

DUNIA BERPUTAR—THE WORLD TURNS

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This essay was written for
Energi Positif: Opini 100 Tokoh mengenai Indonesia di Era SBY
[*Positive Energy: 100 Leaders' Opinions of Indonesia in the SBY Era*],
ed. Dino Patti Djalal (Jakarta: Red & White Publishing, June 2009),
a collection occasioned by the naming of Indonesian president
Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) as one the “100 Most Influential People in 2009”
by *TIME Magazine* in its 14 May 2009 issue.¹

My wife, our nine-month-old daughter, and I first arrived in Indonesia in December 1967. I was a graduate student hoping to do field work for my dissertation. We stayed for two years—a year and a half in Jakarta plus a half-year in Bandung.

In Jakarta we lived on Jalan Doktor Abdulrachman Saleh near its intersection with Jalan Prapatan/Kwitang, on the second floor of a building that would have had a third floor had the owner, Ibu Soekasno, not run out of money to keep going higher. She sold tires and soup from the ground-floor apartment where she lived with her husband, a civil servant who earned a fraction of her income.

At that time our neighborhood was part of the subdistrict (*kelurahan*) of Senen. Senen was a rough and poor part of the city—the opposite of the Menteng neighborhood where elite Indonesians and foreign diplomats lived. The one and only time anyone tried (and failed) to rob me during our two years in Indonesia occurred one night on a main street in Senen.

Our immediate neighborhood was quite safe. We thought nothing of letting our blonde infant daughter Kirsten disappear down the back alleys of “kampung Kwitang” with Bu Mirah, our maid, for hours on end. Nevertheless, I confess that when Indonesians at upscale receptions asked me where we lived, sometimes I said “Senen” just to see the look on their faces.

We nicknamed Kirsten “Kartini” to honor an Indonesian heroine and because her real name sounded like *Kristen*—Protestant—in the Indonesian language. I may have been too sensitive, but I didn’t want my orthodox Muslim friends and informants to mistake us for missionaries.

¹ I was happy to write this essay upon being invited by Dr. Djalal to do so. The symmetry between *Time’s* title and the title of this book should not be taken too seriously, however, at least not as far as my implied status as a “leader” is concerned. I hope I am a “scholar,” but anyone who says I am a “leader” has a good sense of humor. As for “positive energy,” I will acknowledge having that in a broad sense: wanting Indonesians to have a better life and being heartened by their country’s present status as a relatively stable and democratic country, whomever they may elect to be their president for the coming five years.

If our building was unfinished, so was Jakarta. Empty lots and the skeletons of high-rise buildings flanked Jalan Thamrin, the city's downtown thoroughfare. Weeds sprouted from its broken surfaces. In front of the Hotel Indonesia, the first and only "luxury" hotel in town, pedicab drivers called out, "Hey, mister!" when a rare *bulé* (white foreigner) walked by.

Those were also the days of *Hwa Hwee*—the Chinese gambling game that managed to capture the imagination, not to mention the cash, of a good part of Jakarta's population. Evenings we sat in the cool open air among the construction rods on our unfinished rooftop listening to gamelan music on our battery-run record player while young men on Vespas drove by shouting the night's winning numbers.²

Dunia berputar. The world turns. Times change. Jakarta is not now and never will be the same as it was in 1967-69, more than forty years ago. That's not a bad thing, for three reasons: the brutal repression of the left that accompanied the inception of General Suharto's New Order; the early militarization of political life under his regime; and the poverty of Indonesians then still suffering the consequences of prior economic neglect under President Sukarno. Not until later would sustained economic growth and a significant reduction of poverty be achieved, thanks in part to good macroeconomic policy advice from the "Berkeley Mafia"—a name whose connotations would evolve from derision toward admiration. And not until 1997-98 would corruption, repression, nepotism, and the Asian Financial Crisis bring out onto Jakarta's streets the young beneficiaries of those earlier and now suddenly reversed economic gains. From yelling out lottery numbers thirty years before, young Jakartans were now shouting down Suharto.

Only a dreamer could have imagined in May 1998 that in May 2009 Indonesia would be a stable democracy preparing for its second direct presidential election—the most democratic country in Southeast Asia by Freedom House standards. This is not the place to allocate responsibility for that achievement, but President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) certainly would figure in such an account.

In a book that celebrates the inclusion of President Yudhoyono in *TIME Magazine*'s list of the world's 100 "most influential people," it is both heartening and ironic to note that the comment on SBY commissioned by *TIME* is not a puff piece that merely praises the president and his considerable accomplishments. In addition to lauding SBY, Malaysian author and politician Anwar Ibrahim is candid about the challenges that Indonesia faces: persisting poverty, neglected infrastructure, injurious corruption, and "a bewildering array" of investment-discouraging regulations.

Anwar's blurb for SBY is heartening not only because it avoids bogus flattery, but also because the president himself, perhaps in light of his partly academic background, readily acknowledges the value of critique. Anwar's remarks are at the same time ironic insofar

² I wrote about *Hwa Hwee* later in "Gambling and Development: The Case of Djakarta's 'Flower Organization,'" *Asia* (Autumn 1972).

as a reader with a sense of humor can wonder: If Yudhoyono really is one of the 100 *most influential* of all the 6.8 billion people now alive on this planet, how can poverty, corruption, and red tape still exist in the country he has been governing nonstop ever since he was elected to its presidency five years ago?

This is a joke, of course, but it prompts a serious thought. Indonesia is a democracy—flawed, to be sure, but democratic nonetheless. Democracy is intentionally and institutionally geared to *prevent* or *remedy* the concentration of influence in the hands of any one person—king or queen, president or prime minister—standing at the top of the political system. Indonesia could not possibly be a democracy if the editors of *TIME* had selected the country's leader on the basis of brute omnipotence rather than persuasive talent—taking into account hard power alone, ignoring the softer kind.

Democracy is not a one-size-fits-all solution to any problem. In Indonesia's decentralized multiparty system, politics can hamper performance. The necessity for coalition and compromise can undermine the exigency of good governance and effective public policy.

Indeed, President Yudhoyono's more enthusiastic supporters could argue that what he needs is not *TIME*'s congratulation for being so uniquely and impressively influential. They could ask instead for recognition that, if he is re-elected, and if he then governs by compromising with his political opponents and appropriating their diverse partisan agendas, he could lose what limited influence over policy he might otherwise be able to exercise.

It is one thing to make a state accountable. It is another to make it responsive—responsive, that is, to the physical and socioeconomic needs of its citizens. If accountability is an electoral question for politics, responsiveness is a policy question of performance.

Consider the president's decision to choose as his running mate the head of Indonesia's central bank, Boediono, a man without a political base but well regarded for his economic expertise, managerial skill, and personal integrity. Boediono is a Muslim. Yet the head of one Islamist party, Tifatul Sembiring of the PKS, accused him of not being Muslim enough to warrant selection as a potential vice-president in Muslim-majority Indonesia. In addition to noting the multi-religious character of Indonesia, reflected in its trans-confessional national doctrine, *Pancasila*, one could observe that for Sembiring, the politics of identity mattered more in this instance than the criterion of competence.

If Yudhoyono's presidency is renewed, will he be influential enough to establish and sustain the criterion of competence in his cabinet appointments? Or, lacking sufficient political clout, will his ministerial choices amount to political concessions to the parties he needs to ensure a majority coalition in the legislature—appointments of individuals whose loyalty or importance to this or that party may exceed their knowledge of, and ability to improve, the policy sectors entrusted to their care? How will Indonesia balance the political need for dispersed representation in the legislative branch of government

with the policy need for concentrated effectiveness in the executive branch? Whose influence will count, and with what consequences for the country as a whole? Those are the questions that President Yudhoyono's winning *TIME*'s contest for influence raise, at least in this outside observer's mind.

In Indonesia's polity, directly elected legislators and a directly elected president are juxtaposed. The balance of influence between them, and their willingness and ability to abjure personal avarice, vested interests, and communal agendas, and instead to cooperate in serving the public interest, will be critical to whether Indonesia's government from 2009 to 2014 succeeds or fails.

Whatever happens over these next five years, we can be assured of this: *Dunia berputar*. Times change. So will Indonesia.