





## A Tale of Two Crises

By Ariel Heryanto

What is striking about the general mood in Indonesia's public life today is that there are many parallels to the mood in the first decade of its independence, half a century ago. A sense of impasse, disillusionment, powerlessness, and disappointment have prevailed in both periods. In both instances, the sense of gloom came as an anti-climax to a dramatic moment of political euphoria—feelings of empowerment, self-determination, and triumph after many years of misery and humiliation.

Half a century ago, Indonesia transformed itself from a Dutch and then Japanese colony to one of the world's independent and fully sovereign nations. Today's Indonesia has been generally described as a post-authoritarian country, having managed not only to survive the onslaught of the 1997-98 economic crisis, but also to put an end to the world's longest-lasting authoritarian regime outside the socialist bloc.

In both times, there was a marked increase of political openness. This is evident by what appeared in the press and what was debated in parliament. There were many independent political parties, as well as fairly free and credible general elections. However, in both periods the new political space and liberalization seemed to lead the country nowhere. The political elite were seriously divided, and they were too busy squabbling with each other for what appeared to the general population as shamelessly short-term and narrow vested interests. In both periods, too, the economy was in disarray, and there was no promise that things would be better any time soon.

It is tempting to invoke the common wisdom that history repeats itself. But to do so would be to overlook a number of significant differences. Perhaps the most obvious difference is the prominence in the 1950s of communist elements as one of the major political forces, and their total absence today. A second major difference, and still related to the first, is the state of global politics. The Cold War half a century ago shaped the young republic's political conflicts, and helped determine their resolution. Today's political contests (although to a lesser extent) have been overshadowed by a US-led war, this time on what it calls 'terror'. The list of such historical differences is long; in this essay I will focus on one area of interest that has barely gained attention among today's Indonesians. This is the role of culture, as propagated and debated among Indonesia's urban and middle-class literati.





Seen from both the New Order and post-New Order periods, the debate that caught public attention in the 1950s looked odd indeed. In response to the protracted sense of national crisis, the nation's top intelligentsia of the 1950s framed their debate within the broader questions of social revolution, human history, social classes, and culture, including literature. Although I had been aware of such debate for years, this recently has been brought closer to my attention by Nursam, a young historian from Jogjakarta, who sent me for comments an edited copy of the series of polemics between Soedjatmoko and Boejoeng Saleh in the journals *Konfrontasi* and *Siasat* between mid-1954 and early 1955. For reasons that cannot be fully attributed to the New Order's philistinism, culture and literature have been far removed from the centre of public debates in Indonesia in the subsequent decades.

Examining problems that confront Indonesia today, respected commentators speak of militarism, democratization, human rights, corruption, economic liberalization, employment, management of religious and ethnic diversity, women's participation, and globalization. These are the pressing issues of the day. Questions of culture and literature are almost unheard of. Significantly, though unsurprisingly, none of the candidates of the 2004 presidential election raised cultural or literary issues in their campaigns, and neither did their critics. It would have been astonishing had anyone done so. To the intelligentsia and politicians alike back in the 1950s, however, it seemed a natural thing to contemplate and analyze the nation's critical problems by considering cultural issues and what role men and women of letters should do in response.

None of this is to suggest that the past was better. In time of crisis, it is tempting but unhelpful to romanticize the past, or to exoticize culture. Engaging oneself in erudite discussion of culture or civilization does not necessarily make one more cultured or civilized, any more than discussions of religion or terrorism make one religious or a terrorist. The question of interest is not why there is such a contrast of public opinion between the two periods, half a century apart, but rather, why the contrast has been left largely unrecognized and uncommented upon, today.

The value of revisiting the past is not to discover some magical answer to today's problems. One may be forgiven for thinking that the past 'culturalist' debate was in some ways naïve. But even if we believe that the current debate is more mature, apt, and realistic, it remains to be explained what history has done to us. What were the circumstances of the 1950s that produced this particular set of debates? What sort of history has shaped our present-day consciousness, our sense of reality and urgency in the beginning of the twenty-first century? Why did fiercely opposing political parties in the 1950s use their resources

to establish cultural institutions, and engage in passionate polemics on the arts, while their counterparts half a century later have allocated their resources to build militia groups, and find themselves in inter-religious battles? Looking back, perhaps, helps shed some light on the present.

It is important to realize that the culturalist debate of the 1950s took place in public: it was not the exclusive terrain of small circles of cultural or artistic 'freaks'. In the 1950s most men (and a few women) of letters were usually active in political parties. Many took positions in the government. Their total number was small, and together they constituted a tiny elite in a population then of around 100 million people. But their erudition and educated principles led them to take on crucial roles in the building of the nation. Politicians of that period not only took a great interest in culture and arts, many (including the first president and members of his state cabinet) produced intellectual analyses or artistic works at some time during their career development. The distinction between artists, intellectuals and politicians was insignificant then.

Given that our time has witnessed a marked increase in the division of labor and professional specialization (hence the cultural illiteracy of today's politicians), one wonders what Indonesia's intellectuals and artists today have to say about the current national crisis. To what extent are they interested in and responsive to the social, economic, and political issues beyond their immediate and specialist concerns? How do they express their response?

Admittedly, no easy or final answer can be offered here. Preliminary observation suggests some clues. Today's Indonesia does have individual authors—besides the eminent novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who belongs to the earlier of the two periods compared—who show deep concerns of social and political importance. Mangunwijaya, Kuntowijoyo, Seno Gumira Ajidarma and Remy Sylado are some of the more prominent examples, to mention just a few. But it is significant that none of the works of these individuals has acquired recognition beyond cultural or literary circles. None of the literary debates that they have sparked can be compared in scope or significance to those of the 1950s. With the exception of the late architect-cum-priest-cum-novelist Mangunwijaya, none of these authors has taken any leading role in public debates about the national crisis. Of course this is not the fault of our contemporary authors. If anything, it just signifies the sort of society we live in today.

More recently, critics have spoken of a 'new wave' of Indonesian literature and films. In literature, the works of young female authors such as Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, and Djenar Maesa Ayu have been heralded as harbingers of change. Interestingly, these works have been recognized by critics for their aesthetic innovativeness, and by larger



circles for their graphic erotic exposition. This is despite these novels' offering issues of social and political relevance for serious discussion about the nation's crisis; but these issues are lost in the public discussion.

Of course, it is not fair to expect contemporary literature to be simply a continuation of the literature of the 1950s. Not only have Indonesia and the world altered significantly, but so has the position of modern literature. Regardless of their contents, novels (like schools and the press) were a modern mode of expression that helped bring nations into being where they did not exist. In the late twentieth century, novels could not possibly function the same way. In the 1950s, when only about seven per cent of the population were functionally literate, producing and consuming modern fiction was the privilege of a very few people. They enjoyed moral and political authority by virtue of such production and consumption. This is no longer true in today's Indonesia.

In many colonies and former colonies, early novel-writing and -reading required a substantial amount of economic and cultural investment. Such practice also carried high prestige and authority. This is why despite their limited circulation, many novels in such societies were subject to state censorship, while novelists were subject to prosecution. While such powerful (and potentially revolutionary) fictional narrative may have no equivalent in today's Indonesia, film-making is probably the most comparable.

Post-New Order Indonesia has witnessed the boom of independent movies. So much so, that the term 'independent' in popular Bahasa Indonesia today has barely anything to do with the 1945 Declaration of Independence, but much to do with the privately-run world of music and film production. Indonesian students in Melbourne have for years screened newly released films from Indonesia, and produced their own mini-films. In 2002 they hosted the first Indonesian Film Festival since 1992, when the festival was last held in the homeland. Early in 2004, they launched the first mini-festival of Indonesian films by Australia-based Indonesians, and called the event "Independent".

In Indonesia a few prominent film makers comment on social issues of salience in their society without compromising aesthetic values. But like the socially-engaged literary authors mentioned above, the works of film directors and producers such as Garin Nugroho, Christine Hakim, or Aria Kusumadewa occupy a peripheral position in public discussion, away from urgent central issues in the public debate. These independent film makers find recognition mainly among critics and film buffs, especially overseas, such as those in Melbourne.

The more market-driven new films have enjoyed the

political liberation that came with the fall of the New Order in 1998, and they revived the film industry from its earlier demise. Many of these new films found enthusiastic reception among Indonesian urban youth, but not from senior critics. But to judge contemporary literary and cinematic narratives on the basis of values cherished in the high modernity of the 1950s is to ignore history.

In the hands of the younger generation, film-making seems not to carry the old burden of social commentary of the storytellers of the 1950s. The new young film-makers are free of the ambition to achieve aesthetic excellence, festival awards, or large commercial gains. In the hands of these children of well-connected and prosperous families, film-making is a new toy for experimenting and expressing themselves to their globally mobile peers. For them, making a film is almost like sending an SMS, or posting an email message to a mail-list group, writ large. It is intimate, convenient, innocent and sincere, but not much more or less.

The nation may be in crisis politically and economically, just as it appeared to be half a century ago to the nation's literati. But today's crisis is not a repeat of that of the 1950s, because it is taking place in the broader context of globalization and post-nationalism. To an increasing number of young well-educated Indonesians, Indonesia is but one of several points of their existential, emotional, and cultural reference. For better or worse, the national crisis finds less space, if any, in the narratives that young Indonesians produce and consume. The meaning of 'homeland' is increasingly ambiguous.

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