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Questioning the relevance of nat'l awakening today

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On Tuesday, Indonesia celebrated the 100th anniversary of its "national awakening", commemorating the founding of Boedi Oetomo in 1908. This is officially considered to be the first modern "Indonesian" organization, but this is also highly contentious.

No writing in Indonesian has challenged this myth as strongly as Pramoedya Ananta Toer's highly celebrated semi-historical tetralogy. The novels suggest that Boedi Oetomo was basically an exclusive men's club -- more precisely, an exclusively an aristocratic Javanese men's club.

Because of its remarkably conservative character, the Dutch colonial administration tolerated this, instead of the more populist and egalitarian Islamic association (Sarekat Dagang Islamiyah) which was founded a few years earlier. But the independent state has preferred to adopt the colonial historiography.

Although his novels were a product of 20 years of historical research, Toer never claimed to write history as an academic. But, as attested to by the glowing success of their sales, these novels show vividly that history reading can be a politically engaging experience as well as a literary pleasure.

Unsurprisingly the novels were all banned under the New Order (1965-1998) regime. Three student activists were prosecuted under an anti-subversion law for reading, possessing and discussing the novels.

Successive governments since the fall of the New Order have not repealed the ban on all Toer's novels. Of late, what the current government has actually banned is a history text book that the same government had helped publish for secondary schools. The reason was, the book did not conform to the New Order propaganda condemning the bygone Communist Party and alleging its complicity in the so-called abortive coup de tat of 1965.

The key phrase "national awakening" implicates a fictitious long historical past of Indonesia, rather than its recent invention. This same story has made millions of Indonesians feel so good for many decades.

Surely, there is nothing uniquely Indonesian about such social pathology. As Benedict Anderson puts it, "if nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give expression always loom out of an immemorial past."

Indonesians who completed their high school education spent at least 12 years being taught to imagine that Indonesia had existed for many centuries. This practice may continue today, although a more objectivist historical analysis would suggest Indonesia's current physical presence (its territory under one state administration) may have come into being only a few

years after the founding of Boedi Oetomo.

When I lectured in Indonesia (1980-1996), I used to enjoy asking my students in class, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, what they considered to be the year Indonesia began to exist. Their answers varied from 1945 (August declaration of independence), to 1928 (the October youth oath) and 1908 (the foundation of Boedi Oetomo). So, why couldn't these well educated nationalists spontaneously agree with each other on something as fundamental as the origin of their own nation?

And, if Indonesia has existed only from 1908, you can assume the notion that this country was occupied by Europeans for 350 years is a load of nonsense. "Ah", some of my students usually interjected me, "actually Indonesia was called 'Nusantara' in the past and we can trace it back to the days of Majapahit and the glorious success of Prime Minister Gadjah Mada, to unite the archipelago".

Like many of my students, I was once young and was indoctrinated no less. Like most of my fellow compatriots, I used to imagine that Indonesia had always been in existence, no matter what it might have been called previously. Then, as our history text books taught us, Europeans came to colonize this natural resource-wealthy "nation" for hundreds of years.

Indonesian people suffered from foreign colonization until the "nation" awakened and fought back audaciously for its liberation, which was finally attained in 1945.

It took me a while to learn English, a third language that I learned via my second language (Indonesian), before I encountered and readily comprehended Gellner's aphorism, "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist".

I came to learn, later on, that far from being an intruder to the prosperous and peaceful existence of Indonesia, European colonizers had in fact been primarily responsible for the birth of this nation, its official language and its territory. These are the three sacred identities of 'Indonesians', as declared in the 1928 Youth Oath.

I wonder how many Indonesians, if any, still imagine Indonesia's origins as we did in previous generations.

The above is far from being a small matter of historical inaccuracy which can be easily amended on paper and in our minds. The general failure to date Indonesia's beginning and to recognize the fictitious nature of our nationhood, and the comfortable feeling of belonging to a great nation (in size and past glory) all have to do with huge material and non-material interests at stake. They all have multiple, very serious and sometimes fatal consequences. Due the limited space here, let us consider one example below.

The notion of Indonesia as having already been there from time immemorial provided the notion of Indonesia with a heritage attained as a birthright by the so-called "indigenous" segments of its population. This formed the basis of claims for privileges, and racial discrimination against other citizens deemed "non-indigenous". The distinction between the two are extremely weak or purely arbitrary, but the legitimate power that has been endowed to this myth is enormous.

In the past decade alone, more than a few thousand Indonesian lives have been lost in conflicts with fellow nationals. Although these conflicts may not be rooted or caused by an indigenous-

versus-non indigenous division, that divisive myth has been a major means of articulation for the many bloodbaths.

One wonders how much longer Indonesians can possibly maintain Indonesia as a unitary nation-state without successfully managing their overwhelming diversity. This in turn requires a basic understanding of why imminent conflicts in this nation have been expressed in inter-ethnic or inter-religious terms. Ultimately this begs the question of whether it would be possible for Indonesians to grasp such understanding, unless they truly awaken and recognize the fictiveness of all ethnicities and nations.

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