



# Lontar Newsletter

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June, 2026

## Greetings

This is an especially sad day for Indonesia. In a decision that will send shockwaves through Indonesia and beyond, the Jakarta Corruption Court has found Nadiem Makarim guilty of corruption in connection with the controversial Google Chromebook contract. Makarim, the celebrated founder of Gojek and former education minister, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and ordered to pay restitution of 809 billion rupiah, along with a one billion rupiah fine. If unable to pay the restitution, an additional 5 years will be added to his prison sentence. The court ruled that Makarim approved the purchase of Chromebooks at inflated prices and with unnecessary software licenses, resulting in a state loss of \$120 million. Prosecutors argued that the contract was a quid pro quo for Google's earlier investments in Makarim's companies, though neither Google nor its executives have been charged.

Makarim consistently denied the charges, calling them baseless and politically motivated. He maintained that no evidence of personal gain was found and that the decision to purchase Chromebooks was based on his team's recommendation for cost-effectiveness. The verdict has intensified concerns about Indonesia's political climate under President Prabowo Subianto, whose administration has been accused of using anticorruption campaigns to centralize power and suppress dissent.

The guilty verdict is likely to have a chilling effect on innovation and reform within Indonesia's education sector. Makarim's tenure was marked by bold moves and attempts to modernize the system,

## Ruminations

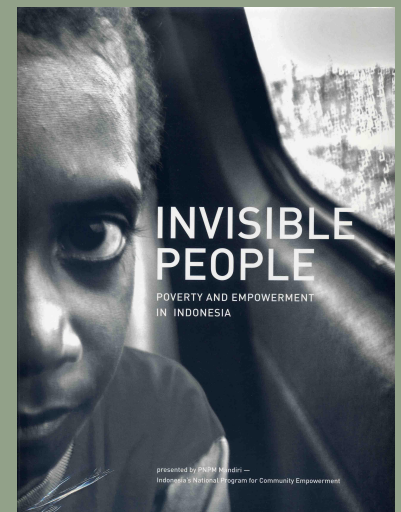
### Invisible People

Something odd happened after I came out in 1971—the “real me” became invisible. Previously, during the course of a conversation, when asked if I had a girlfriend, what kind of chicks I liked, or some such thing, I hadn't given the question any thought and was able to answer straightaway: “Yeah, her name is Luisa; she's a Dance major.” “I like them petite, with long hair.” Now, I had to think before answering—or not answering at all. Must I come out to that person? Must I make my real self visible? And what might their reaction be? I thought of an acquaintance, an effeminate man who had been beaten half to death by gay-bashers not long before while walking home from the Back Door, Madison, Wisconsin's popular gay bar.

To be visible or invisible is no different from Shakespeare's question, “To be or not to be?”—one that has forever affected my life's choices.

In 2010, Lontar released *Invisible People: Poverty and Empowerment in Indonesia*. Authored by Irfan Kortschak, the book contained translations of interviews with 51 poor Indonesians from marginalized and excluded groups. The book sought to answer the question asked by Scott Guggenheim, Senior Social Scientist at the World Bank, in his foreword: “What makes for a just society?”

*Invisible People* contains stories of people who are excluded from participating fully in community life because of their gender, physical impairments, ethnic backgrounds, geographic location, economic situation, political ideas, or lifestyles and life choices. The list of people interviewed included paraplegics, sex workers, rural workers in isolated communities, transsexuals, single women household heads, semi-nomadic fishing people, and people dealing with HIV and the effects of leprosy. In their own words, these people describe the challenges that poverty and



The cover of *Invisible People*



including the controversial but ambitious Chromebook initiative. The prosecution and conviction of a minister for policy decisions—especially those made under pandemic pressures—may discourage future leaders from taking necessary risks or implementing large-scale reforms. There is a risk that education officials will become overly cautious, fearing legal repercussions for decisions that do not yield perfect results, even if made in good faith. This could slow progress and stifle creative solutions to persistent challenges in Indonesian education, particularly in bridging the urban-rural digital divide.

The case has already become a cautionary tale for young, talented professionals considering public service. As highlighted by human rights lawyer Todung Mulya Lubis and former ambassador Dino Patti Djalal, criminalizing policy decisions sends a strong deterrent signal. The fear of prosecution for well-intentioned but imperfect decisions may dissuade high-achieving individuals from the private sector from joining government, depriving the public sector of much-needed expertise and fresh perspectives. This chilling effect could be long-lasting, undermining efforts to modernize government and improve public services.

Yuli Ismartono ([yismartono@lontar.org](mailto:yismartono@lontar.org))

exclusion create and how they strive to overcome them—is often by working together with others facing similar challenges.

Some stories describe successful grassroots initiatives; others speak of the isolation of those who have failed to find a community of their own. For example, there is Santi from Ambon, who suffered severe scarring and disfigurement when her husband poured kerosene over her and set her on fire. In the book, Santi tells of the apathetic response to her medical needs and the lack of condemnation for her husband in a community where domestic violence is accepted.

The story of Andi Amin Reffi, living with leprosy-related disabilities in Makassar, South Sulawesi, tells of how he worked with others in the community who were also living with leprosy-related disabilities to establish a self-care group. They come together to treat their wounds and support each other. The health of these members has improved and the number of amputations of limbs has declined. As Andi Amin Reffi reports, “Back in the village, people who have had leprosy wouldn’t be brave enough to show their faces in public. You can lead more of a normal life here. It’s a community.”

The book includes interviews with several *waria*, biological males who dress, act, and behave like women. The term is derived from a combination of the Indonesian words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man). In English, they would be called, for lack of a better word, “transsexuals,” but many of the *waria* I have known think of themselves as a distinct gender, one neither male nor female but rather a combination.

When reviewing Irfan’s interviews, I thought of my encounters and friendships over the years with *waria*, most of whom I met at Jakarta’s “gay bars”—a misnomer, since all but Moonlight on Mangga Besar were “gay” only one or two nights of the week.

These bars usually featured performances by *waria*, often lip-synching current popular songs. When watching them, I could not help but compare myself unfavorably to them. I had it easy: I was a young white male, masculine in appearance and of adequate income besides—not, ostensibly, a marginalized person in any way. When people asked me if I was married and I answered *belum ketemu jodoh*—“I haven’t yet found the right one”—they would nod in understanding. Not so, I am very sure, if I told them that I had a male friend whom I was not allowed to marry.

I did not face the crushing poverty or physical hardship experienced by many of the people in *Invisible People*. Yet I recognized in their stories a common experience: the pressure to hide aspects of oneself that society would rather not acknowledge. Thus, while my physical self was visible, my inner self remained invisible. As such, I couldn’t help but applaud the *waria* on stage and their bravery in making visible the selves that society preferred not to see—much in the way that same society did not want to see in its midst sex workers, single women household heads, people dealing with HIV and the effects of leprosy, and other minority groups.

## UPCOMING EVENT



From July 15 to 18, Universitas Kristen Indonesia (UKI) will host “Archipelagic Flows,” a landmark international conference, at the university’s Cawang campus, Jakarta.

This event marks a historic collaboration between two international academic networks: the Critical Island Studies Consortium (CIS) and Performance Studies international (PSi). CIS brings together scholars examining knowledge, culture, and identity rooted in island and archipelagic experience, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific. PSi, founded in 1997, is a global professional association connecting artists, scholars, and activists working in and around performance studies.

For the first time, these two organizations are convening a joint conference—and Indonesia has been chosen as the host. It is a fitting choice: as the world’s largest archipelagic nation and a country of extraordinary cultural and performing arts traditions, Indonesia sits at the very heart of the conversations this conference seeks to open.

The conference will bring together presenters from around 35 countries, eight internationally acclaimed keynote speakers, and a rich program of performances and art installations—all designed to spark productive, cross-cultural dialogue between academic research and artistic practice.

Archipelagic Flows is an open invitation to rethink how knowledge and art are born from—and flow through—archipelagos. And Indonesia is at the center of it all.

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On the National Mall in Washington, DC in October 1979.

So, coming back to the question of what makes for a just society, as Scott Guggenheim writes in his foreword to *Invisible People*, most people would agree that a just society treats its people with respect and dignity. Opportunities, resources, rights, and obligations are distributed fairly to each member of that society. And most people would agree that the true measure of a society’s fairness is not how it treats its wealthiest, most powerful, and most favored individuals, but how it treats those people and communities who are less favored. The measure of a just society is how it treats its poor, its marginalized, and its vulnerable citizens.

On October 14, 1979—my birthday—I participated in the first National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington, D.C. This event was part of a four-day gathering that included conferences, meetings, and social events aimed at uniting the LGBT community and its allies from across the United States. The march was organized in response to a decade of increasing hostility toward LGBT individuals, highlighted by the anti-gay campaign of former beauty queen Anita Bryant and the 1978 assassination of gay activist Harvey Milk.

Organizers of the event had five formal demands, including prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. With an estimated 100,000 or more participants on the National Mall that day—the atmosphere was one of celebration and solidarity.

I could not help but feel that day that I had found a community, that I need not be invisible. And in the years ahead, living in Indonesia, where the rights of minorities are often given short shrift in the name of “social harmony,” “national development,” or some other abstract notion, I have often seen failure when using the measure Scott Guggenheim described. Measured by how it treats those who are poorest, most vulnerable, or simply different, no society can claim justice merely because it preserves harmony or promotes development. A society is just only when those who have been made invisible are allowed to be seen.

John H. McGlynn ([john.mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john.mcglynn@lontar.org))



*Asrul Sani in 1992*

Asrul Sani, born on June 10, 1926, was one of the leading figures of Indonesia's Generation of '45 and is widely regarded, together with Chairil Anwar and Rivai Apin, as part of the trio that transformed modern Indonesian poetry.

Born in Rao, West Sumatra, Asrul received his early education in Bukittinggi before continuing his studies in Jakarta. After completing his secondary education, Asrul studied veterinary medicine at what is now the Bogor Agricultural Institute (IPB). Despite his academic training in veterinary science, Asrul devoted his life to literature, film, and cultural affairs. Over the course of his career, he worked as a poet, fiction writer, screenwriter, stage and film director, and arts administrator.

Asrul's friendship with Chairil Anwar proved especially significant. Together with Chairil and Rivai Apin, Asrul published the influential poetry anthology *Tiga Menguak Takdir* (*Three Unveiling Destiny*) in 1950. The three writers also issued the celebrated "Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang" ("Gelanggang Statement of Beliefs"), a landmark declaration of artistic and cultural principles.

Although Asrul devoted much of his later career to filmmaking, particularly from the mid-1950s onward, he remained an important figure in Indonesian literary life.

The scholar Taufik Abdullah described Asrul Sani as one of the most significant modern cultural thinkers in Indonesian intellectual history.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### SURAT

Kawan Moer,

Salah satu jenis tulisan yang kuminati membacanya adalah surat—ya, seperti yang sekarang kutuliskan padamulah. Tentu saja yang penting dari surat ini adalah bagaimana si penulis mengungkapkan perasaan dan pikirannya melalui tulisan, dan yang tak kalah penting pula adalah untuk siapa surat itu ditujukan. Bukan hanya orang yang penting-penting, tetapi juga nama-nama yang tidak kita kenal sama sekali dalam sejarah, kemudian menjadi penting karena ia dituliskan dalam sebuah surat oleh orang yang kita anggap penting.

Surat memungkinkan seseorang mengungkap isi hatinya yang terdalam sebab pada mulanya surat bersifat rahasia, hanya ditujukan untuk seseorang yang namanya disebut dalam surat tersebut. Sebuah surat baru menjadi pengetahuan publik ketika, ketika penerimanya menyatakan barang itu sebagai bagian dari pengetahuan umum.

Dalam sebuah surat kepada ibunya Hermína Bieblová, misalnya, penyair Ceko Konstantin Biebl pernah meminta dikirim uang karena, rupanya, begitulah kehidupan sastrawan. Nama beken, tetapi kantong cekak. Atau, dalam sebuah suratnya yang singkat saja, tertanggal 24 Maret 1921, penulis Katherine Mansfield memperingatkan Putri Elizabeth Bibesco akan perselingkuhan antara Bibesco dan John Middleton Murry, suami Katherine. Di akhir surat, dia bilang begini, "Aku tidak suka mengomeli orang lain dan hanya benci jika harus mengajari mereka tata krama."

Tentu saja itu sindiran keras. Seorang perempuan bangsawan yang kebetulan sudah bersuami, masih bermain mata dengan seorang lelaki yang sudah beristri. Katherine tidak keberatan perempuan bangsawan itu menulis surat cinta kepada suaminya, hanya saja, dia tidak sudi mengajarkan seorang perempuan bangsawan untuk berlaku sopan. Maksudnya, toh anda sudah semestinya tahu yang begitu tidak boleh dilakukan.

Dalam kesusastraan kita, surat juga memegang posisi yang penting. Jika kita membaca surat-surat H.B. Jassin yang dihimpunkan dalam *Surat-Surat 1943-1983* (1984) kita akan melihat bagaimana melalui surat-surat yang berjumlah tidak kurang dari 246 pucuk itu Jassin memperlakukan orang-orang yang dikenalnya. Namun, posisinya sebagai redaktur dan kritikus sastra membuat surat-suratnya itu punya kaitan dengan situasi kesusastraan pada masanya. Dari bagaimana ia menolak sebuah tulisan, mendukung seorang penulis berbakat, hingga mengecam orang-orang yang hanya bisa marah dan memaki-maki pekerjaannya sebagai redaktur dan kritikus sastra.

Namun, yang bersifat pribadi ada juga. Tengoklah bagaimana ketika ia menyurati Saleha, ibunda Chairil Anwar, di Medan, pada 24 April 1949,

## ANNOUNCEMENT

The Lontar Foundation is seeking a new Director of Publications to lead its publishing program into the future. Following a transition period, the successful candidate will assume responsibility for guiding Lontar's publications program no later than October 2027.

The Director of Publications plays a central role in shaping Lontar's editorial vision and advancing its mission of bringing Indonesian literature and culture to readers around the world. The ideal candidate will be fluent in Indonesian and English, possess a deep knowledge of Indonesian literature and culture, and be familiar with the body of Indonesian literary works already available in translation, with the ability to identify important gaps and opportunities for future publication.

Candidates should have publishing experience; understand the needs of educational institutions abroad, and be able to develop projects that expand the international visibility and use of Indonesian literature. Experience in fundraising, proposal writing, and donor relations is highly desirable.

The position requires creativity, initiative, and a willingness to explore new opportunities for promoting Indonesia through publishing. Applicants of any nationality are welcome. However, the salary is comparable to that of a person in a comparable position in Indonesia's publishing sector, and no expatriate benefits are provided.

Lontar seeks someone prepared to make a commitment of at least five to ten years. While the financial rewards may be modest, the opportunity to shape the future of Indonesian literature in translation and to leave a lasting mark on one of Indonesia's most respected cultural institutions is exceptional.

If you are interested, please send a message and your CV to John McGlynn at [john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org).

ketika sang penyair jatuh sakit dan dirawat di CBZ (nama lama Rumah Sakit Dr. Ciptomangunkusumo, Jakarta). Rupanya, Chairil ingin pulang ke Medan dan dirawat di sana, di samping ibunya, tetapi Jassin tidak punya uang untuk membantu keperluan Chairil. Maka dari itu, ia mintakan ongkosnya kepada Saleha.

Kata Jassin, "Kirimkan saja ke alamat saya: H.B. Jassin, Jl. Siwalan 3, Tanah Tinggi, Jakarta. Nanti saya sampaikan kepada Chairil. —Lain tidak."

Surat itu bukan hanya menyangkut hubungan amat dekat antara Jassin selaku redaktur dan kritikus sastra dengan penulis terpenting dari Generasi 45 Chairil Anwar, tetapi juga situasi ekonomi yang, ternyata, tidak cukup baik. Setidaknya, untuk membantu Chairil pulang ke kota kelahirannya. Lebih dari itu, ini adalah sebuah kejujuran yang menyentuh hati. Sebuah tanggung jawab seorang teman kepada temannya yang sakit—yang kemudian kita tahu, tidak tertolong lagi, sebab empat hari kemudian Chairil berpulang.

Jika sekarang ini aku bersurat kepadamu, bolehlah kausimpan suratku ini. Setidaknya dari sini terbentangan sudah apa-apa yang terjadi di antara kita. Meski kita terpisah dan jauh di mata, masih selalu dekat di hati. Ya, surat-surat di antara kitalah yang jadi penyambungnyanya. Kukira, akan baik juga kusimpan surat-suratmu kepadaku, sebab kelak akan ada nilainya juga buat orang lain yang ingin tahu tentang kau, terutama dari hubungan kita selama ini.

Suratku kepadamu atau suratmu kepadaku mungkin akan jadi cerita tersendiri bahwa dua orang kawan yang berbeda jauh dalam tempat dan usia, tetapi masih dipersatukan melalu surat-surat. Bukan sekadar penyambung silaturahmi di antara kita, tetapi juga upaya kita untuk terus menulis, sebab jika kita berhenti menulis—meski hanya sekadar menulis surat—akan berhenti pula perasaan dan pikiran kita.

Kita sambung lagi nanti ya, Bung. Salam. **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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