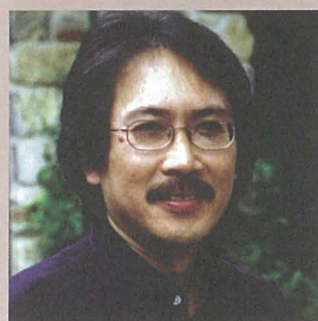


# Politically incorrect smiles in

# Bali

## *A cultural perspective on the Amrozi incident*



By Ariel Heryanto

Australians are 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 offence, 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, are embedded with diverse meanings in the social lives of most Indonesians. The same is true about many societies across South-East 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 being 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 international 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.

Several sympathetic Australian journalists and Indonesian commentators have offered to the Australian public 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, or an 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 is 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 by 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, or take issue, 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 that go 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 in a letter of very

*...English-speaking people always open an official letter with the greeting "Dear", even in a letter of very serious complaint...*

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 at the pose, despite their being impatient to see Soeharto step down!

Smiles are built-in in many languages in Indonesia, just like tenses or gender in European languages. For the thousands of Australians who have learned to speak Bahasa Indonesia, a common pitfall – 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 always happy, hospitable or courteous people. Their smiles have been taken more seriously than warranted. When foreigners tell Indonesians they meet of their impressions of them ("You Indonesians are so gentle, graceful, hospitable") the Indonesians often misunderstand the remarks, taking them more seriously than necessary. Indonesians do not – as they are taught not to since childhood – habitually express such complimentary 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 funerals. Several overseas observers have described the highly elaborate and capital-intensive funerals in several ethnic groups in Indonesia (eg. 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.

Cultural differences do not faithfully follow the boundaries of nation-states. Neither do any of these cultural differences remain unchanged. There exist cultural differences across sub-national groups in Indonesia, along gender, ethnic, religious, residential and linguistic lines as profound as exist internationally. The same is true with intercultural 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 recognise that the smiles that Amrozi and the Indonesian law enforcers demonstrated are common among many Indonesians. Their "display" in Denpasar may be seen as 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 totally deplorable and the excessive smiles in the 13 November interview are regrettable for the reasons suggested above rather than those indicated in the Australian media and *The Jakarta Post*.

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

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