A New Theatre-State in Bali? Aristocracies, the Media and Cultural Revival in the 2005 Local Elections

GRAEME MACRAE*
Massey University

and

I NYOMAN DARMA PUTRA
University of Queensland

Politik and Pilkada

Until recently, politik was a dirty word in Indonesia, “marked by a sinister tonality acquired after the political killings of the mid-1960s” (Pemberton, 1994, p. 4; see also Antlov, 2003, p. 75). After the fall of Suharto in 1998 and the end of his New Order [Orde Baru] regime, four changes of president in the following six years, and the successive programs of reformasi [reform], demokratisasi [democratisation] and desentralisasi [decentralisation], however, politics is back in the public domain. In Bali, where a studied apoliticism was raised to the level of an art sanctioned by religion (MacRae, 2003); the political has re-entered public life more gradually, with public figures now stepping into the formal political arena as candidates in free elections.

The national process of desentralisasi and demokratisasi saw the heads of districts [bupati] and city mayors [walikota], along with their deputies, elected for the first time in 2005 by popular vote rather than appointed from above. In Bali the first such election (Pemilihan Kepala Daerah, commonly abbreviated to Pilkada, or Pilkadal in which the final “l” stands for langsung [direct]) in June 2005 offers some insights into the repoliticisation of Indonesian society in general. It also highlights a distinctly Balinese approach to this new political era. The campaign leading up to the election drew on a combination of elements of traditional Balinese political order and new formations of power made possible by the mass media.¹

In June 2005, Pilkada were held in four of the eight districts [kabupaten] of Bali (Badung, Bangli, Tabanan and Karangasem) as well as in the main city, Denpasar.

¹ Correspondence Address: Graeme MacRae, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Auckland, NSMC, PB 102 904, New Zealand. Email: G.S.MacRae@massey.ac.nz
candidates were affiliated with a range of parties, but the most visible were Golkar and PDI-P.\(^2\) Some candidates were of aristocratic \textit{triwangsa} descent; some were not. On the face of it, differences in traditional status, long a significant axis of social tension and political affiliation in Bali (Dwipayana, 2004, pp. 83–91, pp. 98–105; Picard, 2005; Vickers, 1989, pp. 150–55), now seemed to be subordinated to other differences. Despite this, candidates of all parties, \textit{triwangsa} or not, sought from the outset of their campaigns to associate themselves publicly with and claim support from local traditional elites [\textit{puri}].\(^3\) At the same time, members of \textit{puri}, many of whom had been largely absent from the formal political arena, put themselves forward as candidates.

All parties, candidates and factions sought to present themselves to the public via the mass media, especially television, and specifically through the new, locally-owned \textit{Bali TV} channel. Since it opened in May 2002, \textit{Bali TV}, as the channel of choice for many Balinese, especially those of more conservative sensibility, has played a major role in the formation of public opinion. It therefore emerged as a powerful player in the politics of the 2005 \textit{Pilkada}.

This article explores this emergent formation of political power in Bali and its novel forms of affiliation and representation and locates them in the wider contexts of a contemporary crisis of cultural identity in Balinese society and the visual languages of traditional politics. It addresses Jacqueline Vel’s pertinent questions: “Do the entrenched ... elites succeed in capturing the latest institution of democracy ... or does a direct election open up opportunities for new candidates?” (2005, p. 82). It also looks beyond such questions in two ways: first, it extends the notion of “elites” beyond those “entrenched” in the New Order to those whose claims to legitimacy long predate it; second, it argues that while such elites are, at least in Bali, adopting the techniques of modern politics, including use of the mass media, the media themselves are adopting elements of the language of traditional politics and in the process are making a claim to leadership in terms derived from tradition. These arguments suggest that cultural factors, especially those of greater historical depth than the New Order period, have been given too little attention in much of the literature on contemporary politics in Indonesia, and that attempts to generalise about “Indonesian politics” may seriously underestimate local variations.

\textbf{Elites: Old and Older}

In precolonial times Bali was ruled by an ever-shifting constellation of small and fractious kingdoms. The Dutch colonial state took control of most of the island in the early years of the twentieth century, first deposing the kings, and then reinstating them as indirect rulers on their behalf.\(^4\) Either way, the kings effectively lost any real political power, maintaining at most a degree of symbolic power based on socio-religious status. In the latter half of the twentieth century, after independence, their descendants turned increasingly to modern education and careers in business and the public service, and in some cases national politics. During Suharto’s New Order regime the top positions at all levels of government were allocated from the top down and often went to non-locals, in many cases military officers. While some of these were from local \textit{puri}, the majority were not, and only the most local, lowest-level positions tended to be occupied by local aristocrats. Aristocratic status was at best secondary to positioning in the national political apparatus.\(^5\)

Since the passing of the New Order, the hopes for a truly new “reformed” political environment have been somewhat disappointed in many parts of the country by the survival
of remnants of New Order formations of power, often thinly disguised under new names and forms (Robison and Hadiz, 2004, p. 187, p. 217, p. 223; Vel, 2005). A largely unanticipated aspect of the new politics all over Indonesia, though, has been a re-emergence into the formal political arena of the traditional aristocracies that had been substantially marginalised during the New Order period (Cribb, 2006; Dwipayana, 2004; Parker, 2003; Pedersen, 2006, p. 281, van Klinken, 2006). In the 2005 Pilkada in Bali, it was members of various puri, many of whom had little or no previous political experience, who stood as candidates for most parties in the majority of electorates, rather than members of the New Order elites. While Pilkada provided a venue for this traditional elite to re-enter the political arena, the axes of contest were not, as they have sometimes been in the past, between aristocratic and non-aristocratic candidates (Picard, 2005), between rival puri (Dwipayana, 2004, pp. 128–29), or between powerful descent/caste groups. In 2005, ksatria, brahmana and non-aristocratic candidates were often paired with each other in relations not always aligned with caste hierarchy. These new alliances between triwangsa and non-triwangsa candidates, and their patronage by other puri, led to a tangled web of cross-cutting affiliations, especially for the mayorality of Denpasar. Here, two of three pairs of candidates (AA Ngurah Puspayoga and IB Rai Mantra; and AA Ngurah Widiada and AA K. Sumawidana) were triwangsa, while the third pair, Made Sudharmi (non-triwangsa) and Ida Bagus Ketut Kiana (triwangsa) was mixed. In both Badung, and Tabanan candidates were mixed jaba (lit. “outsider” = non-triwangsa) and triwangsa. Only in Bangli were both candidates non-triwangsa (W. Gunawan and W. Wirata; N. Arnawa and M. Gianyar). Similarly, there were no clear correlations between traditional status and party affiliation. Affiliations and alliances did not fall along easily read lines of class or caste. This appears to be a new kind of politics, in which political capital based on past status is allied with newer forms of political capital and with modern/democratic ideas of popular representation.

The aristocratic candidates utilised the political capital derived from tradition in various ways and to varying degrees. At one extreme, a somewhat comic duo of unknowns from an obscure branch palace in East Bali appeared on television. They were dressed in the regalia of nineteenth-century kings and invoked solemn oaths and invocations of loyalty and sacred duty, conveying a message along the lines of “vote for us because we are your traditional rulers”. At the other, the widely respected head of one of the former major kingdoms (Mengwi) spent a lot of time visiting rural communities throughout his old kingdom asking farmers what he could do for them (and no doubt making generous donations to local causes). Meanwhile in the capital city the two main candidates from powerful rival palaces pitched their campaigns largely to the concerns of their contemporary urban constituencies, while the politics of affiliation and alliance were played out invisibly in the background.

But all candidates, aristocratic or not, began their campaigns with visible visits to local palaces seeking their support. The media often refer to these visits as dharma suaka and simakrama. The former means “asking for blessing/support” and the latter refers to establishing ties of friendship. The words are old, but in the context of political campaigning they represent an invented tradition: this relocates and redefines a practice known at the national level as silahturahmi politik in distinctively Hindu-Balinese terms. From the point of view of most Balinese such neo-traditional repackaging is unnecessary: it is easily recognised in terms of nangkil ke puri [“presenting oneself at the palace”], a practice in which anybody who wants anything, from material resources to spiritual blessing to wise counsel, presents themselves at the palace of their king and asks for help (MacRae,
This process is intended to provide benefits for the petitioner. But it simultaneously has the social effect of recognising, publicly displaying and thus reinforcing a hierarchical relationship between petitioner and host, client and patron, subject and ruler.

Thus the old kingdoms re-emerged into the Pilkada, directly in the form of candidates, but also symbolically, in the form of practices that brought the traditional spiritual mandate of the royal houses into play as a factor in the political process. But the old puri were not the only p(a)laces the candidates visited in search of support.

The Media and Politics

After obtaining the blessings of their local puri, the next stop for most candidates was a formal visit to the headquarters of the Bali Post Media Group (Kelompok Media Bali Post, hereafter abbreviated to BPMG). BPMG is a locally-owned media conglomerate based on the foundation of the island’s main newspaper Bali Post. Bali Post was founded by Ketut Nadha in 1948 as Suara Indonesia, a local voice of the national independence struggle and of pro-republican sentiment. After his death in January 2001, the ownership and management of the paper were taken over by his only son Satria Naradha, a graduate of the Academy of Journalism in Surabaya. During the transition period of management in the late 1990s and especially after he took full control, Naradha expanded the business into other newspapers and magazines (Denpasar Post, Bisnis Bali, Bali Travel News and Tokoh) and radio stations (Global FM, Genta, Singaraja FM and Suara Besakih). But by far his most important development has been the television channel Bali TV.

Throughout the New Order period media licences were limited by the government, as was freedom of expression even for those with licences. Consequently there were relatively few media outlets, and these were restricted in content and tone (Sen and Hill, 2000, p. 119). In practice in Bali, many did little more than report official events and presidential pronouncements and show sanitised local cultural performances and politically innocuous foreign programs. News content was the most rigorously controlled (Sen and Hill, 2000, p. 125). Those who diverged were severely punished, with closures of magazines and imprisonment of editors (Sen and Hill, 2000, pp. 53–54; see also Grant, 1994). Towards the end of the regime this control was both contested and relaxed somewhat and the media played a significant role in the downfall of the Suharto regime (Sen and Hill, 2000, p. 52, pp. 67–71, pp. 122–23, p. 130). Since then the licensing system has been deregulated and restrictions have been largely (but by no means entirely) lifted, diversity of opinion and expression have flourished, and new media outlets have sprung up like mushrooms (Sen and Hill, 2000, p. 70, p. 132). The expansion of the BPMG occurred in this new climate of deregulation and freedom.

The most important part of the expansion of the media throughout Indonesia was the opening of a number of commercial television channels. Those available in Bali, as elsewhere, are mostly based in Jakarta and are oriented to the concerns, tastes and linguistic habits of urban middle-class Javanese, all of which are remote from the cultural worlds of the majority of Balinese. Bali TV by contrast was designed from the outset by Balinese for Balinese: to speak to themselves about themselves and their concerns, in their own language.

Bali TV was founded on 26 May 2002 with considerable fanfare and an explicit vision: “to give shape to a dynamic ideal of guarding the identity, space and process of Balinese culture” (BPMG, 2005, cl.11.3). The timing was fortuitous: barely four months later the
deadly bomb blasts in Kuta devastated not only the tourism-related economy but Balinese perceptions of themselves, their relationships with the rest of Indonesia, Islam and indeed the world and their future (Inside Indonesia, 2003). It was in this climate of loss of confidence and direction, and in the absence of strong or inspiring leadership, that Bali TV, together with Bali Post, took on a new role as the island’s guide through troubled times.

Bali Post is characterised by a prose style that is at best awkward, at worst almost unreadable, the text broken into barely digestible chunks by long acronyms disguised as ordinary-looking words. Its point of view, not surprisingly, is Bali-centric, and its politics conservative. But while there are alternative Bali-based newspapers (Nusa and Radar Bali), even the critics of Bali Post agree that it is essential reading because it provides the only broad and reliable coverage of most important events and issues in Bali. Bali TV is likewise conservative and highly Bali-centric. The only other locally based option is not popular, however, and Bali TV is clearly the channel of choice for many Balinese, especially in the more conservative areas outside the main urban centres. As a result, the combined media of BPMG have a disproportionate influence on the dissemination of information and the formation of public opinion in Bali. Such was the media environment in which public understanding of the Pilkada campaigns unfolded in 2005.

An unusual aspect of Bali TV’s programming is the practice of demanding payment from individuals, groups or organisations for coverage of their activities on Bali TV. These payments, known as “donations to support human and technical resources”, apply to people such as aspiring pop music groups seeking exposure. But payments are also demanded for “news” coverage of various activities of businesses, government and NGOs, which are presented alongside fee-free items deemed to be newsworthy in themselves. Fees for coverage start from as low as Rp. 400,000 (A$65) but can go much higher and constitute a significant source of income to cover production costs for the channel. This practice somewhat blurs the line between advertising and editorial content, and did so during the Pilkada campaigns.

When candidates visited the imposing headquarters of BPMG (Gedung Pers Bali K. Nadha), they were received in person by Satria Naradha. These visits were widely reported both in Bali Post and on Bali TV. While new to Balinese local politics, there was a precedent for this somewhat ritualised visiting and reception of candidates in the 1999 Indonesian General Election and Golkar convention, when candidates for the presidency all came to Bali. At this time almost all candidates for the Indonesian Presidency, including Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Megawati Sukarnoputri, came to Bali TV. In the case of Megawati, the incumbent president at that time, her visit was run as live “breaking news” on Bali TV. Like the visits to puri, such visits are referred to as dharma suaka or simakrama.

These visits have obvious material benefits for both parties. BPMG boost their profile as powerful media in the eyes of public and politicians alike; the visiting candidates, apart from getting wide exposure in all media of BPMG, are also able to send a message to Balinese society as if they were state dignitaries being welcomed personally to Bali. But at another level, these rituals of visitation conveyed subtle messages in the language of an older form of politics.

The Politics of Prasasti

There is more to dharma suaka/simakrama than a simple exchange of material benefits. One of the main elements of the visits of dignitaries in previous years was the signing of
prasasti [inscribed stone tablets] proclaiming their support for Ajeg Bali, a new movement of Balinese cultural revival, sponsored and promoted by BPMG and associated closely with Satria Naradha. At the Gedung Pers Bali K. Nadha dozens of prasasti have been signed since 1999 by various leaders and political figures.

Prasasti have two sets of associations in Bali: historically as the means by which rulers made public and lasting proclamations; and in religious contexts, along with palm-leaf manuscripts [lontar], as the vehicles in which sacred ritual knowledge was enshrined and preserved (Creese, 1997; Hobart et al., 1996, pp. 24–31). The use of prasasti, even the terminology itself, thus had the effect of making an implicit analogy between the institution of BPMG and the ancient kingdoms of Bali, and between Satria Naradha and the kings of old.

The layout of the prasasti at Gedung Pers Bali K. Nadha reinforces this impression. The main tablet commemorating the founding of Ajeg Bali, dated 23 May 2003, is written in two scripts, Roman and Balinese. It reads “dengan semangat persatuan mari kita ajegkan Bali” [with spirit of unity let us keep Bali standing up strong]. Naradha’s name is inscribed at the top of the list, on the same level as the Governor of Bali, and above the deputy governor and all the heads of districts. In addition the prasasti are located not in some central, neutral or common location, but at the headquarters of BPMG, to which the dignitaries come, rather than Naradha going to their offices.

While the visits of Pilkada candidates in 2005 no longer involved the signing of prasasti, they still took a somewhat ritualised form that followed precedents set by the prasasti-signings. Like the state dignitaries, the candidates came in person to the BPMG building. On arrival they introduced themselves formally and then proclaimed their support for Ajeg Bali. In return they requested support from BPMG. Naradha responded by encouraging candidates to strengthen their commitment to make Bali ajeg [upright, firm]. This was all widely covered by Bali TV and other media of BPMG. But Ajeg Bali is more than just a name on a prasasti; it formed the background of public opinion to the whole Pilkada and to a degree even set its agenda.

Ajeg Bali

Ajeg is a Balinese word, not often used in everyday speech, meaning to stand upright, strong, firm; it implies getting Bali back on its feet or at least keeping it there. The origins of the term are uncertain, but the first recorded public use was at the opening of Bali TV in 2002, in a speech by the Governor of Bali in which he said “the noble mission and vision of Bali TV is the promotion and mengajegkan of Balinese tradition and culture to grow together with tourism” (Darma Putra, 2004a). The idea, and the term, in its noun form Ajeg caught on among the BPMG leadership, and in August of the following year, as part of the celebration of the 55th anniversary of the founding of Bali Post, BPMG sponsored a seminar on Ajeg Bali. Some of this discussion was subsequently published as a special supplement celebrating the anniversary of Bali Post. This supplement was then published as a book entitled Ajeg Bali Sebuah Cita-cita. Bali Post also published another book, Bali Menuju Jagadhita, Aneka Perspektif (2004), consisting of articles by leading Balinese intellectuals exploring the problems facing Bali and suggesting solutions. As well as selling them in bookstores, Satria Naradha presents these books as gifts to visitors to BPMG. Both books claim that Ajeg Bali is no empty slogan – “not a stagnant concept but ideas and strategy that need to be struggled for in
order for Bali to prosper” (2003). But what *Ajeg Bali* means in practice, especially to ordinary Balinese, is somewhat less clear (Darma Putra, 2005a).

The PR and Marketing manager of BPMG, Made Nariana, described it as “... a moral movement ... about making Balinese culture sustainable ... , and includes things like encouragement and sponsorship of ritual sacrifice, praying competitions etc.” (interview, 22 June 2005). The chief of police in Bali, Made Mangku Pastika, interviewed on *Bali TV* on the occasion of his 54th birthday, said “you ask me how to *meng-ajeg-kan* Bali? – stop gambling” (‘Seputar Bali’, 22 June 2005). Examples cited by Schulte-Nordholt include: “... we should go back to the beginning, back to the pure and peaceful Bali, when things were in order and true ...”, “Ajeg means that Bali is safe and can resist terrorists”, “... an answer to modernisation without substance” (2005, p. xx), “Making Bali *ajeg* is defending our customs and traditions that are beginning to fade...” (Allen and Palermo, 2004, citing N. Suryawan).

Similarly, in mid 2005 it was heard used in the following contexts, and with the following meanings and references: as an exhortation by an agricultural scientist to farmers to grow organically; at the conclusion of a conversation with a friend about the threat of Javanese immigration and Islam to Balinese culture: “*Ajeg Bali* is about the same thing – it means straight, true, unwavering – but what it really means ... is security [*aman*]”; in a discussion among men singing sacred texts [*mabasan*] in a temple as the economic process by which investment in ritual provides economic benefits and growth for all; by a couple of young and well-educated but not very affluent aristocrats – that Islamic-Javanese immigration is a real threat to Bali but that “shutting the gate” is “too fanatical” and the real answer lies in strengthening Balinese culture from the inside by such means as education, supporting agriculture and improving the “human resources” [*sumber daya manusia*] of Bali. As several writers including Dwipayana (2003) and Picard (forthcoming) have noted, the genius of the concept lies in the way it taps into and mobilises a widely-held

![Figure 1. *Ajeg Bali* inscription by President Megawati (Darma Putra)](image)

The Media and Cultural Revival in the 2005 Local Election in Bali 177

Downloaded By: [University of Queensland] At: 02:18 6 June 2010
range of public concerns. It is formulated with sufficient vagueness to accommodate almost any meaning, and to be manipulated by powerful actors for their own ends. From its formation in 2002 until the Pilkada in 2005, Bali TV slowly but surely became the voice of Ajeg Bali in ever more active ways. All of its 300 employees are Balinese: this not only provides jobs for locals but is linked to a commitment to develop Balinese culture. Its entire program is underpinned by Ajeg Bali ideology. There is a weekly program called Ajeg Bali, an interactive public forum in which issues of Balinese arts, society and culture are discussed with experts in the studio. This and other similar programs provide opportunities for ordinary Balinese to learn, discuss and even criticise their culture. In a more concrete vein, BPMG, via Bali TV, held competitions for Balinese pop songs and festivals of child dancers and puppeteers. It has also organised and sponsored rituals to spiritually clean Bali and ask God to protect Bali – another responsibility traditionally associated with rulers.27

Bali TV has not only appropriated and developed the discourse of Ajeg Bali (Allen and Palermo, 2004), but implements it in concrete ways to develop Bali culturally and spiritually, as well as economically. The main vehicle for the latter is a new institution known as Koperasi Krama Bali.

Koperasi Krama Bali

In early 2005, in the lead up to the Pilkada, Satria Naradha announced with characteristic fanfare and media coverage the formation, under the umbrella of Ajeg Bali, of Koperasi Krama Bali (KKB). A literal translation of the term is “the cooperative of the people of Bali”, but it is open to interpretation in different ways. The term koperasi has long been used throughout Indonesia to refer to local government sponsored cooperatives of various kinds that provide financial support, mostly in the form of credit for local enterprises, especially agricultural ones. In recent years, however, public confidence in them has waned as a result of widespread reports of financial mismanagement and corruption. So the climate in which KKB appeared, coinciding with the re-launching of the daily newspaper Bisnis Bali [Business [in] Bali], and the initial absence of a clear program of practical implementation, suggested another more visionary reading, along the lines of “(the people of) Bali, Inc.”.

In Satria Naradha’s own words, KKB is “an answer to the marginalisation of the small-scale economy” which will “push the aspirations of the young generation to embrace the informal sector” (BP, 21 June 2005). Its purpose is to “help strengthen the resilience of the Balinese economy”, and to help the funding of the informal sector by providing loans (BP, 22 June 2005). But like Ajeg Bali, it began as something of an empty vessel into which all Balinese could pour their own dreams and priorities for the economy of Bali: “to build the strength of the Balinese economy from below” and thus “to become masters of our own land” (BP, 20 May 2005); to address the post-harvest problems of the farming sector; to make KKB “transparent” because of the corruption of koperasi of the past; to make “Balinese-style night markets” flourish; and to make Balinese bakso [meat balls in noodle soup] sellers and pig merchants able to compete against outsiders (BP, 28 May 2005). By the time of its official establishment on 26 May 2005, over 3,000 Balinese had formally joined as members, and it had amassed a working capital of Rp. 50 million. By the time of its registration as a koperasi in early August, its membership and capital had increased to 5,000 and Rp.1.5 billion respectively (DenPost, 9 July 2005).28
While KKB operates ostensibly for the economic benefit of Bali as a whole, especially the less affluent informal, rural and more “traditional” sectors, it is not without its benefits for BPMG. As the holder and manager of the rapidly growing funds of KKB, BPMG has under its control a considerable amount of money. Bisnis Bali, originally launched a couple of years earlier as a twice-weekly newspaper and re-launched as a daily, has become virtually the official organ of KKB. Consequently, the apparent “ownership” of Ajeg Bali by BPMG has attracted considerable advertising revenue, especially from businesses anxious to associate themselves with the project of Ajeg Bali and/or KKB. This was especially so during the 2004 Presidential and 2005 Pilkada campaigns, when affiliation with Ajeg Bali and KKB became central issues and was virtually compulsory for candidates.

The Pilkada Campaigns

The Media and Ajeg Bali

From the beginning of the campaign, all candidates announced their candidacy through Bali Post. Every day, it reported, with scrupulous even-handedness, meetings of opposed teams of candidates, usually those of the two main parties, Golkar and PDI, along with their various local constituencies and pledges of support for them. For example, on 25 May, in articles of almost identical length, side-by-side on page 2, it reported on the daily achievements of both teams in Badung district. Agung-Sudikerta (Golkar) had visited a farming community in the upland part of the electorate where they had received pledges of unqualified support, while their support in Mengwi, the hometown of their leader, remained “solid”. Meanwhile, their opponents, Sumer-Oka (PDI-P) had gained the support of the various Muslim parties preferred by the (mostly Javanese) immigrant
communities in the urban and tourist areas. 29 Bali TV devoted most of the first half of its daily evening news program (Seputar Bali) to similarly paired reports.

Both media also focused, as did the government, on the management of the election, issues of security, and the need for proper conduct by all concerned. Substantive policy and party affiliation were conspicuous by their almost complete absence. For example Bali Post reported with approval the admonition of a local community leader that the campaigns be kept “free of the attributes of party politics”, and that of the leaders of campaign teams that Pilkada would be “a polite and ethical festival of local democracy” (6 June 2002). A few days before the election it quoted an official statement urging voters to wear Bali-Hindu ritual attire for the occasion (21 June 2005), as they had for the general election a year earlier. Pilkada, which was supposed to devolve power from the national to the district level was effectively redefined and repackaged in distinctively Balinese (i.e. provincial) terms. 30

The scrupulously even-handed coverage of all candidates was presumably a function of their payment of the same fees. But by positioning itself as the promoter of a good election for the good of Bali, rather than any particular candidate or party, providing publicity to all candidates equally, and refraining from critical commentary of any kind, BPMG in effect supported no party and no candidate. As a result candidates and parties alike were more beholden to the media than the media were to them. By repackaging the election in Balinese terms, BPMG was also positioning itself as the definer and defender of Balineseness.

KKB and the Visual Language of Traditional Politics

The terminology of dharma suaka and simakrama signals the redefinition of these practices of visiting and receiving blessings from local puri and BPMG alike, and relocates
them at least partly from the domain of modern/state politics into a framework of local tradition. More specifically it re-frames the whole Pilkada in terms of recognisable practices of deference and hierarchy. This practical recognition takes place at all levels of daily life in several ways. One of the best known of these is language, in which there are usages and forms of speech appropriate to and expressive of the respective socio-religious positions of a pair of conversants (Geertz and Togog, 2005, p. 77). Equally fundamental and universal, but perhaps more subtle, are the visual indicators of status.

This balance of power in the relationship between politicians and media is evident in visual form in their membership of KKB. As noted above, persons of lower rank traditionally present themselves at the places of those of higher rank, as exemplified in the lines of petitioners awaiting the attention of princes and priests. Kings do not visit commoners, but call for them to present themselves at the puri. Through late May 2005, the candidates assiduously and humbly presented themselves to local communities as well as palaces, while BPMG reporters followed them around with equal assiduity. At the same time however the candidates signed themselves up as members [anggota] of KKB. It was obviously in their interests to be seen to support this initiative, but to do so they had to present themselves at the headquarters of KKB. This was none other than the Gedung Pers Bali K. Nadha, the stronghold of BPMG, where they were duly photographed and filmed signing the membership list, watched over by its head Satria Naradha. As these images were published and broadcast, day after day, the relations of power/status implied were not lost on ordinary Balinese. The candidates were presenting themselves to Satria Naradha at his palace as if he were a king.

a) Satria N & Sumer-Oka (BP, 20 May 05)
b) Suharto & IMF
c) SN & Dewa Beratha (BP, 17 May 05)

The candidates were not the only ones to sign up to KKB. On 17 May, the top half of the front page of Bali Post consisted of a large coloured photograph and article showing the Governor of Bali, Dewa Beratha, signing himself in as member No.1 of KKB, watched over attentively by a beaming Naradha. Three days later, a strikingly similar front page...
picted the chairman of the Provincial Parliament of Bali (DPRD) also signing in. In these cases, however, the signings took place at the offices of the Governor and the parliament building. While Naradha was in fact paying his respects at their respective palaces, the photographs were framed to look as though, as in the other cases, they had come to him. The form of these images, and the message they conveyed, are reminiscent of the famous (and politically fatal) image of a powerless and humiliated Suharto signing the documents acquiescing to IMF control over the stumbling economy of Indonesia. This image was widely read by Indonesians as a sign of Suharto’s loss of power and legitimacy. While Balinese did not, to our knowledge, make an explicit equation with the image of Suharto, what we are suggesting is that they read the images of Naradha and politicians in similar ways.31

Puri Bali TV: A New Theatre State?

It has been suggested that “de-deifying their leaders has (perhaps) been one of television’s most perduring effects in Bali” (Hobart, 1999, p. 282). This may be so, but Hobart was referring to the state-controlled television of the late New Order period. Since then the media landscape has changed dramatically, in ways that move forward from the New Order, but simultaneously refer back to ideas and images that long predate it. We suggest that a process not of “re-deification” but perhaps of a revisioning of leadership, in terms of ideas and images derived from tradition, may also be at work in the current political and media environments. BPMG appears to be representing itself as (something like) a palace and its head, Satria Naradhna as (something like) a king. It is representing itself thus by a variety of actions that speak to Balinese in traditional languages of hierarchy and leadership. BPMG appears to have taken on the traditional responsibility of legitimate rulers for the well-being of the island as a whole – socially, politically, economically and even spiritually. Its near-monopoly of the means of public communication has enabled it to publicise this widely, but also to provide a subtle sub-text via the languages of visiting, receiving and granting requests. This text, repeated daily throughout the Pilkada campaign, suggests the superior status of BPMG to candidates for the highest political office at district level and arguably even at provincial level.
BPMG also celebrates, publicises and immortalises its achievements and relationships with persons of high station through the use of prasasti, which are in themselves a medium associated with rulers of the highest order and ritual sanctity.

Clifford Geertz argued famously (1980) that traditional Balinese polities were “theatre-states” – constituted less by the devices and strategies of conventional material political economy than by a symbolic and performative display of their accord with the order of the cosmos and divine sanction. Most scholars of precolonial Balinese politics find little evidence to support his position, but as one of us has argued elsewhere (MacRae, 2005), there is nevertheless a kernel of truth in his argument. Ironically, this has become increasingly apparent in the local politics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We suggest here that a “theatre-state” model may also be a useful one for making sense of the political agenda and means of the BPMG in the present.

While BPMG bears little superficial resemblance to a nineteenth-century kingdom, it is making implicit claims to moral authority not unlike those made by such kingdoms, in the languages that Geertz believed those kingdoms used. And, like Geertz’s model of the nineteenth-century kingdoms, BPMG is making its claims not directly in terms of its particular combination of wealth and power, but indirectly, using this wealth and power to display its resemblance, if not to the cosmic/divine order, to that of the kingdoms of the past. From the point of view of BPMG, the actual results of Pilkada appear to have been little more than a side-show.

Winners and Losers?

In the end, the results of Naradha’s side-show were mixed. The old aristocracies were neither reinstated as the new rulers of decentralised Bali; nor were they discarded in favour of a new breed of political beings. In Tabanan and Bangli, the incumbents were re-elected, apparently more on the basis of their incumbency than any other obvious factors. The Denpasar mayoralty, in which both teams were closely associated with rival puri, was also won by the incumbent, but more as a result of their campaign strategies than their puri affiliations. The team that played most overtly on their royal descent (Mataram-Agung), in arguably the most conservative electorate of all (Karangasem), was comprehensively defeated by a combination of jaba and lower aristocracy [gusti] (Geredeg-Rai). Only in Badung, where it was a close contest between a Kuta businessman and the raja of Puri Mengwi, does the puri influence seem significant. Sumer-Oka won in the Kuta electorates and the rural area of Petang, where Oka had some influence. In the heartland of Mengwi and Abiansemal, however, Agung won convincingly, mostly as a result of his hereditary authority there, combined with his grass-roots campaign strategy of listening to the needs of village people. Aristocratic descent thus played a part in both the campaigns and the results, but a variable part and never in itself a decisive part. It is best understood as a new/old resource that various candidates drew upon, mobilised and exploited in different ways to different effects.

New Media for Old Kingdoms? Or Old Kingship for New Media?

Toward the end of 2005, after the election, Satria Naradha travelled to most of the districts of the newly elected bupati to promote KKB and its major program of establishing Balinese in the informal sector. Short courses were run in Denpasar and other districts on how
to make bakso and soto ayam [chicken soup] and members of KKB established themselves as bakso sellers. Some of these courses were conspicuously attended by bupati or wali-kota. Their attendance can be seen as a return to Naradha for the political hospitality given to them by BPMG during their election campaigns. Naradha’s “safari” was once again similar in form as well as name to that normally performed by a governor. While under Suharto TV viewers saw the Governor and his activities every night on state TV (TVRI), it was now Naradha’s face they saw, especially on Bali TV.

During the Pilkada campaigns, one of the authors was talking casually with a group of young men (of admittedly critical political persuasion) about the Pilkada, Bali TV and KKB. One of them commented spontaneously that the real purpose of it all was to expand the “kerajaan” of Bali TV. Kerajaan is the word Balinese most commonly use to refer to the precolonial kingdoms of their island. Its literal translation, “in the state of having a king” (Milner, 1982, p. 9; see also MacRae, 2005), is close in meaning to the English “kingdom”. When asked if he really meant that Bali Post/TV was like a kerajaan and Satria Narada like a raja, he said yes, that was exactly what he meant. One of his companions immediately added, by way of clarification, that “there are two Governors in Bali now, that one over there (indicating the direction of the Governor’s office) and this new one”. He was not the only person to tell us that Satria Naradha’s ambition was to become Governor. Even when we questioned Naradha’s own PR/Marketing manager about his ultimate ambitions, his immediate response was “oh, do you mean that ‘two governors’ business?” Our relating of all this is meant not as a prediction about the future, but to report on the ways in which Balinese interpret these representations, and thus to reinforce several points emerging from the above discussion.

The first and most evident point is that the new political climate occasioned by local autonomy in general and local elections in particular has given rise to strikingly new forms of political campaigning and public interest. Second, the status-assertions of the traditional elite, which have until recently taken the form of social and ritual precedence (MacRae, 2005), have emerged as a potent form of what might, following Bourdieu (1991, p. 230) be called political capital. Third, the political resources deriving from tradition do not translate automatically into votes: they need to be mobilised and strategically utilised in relation to other newer resources derived from other sources. The fourth point is the dominant role of the mass media in mediating public knowledge and opinion about the election, and the fifth is the moral authority and political power that have accrued to the media by virtue of this role. Sixth is the specific and apparently quite deliberate ways in which the combined media of the BPMG have exercised this new power: they effect ends that at once appear to have the highest social good as their aim, but simultaneously raise and embed their own position through a symbolic language of status derived from traditional politics. These conclusions perhaps say little in terms of conventional political science, but what they do suggest, as Geertz did in Negara, is that factors of deeper historical depth than the New Order period and wider cultural compass than the formal “political” domain play very real parts in contemporary “political” processes.33

The contest in the 2005 Pilkada (apart from the mayoralty of Denpasar) was for the leadership of administrative districts that correspond to the territories over which the last precolonial kings ruled. One of the explicit reasons for the devolution of more power to the district rather than to the provincial level was to avoid the potential for separatist movements based on provincial levels of ethnic, linguistic and often religious
homogeneity (Aspinall and Fealy, 2003, p. 4). In Bali the provincial level corresponds to the whole island. The last king to exercise spiritual, if not politico-military, jurisdiction over the island was deposed and killed by the Dutch in 1908: with him seemed to die any hope of a politically reunified Bali (Vickers, 1989, p. 76). The Dutch are long gone, but a century after their arrival, with a widespread perception of other common threats at the door, it seems that neither the sentiments underlying this image of kingship nor the symbolic practices that helped create and maintain it have disappeared altogether; and a new kind of theatre-state may yet be emerging in twenty-first century Bali.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on observations of the 2005 Pilkada and discussions between the two authors in Bali in May and June 2005 and subsequent email communications. It also draws on Darma Putra’s knowledge of the contemporary political and media scene in Bali and MacRae’s previous reflections on aspects of Balinese politics (2003, 2005). We are grateful also for insights gained in conversations with Michel Picard and exchanges of manuscripts with Ngurah Suryawan, Michel Picard and Henk Schulte-Nordholt, as well as useful suggestions from two anonymous reviewers and the editor of ASR. MacRae’s visit to Bali in 2005 was partly funded by Massey University. He is grateful also to Susi Johnson for generous hospitality and Diana Darling and AA Ardi of Ubud for news and views. Thanks also to Adrian Vickers for his assistance in enabling Darma Putra to attend and present a version of this paper at the ASAA Conference, Wollongong, June 2006.

Notes

1. We use the term “traditional” advisedly, to refer in an unproblematised way to political formations, ideas and practices that predate both the New Order and the colonial period. But they are “traditional” also in the sense that they are seen in popular Balinese thinking to be both indigenous and surrounded by a certain aura of ritual sanctity.

   For a discussion of the decentralisation policies and their implementation see Seymour and Turner (2002) and Aspinall and Fealy (2003). For more comprehensive discussion of the background to and details of the new electoral system, see Jacqueline Vel’s excellent article (2005) and Choi (2004).

2. Golkar is new wine in an old bottle – the official organisation of government during the Suharto regime reinvented as a modern democratic political party; PDI (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia) is associated with the political legacy of the first president Sukarno, split into two factions, the more prominent one (PDI-P) headed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Sukarno and herself the immediate past president. For a more comprehensive discussion of political parties in the new electoral climate see Choi (2004).

3. The Balinese term puri is conventionally translated as “palace”, and in fact has a very similar range of referents: to the building, the family, the institution and occasionally the (aristocratic) class as a whole.

4. Only the northern kingdom of Buleleng was taken over by the Dutch in the mid-nineteenth century.


6. Analyses of the politics of the immediate post-New Order period (e.g. Robison and Hadiz, 2004; Schwartz, 1999; Renton-Green, 1999; Hasibuan, 1999; Vel, 2005) stress the survival of New Order elites, as well as the roles of various other parties including the military, Islamic elements, and gangsters [preman] but make no mention of traditional aristocracies. However it is also notable that all of these studies refer to “Indonesia” in a very generalised sense (often in practice reducible to Java or even Jakarta); none mentions, let alone focuses, on Bali.
7. It is important however to note that this retreat from the formal political arena was not total. The leaders of PDI in Bali have long been from Puri Satria and Puri Kesiman, while members of their rival Puri Pemecutan were prominent in the Golkar of the New Order period. Golkar though was usually led by former military people such as I Dewa Gede Oka and I Ketut Sundria, and its previous chairman was I Gusti Ngurah Alit Yudha, son of the independence hero I Gusti Ngurah Rai. The current chairman however is Cokorda Budi Suryawan, from Puri Ubud, who has emerged as a career politician in the post-New Order period.

8. Robinson (1995, p. 197, p. 258) has argued convincingly against the reduction of the politics of the pre-New Order periods to such patterns of “traditional” affiliation and alliance. His point is well taken, but our point here is that it has been perhaps too well taken and that these almost-forgotten patterns have remained a significant part of the contemporary social realities of many Balinese to re-emerge into the formal political arena half a century later.

9. The titles Anak Agung (AA) and Ida Bagus (IB) indicate aristocratic [triwangsa] descent. Names without such prefixes indicate non-aristocratic [jaba] descent. In the Pilkada itself, and henceforth here, the pairs of candidates will be referred to by their combined and hyphenated last names, e.g. Sumer-Oka.

10. The backroom dimensions of Pilkada 2005 undoubtedly include the inevitable “money politics” and party affiliations emphasised in other accounts (e.g. Choi, 2004). This essay focuses on other dimensions of the political process, but part of our argument is that in this election these conventionally political-economic aspects appear to have been less important than elsewhere and than the factors we focus on here.

11. Although our reference here is to visits to persons of higher status, the terms are in fact used for all the visits of candidates to their various constituencies.

12. Our rather generalised reference to “the media” refers primarily to newspapers and television, but especially to the control over information represented by their combination in the Bali Post Media Group referred to below.

13. Only one pair of candidates (from Bangli) did not visit, for reasons unknown to us.

14. For accounts (in Indonesian) of Ketut Nadha’s life and work see Dwikora Putra and Supartha (2001).

15. Since then BPMG has moved into partnerships with other local TV stations in Jogjakarta, Semarang, Bandung and Palembang. For a comprehensive history of the media in Bali see Darma Putra’s PhD thesis (2003).

16. The media climate during the New Order was obviously more complex and ambiguous than this, as Sen and Hill’s definitive and nuanced study (2000) shows. Our comments rely heavily on their work but our purpose is a more generalised picture that no doubt sacrifices subtlety in the interests of comparison. But more importantly, Sen and Hill’s analysis is, like most of the political analysis referred to above, fairly Java-centric and in fact makes no specific reference to Bali, which is significantly different in several ways. For this we rely on our own experience and Darma Putra’s own local study (2003).

17. Unless otherwise noted, all the publications referred to here are in Bahasa Indonesia and translations are by the authors. Bahasa Indonesia derives from Malay, the precolonial language of trade throughout (pen)insular Southeast Asia. It became the language of colonial administration and is now the official national language of bureaucracy, education and communication between people from different parts of the country. It is spoken with varying degrees of fluency by most people, especially the younger and the better-educated ones, but is a second language for most people, including Balinese.

18. In the mid-1960s, the military, as part of its statutory function in civil society, established newspapers in most provinces of Indonesia, including one in Bali called Angkatan Bersendjuta, as the voice of military and government. It was renamed Nusa Tenggara in 1978 and Nusa in 1998. Since the mid-1980s, the Surabaya daily Jawa Pos expanded its distribution and coverage to Bali, presumably because of the large population of East Javanese immigrants there. In the late 1990s, it added a supplement Radar Bali providing local news.

19. The other locally based TV channel, TVRI Bali, has lost most of its viewers because it is seen as the voice of a largely discredited government, or even as a remnant of the New Order. Ironically, since the fall of Suharto it has also suffered from management and financial problems.

20. Although unusual nowadays, this practice is not unknown in Indonesia. It was in fact practised in the past by the state broadcaster TVRI.
21. We understand that candidates paid a flat fee of Rp.700,000 for general coverage of their campaigns, but also that Bali Post newspaper charged more, Rp 1 million, which they described as “dana punia”[donation]. However, it is not clear exactly what this covered, as some aspects of their campaigns would have been covered as news anyway. Nor do we know whether any candidates declined to pay for coverage. But they did also pay for advertising in addition to this flat fee.

22. Satria named his new headquarters after his father, the founder of the Bali Post, “The K. Nadha Bali Press Building”.

23. Local party leaders played an important role in mediating between candidates and the chief of Bali TV in order to make the visit well organised and politically meaningful propaganda.

24. “...misi dan visi Bali TV yang sangat mulia yaitu mengembangkan dan mengajegkan adat dan budaya Bali ditambah dengan partwisata Bali...” Mengajegkan is the verb form of ajeg.

25. These titles translate loosely as “Ajeg Bali: an ideal” and “Bali approaches prosperity: various perspectives”.

26. “ajeg Bali” bukanlah konsep stagnan, tetapi cita-cita dan strategi yang terus harus diperjuangkan untuk membuat Bali sejahtera”.

27. As well as its Ajeg Bali content, Bali TV programming does include some programs of wider interest and more global origins such as a popular serialisation of the Indian epic Mahabharata and some programs from Voice of America.

28. Rp. = Rupiah, the currency of Indonesia, which at the time of writing is worth about Rp. 7000 per $A.

29. The names Agung-Sudikerta and Sumer-Oka refer to the names of the pairs of candidates.

30. It has been noted by several observers, including one of the reviewers of this article, that much of the style and flavour (even some of the terminology) of the electoral process promoted by BPMG is eerily and ironically reminiscent of that of New Order elections and indeed the regime’s overarching ideology of Pancasila (as described by Morfit, 1981). It has also been suggested that other contemporary practices under the umbrella of Ajeg Bali, especially those relating to local security, are reminiscent of the New Order. We tend to agree and this is certainly a subject for further research.

31. The argument of this section implies some assumptions as to how these visual images are read by “ordinary Balinese”, and as Mark Hobart (1999) has reminded us, Balinese are by no means uncritical believers of all they see/hear on television. While we have little evidence of how Balinese read these messages in such a direct form as interviews, our primary evidence, indeed the primary stimulus for this whole argument, lies in Darma Putra’s own reactions as a Balinese, reinforced by his wider perceptions, as a journalist, of Balinese public opinion, supported again by MacRae’s impressions over the period under consideration.

32. The final revisions to this paper were made on the day we heard of Clifford Geertz’s passing, signalling the end of an era in Balinese studies. We would like to take this opportunity to salute his influence on this, possibly the first work in which his legacy will live on posthumously.

33. The aim of this paper is not a critique of political science; what we refer to here is a tendency to focus on the formal structures of political process, including parties, policies, leaders and the machinations of power relations between them. Our point here is that focus on these tends to ignore more subtle dimensions of the “political” embedded in ostensibly different social realms.

34. For an account of this last king and his loss of power, see Wiener (1995).

References

Local Newspapers, Magazines and Television
Bali Post
27 May 2005. ‘Koperasi Krama Bali Dideklarasikan: Menikmati Bakso dan Soto ala Krama Bali’.
22 June 2005. ‘Krama Bali jangan Jadi “Benalu”’.
24 June 2005. ‘50 Siswa segera Masuk Pesraman Ajeg Bali’.
Bali TV
Bisnis Bali
Denpost (Denpasar Post)
Jawa Pos
Nusa
Radiya
Sarad

Other works
Bali Post Media Group (2005) Studi Kelayakan Bali TV.