

Southeast Asia

JOSEPH ERRINGTON

Social, political, and economic turmoil now make it easy to forget that just two years ago Indonesia stood out amongst ethno-linguistically plural nations for its successful nationalist and developmental dynamic. And as recently as the mid-1990s, Indonesian modernization seemed to be unimpeded by religious tension.

**Text book on Hindu religion, Project for Improvement of the Level of Religious Education in Hinduism and Buddhism, Department of Religion, Republic of Indonesia**

President Suharto and his New Order government received international praise for economic progress among a diverse, peacefully coexisting citizenry of Muslims, Buddhists, Protestants, Catholics, and Hindus. But over the last two years bloody civil unrest, mostly along ethno-religious lines, has arisen out of conditions of economic recession and political uncertainty. Some see parallels between this unravelling of Indonesia's social fabric, and the strife in the Balkans following the end of the Cold War. With the demise of Suharto's authoritarian state, by this line of reasoning, 'age-old', 'primordial' ethno-religious hatreds have been allowed to emerge. But current events can also be plausibly read as effects and even continuations of the less praiseworthy aspects of New Order rule.

Fear and violence which now feed each other in many parts of Indonesia have clear antecedents in the massacres of hundreds of thousands which occurred in the dark days of 1965, and which underwrote the le-



gitimacy and style of New Order rule. Some of the most vicious clashes are now occurring in areas where state transmigration and development programmes have created communal conflict across lines of ethno-religious difference; some ethnic resentments which have fuelled riot, murder, and rape, date from the colonial era, and were in turn exploited rather than effaced under New Order rule.

If there is more than one diagnosis of the current trouble, there is likewise more than one way to think about possible Indonesian futures. Here I consider the future of ethno-religious pluralism in Indonesia with an eye to the unobvious but constitutive role of languages in the Indonesian national project. This may seem a distanced way of addressing the kinds of atrocities which con-

# Language, Religion, and Identity in Indonesia

tinue to be committed with impunity. Nonetheless, language is integral to the nexus of religious and national identity, which will continue to be crucial for any brighter, less bloody Indonesian future. Relying heavily but not exclusively on my own experiences in Central Java, I sketch the linguistic grounds of ethnicity, nationalism and religion in Indonesia with special attention to the ambiguities of identity which linguistic pluralism has allowed.

From its inception in 1965, the New Order government operated and legitimized itself through a far-reaching, top-down programme of national development (in Indonesian, *pembangunan nasional*). Crucial here are just two dimensions of this vast enterprise: the establishment of Indonesian (*bahasa Indonesia*) as the national language, and of monotheism as the common attribute of state-sanctioned religious identities.

## Indonesian language in the Indonesian nation-state

Before independence, the language now called Indonesian counted as an artificial language for administration in the Dutch East Indies, a non-native variety of Malay which was spoken natively in several other dialects by a few million subjects in the colonies. But since 1965, knowledge and use of Indonesian across Indonesian territory has exploded. At a 1990 conference, the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture asserted, not implausibly, that 83 percent of citizens over the age of five knew Indonesian, and that by 2010, all Indonesians would speak the national language. So Indonesian is a national language spoken natively by relatively few Indonesians. Most know it as a second language lacking primordial links to a distinct group of native speakers. This paucity of native speakers makes Indonesian less a non-native language – that is, a language native to some 'other' group in the country – than an un-native language, that is, devoid of ante-historical roots in some ethnic, religious, or territorial identity.

The New Order also zealously promoted Indonesian-ness through the five principles (the Panca Sila) which count together as a summary ideology of official Indonesian nationalism. Most relevant here is the first principle, which establishes monotheism as both a condition of citizenship and a parameter for religious tolerance. In effect, it reconciles national unity with religious pluralism through an obligation that citizens acknowledge one of five authorized, (putatively) monotheistic religions: Islam, Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Hinduism(!), and Buddhism. In fact, the vast majority of Indonesians – 90 percent of the population, or more than 180 million – count as Muslims at least for official statistical purposes. Current ethno-religious strife is throwing into relief the longstanding discrepancy between Muslims' demographic

dominance in the populace on one hand, and Islam's official coequality with four religions of far fewer adherents on the other. As a result, there have been ambiguous, sometimes conflicted understandings of the rights and obligations of Indonesians as members of an Islamic community (*umat*) and citizens of a secular nation-state (*negara*). Here I am concerned with the instrumental and symbolic roles which languages have played in these vexed political and cultural arenas. Indonesian, I suggest, has helped foster official religious tolerance by assimilating religious doxa and practice, via religious language, to the institutions of the State. This is a double development that I sketch here with an eye to Islam, but also to the peculiarly Indonesian version of Hinduism which has highly Sanskritized Old Javanese as its vehicle.

## Language and religious community

In his influential account of the rise of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson suggests that secular/national languages (like Indonesian) contrast in important ways with sacred/esoteric languages of religious discourse (like Classical Arabic or Old Javanese). He links the rise of nationalism to the spread of secular literacy in national languages. These differ crucially from what he calls 'Truth languages', which are vehicles of sacred texts and discourse, imbued with religious truth, and transmitted through restricted literacy. The ascendance of standard national languages, Anderson argues, makes all languages comparable and intertranslatable, including those which are privileged as vehicles of sacred discourse and transcendent truths. Indonesian, as one such national language, can be considered in this regard with an eye to Islamic reform movements, which have become increasingly salient in current Indonesian politics. Under the New Order, groups like Muhammadiyah were restricted in their activism to efforts to purify Islam of local syncretisms and heterodoxies, and did so through educational systems which provide direct, knowledgeable access to the Koran. This scripturalist movement has made Islam's Truth language focal, but taught it in a modern educational framework through Indonesian. The national language, as the medium of instruction, thus takes on a simultaneously privileged and symbiotic role in relation to Arabic and the Islamic project. If Indonesian's un-native, non-ethnic origins enhances its status over and against a multiplicity of local, ethnic languages, it also gains value as a 'neutral' linguistic mediator of religiously based knowledge.

A similar but more striking instance of this complementarity between national and religious identities involves marginal highland Javanese communities, where peasants responded to government requirements that they acknowledge an authorized religion by collectively espousing Hinduism. Though

associated primarily with Bali, Hinduism on that island is universally recognized to have its antecedents in pre-colonial Java. The State actively supported these rural Hindu communities by making Hindu texts and doxa required subjects of study in local schools. Because they are taught in Indonesian, the national language becomes the means of access to standardized, public versions of formerly esoteric, sacred Old Javanese texts. The paradoxical result is that the national language mediates between these villagers and the ancestors they imagine to have been the original practitioners of Hinduism in Java, and original users of the sacred Old Javanese Truth language. Their assertion of a distinctly local religious identity is thus bracketed or muted by the intervention of an un-native, national medium of religious instruction. The broad point, then, is that the Indonesian language helped to mute political and cultural tensions under the New Order that arose from the condition of religious pluralism and requirements of national unity. When Indonesian's role as mediator between religious affiliation and national identity is foregrounded, it becomes easier to gauge that language's enduring salience for the national project. Indonesian survives as an infrastructural means to reduce or elide felt differences between religious and nationalist modes of community.

Speculation on multiple political and cultural saliences of language might lack clear relevance to ongoing, deadly conflict; but it might help to envision a polity in which a national language facilitates not just religious diversity but a civil society, and the sort of public sphere which the New Order systematically suppressed. As other New Order successes come to seem hollow and illusory, Indonesian's enduring viability may obtrude if it subserves an Indonesian version of public citizenship, and a public discourse in which the demands of faith and country are neither completely divorced, nor entirely congruent. Perhaps Indonesian will be among the New Order's best and most lasting legacies: a medium for public discourse within and across lines of political and religious difference, a national mode of discourse never supported by an authoritarian state which successfully fostered a vehicle for it. ◆