

Prospect

From the June 1999 issue

ESSAYS

Pramoedy

Pramoedy Ananta Toer, Indonesia's leading novelist, was jailed for 14 years under Suharto's New Order. Before the June elections, he reflects on Indonesian politics and writer's block.

By Robert Templer

June 19, 1999

If you ask Pramoedy Ananta Toer what has changed in Indonesia since the end of the Suharto dictatorship last May, he gives a bleak answer. "Nothing," says Indonesia's most acclaimed novelist and one of its finest historians. "This is just a continuation of Suharto's New Order. It's just the New New Order." On the face of it, this is a surprising thing to say. Since the riots last year in Jakarta, which left 1,200 dead, Suharto himself has lived in seclusion in his compound in Menteng. But outside, his New Order appears to be unravelling.

BJ Habibie, Suharto's protégé and successor, has seen East Timor careering towards independence and, possibly, civil war. A separatist movement in Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra smoulders again. Long repressed antagonisms between Muslims and Christians have erupted into horrific violence. Suharto's policy of exporting people from the over-crowded islands of Java to more distant parts of this sprawling archipelago country of 200m people has fired up ethnic conflicts from East Kalimantan to Irian Jaya. But despite the breakdown in order, the military is discredited and there is a strong desire that it withdraw from politics altogether.

The background to this disorder was the worst peacetime slump anywhere since the second world war: economic growth went from 7 per cent in 1997 to a contraction of

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Suharto, is also a likely candidate. Golkar still has a powerful political machine and the benefit of government patronage, but it has splintered into rebellious factions since Suharto's resignation. Abdurrahaman Wahid, the elderly and frail leader of Indonesia's largest Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama, has said that he does not want to be president, but he could be a key power broker. He dislikes Rais, but his more conservative Muslim followers are unlikely to favour an alliance with Megawati. The armed forces, known as Abri, automatically get 8 per cent of the seats in the parliament, which could give the minister of defence, General Wiranto, a kingmaking role. If the June poll triggers a new wave of violence, the military may step in again more directly.

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Yet, despite all this, Pramoedya's insistence that nothing has changed is a common sentiment in Jakarta. Soon after Suharto's fall Benedict Anderson wrote that "the forces unleashed in the collapse of the dictatorship cannot be satisfied without a complete overhaul of Indonesia's economy and political system." But in the past year, people's hopes for real change has begun to evaporate. Although an investigation has been launched into the huge accumulation of wealth by Suharto and his children, it has yet to declare Suharto even a suspect, the first step towards prosecution. In March, tapes of a telephone conversation between Habibie and the attorney-general, Andi Ghalib, were leaked, in which Habibie suggested that investigators focus their attention on his enemies rather than his mentor. The president has promised change while surrounding himself with former Suharto cronies. The economic collapse has made graft more obvious and desperate. And Habibie has been more concerned with protecting the fortunes of the kleptocracy than with persuading ethnic and religious groups to find some new way to govern Indonesia.

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pramoedya ananta toer was editing a collection of short stories by President Sukarno when the soldiers arrived to take him away on the night of 13th October 1965. In the fevered atmosphere of those times, a group of anti-communist thugs had gathered outside his house, wearing masks and brandishing machetes. The soldiers were supposed to rescue him from the crowd, but when he was led out, a rope was bound tightly around his hands and neck and he was pushed into the back of a truck. The mob then ransacked his house as the soldiers stood by. They destroyed his library, a huge archive he was collecting for an encyclopaedia of Indonesian history and culture. Fragments of charred paper floated over the neighbourhood as the masked men burned thousands of pages of unpublished manuscripts. As he begged the soldiers to save his papers, one raised his rifle and struck him on the side of the head.

That night began 14 years of imprisonment without trial, ten of them in the penal colony on Buru Island in the Moluccas. After his release Pramoedya endured a ban on travel and on publication of his books. But for all the brutality inflicted on him- the blows to the head which deafened him, the grinding forced labour, the lies which were used to discredit him-nothing still rankles so much as the loss of that library.

Pramoedya now lives in a spacious house in a middle class but crowded district of Jakarta. It could be the neat, comfortable home of a middle ranking civil servant, although the pictures on the walls are gifts from friends such as Gunter Grass. Pramoedya is small and wiry, dressed in shorts and a baggy green T-shirt with a fake Gucci logo. He describes himself as underconfident and shy, but he comes across as warm and solicitous, with a frequent rumbling laugh deepened by the clove cigarettes he smokes. Two of his 15 grandchildren rush around the ground floor of the house, attacking each other with plastic swords in between moments of brief attention to a large television blaring out Japanese cartoons.

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Jakarta where he got a job as a typist for the news agency of the occupying Japanese forces. When Sukarno declared independence in August 1945, Pramoedya enlisted with the People's Defence Force at the rank of lieutenant, and served as a press officer during the four-year conflict against the Dutch, who tried to resume their colonial rule.

In 1947 he was caught carrying anti-Dutch documents, and jailed. In prison, he wrote his first novel, *The Fugitive*, a story of the fight against colonialism, which established his reputation at the age of 24. Smuggled out of jail by a Dutchman, it was one of the first accomplished novels written in Bahasa Indonesia, the Malay dialect which has helped to unify the vast array of cultures across the archipelago.

As his literary star rose, Pramoedya's personal life began to disintegrate. His father died, he struggled to make a living as the economy collapsed, and in 1954 his first marriage ended. Those years were also a turbulent time in Indonesian politics, with Sukarno trying to keep the country non-aligned as the cold war intensified in Asia. Pramoedya served as an honorary board member of Lekra, the cultural wing of the Indonesian Communist party, but he was never a member of the Party, saying that he refused to be beholden to any one organisation.

In 1960 he published a history of the Chinese in Indonesia. To wrest economic power from the rich and despised Chinese minority, Sukarno had banned the Chinese from trading in rural areas. Pramoedya's book was regarded as too sympathetic to the Chinese, particularly in its description of their role in the creation of Indonesian nationalism. Once again he was jailed for a year. On his release, he became editor of *Lentera*, the literary section of a newspaper backed by the left-wing Indonesian Nationalist party. Although Pramoedya was never a communist, he did argue that literature should have a social role. In the fiery rhetoric of the time, he castigated writers who believed in art for art's sake, describing them as "vagrants" who needed "to be cut down."

Pramoedya's opponents subsequently blamed him and other left-wing intellectuals

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been killed: ship them to Buru Island, where they would develop this virgin territory. "After our arrival on Buru there was no more talk about 'release,'" Pramoedya wrote in *The Mute's Soliloquy*. "The term we heard was 'socialisation' which was usually followed by 'through transmigration...'. The inference was clear: we were never to leave Buru Island; we were to remain in exile until our deaths."

Pramoedya describes life on Buru in painful detail. The men were kept on a starvation diet while forced to clear the land with the most basic tools. Once they got the prison farm going, the guards took most of what they grew. Conditions were primitive, rules were arbitrary, beatings and torture commonplace. Hundreds of prisoners died. Pramoedya kept details of their deaths, published as an appendix to *The Mute's Soliloquy*.

For the first four years of imprisonment, Pramoedya was not allowed to write. "When I finally got permission to write, it was like a flood being released. I happen to be pretty productive when I am in jail. When you are in jail you have to spend more time with yourself." By raising chickens, he was able to buy the essentials for writing-paper and cigarettes-and began to write his masterwork, a long story first told each day to entertain other prisoners.

The *Buru Quartet*-*This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps* and *House of Glass*-tells the story of a Javanese aristocrat known as Minke who develops from a self-absorbed youth into a leader of the anti-colonialist movement against the Dutch. They are pungent, melodramatic novels, which capture a great sweep of history in a dense personal story which ripples with passionate loves, terrible deaths from syphilis, and unforgiving family conflicts. Unusually for Asian novels set in colonial times, they are not populated by rigid archetypes-the bad colonialist, the good resistance leader, the trampled peasant-but offer a range of complex, mobile personalities. The women drive much of the story. Nyai Ontosoroh, Minke's first mother-in-law and the wealthy and strong-willed concubine of a Dutchman, dominates *This Earth of Mankind*. Her character, whose steel is forged in

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publisher was jailed and Max Lane, an Australian diplomat who translated the books, was declared persona non grata. Although the Buru Quartet takes place long before independence, it still enraged the government, which declared that the novels were Marxist-the charge levelled against anything it did not like. The books do indeed examine colonial exploitation but, more irritatingly for the government, they countered the amnesia of the New Order.

Pramoedya's books have always been available underground and they are read avidly by Indonesian intellectuals. The elegance of his language, and the directness of his ideas and characters, were invigorating in a country where politics was buried under a weight of euphemisms. A friend in Jakarta says he always buys five copies of any new book so that his wife and three sons won't squabble over who will read it first.

After Pramoedya's release in 1979, he was restricted to Jakarta and had to report to the police, although after a while he refused to do this and the police came to him. He persisted in his attempts to recover his property, but he recently received a letter from a court again dismissing his claims. It deepened his sense that little has really changed in Indonesia.

When I press him on whether his view of the current situation is too bleak, he asserts that he does have hope for change. "I'm not pessimistic-I have faith in the young. It is the young people who need to sweep in and become the leaders. They don't have blood on their hands or dirty money in their pockets... The people who say they want to become president can talk like that because of the triumph of the students, but do they ever say thank you to the students? No."

He is sceptical that the June elections will bring stability. Habibie's successor-who will be indirectly chosen by the People's Consultative Assembly in August-will have to rule a country which is looking increasingly fragile; potentially a giant Yugoslavia in southeast Asia. For those like Pramoedya, who were raised on anti-colonial nationalism and came of age in the idealistic years after independence, it is an alarming prospect. "There is nothing about democracy in our history," he says

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the Chinese-Indonesians who have not fled abroad have barricaded their homes and armed themselves in case of a repetition of the riots in May last year. "I say to my ethnic Chinese friends, why is it that these things can happen to you? It is because you don't have an organisation to represent and defend you," says Pramoedya.

Habibie has little support, but his weakness has not been without benefit. Under Suharto he engineered the closing of newspapers which questioned his pet projects, but his government has permitted the emergence of a freewheeling media and journalists are stripping away the taboos of the New Order. Writers who forgot to put a suitable honorific in front of Suharto's name would once have been rebuked by military intelligence. Now they are digging into the murky deals of Suharto and his children.

The emergence of a critical press is an important change that bodes well for the development of a more democratic government. "If there is a revolution it will be supported by the press," says Pramoedya. This "miracle," as he describes it, has alleviated some of Pramoedya's fears, including a belief that if he left the country he would not be allowed to return. In April he visited the US for a lecture tour. It was his first trip outside Indonesia in more than 35 years.

Given his experience of jail under the Dutch, and under both Sukarno and Suharto, Pramoedya remains wary of the new freedoms he enjoys. Part of him even hankers for jail, a place of extraordinary productivity for him: on Buru, not only did he write the Quartet, but three other novels and a play. He also worked on his (still unfinished) encyclopaedia of Indonesia. Since his release, writer's block has sometimes been a problem. "It is difficult to write now-it really wouldn't be a problem to go back to prison," he laughs. "Well, I've made a lot of comments about those in power. Perhaps it won't be too long now."

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