

George Junus Aditjondro: an uncompromising activist

December 19, 2016



George Junus Aditjondro. *Photo by Antara.*

On International Human Rights Day, 10 December, Indonesia lost one of its great public thinkers: George Junus Aditjondro. Born in 1946, George led a rich and extremely colourful life, worth celebrating with pride and gratitude. He began his career as a journalist, before taking leading roles in highly respected civil society organisations dedicated to the environment and sustainability. For his environmental work, he won the prestigious Kalpataru Award from the president in 1987. In subsequent decades, he became a socially engaged academic, and one of Indonesia's most vocal public intellectuals.

In addition to his international collaborations, George reached out to many of the diverse communities across the Indonesian islands. He took an extended

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occupation, and became a prominent supporter of the decolonisation of East Timor.

I had the privilege of working alongside him for several years. In the first half of the 1990s, we worked in the same unit, the Postgraduate Program in Development Studies at Satya Wacana Christian University, in Salatiga, Central Java. It was the first postgraduate program run by a private university in the country.

George's office was located between mine and that of another legendary public intellectual, Arief Budiman. Both were political mentors to me. We often worked together on and off campus, thanks to our shared political activism against the military dictatorship of the New Order government (1966-1998).

The 90s was an exciting time, as irrevocable divisions opened among the top political elite, leading to the inevitable downfall of the New Order in 1998. Our campus was a meeting place for many of the country's political activists and fugitives. Police and military intelligence agents regularly roamed our corridors.

Partly because of these political activities, the university became beset by major internal conflicts, leading to a massive and uninterrupted nine month strike involving students, and administrative and academic staff in nearly all units, except the Faculty of Economics. By the mid-90s, many students and faculty members left the university, including George, Arief and myself.

More than once, George's research on East Timor annoyed the government. In late 1994, Yogyakarta Police interrogated George over a political seminar he delivered at the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) in the city. He was never tried, as he took a fellowship at Murdoch University for a few months in early 1995. Satya Wacana terminated his employment soon after his departure for Australia, in the face of pressure from local authorities. After leaving Murdoch, George taught at the University of Newcastle for the next five years. He eventually returned to Indonesia in 2002, and lectured at Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta.

Among his peers, George stood out as a passionate, independent-minded and uncompromising researcher and activist. George impressed many for his ability to speak expansively on many topics with attention to minute empirical details. George's most celebrated work was on the scale of wealth and global investments of Indonesia's first family during the New Order. Most educated

knew as many of the details as George. When *Time* magazine, and its Indonesian equivalent, *Tempo*, separately published cover stories on the topic in 1999, they owed a considerable debt to George's work.

In 2009, George completed a similar research project examining the distribution of wealth in Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's inner circle. The controversial book, "Unravelling the Cikeas Octopus" saw him face accusations of defamation and major book chain Gramedia was initially unwilling to sell it.

George was remarkably radical, bold, and confrontational. In his office in Salatiga, he hung a huge East Timorese flag on the wall facing the door to the main foyer of the building. In large diagonal letters across the flag were the words: "Indonesia, get out of East Timor".

Perhaps due to his ample energy, restlessness, and uncompromising style, George found it difficult to operate in one institution for too long. He must have found them too slow and timid. He moved from one to another, and never showed interest in building a secure professional career in any one institution. He went wherever his burning passion and concerns took him.

George worked independently, as a loner. He preferred a few select close and long-term friends and did not reserve his criticism for the elite. Some of his critiques of fellow activists agitated them, and created occasional tensions. In Salatiga, university management was often nervous in dealing with him, and even more so with the local military authorities who had an eye on him.

Despite his fighting spirit, George was not a gruff or overly serious scholar. He had a great sense of humour. His political jokes and puns were original, and they often stung. As mentioned, in 1994 George faced the threat of prosecution. Details of the indictment were never made public but one likely trigger was a joke he made during the seminar at UII, where he asked the difference between student activists and President Soeharto. The first had *buletin* (bulletins, or pamphlets), he said, while Soeharto had *Tien yang bulet* (round or fat Tien, the nickname of the first lady).

George will be fondly remembered as one of Indonesia's most radical political critics, public intellectuals and investigative journalists. His audacity, passion, dedication and uncompromising commitment to political advocacy were second to none among his peers.

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Date created: 1 July 2015