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Writing novels under the New Order: state censorship, complicity, and literary production in Indonesia, 1977-1986

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Chapter 6

Conclusion: Complexity, Complicity, and the Logic of *Antisipasi*

“We know them. They’re our friends.”

D.J. Tampubolon⁴⁵¹

In the late 1970s and first half of 1980s in Indonesia, three authors, Yudhistira Massardi, Ahmad Tohari, and Ajip Rosidi, managed to get their novels that addressed episodes from Indonesia’s most violent history published, in manners and words that would be normally unspeakable and censored at the time. What ultimately explains how their books managed to be published despite the political climate, a legal framework hostile to free expression, active institutions of censorship and dominant cultural mores? In an attempt to answer this main research question exploring the explanations and stories behind the publication of the novels, I examined the features and mechanisms of the pervasive New Order censorship under which these novels were produced. My research revealed that, under the authoritarian Indonesian government, censorship was believed to facilitate literary growth, an important cultural goal of the regime, and this censorship was carried out effectively but unevenly through various institutions and publishers. The New Order offered clear incentives, with the lure of rewards and threats of punishment, all backed up by state resources that linked the growth of literacy and the creation of a national literature to its developmental goals. It was a well-organized and well-coordinated effort. At the same time, however, censorship was a more ambiguous matter than is commonly understood, as it drove literary authors, editors, publishers, and censors closer together rather than further apart.

Instead of fostering constant antagonism, as often highlighted in the liberal conception of censorship, in actual practice, the state, the censors, authors and publishers together engaged in an interdependent and nuanced relationship that was in constant negotiation, anticipation, and delicate recalibration. It is, therefore, a misunderstanding to view censorship in Indonesia entirely as an unorganized, arbitrary process in the hands of powerholders that pit censors against authors, and agents against victims while negating the complexity, complicity, compromise, and anticipation that took place during the entire process of literary production. It is in the analysis of these factors that we find an answer to the three cases under scrutiny here.

1.) The dominant scholarly view and popular imagination of censorship under the New Order Indonesia generally maintain that censorship was a disorderly,

⁴⁵¹ Staff of censorship agency at the Attorney General Office when asked about the censor body connection with Indonesia’s largest publishing house and reflected its long history of mutual relationship. Interview in 2017.

erratic and arbitrary process in the hands of the power holders. It also assumes that censorship was carried out by understaffed, unskilled, and uncritical censors. My findings refute such generic claims since they often distort the complex, systematic, and institutionalized system of censorship in Indonesia. As I explored the heart of the state censorship agency, I found, instead, a massive, complex, and largely consistent system of censorship. It was operated with complete and heavy machinery that had many moving parts, buttressed by repressive legislation, heightened by intellectual bureaucrats who were not failed academics, but chose to make their way in the apparatus of the state in order to improve national literacy, and were entangled in unique forms of deference to authority.

Heavily institutionalized and highly pervasive, censorship in the New Order demonstrated a tendency for collective decision making, involving all state departments, apparatuses, academic bodies, and corporations who were determined to make sure that nothing explicitly offensive to the establishment would appear in print. Mobilizing hundreds of employees, the entire network of institutions involved formed a prohibition regime, of which growth is related closely to the increasing dominance of the New Order as a whole. The Attorney General, in which the state vested the sole right to censor, organized such networks and held the power to determine printed materials that could or could not be produced, distributed, and circulated in the community, making the body of knowledge of the entire nation fully dependent on the institution's policy and wisdom. In some cases, like Pramoedya Ananta Toer or his translator brother, Koesalah Soebagyo Toer, it appears that decisions had more to do with specific political considerations — such as the political attitudes of the author.

2.) Secondly, censorship in the New Order Indonesia bore a resemblance to that of eighteenth-century France, recently explicated by Robert Darnton in his seminal work *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (2014). In monarchical France, censorship was a matter of complicity between the state and society, where censors, authors and publishers collaborated in making literature by navigating the intricate culture of royal privilege. Along this line of new critical censorship, my thesis likewise opposes a Manichean view of censorship that reduces the subject to simply a battle of light versus darkness, repression versus liberty, or authority versus innocent authors and poor publishers. Initially, when I first started this research, I also shared the simple and dominant idea that censors stifled freedom. The way that Pramoedya Ananta Toer's books were banned gives that impression. The archives, documents, and informants I consulted, however, reveal how publishers and authors engaged in state censorship in complex and layered relationships of interdependency. Censorship under the New Order relied greatly on collusion, collaboration, and complicity enforced by a vast network of actors and institutions that included authors, editors, outside readers, various consultants, ministry officials, and, of course, the censors themselves. Interestingly, this interconnectedness lent advantages to the authors as well as their editors and publishers, particularly in regard to the publication and distribution of their novels, as well as literary awards from the state. The New Order created clear incentives, not

merely overt threats of punishment, but offering rewards subsidized by state resources in a coherent policy that linked the growth of literacy and the creation of a national literature to national development goals.

Literary works, of course, were formed in various and complex ways. Some may well have started as the author's moment of inspiration or political aspiration. The novels at the heart of this study, however, were shaped, resettled, and settled in a constant process of interpretation, compromise, complicity, and negotiations between the author and publisher. The publishing industry was also used by the government to maintain state dominance. My research finds that the only way for publishing businesses to survive was to have a cooperative relationship with the government. Editors edited manuscripts according to the taste of the censors — or what they believed and imagined to fall in accordance with the censors' taste. They gained instructions from the higher levels of the hierarchy as well as from regular contact and friendly relationships with the censors, and used this knowledge and sensibility to frame topics, influence people, and regulate the contents of manuscripts. Against this background, Jakob Oetama, the owner and founder of Gramedia, the publishing house where the novels were produced, highlighted the importance of adapting in clever, creative, and innovative ways, which often comprised publication strategies such as serialization, genre categorization, and layout. In addition to being creative, publishers and editors developed interplay with censors or in anticipating censorship, enacted self-censorship. At one point, as evident in the dossier archived in the Attorney General Office in Jakarta, the publisher that printed the novels discussed in this dissertation sat together with the censors, essentially working together toward shared goals.

3.) As I show in my last chapter, I argue in the third place that authors were also part of the system. Borrowing the words of Matthew Bunn in "Re-imagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After," (2015) they 'engaged with censorship in inventive and novel ways, drawing out new avenues of inquiry into how textual boundaries are shaped by forces beyond those of the authors.'⁴⁵² As censorship became a constitutive feature in the creation and development of national literature, literary authors could dare to be subversive, but they ran the risk of being called obscurantists — deliberately preventing the facts or full details of something from becoming known, or selecting textual expressions that were favorable to the government. In this regard, they anticipated probable consequences by making sure that they did not contradict the grammatical discourse outlined by the state and resorted to obscure language that limits the active presence if not completely omitting its agency. As Burt (1994) puts it, 'censorship involves cultural legitimation as well as delegitimization.' This is evident, for example, in the case of linguistic features that Massardi resorted to in his novel. His frequent use of passive voice to a great extent limited the presence of agents or perpetrators of the killings and disappearance of the people. While less frequent in using Massardi's strategy, Tohari

⁴⁵² Bunn 2015, p. 26.

developed an anticipating language that is filled with tedious narration jammed with detailed settings that often distorted or delayed the plot. Rosidi, a well-connected and reputable author, brought narrative balance while simultaneously took advantage of the epistolary form as a way to detach authorial presence in his novel. Furthermore, in addition to the narrative style and language and despite the apparent concern and sympathies, these authors still mimicked the state's main narrative of the 1965-66 events in the larger part of their storyline. As Henk Maier (1999) pointed out, due to the complexity and pervasiveness of state censorship, these authors without them noticing it were complicit in silencing themselves.

In connection with the wider debate in the field of censorship studies, the case of censorship under the New Order Indonesia conforms to New Censorship Theory that, 'stresses the multiplicity of censorship and the generative effect of censorship, an activity hitherto seen as purely repressive.'⁴⁵³ The Indonesian case intriguingly confirms and endorses the study conducted by Darnton (2014) on censorship in three authoritarian regimes, namely eighteenth-century Monarchical France, nineteenth-century imperialist Britain, and twentieth-century communist East Germany; it concords with Burt (1994) on the prohibitive as well as productive nature of censorship; and echoes Bunn's (2015) findings on the multiplicity and generative effects of censorship.

Darnton finds that censorship is generally a complex process that varies depending on the character of each government, requires talent and training, and extends deep within the social order. In every case he studied, censorship crystallized around the core principles unique to each regime: privilege or approbation in the case of France, surveillance in the case of British India, and planning in the case of East Germany. In each case, censorship pervaded every aspect of literary life and shaped literature as a cultural system within a sociopolitical order. It was produced through a constant process of interpretation, compromise, complicity, and negotiation, 'rendering censors as actors internal to communication networks, and not as external, accidental features.'⁴⁵⁴ In Bourbon France, in order for a book to be published, it first had to get what was known as 'privilege', similar to copyright, that was given by the censors and approved with a royal stamp which entailed the quality of the book, worthy of royal merit. In this regard, censorship was considered to be positive, as the censors thought that they were defending the honor of French literature. In British India, censors were concerned with surveillance through catalogs and were very systematic in the ways they kept records about publications, authors, press, and so on. The criteria that were used to apply censorship were developed by civil servants and special agents who ran libraries and other cultural institutions. They ranged from pornography to sedition. One record, for example, described one book as openly vulgar and, therefore, not having the semblance of an excuse for the public good. These criteria were as elastic as the criteria developed by the Attorney General in

⁴⁵³ Bunn 2015, p. 25.

⁴⁵⁴ Bunn 2015, p. 25.

Jakarta which I examined in Chapter 3. In East Germany, the censors that also included authors, scholars and critics, drew up plans for national literature in partnership with writers in the country, which confirms Bunn's notion of the generative aspect of censorship, as well as Burt's productive side of it. Being a writer, therefore, involved a permanent interpretation of the guidelines, in the form of language and contents of the plots. Negotiation occurred at all levels, especially in the early stages when a text began to take shape.

The Indonesian case conforms to or fits with most of the characterizations of censorship under the three authoritarian regimes that Darnton investigated. Combining the core principle that was found in each authoritarian regime, censorship under the New Order was founded on positive criteria for publication outlined by the state, and defended by notable literary critics. The criteria developed and their number grew over time, from simply stating that books should be censored or banned if they disturbed public order (*mengganggu ketertiban umum*) to a detailed and more explanatory list consisting of ten points for the application of censorship or outright ban — the last point being extremely elastic, i.e. *dll.*, a contraction of '*dan lain-lain* (et cetera), in order to anticipate other criteria that might have not been included in the list. In regards to surveillance, while the British had the initiative to develop a list of publications for the purpose of surveillance, the New Order censors surveilled the authors through catalogs that were published by the supposedly independent IKAPI, which Rosidi himself once chaired. This eventually, and probably without them realizing it, incorporated involvement and complicity from the authors, editors, and publisher.

Interestingly, while seemingly in line with British India's heavy emphasis on the liberal value of freedom of expression, the New Order government, in fact, and more similar to the French, used a draconian approach in carrying out censorship — sending authors to the Bastille. The British in India rarely repressed books and official intervention was largely limited to surveillance, unless there was any sedition. Even so, the authors who were found guilty had the right to a proper trial and defense attorneys. Planning that became the core principle of communist East Germany was also a core principle in the case of literary production in the Indonesian authoritarian regime. As President Suharto himself stated, and this was further echoed by the Minister of Culture and Education, Daoud Joesoef, the government had a strong conviction that books, particularly literary works, contributed greatly to the advancement of the Indonesian people. According to Daoud Joesoef who, in some complicated ways, was connected to Massardi, literary works were the foundation of Indonesian culture of which core functions were to expand knowledge, increase literacy, and broaden the horizon of the people as long as they were planned and in accordance with the state mission of national development. This planning, as it was in East Germany, was carried out by censors, who were other writers, intellectuals, and academics, as well as editors and publishers.

A strong indication for such complexity and complicity in the case of censorship in Indonesia appears in an invitation letter for book assessment. On the

final page of the letter, a list of attendees was printed — consisting of names of scholars, institutions such as the IKAPI and History Department of Universitas Indonesia, state apparatuses, major publishers, and authors to discuss a book that was subject to censorship. This invitation began as early as the second half of the 1970s and was at least last issued in October 2017, which indicates that censorship has been active throughout, and across the New Order regime period until today.

Censorship in Indonesia only seemed to be inoperative during the first few years of Reformasi Era, especially after the withdrawal of Publishing Permit (*Surat Izin Usaha Penerbitan Pers*, SIUPP) by President B.J. Habibie in September 1999 and the disbanding of the Department of Information (*Departemen Penerangan*) by President Abdurrahman Wahid in November 1999. During these years, publications that were once considered sensitive began to jam bookshelves in bookstores in major cities in Indonesia. However, shortly after Abdurrahman Wahid was removed from power in 2001, the Attorney General Office immediately issued decrees to ban several books that centered their themes, in particular, on the Leftist movement and on the self-determination of the Papuan people and their rights. The Attorney General claimed that the books had gone through meticulous, selective assessment processes prior to their bans. These processes continued for several years until, in October 2010, the Indonesian Constitutional Court revoked Law No. 4/pnps/1963 that was often used by the Attorney General as legal standing for a book ban. The revocation, however, seemed rather ineffective. Recent illustrations of this can be seen in the confiscation of 138 books by the military and the Indonesian police in Kediri, East Java, and the Attorney General's attempt to take advantage of side-laws from the Ministry of Culture and Education on book supervision.⁴⁵⁵ No matter how inoperative it might have seemed, the censorship machinery kept running. And to circumvent censorship or to get published, one had to play the game, with different ways of playing it, from using literary techniques and methods to personal relationships with the publishers, editors, censors, or even higher officials to deviate from the strict interpretations of the laws, rules and guidelines.

⁴⁵⁵ “TNI- Polisi di Kediri Sita Ratusan Buku Memuat Kata PKI”. Available at <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1159250/tni-polisi-di-kediri-sita-ratusan-buku-memuat-kata-pki/full&view=ok> [accessed on 10 August 2021].