

Ariel Heryanto - Perspective - ABC Radio National (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)

Many Australians were rightfully upset at the smiles, laughter and handshakes they saw in the media.

But what many have failed to understand is that a smile can mean many different things in Indonesia.

This is neither to exonerate the crime against humanity of the Bali bombing perpetrators, nor to excuse the Police officers' for their failings during the interview -- in other words, their lack of awareness of the existence sensibilities and ethical codes that are radically different from those prevailing in contemporary Indonesia.

Unfortunately, the foreign media and analysts have not understood things any better. The event has been misconstrued, although with reasons.

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.

They correctly stressed that the smiles did not necessarily imply delight, amusement, or friendliness between the suspect and the officers. They "laughed", but were not "laughing at" anything or anyone.

I agree with these culturalist interpretations, but other, political rather than cultural, explanations being put forward are problematic.

This reading says the smiles 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).

Most likely no calculation, clever or otherwise, was involved. Those people appeared to have smiled because they could not help it, because that's the way they were brought up since childhood.

For most members of the Indonesian public these smiles would not have seemed unusual at all. Significantly, with the exception of the English language newspaper *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". To ask why Amrozy and the police should smile is almost like asking why English speaking people always open an official letter with the greeting 'Dear',

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even if this is a letter of very serious complaint or protest.

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 people 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. For instance, you can't say "Jakarta" properly without spreading your lips. Not spreading their lips, new learners of Indonesian say "Jakarta".

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.

When these foreigners tell those same Indonesians things like 'Indonesians are so gentle, graceful, hospitable,' Indonesians also often misunderstood the remarks, taking them more seriously than necessary.

Indonesians do not -- as they are taught 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.

Lest I be misunderstood, cultural differences do not faithfully follow the boundaries of nation-states. Neither do they remain unchanged.

The cultural differences between sub-national groups in Indonesia, along gender, ethnic, religious, residential, and linguistic lines are as profound as those between Indonesia and other nations.

The Bali bombing is of course seriously deplorable.

But the painful incident provides yet one more opportunity for Indonesians to better understand other people's sensibilities. And it also offers the chance for their friendly Australian neighbours to understand what might, or might not be, behind a smile.

It would be a pity if this opportunity is lost.