization; but the agenda they championed was adopted as HMI's new platform. It was basically an agenda based on seeing Islam not as an "ideology", meaning an immutable, totalising vision distinctly different from other, opposing

⁷ *Ibid.* See also Robert W. Hefner, 'Print Islam: Mass Media and Ideological Rivalries in Indonesian Islam,' in *Indonesia*, 64 (October 1977), pp. 77-103.

⁸ Djohan Effendi and Ismed Natsir (eds.), *Pergolakan*, p. 27.

⁹ In an entry dated July 14, 1972, Wahib wrote a 30-page account, in an essay form, on the development of the new "understanding" (*pemahaman*) of Islam in HMI politics, in which he, with a number of people, played an important part. See *Pergolakan*, pp. 144-174.

“ideology(ies),” but as an inspiring source of conduct. Starting from this platform, freed from the political stigma, the Manichean myth and the stiff precepts of the past, HMI grew progressively into becoming a breeding ground for Indonesian new political elites; today, they are the ones who practically run the country.

To be sure, Wahib’s ideas did not always find a receptive audience. In fact, he was under persistent attacks by HMI’s old guards, who defended the old Masyumi’s idea of ‘Islam’ and the quest for an Islamic state; so exhausting was the infighting that ultimately Wahib left HMI, explaining that he did it to free the organization from his “constantly dissenting voice”, and to give himself a “wider inner space” to think.¹⁰ However, by 1970, his ideas won new converts, the most important one being Nurcholish Madjid, who, in a sudden move, eloquently promoted the thing Wahib had been talking about in close circles.¹¹ It was the imperative of “secularising” today’s Muslim society.

By all accounts, what Nurcholish Madjid did was a major, if not historic, event in the development of liberal ideas in Islam in Indonesia. The role of Nurcholish Madjid was doubtless highly strategic. At the age of twenty-seven, he was already a rising star. He was elected Chairman of HMI for two consecutive periods (1966-1971), when Indonesia was undergoing a cataclysmic political and social change; when Sukarno’s ‘guided democracy’ and his socialist economy collapsed, when Suharto’s New Order rose to power through a terrible bloodbath exterminating thousands of suspected communists, and with the help of the students, most of them were HMI members, who took the street in thousands, toppling Sukarno, changing the country. It was a time of HMI’s euphoria. After almost a decade living the life of a political pariah, many Muslims, especially the ‘modernists’, the bulk of Masyumi’s constituency, saw in Nurcholish Madjid an intellectual and political leader of the future.

¹⁰ *Pergolakan*, p. 44.

¹¹ Wahib used the words “secularisation” in an entry dated August 22, 1969 in his diaries: “...religion has lost its capacity to absorb the problems of the world. We have been unable to secularise God’s guidance.... To secularise His words is an absolute must.” *Pergolakan*, p. 37.

He had all the necessary credentials. He was born in Jombang, East Java, a stronghold of traditionalist Islam, and raised by a father who was a *kiyai* (an ullema, a religious teacher) who chose Masyumi as his party. Nurcholish was a graduate of a *pasantren*, or Islamic boarding school, although it was a *pasantren* with difference: it taught Nurcholish not only Arabic, but also English and French. Even as a young student activist, he was known as a man of erudition and personal integrity. The ‘modernist’ admiringly called him “the new Natsir” – Natsir being the revered leader of Masyumi, who was also a man of erudition and personal integrity, although with much more intransigent disposition.

Initially, Nurcholish was comfortable with the ideas Natsir and the old “modernists” stood for. In 1965, he published a book, *Islamisme*, soon to be a required reading for HMI members all over the country. His argument was based on the prevailing ideology of the ‘modernist’, valorising the finality and the integrality of Islam. Using typically essentialist proposition in books like Vera Michels Dean’s *The Nature of the Non-Western World*, Nurcholish saw in Islam an all-in-one praxis, comprising religion, political system, way of life and interpretation of history.¹² In line with such a panoptic view of Islam, Nurcholish wrote another article to be distributed, like his *Islamisme*, to HMI chapters all over Indonesia; it pointed out that “modernisation” is not equal to “westernisation,” implying a strict dichotomy of perfectly coherent and all encompassing entities, perpetually classified as “West” and “non-West.”¹³

Such temptation of totality was probably irresistible given the predominance of Marxism (and to large degree, of Marxism-Leninism) in Indonesian political thinking in the 1960s. Nurcholish, like many others, naturally would insist that: Islam had to give an

¹² See *Tempo*’s cover-story on Nurcholish Madjid and the new reformist movement. The story was written by Ahmad Wahib, who was then *Tempo*’s new reporter, and Syu’bah Asa, *Tempo*’s senior editor who was briefly a member of the Muslim intellectual circle Wahib belonged to when they were both in Yogyakarta *Tempo*, July 29, 1972, p. 46. and pp. 44-49. On Nurcholish’s position, and Wahib’s critical remarks of it, see *Pergolakan*, pp. 28, 29, 156.

¹³ *Pergolakan*, p. 156. On the influence of this writing on HMI’s politics, see p. 158.

adequate response to it. However, his view gradually changed. In his dairies, Wahib wrote that it began shortly after Nurcholish's visit to the US, which was his first foreign trip, in October 1968. In his diaries, Wahib described Nurcholish's momentous meeting with Soedjatmoko, the Indonesian ambassador to the US, a widely respected Indonesian intellectual, and how it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and of Nurcholish's transformation.¹⁴ But whatever the reason, (and there should not be a single cause of this kind of thing), the quest for a liberal Islam in Indonesia was ripe for a new impetus, and 1970 saw Nurcholish moving to the centre stage of the new Islamic reform movement.

He delivered the controversial speech on January 3, 1970, in front of a large gathering of Muslim students and other young activists. This may be a usual pattern in the battles of ideas among Muslims in Indonesia: deadly serious, often profound, intellectual arguments take the platform of organizational politics. The speech, titled *Keharusan Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam dan Masaalah Integrasi Umat* (The Necessity of Renewing Islamic Thought and the Problem of the Integration of the Umma), wrapped in a lucid, if not rather bland, prose, was intended to generate a rational, judicious, review of the complexity Indonesian Muslims had to deal with. Nurcholish, like Wahib before him, appealed for an effort to "secularise" Moslem's life. By "to secularise" what he actually meant was "to desacralise" things profane but made sacral – like the idea of an Islamic state. In other words, Moslems should "secularise" the political while preserving what is truly sacred in Islam.

The word was shocking (it was a "tactical blunder", Nurcholish himself later conceded),¹⁵ the issue was decidedly thorny, so the reaction to the speech was predictably vehement. As

¹⁴ *Pergolakan*, p. 161.

¹⁵ See Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, p. 29. Kurzman published a new version of the text, which was delivered in 1972, in which Nurcholish explains: '...by "secularisation" one does not mean the application of secularism and the transformation of Muslims into secularists. What is intended is the "temporalizing" of values which are in fact worldly, and the freeing of the umma from the tendency to spiritualise them...'. Kurzman, p. 286.

Heffner puts it, “one could hardly think of a more provocative point from which to launch a career as a Muslim intellectual.” His *Civil Islam* gives an excellent description and analysis of the controversy over Nurcholish’s 1970 speech, as well as the social setting of the growing polarity between the new generation of Muslim intellectuals and the old “modernists”. I am not going to repeat Heffner’s description here.¹⁶ For the purpose of today’s talk, a quote from Heffner, paraphrasing Natsir, the leading thinker of the old “modernist”, will suffice to remind us of what I believe to be the leitmotif of Indonesian quest for a liberal Islam. “Islam is a ‘total’ system”, Natsir wrote in 1953, “intended to regulate the whole of human life. To concede the idea that Islam cannot control all social spheres implies a renunciation of Islam’s holism.”¹⁷ It is precisely against such ‘holism’ a new generation of Muslim intellectuals, many of them under 40, raise their voices.

Before I tell you more about these new players on the field, allow me to review what are the issues on the table, after we follow the stories of Ahmad Wahib and Nurcholish Madjid.

One important emphasis that Wahib put in his pioneering probe into the problems of Islamic ‘inertia’ (*kemandegan*) in Indonesia is the imperative of historicizing the faith. To be sure, this is not something unusual in contemporary Islamic thought. All the same, it was Wahib, in his youthful and unsystematic way, back in 1969, who called upon the notion “essence”, “unity”, and “immutability” to be re-examined.

Let’s remember that in the beginning, Wahib did not abandon the notion of “essence” entirely. The Divine guidance is given to all mankind, regardless of particular space and time. “It is singular, eternal and universal,” he wrote in November 7, 1970. However, human is space- and time-bound, and more importantly, he/she grows, develops, changes. He/she is being-in-history. On

¹⁶ Heffner, *Civil Islam*, pp. 116-119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

that account, the status of the Prophet is like “a conditional case”. The Prophet’s life history is a “copy”, or a “snapshot”, of the teaching of Islam, and not the teaching itself. Therefore, he says, the relation between a Muslim and the Prophet is necessarily a creative one. “One does not have to emulate every word-and-act of the Prophet.” Thus, it is not exactly correct to see Islam “limits” or “outlines” directing the works of humankind, and Allah as Being directing all human activities. “To me,” Wahid says, “Allah is central authority of the ethical and Islam a source of the moral (spiritual).” As a consequence, Islam, for Wahib, is a “a private/personal religion” (*agama pribadi*).

In an entry dated September 15, 1970, Wahib went further into questioning the position of the Qur’an: “By saying that the Qur’an is not God’s revelation, I exalt Him glorify Him even more. By identifying the Qur’an as Allah’s words, we slight Him, insult Him and His Wills, seeing them as mere objects explainable to human language. ...God is “the unverbalizable”. He is the owner of eternal messages. He and His Word are hidden, unreachable by our reason and our expression.... With faith we try to receive God. But Faith itself is not equal to God. Faith is only a medium of an encounter. Therefore the notion of Faith is changeable according to the level of experience of the human who uses it.”

Wahib died at 31, and did not have the time to continue his probing and develop his thinking. But what he wrote in the above-quoted entry is tantamount to deconstructing the notion of “the essence” to which dispersed Moslems should return. In fact, Wahib’s argument is a celebration of dispersal.

His thesis is more like the ideas developed in the so-called “negative theology,” but more interestingly, a parallel thesis is discernable in Nurcholish’s later theological thinking. Nurcholish is of course, more equipped than Wahib in running a close reading of the Qur-anic text, and writing to a large public, he is more lucid in his prose, with a touch of serenity. But what he expresses is fundamentally a radical break from the notion of Islamic “holism”, the idea of trans-historical precepts, and the myth of the singular *ummah*. His more popular writings, collected in a book

aptly titled, *Pintu-Pintu Menuju Tuhan* (Doors Towards God), is a defence of difference against the suppression of identity.¹⁸

One of Nurcholish's most interesting arguments is his interpretation of *syariah*. *Syariah*, according to Nurcholish, is equal to the word "way". In other words, something that does not imply "inertia". It implies "process", which is by definition a continuing event – not a closure. The key notion is "towards", (*menuju*), and we all are always on the way towards God, the unreachable (or, in Wahib's word, "the unverbalizable"), because He is absolute, and we are not.

Even the meaning of "Islam" itself requires a redefinition. For Nurcholish, *islam* means "a complete submission to God." Therefore all true religions are "'*islam*", and even the religion brought by Prophet Mohammed is not unique. It is not an isolated and separate entity. When some one says of the "triumph of Islam", Nurcholish says, "it should be the triumph of an idea, regardless who does the good work. The triumph of Islam should be a happiness for all."¹⁹

Nurcholish's inclusive theology is doubtless a very appealing alternative to today's sound and fury of, to use Karin Armstrong's metaphor, "the battles for God". It has the positive sense of making universality not only desirable, but also possible. However, it is the very issue of universality that today's 'liberal Islam' has to address to. Both in Wahib's deconstruction of the notion of "essence", and in Nurcholish's argument to liberate difference from identity, the emphasis is on the historically contingent character of Islam. From this perspective, what holds the notion of universality in their ideas?

To the current thinking in Indonesia's brand of liberal Islam, the notion of universality is problematic. One way or another, the "modernist" of the previous generation of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, insisting on the purification of the faith, viewed

¹⁸ *Pintu-Pintu Menuju Tuhan* (Jakarta: Penerbit Paramadina, 1995).

¹⁹ See my foreword to *Pintu-Pintu*, pp. vii-xv.

sediments of local history (or histories) as un-Islamic. “Modern”, in this sense, is devoid of memories – or of a claim of particularity. But it is a moot question whether, while negating the notion of historical contingency, the purifying modernists accept the inclusive sentiment implied in the notion of universality. An Islam beyond history is a pristine perfection; it is final, like a closed space – and it cannot possibly be open to otherness. It claims the Text as monolithic, and its their political imagining of it.

Probably for this reason, the new generation of liberal Islam includes a large number of intellectuals with a more traditionalist background. They come from strong families of NU, or the Nahdhatul Ulama, a socio-political group led by a confederation of ulemas, whose social and political bases are pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools). Increasingly, NU defines its identity by asserting a critical stance towards the push and pull of “modernity”, insisting the legitimacy of cultural legacies that shape “customary Islam”. On that account, not all of the young intellectuals, while arguing for the historicity of the Faith, like Wahib and Nurcholish (whose intellectual genealogy is more on the side of the ‘modernist’) do, are happy with the word “liberal” as an adjective. An article in the recent issue of LKiS Website, written by A.Djadul Maulana, one of the leading figure of the LKiS group, a Muslim NGO known for its open opposition to the “fundamentalists” street histrionics, argues that the current discourse on “liberal Islam” maybe only a replay of the previous “modernist” temper, since its bias remains for Islam’s universality.

It is not certain whether the new generation of young liberal Muslims who run the Islamlib Website would satisfactorily answer the challenge. However, like the LKiS people, they put themselves squarely against the very “modernist” temper Maulana speaks about. Like Maulana, the leading figure of this group, Ulil Abshar Abdallah is a solid NU intellectual. Ulil, as he is commonly called, was the son of an NU ulemma in Jepara (Central Java), finished his traditional schooling and acquired his Arabic in a private college in Jakarta. Well-versed in the long history of Quranic exegesis (from which he learned the dynamics of “internal dissension” in interpreting the Faith) he is familiar with contemporary European

philosophy, among others by reading his Heidegger in Arabic. At 31, Ulil has established himself as a brilliant writer and speaker, and also an activist promoting dialogue between different religions. His argument for “liberal Islam” is precisely against the idea of a pristine Islam or “Islam *an sich*”, or, by implication, Islam as transcendental presence. As he says it, Islam has always an adjective attached to it. Hence the word “liberal” in “liberal Islam” is not simply one qualifier among others, but an inauguration of the legitimacy of qualifiers. Hence while the word “liberal” implies a belief in the individual right, especially in religious matters – in the other words, the recognition of dispersion, it also carries a notion of “liberating”.

In his recent e-mail he goes further by arguing for a post-Nurcholish interpretation of Islam. “We are aiming the very heart of the doctrine,” he says. His group, he says, is planning to publish a new edition of the Qur’an (he and his friends call it “a critical edition”) that can serve as a wealth of different alternatives of interpretation.

It may be not an idle talk. Quite recently, a young scholar from Makassar, Taufik Adnan Amal, published a study on the history of the Qur’an, describing, among others, the repression of heterogeneity in the way the Qur’an. This took place after Uthman, the third Caliph, unified and standardized the writing and the reading of the text in mid-7th century. His book, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah al-Qur’an*²⁰ (the Reconstruction of the History of the Qur’an), is definitely the first of its kind, and may open the way of further “liberation”.

To be sure, the drive for the liberating feature of Islam, will generate resistance from the more “scriptualist” Muslims. But to suppress it would require a less democratic, and more Islamist kind of regime in Indonesia. After all, if an Ahmad Wahib could write down his endless list of questions about God and other small things, other restless minds will be as capable as the rebellious young man who died in the street of Jakarta in 1973.

Thank you.

²⁰ Yogyakarta: Forum Kajian Budaya dan Agama, 2001.

3. REMEMBERING THE LEFT*

The evening of 22 June 1996 began with a spectacle of red bandannas. About 70 people, mostly in their twenties, packed the neon-lighted conference room of the Jakarta Legal Aid Bureau's office. Almost everyone had a red scarf tied around the neck, almost everyone was skinny and emaciated, and the room had an air of excitement and of brazenness.

Obviously, it was an unusual evening. The young people were celebrating the birth of a new political party, the PRD (Partai Rakyat Demokratik, or the Democratic People's Party). In one bold stroke, they produced two acts of defiance against the Soeharto regime. The regime had declared it illegal to set up a political movement or party without the government's permission, and the PRD people challenged this openly. The Soeharto regime created a widespread fear of anything "leftist", and threatened anyone fostering an opinion tainted with Marxist ideas. Against this, the young people with red bandannas stood up. Under the watchful eyes of government spies, they openly hoisted the banner of the Left.

The evening was also marked by an award-giving ceremony, honouring people and institutions regarded by some as the enemies of the regime, including among others novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer and *Tempo* news weekly.

Any Indonesian over the age of forty who witnessed the events of this evening would likely be either moved or apprehensive, or both. What was moving was the courage of these young people: here was a group of people who without restraint or inhibitions, rose up and threw off the cover of suppression forced on them for years. However, this experience was frightening at the same time. The Soeharto regime was very capable of elimi-

* A paper presented for the 2000 Indonesia Update, "Indonesia: 20th Century History and the Future", at the Australian National University, October 6-7, 2000. I'd like to thank Dewi Anggraeni for translating some parts of the text. I'd like to thank M. Nasiruddin from the ISAI Library for helping me in my research.

nating anything or anyone it regarded as indicating the return of communism. Everyone in that conference room was acutely aware of the violent backlash awaiting those young people. Our fears were turned into reality when on 9 August 1996 the government charged the PRD with having committed treason, and in August 1996 all the leaders of the PRD who had gone into hiding were arrested. The PRD chairman, Budiman Sujatmiko, was subsequently charged and sentenced to 13 years in prison, and a number of PRD members were kidnapped and tortured, and one of them murdered.

However, the New Order regime also revealed a serious flaw in its strategy of attacking the 'Left'. Suppressed, the Left grew and developed into something else: it is no longer a definite political view on certain matters in life, and it is even more than just a brand of ideology. It has become a badge of courage among the young and an enchantment for the uninitiated. To paraphrase the words of a Graham Greene's character on communism, there is a '*mystique*' and there is a '*politique*' about the 'Left'.¹

The *mystique* grew from various whispering voices. Since books on Marxism were banned, they became a new form of pornography: young people surreptitiously sought and avidly explored them. They also photocopied these books, thus multiplying them. Some of these people even became publishers: 'We used to get them in photocopy [form], passed on from hand to hand', said one of the executives of Teplok Press Publishing, which published a volume of analysis on *Das Kapital*. So these activities, begun in 1989, continued as they held discussion groups in unlikely places, for instance while mountain climbing or in rooms lit only by kerosene lamps, known as '*teplok*', a word they later adopted as their business name.² It is not surprising

¹ "Communism, my friend, is more than Marxism, just as Catholicism... is more than the Roma Curia. There is a *mystique* as well as *politique*.... Catholics and Communists have committed great crimes, but at least they have not stood aside, like an established society, and been indifferent. I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate." From Dr. Magot's last letter, in *The Comedians* (1966), part 2, Chapter 4.

² *Kompas*, "Buku-Buku Kiri Menyerbu Pasar....," 15 April 2000, page 7.

therefore, that barely one year after the fall of Suharto, books with left leaning contents have entered the market unhindered.

My own observation shows that, since 1999, there have been around 40 titles associated with socialism and Marxism published in Indonesia. Among these are *Marx for Beginners*, a translated work of Mao Zhe-dong about contradictions, a translated work of Che Guevara, and the writings of Tan Malaka. A book introducing Marxism has sold more than 20,000 copies within a year, reaching its fourth edition. There are seven publishers, managed mostly by young people, actively putting out this genre of literature.³ Apart from publications in book form, they also produce bulletins and journals. At least three periodicals are in circulation this year that carry 'left-leaning' contents: *Majalah Kerja Budaya*, *Kiri* and *Kritik*.

The expression 'left-leaning' is not restricted to literary publications. It has as much meaning in the arts as well. In Yogyakarta, a group of young artists sporting punk hairstyles and tattoos, calling themselves *Taring Padi*, or Fangs of Rice, founded in 1998, initiated a kind of art that opposes the business of art in galleries – obviously because of its association with capitalism – and produces images with political themes in public places. Co-operating with a number of organizations, they publish a short-lived bulletin with a slogan printed on the cover: 'opposing imperialism'. They come across as wanting to be more 'left', more 'collectivist' and more radical than any organization which had existed since April 1997, *Apotik Komik*, which carries the message of social concern and takes their works beyond the galleries without shouting 'social realism' in their work.⁴ Many depict, in empathic, drawing-like lines, against plain, primary colours, suggestive images of human bodies in pain or anger, as if to represent, with a surrealistic touch, grim realities of the New Order.

So, what does 'Left' signify for these young people? 'Left', ultimately, is an issue in the politics of memory under the New

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ On the difference between Taring Padi and Apotik Komik, see *Gamma*, 27 June 2000.

Order. To be sure, for various groups of pro-democracy activists born and growing up after 1966, the beginning of the New Order, 'Left' represents more of a statement of opposition rather than an attempt to recapture things past. However it is this memory that assumed a territory invaded by power, and it is the authority to weave that memory that the young people are fighting to seize. The struggle was not always an open protest. Every year since the 1980s until the end of New Order, they had to watch the film 'The betrayal of G30S-PKI', a propaganda film about the murders of the Army generals in 1965. In protest, they read with enthusiasm the works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer who was accused of being a 'communist' and whose works were banned. In various closed meetings, they welcomed former political detainees who had links with the PKI or the Indonesian Communist Party. The bandannas adorning the necks of the PRD members on 22 July 1996, was also a deliberate act in the politics of memory – reminiscent of the political consciousness amongst some student groups and others particularly in the 1965-7 period.

Thus, the important thing is not what is 'Left', but how it is expressed. An English language website which features the leader of *Taring Padi*, Yustoni Volunteero, describes him not only as having the appeal that lures "womankind", but also as a reader of *Das Kapital* and Bakunin. One prolific publisher, LKIS, managed by young Muslim intellectuals in Yogyakarta, publishes books that link ideas of social emancipation with Islam. There is a trace of bravado in all this, but also an uninhibited desire to explore new territories of thinking transcending the border prescribed by society and religion. While lured by the mystery of the repressed past, the new commitment to the 'Left' is not a copy of it. The PRD, for years regarded with various degrees of concern as a "new generation of PKI,"⁵ promotes in its political agenda the need for parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system (and says nothing about the leadership of the proletariat). In a

⁵ See a report by Human Rights Watch/Asia, Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, August 1996, No. 8 (C). More recently, a statement by a deputy chairman of MPR suggests PRD's plan to bring communism back to Indonesia." See *Media Indonesia*, March 20, 2000.

discussion about ‘The Left in Asia’ in Jakarta, PRD chairman, Budiman Sujatmiko, even attacked the conceptual mistakes of the PKI in its land-reform programs in the 60s.⁶

Kritik, one of the journals of the Left, expresses the need to explore new thinking for the “renewal of socialism”. PRD activists as well as young intellectuals following political ideas of “democratic socialism” sit as members of the editorial board. It is not clear what unites or divides them. In the past, it was the Indonesian Socialist Party, or the Partai Sosialis Indonesia, (PSI) that represented the “democratic socialist” platform. The PKI branded the PSI as “right wing”.

On that account, the *mystique* of the Left, or its spell as the most feared enemy of the ‘New Order’, has not generated any coherent thinking about the current situation of Indonesian society and what is to be done to meet various challenges. While communist and socialist parties of the past all produced precise Marxist analysis of the social and political condition of the society – and official lines guiding strategic and tactical steps to be taken – only the PRD indicates an awareness of the need to have a theory-based political platform. The problem is that it is not easy to draw a leftwing political agenda in an era defined by the success of market economy, both inside and outside Indonesia.

This may have an impact on the *politique*: ideologically on retreat, the ‘Left’ finds itself in uncharted water, unable to decide what should be done to the advance of capitalist ethos in the society. It has failed to make itself a lodestar. Despite the existing social disparity as well as the widespread resentment towards Soeharto’s regime and its link with “big capital”, the presence of the Left remains negligible, in terms of popular following and ideological prominence. In the 1998 election, the PRD only amassed 70,000 votes – not even enough to gain one single seat in the Legislative Council or DPR. In the meantime, another party, Justice Party or Partai Keadilan, which, like the PRD, was founded and supported by young people, and grown from partially

⁶ Notes from a seminar on “Kiri di Asia” (The Left in Asia), organised by *Jurnal Kalam*, at Teater Utan Kayu, 25 February 2000.

underground discussion groups among university students, managed to obtain six seats. Partai Keadilan however has no connection whatever with Left ideology; it espouses instead Islamic ideas of the moral purification kind – quite reminiscent of the Ikhwanul Muslimin movement in the Middle East.

The winner in the election, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, or PDI-Perjuangan, has a large constituency among the poor, carrying banners of Sukarno, who was a man of the Left – and often taken for an ally by the PRD. And yet it did not reveal anything usually presented in the leftist and anti-government agenda during Soeharto's rule. On the status of East Timor and the role of the military in DPR [House of Representatives] and MPR (the Consultative Assembly), this party, led by Megawati, was more in line with the Golkar Party, its actual political enemy. It seems that ideology and class backgrounds hardly play a part in the way Indonesian political parties choose their friends or enemies.

One of the new words Sukarno coined in the 1960s was “*komunistofobia*”. The word was designed to castigate Indonesian political groups who showed aversion to the PKI and rejected any attempt to forge a “united front” with the Marxist-Leninists. But since 1966, Sukarno and his ideas have been wiped off the political constellation, and “*komunistofobia*”, or the fear of communism, indeed reigned supreme.

It began with the massacre of at least 500,000 people accused of being members of the PKI, and it has not yet come to an end. In a recent opinion poll conducted by *Tempo* on over 1,000 high school students in three major cities, 57% of respondents said “no” to the question of whether communism should be allowed to be taught and imparted to students as “knowledge”. Almost 60% said “no” to the distribution of books on communism in Indonesia. It seems that three decades of the New Order's anti-communist campaign has left a deeply engraved trace in the national remembering. According to the poll, 97% of the respondents received their information on the “G30s” (the “30th of September Movement”

involving the arrest and killing of Army generals – a violent act provoking the 1965 anti-communist massacre, from their teachers and school books. More than 80% believe the main message of the New Order propaganda film of the incident.⁷

The persistence of memory, in this case, may play an important role in shaping, or otherwise unsettling, Indonesia's democratic political agenda. A traumatic past can, perhaps, push the nation towards the creation of a better practice and method of resolving conflicts. This traumatic history also impacts negatively on the collection of the kind of social capital Indonesia needs to accumulate, consisting primarily of a shared capacity to trust and peaceable management of differences. President Abdurrahman Wahid's failed attempt to generate a reconciliatory platform in dealing with prosecuted PKI members is indicative of a deep-seated gridlock on the way to more intelligible and institution-alised political reform.

This story is a typical of Gus Dur's style: a bold presidential statement followed by no action. In March, the president reiterated what he said he always believed; namely the need to apologize to the victims of the 1965 anticommunist massacre. "Since early on, I have always asked for an apology... I'd like to apologize for all the killings of those people said to be communists", he is quoted as saying in a public television talk-show on March 13.⁸

Remarkably, the president, who was once a NU chairman, also admitted that many NU-connected people (*kalangan NU*) had taken part in the massacre. He was aware that there was a dispute about whether PKI members, accused, but never proven, of being involved with the 1965 murders of seven top army officers, deserved punishment. The case should be opened, he is quoted as saying, and to settle the dispute one should bring it to court.

The talk-show, named *Secangkir Kopi* (A cup of coffee), had a rather convivial flavour to it, but the reaction to Gus Dur's words was quite intransigent. The main target was the President's

⁷ *Tempo*, October 8, 2000, p. 14.

⁸ *Kompas*, March 15, 2000, p. 1 and p. 11.

suggestion that the 1966 MPR's decision outlawing the PKI and the dissemination of Marxist-Leninist ideology should be revoked.⁹ Most Muslim political and religious leaders adamantly rejected the idea. The Indonesian Council of Ulemmas or the MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) issued an official statement of similar sentiment.¹⁰ The first week of April saw thousands of supporters of the "Indonesian Muslim Community Front or the FUII (Front Umat Islam Indonesia) take to the street, voicing their protest in front of the Presidential Palace, burning PKI flags and symbols.¹¹ Even Gus Dur's natural constituency, the NU community, did not back him on this particular issue. His handpicked successor as the chairman of NU, K.H. Hasyim Muzadi, told a reporter that a policy of reconciliation with the PKI members should be gradual. For the time being, the 1966 MPR decision will stay.¹²

The support Gus Dur enjoys mainly comes from members of the PKB (Gus Dur's own party) in the Parliament and human rights activists and intellectuals; they rank as a modest political influence in today's Indonesia. Typically, the President, known for his contempt for parliamentarians, has done very little to generate a more powerful following in the legislative body. Small wonder that nobody raised his or her voice to urge the MPR's annual session to revoke the decree the previous assembly issued in 1966.

One curious voice is that of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. The writer, who has become an icon of the 1965 victims, rejected Gus

⁹ Gus Dur reaffirmed his position by stating that the 1966 MPR decision violates one's legal rights. *Media Indonesia*, April 1, 2000.

¹⁰ *Media Indonesia*, March 24, 2000. The paper also publishes a quote by Hussein Umar, a PPP member of DPR, who mentions a judgement issued by Kongres Alim Ulama (Congress of ulemmas) in Palembang from 8-11 Sept, 2000, opposing Gus Dur's idea of reconciliation by declaring communists as "infidels" (*kafir*). Any marital bond with them is illegitimate, Hussein Umar says, quoting the ulemmas' statement.

¹¹ *Media Indonesia*, April 8, 2000.

¹² *Forum Keadilan*, April 9, 2000, p. 72. Earlier, he is quoted as saying that "communism should stay banned in Indonesia" and that "MPR members should stay firm to refuse revoking [the 1966 MPR decision]." *Media Indonesia*, March 20, 2000.

Dur's apology. "How easy!" he said with a spark of sarcasm, commenting on Gus Dur's call for reconciliation. He said he did not trust the President, who in his view was someone who, among others, should also be held responsible for the massacre and the establishment of the New Order. "Those who suffered from the beating still feel the pain, while the beaters remember no more. Reconciliation is a nonsense... reconciliation is a mere talk of the people in power."¹³

Instead of reconciliation, Pramoedya insisted on retribution; what is more, he wanted it to be done through legal means. For him, there ought to be justice through trials of the perpetrators. However, he did not offer to tell the interviewer how and whether the government would have the capacity to do it, given the absence of a credible legal institution to deal with political crimes committed by a large number of people more than three decades ago.¹⁴ His recipe was simple: "If the government cannot do it, it should step aside."

Pramoedya's uncompromising voice (with a trace of bitterness, I must say) is a lonely one. He has received no support even from his close friends. In my various meetings with former political prisoners associated with the PKI, I discovered that many of them did not share his sentiments. They even resent it, since they think it will lend support to political groups spreading the fear of a future pro-communist backlash. For some of them, Pramoedya is a political philistine, alienating would-be allies and strengthening existing foes. At least one of them told me that no one had a moral right to reject a public expression of apology from a person as well meaning as Gus Dur is. Many of them

¹³ *Forum Keadilan*, March 26, 2000, pp. 24-27.

¹⁴ Views differ on the killings in 1965-66. There is increasing evidence that these killings were part of a systematic and coordinated plan, but the historical record plainly shows that the pattern of action differed quite dramatically from place to place. Local political conflicts between parties (NU and PKI supporters in East Java and PNI and PKI supporters in Bali) also played a significant role in the bloodshed. See, e.g. Hermawan Sulistyono, *Palu Arit di Ladang Tebu* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2000), pp. 232-247.

believe in Gus Dur's sincerity, since they know that even before he became the head of the state, Gus Dur has often expressed his idea of reconciliation in various private communications.¹⁵

Today, however, the idea has disappeared from the scene. It is yet to be seen whether anything will eventuate from the nation's effort to deal with its traumatic past. There is a possibility, no matter how remote it is, that something is in the making. A draft was prepared by an NGO team to create the legal basis of a "truth and reconciliation commission". The drafting team is composed of members from different departments, including the Attorney General's Office, the Ministries of Law and Legislation, Internal Affairs, and Security. This team hopes to submit a final draft of proposed legislation to the DPR for discussion. Beyond this, however, it has progressed very little and no one is quite sure what might occur. Given the strong reaction against any reconciliatory gesture towards communists and communism, in a time when Indonesia is preoccupied by "separatist" movements in Aceh and Papua and continuing violence in Maluku, it is unlikely that the government will pay attention to it. On top of that, Gus Dur's decreasing political support will make him difficult not to focus his efforts on making his presidential seat secure and his political future assured.

"I am no Nelson Mandela... and Indonesia is not South Africa", Pramoedya Ananta Toer says in an interview, in reply to a criticism of his position on Gus Dur's idea of reconciliation.¹⁶

No doubt Pramoedya is right. In today's Indonesia, no one, including him, is a Nelson Mandela. And true enough there are

¹⁵ See an interview with Rewang, a former Politbureau member of the PKI, in *Forum Keadilan*, April 2, 2000, p. 75. Gus Dur also met with D.N. Aidit's daughter who lives in Paris, France, and regards himself as a friend to the woman whose father was the murdered chairman of the Party. As a President, in his latest visit to Paris, he allowed his picture to be taken sitting next to her – which was quite a gesture, since she is an exile who cannot return to Indonesia. See *Tempo*, March 5, 2000, p. 93.

¹⁶ *Tempo*, April 16, 2000, p. 22.

major differences between the Indonesian and South African experiences.¹⁷

Indonesia lacks a pool of national leaders who can provide credible moral guidance like Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Unlike the ANC in South Africa, the new Indonesian political elite is not a coherent group (in the South African case, it is represented by the ANC). It has no consolidated opponent, or even counterpart, like the white political groupings in the South African state. Gus Dur, although he is persistent in pursuing his policy of reconciliation, appears to have no allies really committed to the establishment of procedures to work together and create visible change quickly. In other words, unlike South Africa, Indonesia has no unified and functioning political elite committed to opening up past crimes to pave the way for a better future.

The diversity of Indonesian grievances and crimes presents another difficulty. While in South Africa reconciliation mainly occurred between two sides, in Indonesia multiple forms of reconciliation must take place. In the New Order history of prosecution, one cannot single out the victims of the 1965-66 anticommunist purge as the only witnesses of political terror. As a former communist student activist told me, the Indonesian communists were not totally blameless in the outbreak of violence in 1965-66. It is morally questionable and politically fatuous to claim, "the victim, that's me". Failure to address the different violations may give certain victims the impression that they are being further discriminated against or disregarded. Such a perception will undermine both justice and reconciliation efforts.

In some cases reconciliation cannot be achieved without meeting at least some demands for justice. However, to advocate justice one has to rely on an acceptable level of institutional capability. Indonesian legal institutions are very weak. It is not clear that they will be able to provide a trial that all parties consider fair.

Given this, it is difficult to envisage how a consistent method of dealing with aspects of the dark side of Indonesia's

¹⁷ I borrowed most of this argument from a draft document prepared by the International Crisis Group (ICG) Asia Report No. 9.

past will be constructed. Ultimately, the nation may have to develop a recognition of its limitations – for the foreseeable future at least – in dealing with such matters. This is particularly important in grappling with questions such as what justice is when the case we have on our plate is a large-scale crime, committed amidst widespread frenzy and horror as occurred in the political cataclysm of 1965-66.

Still, as much as I believe that justice is probably impossible to achieve, it is necessary that Indonesia as a nation tries to come to terms with these issues. In other words, even if the attempt at reaching justice will in all likelihood fail, the nation will be able, in the search for that impossible thing, to solve a number of problems. In the end, one may have to settle for a selected justice of one kind or another, but with a nagging feeling of incompleteness.

My approach implies a certain degree of humility. In an open letter to Pramodya,¹⁸ I write:

In an age when the victim is easily sanctified, one who thinks himself of a higher degree of victimisation will, with ease, also believe in the right to become the ultimate arbiter of justice. But, as with every claim to sanctity, this too could give rise to arbitrariness. Mandela knew this... [He has] humbled [himself].

To be sure, there is a link between humility and the will to forgive. But for me, forgiveness does not mean absolving the guilt or the guilty. Forgiveness is in fact an affirmation of the existence of wrong. And with each affirmation of wrong, life can take flight again, with wound, with trauma, but also with hope. Revenge bears with it an element of justice, but there are those who will distinguish revenge from justice. In each act of revenge waits the turn of another victim.

¹⁸ *Tempo*, April 9, 2000.

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