

Between Hope and Despair: On Living with Difference in Indonesia

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1.

I want to start by acknowledging the conundrum I'm in.

To be called upon to say something about the state of the world as a poet *and* a novelist—as that most limited of specialists, if you will—is always heartening, if slightly bewildering. I say this because poets, *especially* poets, are by nature doubtful of their enterprise and even more so of themselves; Wislawa Szymborska says the reason she values the little phrase “I don’t know” so highly is precisely because poets rarely ever have an answer, not even to their own question. They ask the question, and they remain in the questing. And they seem even more doomed in these dark days of ours, where a madman reigns across the Atlantic; a united Europe struggles to stay afloat; democracies from the Philippines to South Africa, from Hungary to Venezuela tumble and fall, and the world’s largest Muslim-majority country, long celebrated for the harmonious music of its diversity, sinks ever deeper into the mire of intolerance. It seems to me—to quote Adam Zagajewski, that other great Polish poet—that “poetry needs doubt far more than doubt needs poetry.”

Novelists fare no better, not even with the attributes that allegedly make them (if not more reliable) more detailed social commentators than poets. By which I mean neither in the restrictive discipline of their “boundedness, their historicity, the social determination of their language”—qualities that Bakhtin argues are alien to the poetic style—nor in the liberating necessity to represent, even to exaggerate, the condition of heteroglossia.

Novalis may have believed that “the novel arises from the shortcomings of history,” and I won’t argue with him. At least not tonight. But we also know that such a license does not come without limitations. What novelists do, in the end, is tell tales about the world, things that are often dark and evil and depressing, things we already know but prefer to shield ourselves from. They give human beings an interior, a consciousness; they fill in the gaps, give voice to those whose stories fall through the cracks. But while they may take a stab in writing history anew, they cannot amend history any more than they can punish. Like poets, whose fate is one of eternal uncertainty, there’s only so much they can do.

Such is my quandary.

Still, it’s often through literature that we get our first glimpse of the world—of people who are like us and unlike us, of places we’ve never set foot on; places we never knew existed. Places and characters that captivate us because they speak to our own fears or desires, that we fall in love with and somehow carry within us long after we read about them, when we were children, or in our teens, and longing for an imaginary world to which we could escape. And when one day, we suddenly find ourselves in that very place, fleshed out and magnified before our own eyes, there’s this feeling of woozy enchantment. A feeling of recognition, of affirmation, of knowing where we are, of knowing what things are.

And this is how I’m feeling pretty much right now.

For me, it will always be the opening paragraphs of Book I of *Brideshead Revisited*, particularly that one line, which speaks of the past and the present, perhaps a premonition of the future: “Oxford, in those days, was still a city of aquatint.” It will always be, in my mind, the framing image of Oxford. And this is perhaps the best argument, still, for why we read novels and poetry: they hold us to the aquatint of our world: a thing engraved so that it may stay, and leave its mark, but one that is made of dyed water all the same, implying movement, possibilities,

a variety of tones in a single color. With some luck, they may occasionally transcend doubt, directing our gaze toward what we cannot know. To our moving in the world as subjects in process.

Which brings me to the other happy—and aptly serendipitous—fact of this occasion. Today we, the people of Indonesia—that land of boundless diversity—celebrate the 72nd anniversary of our independence day. In ceremonies across the country, in schools and government ministries, in towns and cities big and small, the word *Pancasila*, the five principles of our national ideology, will once again be invoked with due gravity, as it has been every year, along with reminders to stay, as our national motto insists, “united in our diversity.”

There will be pomp and ceremony, long speeches and a rehashing of the same, empty slogans. There will be boredom and indifference, but also, as I often experience it, the occasional tears and the tightening in the chest upon hearing the first moving strains of our national anthem performed in public. There might even be genuine moments of reflection, as one pauses to consider just how that independence was attained—and by this I mean not just the blood, tears, toil and sweat upon which the nation was erected, but also the less conspicuous acts of conciliation, complexity, and sacrifice. One might pause to consider, for instance, the ethos of *Pancasila*, however flawed a philosophy it is to begin with, and the role it has played in fostering, or not, this porous yet strangely abiding thing we call national identity.

And I would argue that it *is* worth giving ourselves that moment, now, *especially* now, on this day of independence, when so much of the Indonesia we cherish seems no longer to be taken for granted; when the phrase ‘living with difference’ sounds more and more like a slogan and a duty, and less and less an everyday experience, a thing lived and breathed, our birthright.

2.

There is a late scene in *Bukan Pasar Malam* (*Not a Night Market*), a novel by the great Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, in which the protagonist and his dying father are in the bedroom. The father, blighted and broken, is speaking incoherently. One minute he says he's the son of an *ulama*, a respected Muslim scholar, but that he doesn't wish to be "a *kehatib* (a preacher), a *nabi* (a prophet), or a *penghulu* (a person who leads prayers in a mosque)." The next minute, he quizzes his son on whether he's aware of a date in history—a birthday, he calls it—that means the most to his life. His son answers without hesitation, "The seventeenth of August nineteen hundred and forty-five, Father." Delighted, the father asks the son whether he knows what patriotism means. Yes, father, his son says, I do. The father says all he wants is to be a nationalist; that's why he's become a teacher. It's tough, he says, but I've given myself to it, I don't mind all the sacrifice.

When I read those lines for the first time, I thought of my father, who was always clear about what that date, the seventeenth of August nineteen hundred and forty-five meant to him, and how he often said it with the same care and deliberation. My father was born in 1932, and he left for Europe when he was seventeen to study in Holland and Germany. He returned to Jakarta from Berlin in 1962; there was never any question of not returning. Twenty-five years later, he sent me off to study overseas with the same words: remember the seventeenth of August nineteen hundred and forty-five. Don't ever forget how we got here and don't ever forget to give back.

Toward the end of *Bukan Pasar Malam*, when the father has just died and mourners flock the house to pay their respects, there is an extraordinary scene in which a Chinese acquaintance—a regular at the father's gambling table—begins reminiscing about the deceased. He speaks of the father as the most profound

ascetic, “the toughest, most tenacious gambler,”; and the most inspiring teller of the *Babad Tanah Jawi*, an old book that compiles historical accounts of the various legends that illuminate the spread of Islam in Java. It’s a scene all the more startling for its brevity, and for the tone and manner in which the lines are delivered: with such candor and casual fondness. Yet, what’s extraordinary about the scene is how in a mere few lines the Chinese man manages to summarize the full spectrum of another man’s character—the mystic abstainer, the skilled risk-taker, and the curious student of Islam who, we are told earlier, nonetheless puts secular nationalist values above religion—an internal plurality of which even the man’s own son doesn’t have knowledge.

It is a particularly instructive scene to keep in mind when we go back to the question of Indonesia. On a purely metaphysical level, Indonesia is an ambitious, gorgeous dream come true: a 20th century invention foisted upon a nation of 17,000 islands and some 700 living languages, a modern political construct that ushered in a lingua franca that by now almost everybody in the archipelago speaks; a oneness so improbable it was instantly embraced—indeed, an ‘imagined community,’ as the late Benedict Anderson told us.

A space, in other words, that was constantly in flux and never the ‘one’ thing.

A space that merited, by its very fallibility, the urgency to “get it right,” as our founding fathers had shown, when, on August 18, 1945, the Republic’s first president Sukarno, who had proclaimed our nation’s independence the day before, delivered the crucial twist in his act of nationhood. Professing to do so in the name of national unity, he took out from the first principle of the *Pancasila* the reference to the obligation for Muslims to practice *sharia* law—the seven words that the Islamists in the independence proclamation preparation committee had previously

forced on him. Even though we can never know his true motives, it was a double gesture of percipience on the part of Sukarno; having the effect of both reaffirming and safeguarding what he must have believed, as some of us do, and continue to do, to be the essence of Indonesia: one that wasn't an Islamic state. It was both a statement of faith and a plea for posterity.

The embrace of monotheism in our national ideology didn't serve everyone, of course, as my generation found out almost too late. It taught us, especially in the late seventies and early eighties of my school years, when *Pancasila* had been hijacked by the dictator Suharto and turned into an instrument of repression, that it was OK to murder Communists because they were going to turn us into a nation of Godless people, because they were anti-*Pancasila* and therefore anti-Indonesia. It taught us to look at history as a battle between good and evil, right and wrong, winner and loser, with no other shades in between—and no regard for the possibility that in any war within a family, no side is ever totally triumphant, both sides suffer losses.

Having said that, the Indonesia I grew up in was for the most part a peaceful one. It was a space that allowed me to grow up in Jakarta in the early seventies, in a home where Indonesian, Javanese, Dutch, English and German were heard, read, and spoken; with Javanese Muslim neighbors to our right and Javanese Catholic neighbors to our left; with my best friend, a Catholic of Chinese descent with a Javanese surname, living around the corner, with another friend, an Indian-Indonesian, the daughter of our family GP, living at the other corner, right next door to our dentist, Dr Tan, a Christian of Chinese descent, who hailed from Surabaya, East Java, and went by his Chinese name.

Even though my identity card said I was Muslim, I went to a Catholic school. I wasn't the only one; there were quite a number of Muslim students in

that school, and you could always tell them apart by the way they remained rooted to their seats during Communion and flinched at references to pigs and dogs. But, like me, they weren't obliged by their parents to pray five times a day, and, at school, we would all go and pray along during weekly Mass at the adjoining church. We knew the Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary Prayer as well as we did the Al-Fatihah. When somebody close to our family died, we would go to *tablilan* to gather and pray. When a house had just been built, or a new company launched, we would hold a *slametan* and provide meals to ensure the safety of the event; on certain days of the year, we would visit the graves of our forebears. There were ghosts and spirits living in our homes, and sometimes we called them by their names.

My Muslim friends who went to state schools exuded the same untroubled conscience; they didn't wear headscarves, not even at home; and, as in our school, religion as a subject was mostly taught in a normative, not a didactic way. Of course, politics played a part: as with history lessons throughout the eighties, taught as anti-Communist propaganda, Suharto's ban on headscarves for women in the bureaucracy and in state schools—a policy that lasted from 1982 to 1992—was to serve a broader authoritarian agenda. Suharto was an *abangan*: until the late eighties, when he realized that he needed political Islam on his side and began to actively court them, he saw Islamic dress as a sign of ignorance and backwardness. Yet, his distance from Islam—or, rather, his being partial to Christians, who had occupied strategic positions in his administration—had made for a certain religious harmony: there was never a moment in which our religion became a point of contention; it could even be argued that our similarity lay in our difference. In some perverse way, we all felt like minorities. As long as our religions stayed within the monotheistic path, that was. As long as we believed in the “one and only Almighty God.”

In 1986, I left Jakarta for a British boarding school in Singapore, where I shared a dorm room with seven other girls—two from Malaysia, one from Brunei, one from Thailand, two from Scotland, and a fellow Jakartan. By this time, difference had become the norm, the standard language. It didn't surprise me to see it all around, even in Southeast Asia's very model of organized diversity. In hawker stalls everywhere, I saw Malays eating at *yong tau foo* stalls, Indians gorging on *mee rebus*, throngs of Chinese turning up early for vegetable *biryani* at its freshest. Sure, Singapore is a country that manages its race consciousness so methodically that the result has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. And yet, just as inevitably, the curious democracy that is consumption seems to take care of the rest.

But of course, there's nothing surprising about this. For at the end of the day, apartheid—the system which allows for halal and kosher—is first and foremost a political act, the institutionalization of a set of rules, whereas culture is about what happens in practice. It subverts, betrays, surprises, has a logic of its own. Or so we want to believe. Or so we want to *especially* believe of religion, which my friends, worried about the future of Indonesia, are increasingly convinced is shaped by politics, more than the other way around. And by religion, I mean specifically Islam as it has been widely lived in Nusantara, even before the archipelago was named Indonesia: an Islam that is in constant interaction with culture. An Islam that has accepted *Pancasila* as a consensus.

3.

Today, the big picture certainly seems to suggest that politics shapes religion more than religion shapes politics. I'm not sure which is worse. But I'm not an academic. I'm not a political scientist or a student of theology. All I know is that when one starts wondering if things were better when Suharto was in power, there's something seriously wrong—with the thinking, above all, but, more pertinently, with the state of affairs at hand. Yet there's no denying that so much that we know

about Indonesia's pluralist spirit have been rendered preposterous by the events of April 19.

We all know the story.

Incumbent Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama—better known as Ahok—was soundly, if improbably, defeated by his challenger, Anies Baswedan, in the second round of the gubernatorial election. The comparison with Donald Trump's shock election as new leader of the free world was inevitable, particularly in the license the so-called unholy alliance that made up Baswedan's camp took in disparaging minorities. What's more, Ahok had endured months of savage and systematic campaign against him, waged by grass-roots, mosque-based, and social media squads; he'd been felled by a blasphemy charge for insulting the Quran, and he was further mowed down by mass rallies attended by tens of thousands of people baying for his blood. Most Jakartans believed he had done a good job as governor, but they didn't—they *couldn't*—vote for him; common sense and justice meant nothing if one was going straight to hell. “Once somebody shouts ‘blasphemy!’, all rationality dies. People no longer use their brains.” So says a deputy of the Golkar Party Jakarta branch, not inaccurately. These are chilling, if sobering lines—for it is this very psyche, so easily stoked, that has allowed marginal Islamist groups to swing elections, be it on their own strength, or through strategic political alliances, or both.

Since then, Ahok supporters have been counseled and rebuked, by voices earnest and patronizing, soothing and sarcastic, reminding that despite his resounding victory in the first round of the election, despite his approval rating consistently being above 60 percent—74 percent at one stage, just before the second round—“he lost; get used to it.” Under normal circumstances, all that sermonizing would have been just another day in politics—pollsters do get it

wrong; the electorate is fickle; your success team might not have been solid. But by no stretch of the imagination could any of these circumstances be qualified as ‘normal.’

I was on the phone from Berlin with a German friend in Jakarta the day of Ahok’s defeat. We were both depressed by the cruel turn of events, though she was doing a better job in trying to be positive. She told me, “I still find it admirable that almost 50 percent voted in favor of Ahok, given the 90 percent electorate. It’s quite staggering. Imagine people in Bavaria voting for a Muslim Ministerpräsident.” I remember thinking whether this realization should make one feel better or worse. But it *was* a staggering thought.

Interpretations abound, of course: most observers of Indonesian politics recognize that there has been a steady encroachment of conservative values on Indonesian culture, and this has adhered the populace to the faith more scrupulously than ever. They also agree that while Islamic sentiment is increasingly being used for political gain, president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo remains in control. They believe that president Jokowi will continue to be tough on conservative and extremist groups, as shown in a spate of terrorism arrests and raids of the past year, his firm command over the security forces during the second “Defend Islam” anti-Ahok mass rally known as ‘212’, and his recent threat to ban Hizbut Tahrir and other Islamist groups he deems ‘anti-Pancasila.’

Experts and scholars also acknowledge the deep divisions within the country’s two leading moderate Islamic groups, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, whose combined followership is approximately 100 million people, and the impact such a rift has had on moderate Islam’s inability to counter the Islamists and to stem the anti-Ahok sentiment.

Where the pundits differ is on whether the hardliners are in fact getting more powerful, and if so, how powerful are they becoming? To what extent is their apparent rise contingent upon the patronage of the old oligarchs, or the larger elite power play leading to the 2019 presidential elections?

Some maintain that the starkest lesson of Ahok's defeat is that core conservative and militant Muslims have gotten better at organizing, funding, and aligning themselves with the powerful old elite network. They believe that what happened on April 19 tells us more about the supremacy of deep-seated political structures than about the rise of religious conservatism. Even the opinion polls, they argue, show that religious intolerance among Indonesian Muslims has declined between 2010 and 2016. They tell us that what we are witnessing, in fact, is a backlash from hardliners whose access to power and capital during the rule of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has been severed since President Jokowi assumed office. An insider friend told me that the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI)—or the *fatwa* factory—received a reported 16 billion rupiah every year when Yudhoyono was in power, in contrast to the paltry 3 billion a year from the Jokowi administration. In the Yudhoyono years, the hardliners were attacking minorities, sure; but they never struck at the government directly. There was no need to because politics and religion were in bed together.

Other observers caution against putting too strong an emphasis on elite power play. They ask us, instead, not to underestimate the more organic, self-generating conservatism of Islamist organizations. They point, in particular, to the ideological divergence within mainstream Islamic organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah, which we are told is caused by the growing identification within their ranks with conservative Islamist theology from the Middle East. This 'conservative turn' in Indonesian Islam—to use Martin van Bruinessen's term—appears to have been the most critical development uniting the moderates and the

Islamists. It explains their frequent advocacy of common political causes, be it local *sharia* law or battling ‘enemies of Islam’ such as Ahok.

We are also told that such theological convergences have afflicted traditional Islamic groups long governed by genealogy. Recently the author Ben Sohib noted that the *sayyid* (an honorific title denoting a people accepted as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and non-*sayyid* groups in the Indonesian Arab community have found an unlikely rallying point in the figure of the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front, Rizieq Shihab. Beset by religious disparagement and social and economic anxieties, they’ve come to realize that the Islamic Defenders Front’s unabashed approach to political praxis, even when their leader is a *sayyid*, is better suited to their activism than the more contemplative, apolitical style of the *Alawiyin*. In Rizieq Shihab, it is quite possible that they’ve found someone who could articulate their social ambitions and growing economic frustrations, so wrote Ben Sohib, citing the mom-and-pop perfume and traditional clothing stores dotting the Arab districts in Jakarta, unable to compete with the glitzy shopping malls that are increasingly dominating the cityscape.

This brings me to the other prevailing argument: one centered on the widening economic gap across class and ideologies—among the urban middle classes, the urban poor populations, and the relatively marginalized sections of the bourgeoisie. Several months ago, I was alerted to a public discussion that took place in Jakarta in February. The theme was “Reading Islam in Indonesia after ‘212.’” What surprised me about some of the panel conclusions were their somewhat rose-tinted emphasis on the ‘peaceful’ aspect of the so-called peace rally. By ‘peaceful’ I’m referring to their insistence on the relative absence of radical Islamist banners and speech, the symbolic presence of women as the great neutralizer, and the theory of an emerging new face of Islam quite independent of the traditionalist-modernist polarization of NU and Muhammadiyah, as though

said organizations' express refusal to take part in the rally had prevented many of their disgruntled members from taking to the streets and denouncing Ahok.

A friend of mine, a scholar and activist who is familiar with the issue, attempts to explain, "What we're seeing in '212' is that people want three things: social justice, good governance, and poverty eradication. And they're not getting it from the government. Instead, they see the rise of state corporatism, a governor and a president who don't care a jot for the poor and the downtrodden. Are you surprised that the people have turned to religion? In the absence of the Left and the failure of 'moderate' Islam, what do you expect? People see puritan Islam as the only answer, the only solution to social justice."

It still isn't clear to me, then and now, how it has come to be, that the far-right has hijacked so completely the rhetoric of the liberal and the left. Even less clear is whether the argument is more a reflection of a genuine empirical assessment of society, or a purely political strategy. But my friend's argument explains why such sentiments have provided much of the grist for the rise of—to borrow Vedi Hadiz's term—the New Islamic Populism we seem to be witnessing today. Seen through this lens, the unlikely coalition that formed around Anies Baswedan—the ultra-nationalist, populist authoritarian Gerindra Party; the religiously conservative Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the radical Islamic Defenders Front—doesn't seem so farfetched after all. By purporting to champion an oppressed and homogenous ummah, it demonstrated the terrifying, insurgent potential of a campaign that successfully mobilized economic and religious grievance against a perceived enemy of Islam and a remote, self-serving political elite. And as we know, these tactics worked. The case of Ahok, as another scholar and activist friend said, was indeed a test of faith: it held our core values to the light, and some of us had been found wanting.

Against such a backdrop, one is almost forgiven the wishful thinking that some things may have improved; that not all is lost. But no such luck. Two years ago, at the 50th anniversary commemoration of the murder of six army generals and one lieutenant—a turning point used by the Suharto regime to justify the extermination of suspected Communists—both the Jakarta Chief of Police and Rizieq Shihab grandly denounced Communism in one of the starkest public shows of their partnership.

In the same period, events followed one another, each smacking too much of the old tropes of official neurosis. Taken together, the arrest and deportation of a 77-year-old former political exile, the confiscation and burning of the Satya Wacana University's student magazine, the censorship of programs at the Ubud Literary Festival, and President Jokowi's refusal to apologize to the families of '1965' victims suggested an eerie revival of the Suharto era. Nowadays, if you check the Army website, you'll see that they've posted an official document warning of the resurgence of the rather charmingly phrased "New Style Communism." It is clear from their regular updates on alleged Communist movements in the provinces that we are meant to see the return of the Red Menace as the gravest danger the country faces.

Yet this shouldn't surprise us. A symbiotic relationship between mainstream political Islam and the military has even deeper roots than the pragmatic, essentially mercenary partnership between the police force and marginal Islamist groups like the Islamic Defenders Front. By their own admission, members of Nahdlatul Ulama, the country's largest Muslim organization, had carried out the lion's share of anti-Communist killings between 1965 and 1968, with active assistance from the Army. Political Islam rarely ever acts alone in its quest for hegemony, and at no other time has this been truer than now.

So, it seems that whichever framework we choose through which to look at the big picture, it's a grim one. There's something depressing, to say the least, about the banality of politics: the realization that for all the changes we've gone through, including the person we have elected as leader, money and power still prevail over sound policies. Even more dispiriting is the return to anti-Communism paranoia as a pretext for military control as well as the realization that at no other time in Indonesian history, except during the brief smear campaign against President Jokowi during the presidential election, have religion and ethnic identity been so blatantly—and severely—politicized to crush an opponent. They say that in true police states, rulers hang on to power through surveillance and repression. But that's not how power is won and sustained in backsliding democracies. As David Frum reminds us, "Polarization, not persecution, enables the modern illiberal regime."

4.

As with many great social and political upheavals, what happened on April 19 has forced us to look more closely at our lives in our attempt to make sense of it all.

Of course, as a child I was very naïve. I wasn't aware that the life I was living was one of privilege: I thought it was just life. I didn't know what it was like to be living in more homogenous areas of the city, or a less secular, middle-class one, where any kind of difference, an 'Us' and 'Them,' would have been starker.

As an adult, and as a writer, I'm afraid I'm no better, just older. And possibly even more naïve, because that faith in my country's 'spirit'—one that is syncretic, generous, and wise—is so embedded within me that when people ask me where I think the country is going, whether I still have hope, I always say, what kind of question is that? Of course I have hope. It is the thing of love.

It's always easier, of course, to hold on to hope when one is faraway from home. I've spent most of the past two years traveling, and while keeping up with news from home is not difficult, any writer knows that travel and relocation entail a dissipation of the vernacular; the absence of the sensory. Knowing about a country, even your own, is not the same as living there, living *it*. I did, for this reason, try to keep myself abreast of things; almost every other day I would listen to anguished reports from my friends, telling me how much things have changed, how splintered the air was with every known aversion rising to the surface—anti-LGBT, anti-women's rights, anti-Communism, anti-Christianity, anti-Chinese—and increasingly after Ahok was charged with blasphemy.

And there I was, listening, part-sibling, part-stranger, to stories of how deeply polarized society had become; how many personal friendships had ended, how many working relationships in tatters; how loud, pig-headed, and self-righteous everybody was in their own opinion, how people no longer knew how to talk to each other, to agree to disagree, to disagree without contempt. I had no idea it was that bad.

I do not say this to make light of my own observations, or the gravity of the situation. But I'm often emotionally bound to the high points of my own life journey, as most people tend to be, and finding that good things have changed is never easy. In 2002, for instance, I was doing research for the Ford Foundation. In those days, there was hope in the air—more books were being written and published, bookstores were no longer afraid to stock previously banned or leftist books, people were able to hold discussions on the anti-Communist massacres of 1965, history was being rewritten, secularization was even trending. In Magelang, Central Java, I interviewed a formidable young woman who'd inherited a *pesantren* from her progressive Kyai father; she was teaching her students decidedly feminist

interpretations of the *Kitab Kuning*—the so-called ‘Yellow Texts.’ I remember being so in awe of her, and thinking if this was the future of Indonesia, I could rest assured.

Now, fifteen years later, female students in state schools in West Java and parts of Jakarta where the ‘Spiritual Islam’ (*Robani Islam*) forces are strong are not only instructed to wear headscarves, but also subjected to corporal punishment. Brainwashed by their teachers, young graduates from teacher-training (IKIP) universities across the archipelago, a majority of these students support the idea of an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia.

In this context, the Jakarta in which I now live is most certainly not the Jakarta of my childhood. At the end of last year, at the height of the anti-Ahok campaign, barbed wire fences, not seen since the riots of May 1998, were shooting up in apartment buildings with a high population of Chinese-Indonesians. Early this year, I seemed to be hearing even more sermons blaring from the loudspeaker of my neighborhood’s mosque; more children reciting the Quran; often in mid-morning, often twice a day, often on the weekend—and always with an edge, always at full throttle. In offices, in hospitals, in shopping malls, there are more praying facilities; everywhere, there are more women wearing headscarves than there ever were in my lifetime; more people are going on the pilgrimage to Mecca and to the graves of revered Islamic saints; our television and radio are increasingly packed with Islamic-themed programs, from sappy “In Islam we triumph” *sinetron* soap operas to Islam-propagating *dawah* by ultra-conservative preachers. When I was growing up I never had a cashier in a supermarket ask me or my parents what our religions were; neither had I encountered so many *halal*-labeled products, from foodstuff and cosmetics, on the supermarket aisles. None of these developments are new, but they are insidious and bratty and persistent, as any child of religion and capital often is.

5.

So where do we go from here? It is plain that one cannot reflect upon Indonesia without touching upon religion, or at least thinking about it—whether you're a believer or not. Religion is the great preoccupation, the great affliction, the great vexation. For the poet and novelist, it is almost the duty of memory.

These days, however, I certainly discern among my generation and the generation of my parents a vague but obstinate longing for lost times—a sort of rueful nostalgia where at the very least heterogeneity was not in question and people just sort of got along. Of course, this reaching back to the past could be a pleasure ride for some and a nightmare for others. And as our fear demands placation, we often look for the soothing words of old wisdom.

Twelve years ago, I happened upon a book called *War and the Iliad*. It brought together for the first time in one volume two important essays by the French philosophers Simone Weil and Rachel Bernaloff, written on the eve of World War II, as Hitler was marching into France. I was so taken by the essays, especially by Bernaloff's, which was less logocentric than Weil's and so much more open to the wonder and the 'not-knowing' of poetry, that I ended up writing my own book. It was my so-called modest intervention into the two essays, published under the title *Perang, Langit dan Dua Perempuan (War, Heaven and Two Women)*.

Although very different in approach and interpretation, the two essays were to their authors their "methods of facing the war," with the *Iliad*, after all Europe's first poem, as their guide to the enduring nature of man and violence. It struck me in particular how literary works could serve as, in the words of the critic Kenneth Burke, "equipment for living," by opening up familiar narratives that could make

sense of new and chaotic situations. The precursor came as early as the fall of 1935, when Jean Giraudoux's popular play *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* pointed to the analogy of France as vulnerable Troy and Hitler as the "Tiger at the Gates," referring to the play's English title.

What I'm trying to suggest here is that Indonesians might not have to look so far into our history for guidance. We could start with rethinking *Pancasila*, for instance, a document that, unlike America's Declaration of Independence, was conceived as a conversation, a verbal presentation based on a spontaneous process, and not as a written composition—a product of judicious thinking, reformulation and philosophical finesse.

In his speech of last June 1st, on the anniversary of the Birth of *Pancasila*, the Indonesian poet, essayist and public intellectual Goenawan Mohamad suggested that the letters and the spirit of *Pancasila* could not be seen separately from its conception: it was never meant to be a *Weltanschauung* or a constitution set in stone; rather, it was a product of community, an interactive negotiation with a 60 people-strong audience with differing points of view. Its epistemology, as Mohamad argued, was a "community-based epistemology," its truths "truths-in-process." *Pancasila* was a text borne out of conversation, as loose and fluid and diverse and imperfect as Indonesia—that is, if we still accept that Indonesia as, in and of itself, a literature in progress: a long, unceasing conversation.

Clearly, the conversation urgently needed today demands from us at once our toughness and humility, in remembering the past as well as in imagining a future. It should first assume the fallibility of those involved in it. And this concerns, in the deepest sense, the nature of memory. Adam Zagajewski reminds us in his beautiful essay "Beginning to Remember," that remembering is at best an unfinished project, a process that can't be seen through to its conclusion. He

suggests that there are at least two kinds of memory—one of “large outlines, rational theses and vivid colors ... not only able but eager to synthesize”; the other humbler, more unstable, even necessarily idiomatic: a memory that is, in his words, “small, quick, acute—that refuses death, and will not agree to alter completely its system for archiving recollections.” And it is precisely because of this, he argues, that this memory “retains more life, more freshness in its flashes.”

Poets certainly do have a point when they liken poetry to an echo: they say it is but a witness that we do not live in a vacuum, and that there is something in that space that multiplies our voices into other places. When we hear that echo, we might even hear a ‘meaning’ or a value far greater than ‘nationalism’ or ‘identity’—namely the plurality within us. The plurality that enables us to refuse being polarized just as we refuse the identification imposed by others upon us.

Today, as Indonesians celebrate our 72nd independence day and ponder anew what its full measure, I wonder whether perhaps we need both kinds of memory. The one that remembers the big picture—the distillation of our founding fathers’ best intentions, imperfect and imperfectible as they are; and the one that reaches into the depths of our human experiences, that chamber of stories and echoes. And by this I mean stories we encounter in our daily lives, through interaction with friends or strangers—an unexpected truce, an unsought act of kindness, a bracing moment of solidarity—that tell us that it isn’t our fate to be like Pakistan, or Afghanistan, even if at times we feel we might. For if there is one truth in this world it is that every society has to work toward a successful future; it isn’t handed to us, just as no progress comes without pain.

Sometimes progress, or what seems like progress, may not even take that long. As we cast our far-flung gaze upon the wider world, barely a year after the electoral shocks of 2016, we see some of our worst fears averted. Extreme

nationalists were hemmed back in French, Dutch and Austrian elections. In Germany, Angela Merkel seems poised to defend her position in the upcoming fall elections. In what appears to be the triumph of people's power, Poland's president has recently announced he will veto the controversial judicial reforms that would have cemented the country's slide into authoritarianism. Despite the rise of right-wing populism around the globe, not all the world is roused by Trumpism and Brexit; some part of it seems to have learned its lessons or even to have been forced to grow up.

Still. If history has taught us anything, it is that we are also susceptible to envy and resentment, to the language of blame and contempt, the need for an Us and Them. Especially when our sense of well-being and entitlement is assaulted by an economic breakdown. Hitler exploited it. Donald Trump exploited it, and we let them rise to power because of it.

We, human beings, are indeed limited—as lawmakers, as leaders, as citizens, as individuals. And it is out of that limitation that we create and reinforce a fallible system, a system that needs to be revisited, reinterpreted and reimagined if it is to stand the test of time. And as *Pancasila* shows, any system of law—whether it be the Constitution or a foundational set of ideas, isn't a machine that will run by itself. “Checks and balances,” as James Russell Lowell puts it, is “a metaphor, not a mechanism.” “Living with difference,” too, is a metaphor, not a mechanism. It requires our goodwill and creativity, as individual citizens, to bestow upon it continuous meaning as we listen more closely to our own complex internal music, and learn to better hear it in others. It requires our standing *both* for social justice and civil liberty, and not one at the expense of the other.

And so, I am still without answers. The novelist, of course, is often tasked with the ultimate humanist duty: to evaluate the world; to be in constant dialogue

with it; to experiment with new ways of dealing with it. But beyond his or her own limitations, there is the internal defiance of the project that is the world itself: always slightly old and slightly new, fixed and changing all the same, almost always resistant to knowing.

Meanwhile, loving a country is a kind of a sickness: we see all her flaws, the puerile, the posturing, the parochial, the prude, the plain repulsive, but we love her anyway, we love her achingly and catastrophically—her spirit, her suffering, her valor, her mortality, her insecurity, even when at times we, in our particularities, in our sense of belonging to things that have nothing to do with country, are at odds with her. It afflicts the departing EU nationals to whom Britain has been a home and for whom leaving is a wound as it does prodigal children everywhere who find their native lands unfamiliar, altered, or even disappointing. After all, “the homeland,” as Marina Tsvetaeva says, is “not a geographical convention, but an insistence of memory and blood.”

It is both a curse and a blessing; and it almost calls for a poet to say it.

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