



Lontar Newsletter

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Greetings

This must be a landmark year for women's rights in Indonesia. Not long after Kartini Day on April 21, welcome news arrived that Parliament had finally ratified the Domestic Workers Protection Law. Millions of domestic workers will now have a pathway to escape the exploitation and discrimination many have suffered in Indonesian households.

The law is the culmination of a 22-year struggle by women's and human rights groups to have domestic workers recognized as significant contributors to the economy, moving them from an unregulated informal system into one that ensures legal protection. According to the World Bank, of the estimated five million laborers in the country, 34% are domestic workers, and more than 90% are women. They will now be able to secure social security, health insurance, and legal recourse against exploitation and abuse.

Further lobbying will be needed, however, before the law is fully implemented and enforced because the necessary rules and regulations (PPRT) must still be established by Parliament and the relevant government ministries. One key point to be agreed upon is the requirement for central and regional governments, as well as employment agencies, to provide vocational training. This empowerment program is expected to improve the competency of domestic workers, giving members of the "nanny economy" added value and greater bargaining power when negotiating wages and safe working conditions. Most importantly, there is a need for a comprehensive public campaign to educate employers about their responsibilities if the law is to be effective.

Ruminations

Contrasts in Power

When writing last month's "Rumination," which was set primarily in 2010, at the time of President Barack Obama's state visit to Indonesia, I reviewed my notes from that time.

Obama's visit included a stop at the University of Indonesia where he gave a speech dotted with fond memories from the time as a boy he was living with his mother, Ann Soetoro, in Jakarta. He said, "I remember the people: the old men and women who welcomed us with smiles; the children who made a foreign child feel like a neighbor and a friend; and the teachers who helped me learn about this country..."

I share a similar point of view with the former president but what I found more poignant were the truths he aired: "But even as this land of my youth has changed in so many ways, those things that I learned to love about Indonesia—that spirit of tolerance that is written into your Constitution; symbolized in mosques and churches and temples standing alongside each other; that spirit that's embodied in your people—that still lives on. 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika', 'Unity in Diversity': this is the foundation of Indonesia's example to the world, and this is why Indonesia will play such an important part in the 21st century."

Obama's speech was nuanced—cordial yet also instructive in tone. He spoke of the need for shared prosperity among nations and the right of all nations to play an active role in shaping the global economy. He said "We must build bridges between our people, because our future security and prosperity is shared. Hand in hand, that is what development and democracy are about—the notion that certain values are universal. Prosperity without freedom is just another form of poverty. Because there are aspirations that human beings share—the liberty of knowing that your leader is accountable to you, and that you won't be locked up for disagreeing with them; the opportunity to get an education and to be able to work with dignity; the freedom to practice your faith without fear or restriction. Those are universal values that must be observed everywhere."

I am thinking about those comments today. Though I have lived almost all my adult years in Indonesia, I still carry a blue passport, not a green one, and feel obliged if not to overtly support U.S. government policies, at least to explain their rationale when questioned about them.

The culture of domestic work in Indonesia is deeply rooted in the Javanese value of *ngenger* (to serve and to devote). In some households, this sense of devotion is passed down from mother to daughter, ensuring job continuity for the family. Many domestic workers come from rural, low-income areas with limited access to education, although this is gradually changing as more schools are built in villages and remote regions. The widespread use of mobile phones has also helped spread relevant information among growing “maids’ groups.” Additionally, in the past decade, increasing numbers of domestic workers have chosen to work overseas in search of better wages. At the same time, the rise of dual-income households in Indonesia continues to drive demand for housekeepers, childcare providers, and elder caregivers.

The passage of this law marks a significant step toward dignity and protection for domestic workers in Indonesia, but its success will depend on effective implementation, public awareness, and sustained political will. Only through these efforts can long-standing inequalities be addressed and meaningful change secured for millions of women.

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

Increasingly, however, as the U.S. government attempts to use its political-economic-military superiority to subject other nations to its will, I cannot.

Following President Obama’s visit to Jakarta, I sent to my family a transcript of the President’s speech. My brother-in-law Bill Scanlon wrote back to me: “What an amazing speech! ... One in which our president acts like a true statesman and international leader. One in which our president reminds me of one of the greatest pronouncements any of our presidents has ever made, namely FDR’s Four Freedoms Speech.”

We are likely in need of a little background. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his “Four Freedoms” speech in January 1941, the likelihood of entry by the United States into the ongoing European War was high. In his speech, the president was aiming to sway public opinion away from isolationism and toward supporting the Allied powers against Axis aggression.

In that speech Roosevelt defined four fundamental rights that should exist everywhere in the world: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Delivered at a moment when global war threatened democratic societies, the speech proposed that American security could not be separated from the condition of freedom abroad. Roosevelt argued that these freedoms were not uniquely American privileges but universal rights.

Obama echoed many of these ideas in his speech when he emphasized shared human aspirations. He linked economic development with democratic accountability and civil liberties, asserting that people everywhere desire the freedom to speak openly, practice religion without fear, obtain an education, and work with dignity. Both Roosevelt and Obama thus place American leadership within a moral framework in which security and prosperity depend on reinforcing universal values and international cooperation.

In recent years, however, that tradition has come under strain. The rhetoric associated with Donald Trump represents a marked departure from this universalist framework. His political philosophy, often



President Barack Obama at the University of Indonesia, Nov. 10, 2010.
(Photo from Christian Science Monitor)

NEW HOMES NEEDED!



Krijono: *Ketut, Penari Bali, Ketut*; oil on canvas; 91x122 cm; 1995

Remember how, over the years, your family home gradually filled up with items your parents had inherited, paintings they'd purchased, and *oleh-oleh* from visitors? Well, a similar thing has happened to Lontar. So it is that Lontar is now looking for new homes for some of its collection of art and craftwork. This includes traditional Balinese paintings, contemporary modern art, art posters, wooden carvings and numerous other items. Please help us in this endeavor

A few images of items in Lontar's collection are shown above and below. To obtain a PDF containing images of all the items or to set up an appointment to see the items at Lontar's office send a request to John McGlynn, either to his email address (john_mcglynn@lontar.org) or his WA number (+62 8164812155).



Robert Pearce: *The Golden Rule*; Mixed media on wooden panel; 200 x 200 cm; 2017

summarized by “America First,” emphasizes national sovereignty and domestic advantage.

The contrast can be seen in several respects. For Roosevelt and Obama, political freedoms are universal and worth defending internationally. For Trump, foreign policy is more narrowly defined in terms of national interest. Where Roosevelt and Obama saw value in sustaining international institutions and alliances, Trump has expressed skepticism toward such arrangements. And whereas earlier leaders framed American power as stewardship within a rules-based order, Trump's rhetoric presents nations as competitors in a largely transactional arena.

These differing perspectives reflect not only changes in leadership but also broader debates about the role of nations in an increasingly complex world.

It is within this context that Indonesia's current position can be considered. Under President Prabowo Subianto, the country's foreign policy appears to follow a path distinct from both the universalist language of Roosevelt and Obama and the more overt nationalism associated with Trump. Rather than positioning Indonesia as a vocal advocate for global political values, or as a state engaged in rivalry, Prabowo's approach has emphasized balance.

Cooperation with major powers, including the United States, remains important. At the same time, such cooperation is generally framed in terms of mutual benefit, economic development, and national stability. Indonesia's diplomacy reflects an effort to navigate competing influences while preserving autonomy.

Such an approach has its strengths. For a nation of Indonesia's size and position, caution and flexibility have merit. Yet it also invites a broader question—one that returns us to the themes raised in Obama's speech in Jakarta.

If Indonesia's founding principles—its commitment to pluralism, its motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*—once positioned it as a model for the wider world, what role might it now choose to play in shaping that world?

Balance and restraint can serve a nation well. But a diplomacy that prioritizes equilibrium above all else may also limit the articulation of broader commitments. In a century still grappling with questions of freedom and cooperation, the absence of a clearly expressed vision can carry its own consequences.

Indonesia remains a country of considerable promise, one whose example has, at moments, resonated far beyond its borders. Whether that promise will again be projected outward—through a more defined voice in global affairs—remains an open question.

John H. McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)



Lovis Ostenerik: *Momentum 23*; digital print on canvas; 92 x 150 cm; 2009



Didik Nurhadi: *Untitled*; Acrylic on canvas; 154 x 134 cm (w. frame); 2000



S. Teddy D. & Daniel Flanagan; *Stay Away Violence*; oil, pastels, and charcoal on canvas; 150 x 150 cm; 2009

Surat dari Pejompongan

PANCHATANTRA

Bung,

Tiba-tiba terambil olehku buku *Panchatantra* gubahan Pandit Vishnu Sharma, terjemahan G.L. Chandiramani, dari perpustakaan Lontar. Ini adalah buku kumpulan fabel yang dipercaya paling tua dan tersebar di berbagai belahan dunia lain. Mulai dari Yunani, Iran, Arab hingga Jawa dan Bali—sementara di Yunani sendiri ada pula kumpulan fabel Aesop, yang isinya kurang-lebih serupa, tetapi punya asal-usul berbeda. Bahkan, dongeng Grimm Bersaudara juga mengambil inspirasi dari *Panchatantra*.

Dengan berbagai variasi kisah di dalamnya, termasuk juga bagaimana kisah-kisah itu ditampilkan kembali dalam bahasa dan budaya baru penyerapnya, *Panchatantra* bisa disebut sebagai salah satu karya fiksi klasik yang paling berpengaruh.

Panchatantra memang himpunan cerita yang memafaatkan binatang sebagai tokoh cerita. Tetapi, karena buku cerita ini pada dasarnya adalah kitab tentang panduan kebijaksanaan hidup di dunia, maka dengan sendirinya ia mengandung ajaran moral yang kuat, dengan cara pengisahan yang berlapis-lapis, dan hampir tidak ada batasnya. *Panchatantra* telah berdiri sebagai contoh terbaik dari sastra didaktis.

Sebenarnya, sebagai fiksi didaktis *Panchatantra* bisa dibaca dalam dua tataran. Tataran pertama tentu saja adalah cerita binatang dan ini sangat cocok buat anak-anak, apalagi dengan pesan moral yang jelas di akhir cerita. Tetapi, pada tataran kedua, kita mendapatkan kitab itu sebagai sehimpunan pelajaran kebijaksanaan hidup yang disampaikan melalui berbagai perumpamaan dalam kehidupan binatang dan manusia. Itulah yang membedakan fiksi jenis ini dengan pelajaran moral dalam agama, misalnya.

Larangan akan kejahatan atau suruhan akan kebajikan tidak disampaikan secara langsung, tetapi dengan menggunakan perilaku binatang sebagai modelnya. Pelajaran moral tertentu, misalnya, ingin mencegah manusia dari sifat serakah atau rakus, maka semua itu disampaikan lewat sifat atau perilaku binatang yang cocok dengan itu.

Mungkin, suatu ketika, kau pernah melarang anakmu untuk tidak rakus atau serakah. Jika kau langsung melarangnya, bisa saja itu terjadi. Tetapi, jika kaubacakan “Kisah Raja Chandra”, cerita penutup *Panchatantra*, akan lain lagi rasanya. Dalam cerita ini sifat rakus ada pada dua subjek, monyet dan raja. Di antara binatang dan manusia ada adu taktik untuk saling mengalahkan. Apa daya, Raja Chandra yang rakus akhirnya dikalahkan oleh monyet yang cerdik, yang sebelumnya sudah menanggalkan sifat rakusnya jauh di belakang.

Dengan kata lain, Bung, perilaku binatang dalam kisah seperti ini adalah perlambang dari sifat manusia. Perlambangan itu tentu saja untuk

AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



S. Rukiah in 1987

Born in Purwakarta on April 25, 1927, S. Rukiah published her first literary work, a number of poems, in *Gelombang Zaman*. In mid-1948, she joined the staff of the literary journal *Pujangga Baru* as its Purwakarta correspondent, and in 1950 moved to Jakarta to become the journal's editorial secretary. That same year also saw the publication of her novella, *Kejatuhan dan Hati (The Fall and the Heart)*. In 1951 she moved to Bandung where she became editor of the children's magazine *Cendrawasih*.

Tandus (Barren), her first collection of poems and short stories, was published in 1952 and won a national literary award that same year. Also that year, she began to write children's books and published continuously in this field until 1964.

It is not known when Rukiah joined the LEKRA, the Institute of Peoples' Culture, but at its first National Congress in January 1959, she was elected as a member of its Central Committee.

As a result of her affiliation with that organization, her books were banned following the overthrow of President Sukarno and the banning of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965. Because of the emotional trauma she suffered in 1965 and the years following, she never wrote again.

Rukiah died in Purwakarta on June 6, 1996.

menghindari sesuatu yang sifatnya langsung, larangan misalnya, agar yang dilarang tidak tersinggung dan bisa menerima larangan itu melalui pencerminan sifat buruk binatang. Dengan taktik alegori, pengarang sedang mengajak kita bermain-main, mengandai-andaikan sesuatu, dan permainan peran itu bisa jadi sangat mengasyikan.

Satu lagi yang kukira sangat menarik, Bung, adalah bentuk cerita berbingkai atau cerita di dalam cerita. Tentu saja cerita berbingkai dalam *Panchatantra* memengaruhi bentuk serupa dalam *Hikayat Seribu Satu Malam*. Tetapi, cerita berbingkai terus berevolusi hingga ke sastra dunia hari ini. Cerita berbingkai adalah modus cerita yang hampir tanpa batas, sebab setiap sebuah cerita selesai, bisa lahir cerita baru yang bisa digolongkan sebagai anakan atau versi cerita yang baru sama sekali.

Sebelum ini pernah kubaca pula *Kalilah dan Dimnah*, versi Indonesia dari teks Arab karangan Ibnu al-Muqaffa. Al-Muqaffa sendiri tidak secara langsung menerjemahkan *Panchatantra* dari teks India, tetapi dari terjemahan Persia yang sebelumnya dikerjakan oleh Borzūya. Dalam setiap penerjemahan, tentu saja, ada yang bertambah, di samping ada pula yang berkurang, tetapi moral didaktisnya tetap.

Seandainya saja pengarang-pengarang kita sekarang ini membaca kembali dengan saksama cerita-cerita dalam *Panchatantra* atau yang sejenisnya, kukira akan banyak hal yang bisa diambil. Dengan kata lain, akan bertambah kemahiran bercerita mereka. Sebab, mengambil ilham dari masa silam adalah salah satu proyek penting bagi setiap pengarang modern. Mereka tidak serta-merta ada, tetapi adalah mata rantai dari perkembangan kemahiran yang sudah lahir sejak lama sekali.

Kita mesti menengok masa lalu, Bung, untuk bisa memperbaiki masa depan kita. Biarlah aku sedikit bijak di akhir suratku ini. Mudah-mudahan tidak kelewat mengguruimu. Salam. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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Bank Name: Bank Negara Indonesia (BNI)

Bank address: Jl. Bendungan Hilir Raya, Jakarta 10210

Account number: 0461 2005 62, Swift code: CENA IDJA

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