

The Singapore Airlines flight touched down at Soekarno-Hatta airport a little earlier from its scheduled arrival. It had been almost twenty-eight hours since I left Madison. I had circled half the globe, made a short stop in Amsterdam and Singapore, enough just for stretching my arms and legs which felt cramped after constrained in such uncomfortable economy-class seat for hours. The quiet morning hours at the airport greeted me, as though the situation was a witness to the economic crisis that had struck Indonesia since 1997, and never resolved as the country moves into a more agonizing political transformation.

I arrived in Indonesia only a few weeks after the House of Representatives impeached former President Abdurrahman Wahid and appointed Megawati, his Vice President, to replace him. The impeachment was a move promoted by certain factions in the House and has been remarked by some as a tragedy in Indonesia's struggle toward democratization. Referring to Wahid's failure to resolve continuing ethnic conflicts and contain proliferating violence, and to alleged corruption scandal, certain factions in the House sponsored campaigns and legal measures to discredit the president's political and moral image. Their "political project" was highly successful, and Wahid eventually had to relinquish his power to Megawati.

During his presidency, Wahid had to face the legacy of thirty-two years of authoritarian rule of Soeharto's New Order regime. The legacy of authoritarian rule has brought about rampant corruption in bureaucracy, human rights abuses perpetrated by security apparatuses, and a justice system characterized by widespread mafia network that protect impunity of criminals and perpetrators of terror and violence. Wahid had, therefore, to fulfill very difficult tasks: responding to the call that human rights abusers should be brought into justice; securing the path toward democratization and civil society empowerment; and – this is the most important and difficult one – eradicating corrupters in bureaucracy and establishing a foundation for a clean governance. These are the tasks that Wahid has tried to promote as the main agenda of his government, but that proved hard unless Wahid managed to replace at least eighty percent of bureaucracy and military forces. Among those tasks, Wahid is said to have been able to lay out foundations for democratization, the foundations which, unfortunately, now face uncertain future since Megawati and her military supporters and cronies have come into power.

The Legacy of Authoritarianism conference was held in Manila amidst such uncertain future for Indonesia's democracy. I came to Manila hoping that I could learn how different countries and societies struggle to cope with their dark past experience and work toward building a democratic future. The conference in Manila was titled "Interrogating Reconciliation" and aimed to "interrogate" how different societies and countries grapple with the significance of reconciliation to overcome differences between past enemies. Representatives from South Africa, Latin American countries, Northern Ireland, Southeast Asia, and of course the United States, attended the four-day conference held at the Ateneo de Manila University. Unfortunately, out of six people invited from Indonesia, only two (including myself) showed up. I was rather disappointed as I hoped to catch up with what these practitioners have done in terms of promoting the idea of "reconciliation" in Indonesia - since the idea gained popularity in Indonesia in 1999, I have been in the US and followed little of its discourse.

Since the day I arrived, torrential rain had flooded the Philippines archipelago. Streets in the city of Manila had turned into rivers, which made travel in the city arduous effort. The climate looked as if giving witness to the “torrential” problems that “flooded” the efforts to reconcile. The conference seems to testify how different experiences of colonialism, political oppression of the postcolonial regime, and the nature of political transformation in each country contribute to complicate the questions of truth, justice, and memory, the questions that shape the necessity for, and form of, reconciliation.

Unlike other countries, Indonesia’s experience of political transformation has just started, and it remains difficult to chart its democratic future. The tension that arises from religious politics merged with racial and ethnic discriminatory practices has affected the degree of social violence that proliferated over the last few years. It has been a very fruitful effort when the Manila conference has attempted to confront these issues of religious and ethnic politics as indispensable elements in the reconciliation process and politics. As I listened to presentations from South Africa, Northern Ireland, Argentina, the Philippines, Chile, and East Timor, I began to think how reconciliation might or might not be relevant in Indonesian context. As one presenter noted, these countries are both similar and different in certain respects. Some have just come out of the history of colonialism; some others are just surviving from authoritarianism; some others combine the experience of neocolonialism and authoritarianism. The conference offered a venue to discuss and compare these experiences across different countries and historical settings.

The four-day conference served as an opportunity for each of us to contextualize problems and promises of reconciliation process and politics. I learned from an Indonesian friend of mine that the discourse of reconciliation in our country still not yet moves beyond formal discourse on law and rights. Less effort has been devoted to unearthing the complexity of evidences and episodes of human rights abuses in which both the state and society has a similar chance to act as perpetrator. In addition, the scale of violence and human rights violation in Indonesia is so widespread, but the discourse of reconciliation seems to overlook the complexity of these local specificities and tends to “nationalize” every cause or case of violence and social conflict.

The attempt to establish Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) in Indonesia remains in its early stage. The discussion TRC has so far failed, to my knowledge, to confront the fact that issue of reconciliation needs to face different magnitudes of social conflicts from ethnic and racial discrimination, discrimination against political ideology, to religiously motivated conflicts. Unfortunately the concept for Indonesian TRC has been drawn more from other TRCs – such as South Africa – and less from particular experiences and settings of Indonesian conflicts and political or cultural practices. Learning from others’ experiences is indeed valuable, as the conference has proven, but it is more important to crucially assess how such experiences can or cannot be applied in a particular context of conflict and geographical location. Unless the Indonesian TRC is able to critically evaluate any effort to nationalize the cause of social conflict and to pay more attention on finding our local stories, the Indonesian TRC would face an extremely difficult task and would risk simplifying the context of social conflict. Such simplification may imperil the sense of justice, a sense that can emerge only from giving an equal chance to stories to be told and shared. Nationalizing the cause of violence means similar to suppressing the plurality of voices. This is what I learned from the Manila conference.