thejakartapost.com

Politically incorrect smiles: Bali incident

The Jakarta Post, Jakarta | Opinion | Mon, November 25 2002, 7:36 AM

Ariel Heryanto, Sociologist, University of Melbourne, Australia

The Australian public is rightfully outraged by the interview between Indonesia's Police Chief Da'i Bachtiar and Bali bombing suspect Amrozi. At issue was the series of smiles, laughter, and handshakes between them, and a few other attending law enforcers. The whole event has been taken as a gross offense, incredibly insensitive to the sufferings of the victims, and their families.

However, what most angry commentators, Australian and non-Australian alike, have failed to understand is the extent to which similar gestures, and smiling in particular, has been embedded in social lives of most Indonesians with diverse meanings. The same is true about many societies across Southeast Asia.

This is neither to exonerate the crime against humanity of the Bali bombing perpetrators, nor to excuse the police officers' failure to understand the regrettable implication of the widely reported

interview. Rather, this is an alternative interpretation of what is indisputably a blunder, underscoring the need for better understanding of, and consideration for different cultures, including their respective parochialism.

Instead of simply a failure to express sympathy for the victims, the problematic interview has in fact reflected the Indonesian law enforcers' failure to understand that there exist sensibilities and ethical codes that are radically different from those prevailing in contemporary Indonesia.

Unfortunately, the foreign media and analysts have not understood any better the failure of these less than cosmopolitan Indonesian state officials. The event has been misconstrued, although with good reasons.

To the Australian public several sympathetic Australian journalists and Indonesian commentators have offered explanations about the disturbing scene. Most of them attribute it to ""cultural differences"" between the two peoples, plus the difficult circumstances under which the Indonesian police operate.

Those giving cultural explanations correctly stressed that the smiles did not necessarily imply delight, amusement, friendliness between the suspect and the officers, nor antagonistic attitude towards the victims of the Bali bombing. They ""laughed"", but they did not ""laugh at"" anything or anyone as often incorrectly, though understandably, understood in the Australian context.

I share the cultural explanations, but would take issue when they are presented, as often the case in Australian media, with additional rationalist reasoning by Indonesians and experts of Indonesia alike. Such reasoning was provided in effect to show the ""objective rationality"" behind the smiles by considering the political contexts.

The smiles were interpreted as if they were a well calculated gesture, a part of a larger strategy on the part of the suspect and his captors to achieve political gains (for instance, for the police to appear humane in public, and for the suspect to avoid heavy sentencing).

Cultures have no objective reasoning outside themselves. I believe the controversial smiles have been done unconsciously. Most likely no calculation, clever or otherwise, was involved. No real political circumstances seem relevant here. Those people appeared to have smiled because they could not help it, because that's the way they were brought up since childhood.

For the same reason, most ordinary members of the Indonesian public did not notice the very same smiles, and took issues, because these smiles appeared so insignificant. Significantly, with the exception of The Jakarta Post, no Indonesian press has picked up the interview as an issue. What several dailies reported as newsworthy was the Australian outrage, not what had provoked it.

As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu said, ""cultures are those what goes without saying"", as they have come without questioning,

or reasoning. They are like languages or accents. To ask why Amrozi and the police should smile is almost like asking why English speaking people always open an official letter with the greeting ""Dear"", even if this is a letter of very serious complaint or protest.

It is also comparable to the controversial 1998 pose of IMF Executive Director Michel Camdessus. He stood straight, arms folded, next to then president Soeharto who bowed down to the table to sign a new reform package. Indonesians took offense of the pose, despite their being impatient to see Soeharto step down!

Smiles are built-in in many languages in Indonesia, just as tenses or gender in European languages. Thousands of Australians have enthusiastically learned to speak Bahasa Indonesia.

One common pitfall for them, as for most English native speakers learning the language, is to pronounce words that start with c-, j-, t-, or p-. One can only do it properly if one spreads one's lips widely enough. In other words, one has to smile as one speaks. Indonesians unconsciously and effortlessly smile as they meet people, speak with others, or encounter experiences that are neither funny, nor delightful.

For these reasons, many first-time visitors to Indonesia (or Asia) have been misled to think that Indonesians are unusually always happy, hospitable, or courteous people. Their smiles have been taken more seriously than warranted. When these foreigners told their impressions of, and to the same Indonesians (""Indonesians

are so gentle, graceful, hospitable""), the latter have often misunderstood the remarks, taking it more seriously than necessary. Indonesians do not -- as they are taught not to since childhood -- habitually express such complementary remarks, or any other strong feelings, directly to strangers or new acquaintances.

Likewise, Indonesians learn to express embarrassment, shame, sorrow, sympathy, or affection in ways that are not necessarily familiar to outsiders. One example has to do with death and funeral. Several overseas observers have described the highly elaborate and capital-intensive funerals in several ethnic groups in Indonesia (e.g. Toraja, Balinese) with great amazement, commenting that ""they live in order to die"".

Foreigners are often baffled when visiting urban middle class Indonesian families. While conversing casually in the living rooms, their Indonesian hosts grab family photo albums in the room, and show a large number of pictures of the funeral of a deceased member of the family, with no apparent remorse or sense of loss.

Lest be misunderstood, cultural differences do not rigidly follow the boundaries of nation-states. Neither do any of these cultural differences remain unchanged. There are as profound cultural differences across sub-national groups in Indonesia, along gender, ethnic, religious, residential, and linguistic lines as they are internationally. The same is true with inter-cultural borrowings. Indonesian cultures, whatever these may mean, are nothing but hybrids of diverse world and local traditions, under constant

change.

Despite these complexities, one can still recognize that the smiles that Amrozi and the Indonesian law enforcers demonstrated are so common among many Indonesians. Theirs in Denpasar may be somewhat more excessive than usually observed in Indonesia. Such smiles can mean different things within their immediate social environment, some are more commendable than others. In any case, they do not solely and unambiguously imply malice to the victims of the Bali bombing, and obviously not to the Australians in particular.

The Bali bombing is seriously deplorable. The excessive smiles in the Nov. 13 interview are regrettable, for reasons suggested above rather than those indicated in the Australian media and The Jakarta Post.

The painful incident provides yet one more opportunity for Indonesians to understand better other people's sensibility, and for their friendly Australian neighbors to understand why Indonesians' have not learned this any better. It would be a pity if this opportunity is lost.