

Gendered Citizens in the New Indonesian Democracy

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This article was written prior to Megawati's rise to the presidency. It was primarily a polemical response to the widespread reporting in Indonesian media of the Islamic rejection of the prospect of a woman president. The polemical ground has shifted, but the questions raised are abiding ones: does the establishment of electoral democracy change the gendered relations of power in Indonesia? Will democracy give women a greater political say than they had under Suharto's military dominated authoritarian regime?¹

In the more general form of 'are men and women equal in democracy', these questions have been asked many times in many different contexts — in the western heartlands of modern political democracy where feminists have produced a critique of the absence of women in the representative forums, in Eastern Europe when Communism collapsed, and in the Third World whenever a dictator has fallen.² The answer to the question remains inconclusive perhaps, but on the whole, disappointing. Let me be quite explicit: I want to argue the 'no' case for the specific instance of Indonesia in the build up and the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Suharto regime.

Over almost forty years academics had got used to taking a Jakarta-government-centred view of the Indonesian nation for granted. And many of us entered our academic careers convinced that the Indonesianist's first duty was to critique the Suharto regime. Both of these certainties have been eroded since the middle of 1998. A new unified understanding of Indonesia and its directions have not yet emerged, indeed, any reference to Indonesia needs to be carefully circumscribed.³ In this context what I have to say may have little to do with the lived realities of women within the now contested boundaries of the Indonesian nation. What I am trying to get at is an understanding of the democratic citizen subject in Indonesia's discourse of democratisation. How were women integrated into the historic events surrounding the fall of Suharto? How did they participate in the birth of democracy — was that

participation gendered from the start? If we accept for the moment that men and women had been differently gendered subjects in the politics of the New Order—and there is a vast amount of literature to suggest that they were⁴—then, did they enter the new era also marked as men and women?

Theoretical Digression

Anne Philips, perhaps the most significant feminist scholar of democracy and democratisation, suggests that there is a conceptual problem in democracy not only with gender difference, but also with difference as such. ‘Democracy implies equality but, when it is superimposed on an unequal society, it allows some people to count for more than others’ (1993, 91). In a sense, democracies have to reflect differences in social power, including gender difference, in ways that authoritarian regimes do not. The powerful authoritarian state can act to transform social relations while democracies must almost by definition reflect these. The ambivalent relationship between women and democratisation came into focus in particular as Communism crumbled and political democratisation started in Eastern Europe in the 1980s.⁵ During the transition it quickly became clear that women, whatever they had gained by having a free and secret ballot, had paid a huge price in lost jobs, lost state-funded child-care and for many undergoing a process of re-domestication. By contrast research in some Latin American countries suggests that the fall of authoritarian regimes opened up opportunities for women’s organisations to re-negotiate gender equality and difference at least at the regulatory or legislative sphere (see e.g. Alvarez 1990).

These cases show that the relationship between women and democratisation is not pre-determined, but a matter of strategic opportunity as well as of how organised women’s movements use the moment to make specific institutional or legal gains. I will later raise some questions about the Indonesian women’s movement in connection to this relationship. But before that I want to allude briefly to a more fundamental quarrel that feminists have had with democracy as a system. What if the differential treatment of women and men in particular historical experiences of democracy was not coincidence at all, but built into the very foundation of democracy?

Pateman's much cited *Sexual Contract* (1988) has provided much of the groundwork for feminist critique of the notion of the 'equal individuals' as the primary unit of liberal democracy. Pateman evokes an interesting image of the way in which women may acquire democratic rights differently from men. She suggests that in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, when women began to demand the right to vote, that, in the Anglo-American context rights were linked largely to the responsibility to defend the nation. Put simply, men claimed the right to vote on the grounds that those who died for the nation should have a say in its affairs. Since women did not fight to defend the nation, they could not have the same rights as men in determining the political fate of the nation via the vote. The counter-argument offered by suffragist women, and their male supporters, for extending the vote to women was that women were performing a public service in their roles as mothers in reproducing the next generation of soldier-citizens, and as educators of these children.

That women who died in childbirth were sacrificing their lives to the nation just as much as the men who died in battle, that women who devoted their lives to bearing and rearing children were performing tasks without which no society could survive, that this seemingly private activity was as much a qualification for citizenship as going out to work or defending the nation (Philips 1993, 107, summarising Pateman 1988).

Thus in Pateman's terms men and women became citizens in distinctly different ways: men as workers and soldiers, women primarily as mothers and nurturers.

Many commentators have noted the gender differences that marked the policies and politics of the New Order. In a speech in 1967 President Suharto stated explicitly that the disappearance of the difference between men and women in the Sukarno years was one of the main features of its political and social instability (cited in Douglas 1980), and implicitly committed the New Order to re-instituting gender divides. Feminist accounts of the Suharto years now routinely refer to two crucial features of the New Order that discursively differentiated women and men as political agents. First, the destruction and demonisation of *Gerwani*, the PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*—Indonesian Communist Party) affiliated women's organisation, marked autonomous, politicised women as sexually dangerous. Secondly the New Order

universalised the Dharma Wanita, the civil servants' wives organisation, which permitted women's public roles only as an extension of her private ones as wife and mother. Suryakusumah has dubbed this 'state ibuism' ('motherism'). As I have argued elsewhere the discourses and practices of the New Order constructed women as biologically specific reproductive workers and their access to political and economic benefits from the state was almost exclusively as wives of men, and mothers of children (Sen 1994, 42).

If the birth of the New Order emphasised a politics of gender difference, what is more troubling, however, is the possibility of mapping onto Pateman's analysis some of the dominant images of women involved in the end of the New Order and the re-birth of democracy in Indonesia. In replaying these images of women in the birthing of the new democracy (and why shouldn't we overlay the language of reproduction?) I want to comment briefly on three episodes involving women around the fall of the New Order to the election in 1999: the making of a series of commentaries on Megawati (in particular on her presidential ambitions); the establishment of *Suara Ibu Peduli* (Voice of Concerned Mothers); and the rapes of Chinese women in Jakarta in May 1998. These were the focal points through which gender issues entered the discourse of democratisation at the end of the New Order.

Megawati Doesn't...⁶

Megawati was of course the most persistent code through which femininity was present in the movement for democratisation. She had been a prominent political actor for almost eighteen months prior to the fall of Suharto. Indeed one could arguably date the beginning of the end for Suharto from the time of her forced departure from the old PDI (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia*—Indonesian Democratic Party) of the New Order. PDI-P ('PDI-Struggle') propaganda posters presented her as the mother, with images that could easily be overlaid with mythologies of mother goddesses and evocations of the motherland. In her speeches and rare interviews she has played on this image of herself as mother.

Both her critics and her supporters have constructed Megawati first and foremost as a woman and a daughter – the daughter of the first nationalist President, a foil to Tutut, the daughter of the corrupt President. Every Asian woman who has ever had political success was either a famous man’s wife or daughter. But even more than most other successful political daughters, Megawati wears the status constantly in her very name. Both her political appeal and her limitation are centred in that fact that she is a woman and that she is *Sukarno’s daughter*. The international media has regularly compared her with other famous political daughters and wives, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, Cory Aquino and Benazir Bhutto — often unfavourably. Indonesia’s most famous novelist and political prisoner Pramoedya has rejected her as an unfit daughter: ‘Almost a million of her father’s followers were butchered... what did Mega do?’ (*Panji Masyarakat*, 11/8/1999) Arief Budiman, one of New Orders best known intellectuals and once anti-Sukarno student leader similarly suggests that ‘Mega has taken her father’s charisma, she has taken her father’s concepts, but without her father’s intellectual abilities’ (*Forum Keadilan* June 1999).

From the end of 1998 and particularly after PDI’s spectacular success in the 1999 elections and till the installation of Abdurrahman Wahid, conservative Islamic and liberal intellectual leaders found dozens of reasons to argue why Megawati could not and should not become president. The argument that got most media coverage was that a woman president was not acceptable in Islam, repeated by several senior figures from Islamic parties and based on the *hadith* interpretation which translates roughly as: ‘A community that makes a woman its leader will not prosper’ (Cited in Ulil Abshar-Abdallah 1999, 156). The next most commonly cited objection coming from the same group was that Megawati was not from ‘*kalangan Islam*’ (the Islamic community) and that her party was dominated by non-Islamic forces.

Whether or not the Islamic rejection of Mega is understandable in the particular context of post-Suharto Indonesian politics is not at issue here. What is interesting is that all of the critical discussion of Megawati seem to be marked by a linguistic strategy which define her by what she is not and does not do. She was not an adequate daughter, she was not a man, she was not truly Islamic. To that we can add a whole series of other common quotations from Indonesian intellectuals that permeated the media, particularly in the months immediately following the elections. It appeared as

common knowledge that she was not clever, not particularly well-educated, had not finished a university degree. And above all she seemed to have no ideas and nothing to say and therefore did not have the capacity to lead. Arief Budiman summed it up as follows: ‘She is silent because she doesn’t know a thing, so what can she say? But others see this differently. There is the worry that if she does speak, she will speak nonsense’ (*Forum Keadilan* 20/6/1999).

The characterisation of Megawati as a set of absences so permeated the political discourse in the months before Gus Dur became president that there seemed to be no other way of talking about her, even when the discussion was not about her personality as such. Nurcholis Madjid, an internationally respected liberal Muslim thinker, in a long interview in *Forum Keadilan* just prior to the 1999 election, summarised his opinion on Megawati thus:

First, she is a woman. For me that is relative [relatively unimportant?] Not everyone objects to a woman president... Nonetheless, the issue [that she is a woman] has become a weakness for Mega.... Second [problem is], PDI-P’s platform which from the beginning wouldn’t condemn (*menghujat*) Suharto; didn’t want to question the dual-function of the military (*dwi-fungsi ABRI*); did not want to amend the 1945 Constitution; did not want federalism, and saw East Timor as an integral part of Indonesia. Perhaps after the election Mega could change, but this has all been noted by a lot of people, including CNN, and they [CNN] have also raised questions about the fixed exchange rate mentioned by Kwik Kian Gie [then senior economic adviser to Megawati]. The third weakness, which is a most emotional issue, is that Megawati is too weak to stop the party from being used by just one group [sic] that is the Protestant and Catholic groups.’ (27/6/1999)

Arief Budiman explained her mass appeal as similarly embedded in a certain inadequacy:

The mass base is from the working class. In terms of 1955, this would be PKI’s labour base. But now this labour is not represented, they have been looking everywhere, finally they have run to Mega, other parties are Islamic and PAN [*Partai Amanat Nasional*—National Awareness Party] is too intellectual. So to my way of thinking the masses have gone to PDI-P, not to the SPSI [*Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia*—All-Indonesian Employees’ Association, formerly the New Order’s authorised workers’ union] Party, because it was previously manipulated by the government. Because they [the workers/masses] have no other channels, in the end they all entered PDI-P’ (*Forum Keadilan* 20/6/1999).

In this logic what gives Megawati her political power base has nothing to do with her actions or even her appeal, but because the masses are *unable* to find another (presumably more) appropriate vehicle for their aspirations.

Whether it was her personality, her political base, or her party's policies that were under discussion, Megawati was always reduced to a series of absences, lacks and weaknesses. For a large part of the intellectual leadership of the Indonesian democratisation movement, their critique of Megawati was not related to what she did or said but in who she was and what she didn't!

Women Are...

In the middle of May 1998 stories of pack-rapes in Jakarta broke in the media. This was another issue involving women, extensively discussed in the succeeding year. In one sense it was a mark of success of the Indonesian women's movement that they managed to keep the issue of race-rapes of Chinese women in the media, first by inserting it into Habibie's political agenda and extracting an apology from the President. Secondly they did this through the controversial visit of the UN Special Rapporteur and discussions they raised of the government's rejection of that report. There is no doubt that feminist strategy dictated the need to keep the race-rapes on the political agenda. In comparable situations in Latin America Jaquette (1989) has argued for instance that politically-motivated rapes actually allowed feminists to put rape as such on the political agenda — it allowed the definition of rape to be shifted from a personal act of passion to a political act of vengeance.

But it seems to me that that is not quite what happened in the Indonesian case. The rapes were taken up in the media in three ways. First there was the denial mode — the argument the rapes did not really happen, or at least, not to the extent that the women's groups are claiming. Secondly, there was the protective mode — the notion that women are victims and they must be protected. Finally, there was the cautionary mode — warnings that women who were mobilising in support of the victims could themselves become victims. Indeed some of the threats were carried out, including the

murder of a young activist, which many believed were related to her work for the rape victims.

If through Megawati the Indonesian woman had been defined as inadequate, then the rapes defined them as weak victims of men's power. This victimisation was not of course seen as legitimate, but woman-as-victim was nonetheless a prominent signifier of femininity in the dying days of the New Order.

More interesting, however, was the self-conscious way in which the women's movement constructed a maternal image for itself. Gadis Arivia, one of Jakarta's leading feminist scholars and a founder of Suara Ibu Peduli (Voice of Concerned Mothers, discussed in more detail in Melani Budiyanta's paper in this volume), describes the formation of this group as follows:

'One day in February (1998) a group of mothers/women with the banner of *Voice of Concerned Mothers* decided to demonstrate in the Hotel Indonesia round-about. From that day on the "courage" of these mothers/women was big news and became headline in almost every mass media and was covered by several foreign papers.' (*Jurnal Perempuan*, No. 7, May 1998, p.5)

The event Arivia describes here involved 40 or so women demonstrating against the rise of price of powder milk. The group was led by feminist scholar Karlina Leksono and had been formed after extensive discussion with many of the best known Jakarta feminists including Arivia herself. This was the same group of women who had self-consciously opted to use the term *perempuan* against the more Sanskritic, more genteel *wanita*, (much the same way that western feminists of a previous generation had opted for 'woman' as against 'lady'). This was the same group of women who had started Indonesia's first journal of feminist theory, confidently titled *Jurnal Perempuan*, the same group of women who had started the rape-crisis centres around Indonesia. These are also the same group of women who had been for some years arguing that the celebration of *Hari Ibu* (Mother's Day) on Kartini's birthday be re-named *Hari Perempuan* (Women's Day). Most interestingly in the same issue of *Jurnal Perempuan* where Arivia waxes lyrical about 'mother power', there is not one other article, which uses the term '*ibu*' generically in the sense of women.

In choosing to call their organisation *Suara Ibu* these feminist activists then were deliberately casting themselves in the role of mother. In fact there had been days of discussion over the name. Eventually, the symbolic power of the *ibu*/mother won out over the feminist politically-correct *perempuan*/woman for two reasons: first it was argued that *ibu* would appeal to the vast majority of women in Jakarta who had not been initiated into a feminist linguistic practices; secondly, and perhaps in that context more importantly, the women felt that the military would be much less likely to act against ‘maternal’ women than against women as such.

Indonesia is not the only place where women have mobilised most successfully against dictatorship as mothers. The mothers were, as many would recall, a force against Pinochet in Chile. In Indonesia *Suara Ibu* was tactically a success. The women in the police force refused to act against them during their demonstration. The students occupying the parliament further legitimised these women’s maternal presence by refusing to accept food from anyone other than the *Suara Ibu* group. None of this is meant as a criticism of the women who adopted motherhood as their political cover. The point is, however, that Jakarta’s most sophisticated feminists could find no other symbol through which to insert themselves into the political watershed of Indonesia’s transition to democracy, other than through motherhood.

This is not surprising if we recall the overwhelming thrust of feminist criticism against the New Order. Weiringa has shown that women entered the New Order either as idealised mothers to be protected or as GERWANI beasts to be killed. This typology of the mother and the demon (I think GERWANI was more demonic than beastly) was reproduced continually in the New Orders politics, policy and pop-culture. It is not surprising then that women exited the New Order as they had entered it: as inadequate, as sub-human creatures who could be raped with impunity, and as mothers defined by the act of feeding the children.

If that is so, how has the new Indonesian democracy moved to redress this absolute and obvious gender injustice?

Political Cartoons

Benedict Anderson (1973) has put cartoons firmly into the texts of Indonesian politics. In fact, I have to confess that the central question of this paper ‘did women and men enter the new Indonesian democracy as different and unequal’ –first emerged for me not because of the decade old work of Feminist theorists cited earlier in this essay, but as I browsed a collection of cartoons titled *Pemilu Yang Rileks* (A Relaxed Election). There are 36 pages of cartoons in this collection (Agus Hermawan ed. 1999). They were collected and annotated by seven men and one woman. The cartoons were selected from the daily newspaper, *Kompas*, May-June 1999. What struck me about the cartoons was the extraordinary regularity with which the population, the masses, the citizens were represented as men. The point is not that anyone, particularly the cartoonists, would have been unaware that there were in fact slightly more women than men in Indonesia. The point is that they were drawing as they saw political activity around the 1999 elections. With a couple of exceptions, in every cartoon where a woman appears, she appears with very specific womanly identity. The ordinary citizen, those who demonstrate, vote, stand in lines and so on are all men. Apart from one cartoon with Megawati as one of the four presidential candidates, women appear in only 4 other pictures. In one cartoon there are two women, one is a middle class wife, the other a destitute beggar, both with small children attached. Another cartoon has an aggressive old woman who would probably be recognised immediately by readers as the characteristic *nenek cerewet* (bossy old granny), who is the brunt of humour in many Indonesian comedies.

The most interesting representation of women is in the cartoon of the PKK, the New Order authorised Family Welfare organisation, made more interesting by Ayu Utami’s notes, which direct us to read the cartoon against its grain⁷. Here the members of PKK are engaged in their New Order authorised womanly activity of origami – completely irrelevant to the political transformation sweeping the nation. Ayu Utami writes:

‘In fact women’s votes/voices⁸ constitute a big market, almost 60% of the voters. Not in the cause of emancipation, but for pragmatic reasons alone, they should have been taken into account in the election campaign. Surprisingly, not one party advertisement dealt with women’s needs as do the ads for anti-

leak sanitary napkins or push-up bras. And only one or two had sexual non-discrimination as part of their platform.

Or, perhaps it isn't surprising.... That the parties don't copy the capitalists in treating women as consumers is perhaps because: 1) they don't regard women as autonomous actors; 2) they are not convinced that women should be free to be involved in politics whatever ... Sad indeed. If I may suggest, let's develop this market so that women become consumers of politics as well. (71)

Utami is correct both in observation and in the analysis implicit in her distinction between the workings of the capitalist market and electoral democracy in Indonesia.

I argued in a publication in 1994 (Sen, 1994) that Indonesian women's identity had been transformed in the late New Order in two fundamental ways. First, that both for the market and for the government, women in the late New Order period, were increasingly being redefined as productive workers rather than reproductive mothers, very much against the dominant construction of the earlier years of the New Order. Secondly, that by the end of the New Order, women were not represented as belonging only in the private sphere but that women were seen in the public sphere both as earning and as spending, in other words, as active members of a capitalist market place. Thus, by the end of the New Order women were no longer exclusively mothers and home makers, they were also (and increasingly frequently) producers and consumers. The implicit argument in that paper was that in representation, and in some small sections of the society, even in practice, women and men in Indonesia were becoming increasingly more equal. Yanti Muchtar (1999) in her thesis on the rise of the women's movement in the New Order and more recently Kathy Robinson (2000), in a review essay on women in Indonesia have taken me to task for overstating the shifts in New Order's policy positions. Both have pointed out that very few people knew or believed the lip-service that the late New Order government had been paying to gender equity. Ayu Utami, however, makes a more useful distinction in the serious argument implicit in her light hearted commentary – that while women are autonomous as consumers they are not seen, nor on the whole see themselves, as autonomous as political actors, that the market in Indonesia may have acknowledged women's needs more than the Indonesian state has.

It is arguable that the position of women in the formal political structures declined rather than improved after the collapse of the New Order. In the new DPR (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, lower house of parliament) elected in 1999, there were more elected members, but less women amongst them than in the 1997 parliament. Also, in the 1997 election, as Kathy Robinson has pointed out, all three of the parties included on their platform at least a lip service to gender equity. In 1999, as far as I can tell, not one of the parties represented in DPR had any gender-related policy on their platform.

In most nations, democracy does not in itself translate into gender equity. Democracy has however loosened the grip of the state over definitions of social identities. For many, including women, there is now the possibility of articulating and mobilising in new ways. Beyond that, the feminist jury is still out on the question of profits and losses incurred by women in the transition to democracy in Indonesia. The symbolic victory that a woman is now president of Indonesia, needs necessarily to be tempered in the knowledge that a bigamist male is the Vice-President – both impossible to imagine in the 33 years of the New Order.

Notes

¹ Some of the ideas raised below have been discussed in greater detail in another article focussing explicitly on Megawati's presidency entitled "The Mega Factor in Indonesian Politics". See Sen (2002)

² See for example Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, McMillan, London, 1997

³ At the conference in Tasmania where this paper was first presented Goenawan Mohammad asked of one of the participants: 'What do you mean by Indonesia?' The question is a potent one as national identity comes to be questioned all around the archipelagic state.

⁴ See for instance Blackburn (1994), Sen (1994), Sullivan (1991) Suryakusumah (1996) and Wieringa (1992)

⁵ See for instance Watson (1993) and Makkai (1994)

⁶ This section title is inspired by a now classic psychoanalytic discussion of Hollywood cinema, De Lauretis' (1984) *Alice Doesn't...*

⁷ The idea of reading against the grain of a text has been extensively used in film theory, and extended to other analysis of visual communication. It is a notion that is used to understand the gap between the encoding and decoding of texts. Often refers to the deliberate, politically motivated 'mis'-reading by subaltern groups, eg. women, lower classes, blacks etc.

⁸ In Indonesian 'vote' and 'voice' is the same word, *suara*.

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