

Pramoedya Ananta Toer: an appreciation

Alex G Bardsley

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The greatest modern Indonesian writer has left a challenging as well as a rich legacy to his successors, writes Alex G Bardsley.

In October 1995, a senior Indonesian lieutenant-general named writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer and two other dissidents as being "identified with" the "formless organisations" that were the subject of some hysteria at the time. "Look at what (they) wrote in the Australian-based Progress magazine", Soeyono told the media (as reported in the *Jakarta Post*) – thus drawing attention to documents that few in his audience would or perhaps even could have read, and which he probably did not want them to read. One of those documents, Pramoedya's pungent essay *Ma'af atas nama pengalaman (My Apologies, in the Name of Experience)* appears to have incensed Soeyono – so much so, that this military figure's response had the paradoxical effect of once again bringing this "non-person" before the public eye.

A non-person for decades: yet for readers around the world, Pramoedya Ananta Toer remains both the country's finest modern writer and its best ambassador. The esteem he earned – evident in the many tributes paid after his death at the age of 81 on 30 April 2006 – is rooted in a body of work that portrays history, people of different backgrounds, and the human world in general with sympathetic imagination; but it is also owed to the fact that Pram (as he is commonly called) was blessed with courage, wit and plenty of common sense. These were also the

very attributes that in combination helped make his life in modern Indonesia rather difficult.

Pram was born in 1925 in Blora, east Java to the strong-minded daughter of a local religious leader and a political activist-cum-schoolteacher; he thus grew up influenced by a pair of formidable personalities. As the eldest child, he was, so to speak, on the frontline – a fact reflected even in his given name, deriving from the phrase *pertama di medan* (first on the field). It did not help his relationship with his father that he was not very successful in school, but his mother supported him and encouraged him to get whatever education he could. She died after being weakened by tuberculosis at the age of 34, when Pram was 17. It was April 1942, four months after the Japanese invasion of the Dutch-ruled colony.

In the aftermath of the war, Pramoedya fought with the republican forces against the Dutch colonialists who were attempting to seize back power after the defeat and retreat of the Japanese. The Dutch later imprisoned Pram for over two years. His writing career really began in jail. The Dutch departed in due course, and Pram's short stories in particular were well received in the new nation of Indonesia. Largely self-taught, he became known as a journalist, critic and "amateur" historian as well as a writer of fiction. But

Pram saw much to criticise and much that called for political action. He always spoke fearlessly, and as a result made enemies:

"(In) the colonised countries that never tasted democracy, winning and losing in the clash of ideas can give birth to long-lasting resentment, arising from traditional concepts of personal prestige and patrimonial authority" (*Literature, Censorship and the State*, 1995).

His clear-eyed defence of the ethnic Chinese, *Hoakiau di Indonesia* (1960), led to his detention by the military for the best part of a year at the beginning of the 1960s. After the intense political controversy generated by Sukarno's nationalist and populist regime exploded in the massacres of September 1965, Pram's association with the political left made him a target. When Suharto's "creeping coup", as Pram called it, brought the general's "new order" to power in 1966, Pram was arrested. When he returned to Jakarta after fourteen years' incarceration – ten of them spent in the island gulag of Buru – Pramoedya found his work banned, his papers lost or destroyed, even his house confiscated, and himself under "city arrest". A literary figure and public intellectual in the 1950s, he became in the 1980s a sort of *tokoh haram*, a prominent non-person.

The novels that Pramoedya composed in prison camp, including the *Buru Quartet* (1981-8), had been suppressed almost as soon as they were published, but these four books – *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass* – made Pram's reputation abroad. It has been said that the steady stream of mostly foreign visitors to his house helped protect him from Suharto's vindictive regime through the 1980s and 1990s. Pram was indeed during this period little more than a (bad) name to most of those Indonesians who had heard of him. Unrehabilitated and unforgiving, Pram would declare by the end of the century that he had given up hope, politically, for all but his youngest compatriots – the students and kids "without blood on their hands or dirt in their pockets."

And indeed, it was this younger Indonesian generation who brought Suharto down amid riots and corruption scandals in May 1998; the rest were at best cheerleaders.

Pram and Indonesia

I spent three afternoons with Pramoedya during one week in July 1997. Deaf he may have been, but Pram heard things. People brought him historical materials and documents (including some old declassified CIA papers on one occasion when I was there). He told me of the influence of the Japanese Communist Party in the imperial navy, and how it contributed to the arming of the Indonesian resistance. We discussed the merits of Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, especially compared to Megawati Sukarnoputri or even Cory Aquino of the Philippines; he told me he had written Suu Kyi a letter of support, which I would love to read some day. We argued about whether the murderous, irrational, kleptocratic Burmese junta was worse than Suharto's new order (an idea Pram found implausible – potable water, schools and all the nitty-gritty of development notwithstanding). I admired the drawing of a fighting-cock Günter Grass had given him.

This sort of dialogue with the students and researchers who visited Pramoedya has been echoed in the intellectual exchange with academics, including historians, political scientists and anthropologists, who continue to find inspiration in his work. Pramoedya's place in Indonesian history – as witness, critic and sometimes unfortunate participant – is assured; his influence on the study and perception of Indonesia abroad, where his work is central to anything that might be considered an Indonesian canon, may be even larger. But it remains to be seen whether his work will help rewrite history (and indeed literature) in Indonesia. Perhaps the next generation of students, researchers and writers will escape new-order historiography and culture. In the words of revolutionary-era poet Chairil Anwar (in *Krawang-Bekasi* [1948]), *kaulah sekarang yang berkata*: now it is you who speak.

Alex G Bardsley is a scholar and writer on Indonesia who runs the Pramoedya Ananta Toer web page.

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