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`Indonesia is just like a beggar'

Yazid Naim

PRAMOEDYA Ananta Toer, Indonesia's eminent novelist, is no longer staying in Jakarta, which is why many journalists failed to meet him recently. He had moved to Desa Waringin Jaya, Bojong Gede, Bogor, which is about 60km from the capital.

Honestly, I was quite lucky to get his consent for an interview despite it being arranged on short notice - one week after the G15 summit.

When we met, Pramoedya was clad in T-shirt and kain pelikat. His new house, located on a hill near a railway line, has not been completed. The conversation was interspersed with the wailing of train sirens.

Despite his 76 years of age, Pramoedya looks healthy and spirited. He has stopped writing for eight years. His novel, Perawan Remaja Dalam Tawanan Militer, was published earlier this year while another, Nyanyi Sunyi, which is in Portuguese came out last week.

When asked how many novels he has authored, he shook his head as he could not recall the exact number. But it is well known that he has authored more than 30 novels, of which at least eight were written while under detention on Pulau Buru.

All his works are now allowed to be published and sold in Indonesia after the ban imposed by the authorities was lifted beginning last month.

Pramoedya denied that he was ever involved with Parti Komunis Indonesia (PKI). He said he had never faced any trial.

The conversation centred on independence and democracy.

His views on politics in Malaysia and the ways the country handled the economy were also sought.

Yazid: Bapak, thank you for giving me the opportunity to interview you.

Pram: Actually, others too want to meet me. So many, from all over the world. Sometimes, people were already waiting for me even before I have gotten out of bed.

Yazid: You have stopped writing. Perhaps the situation now has a role in your decision. Could it be that things are different now, especially when what you have been fighting for has been achieved?

Pram: The things that happened lately are the opposite of what I was fighting for. When I was still young, my parents spoke of what Indonesia would be one day - independent, democratic and modern. Obviously all these have not been achieved.

Independence ... we are under the rule of the world's economy, there is no independence.

Modern ... instead of becoming modern, we are becoming more primitive. Everything is resolved with killings. Dorr...! (pointing his fingers like a pistol).

Democratic ... in Indonesia, democracy is just a slogan. What's happening is panutan isme. You know panutan isme? Merely following others. Because democracy without individual freedom is not possible.

Yazid: So if we take into account the current situation in Indonesia, with its economic and political crisis, what is the future you foresee for Indonesia?

Pram: I don't believe in authority and rules. Based on my own experience, in my eyes, Indonesia is now rotting. That's the reason the people have started to rise. Before, when their land was taken away, they kept quiet but now, they are fighting back.

Since then, more than 100 military and police posts have been seized by

the people. This is the beginning of social revolution. How it will end, I don't know. This is the beginning.

Yazid: But Bapak, during Suharto and before that, it seemed that the leader had total control and although certain provinces showed signs of rebellion or secession, it could be controlled.

But now after the fall of Suharto, we see the separation of East Timor, followed by the escalation in the fight to separate Aceh from Indonesia. What are your views?

Pram: All these are happening because of the army. Everywhere, there are killings. This is a maritime nation but why is the army in control? Everything has been wrong from the beginning.

Because we are not aware and do not learn from history, we are repeating the mistakes again. Indonesia is facing uncertainties.

Yazid: On the organisation, Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia or NKRI, to what extent do you think it can be preserved? We do not want the same thing to happen like in the former Soviet Union.

Pram: I have confidence in the country's younger generation. Not only because they managed to topple a dictator but also because they can resolve all problems in Indonesia.

This is the task for the young group. Not the older generation which is corrupt. I am proud of our youths. In them lie my hopes as there is nothing else left to look forward to in this life.

There is nothing else.

Yazid: Is this among the factors why you have stopped writing books on the revolutionary anymore?

Pram: Yes ... aren't my works for them (laughed). For example, Tretalogi Buru, Warta Buru and many more ...

Yazid: You are confident that today's generation understood how to make use of democracy for the future of the country.

Pram: They do understand, but don't forget, the world is not the heaven. Everything has its effect. The good and bad. And everything has its social function, the good as well as bad. There is injustice in this world.

The social function is to fight against them. Everything in the world, there is social function. But in heaven, everything is perfect (laughter).

Yazid: Bapak, in Malaysia, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has said democracy has its own weaknesses ...

Pram: Hmmm ... hmmm (nodded)

Yazid: Democracy to be practised in a country should be suitable for the country. There is also guided democracy. What are your views.

Pram: Yes ... democracy has its weaknesses. Countries in the West are generally democratic. But once outside ... they colonise, (sound of train siren heard) oppress workers and farmers ... that's why Sukarno rejected Western democracy. Democracy that suits regional situations can be tested but we have to know the principles of democracy first.

It was guided democracy during Sukarno, for example, but it was different. It was a Sukarno-guided democracy. Sukarno escaped seven assassination attempts ... Sukarno ... yes, that's why there was guided democracy, the number of political parties was limited and the revolutionary elements were bonded into a force (clenched his right fist) to oppose the West.

That's the situation during Sukarno. The situation was extraordinary, not normal. Because Indonesia was surrounded by Western countries at that time.

Because Sukarno was anti-imperialism whereas the international imperialism wanted the whole world to become their "dollar fields".

Sukarno refused and tirelessly continued advocating nation and character building. Devoid of character, power will become the hurdle to direct

entry of capital, without character.

Yazid: It looks like the style used by Sukarno and Malaysia is almost similar, where Dr Mahathir himself inculcates sense of confidence among the people...

Pram: Hmmm ... hmmm.

Yazid: So that the people will have self-confidence and independence, so that they will not be dependent on foreign powers.

Pram: Yes, I agree ... if that is needed and is being carried out. Yes, nationalism exists in the face of threats. If there is no threat, nationalism will be weakened.

Yazid: For example, attempts by the West to paralyse the East Asian economy, including Malaysia. And the Prime Minister's stand in accepting aid that will result in having to follow directives from the donors. Perhaps the situation in Indonesia is different. What is your view on Malaysia's economic strategies?

Pram: I agree, Malaysia has its independence.

Yazid: Bumiputera-owned companies in Malaysia have taken control of plantations formerly held by the British.

Pram: (shook hand with reporter) I congratulate Malaysia (smiled proudly).

Yazid: Thank you Bapak. So what do you think about how Malaysia manages its economy?

Pram: Yes ... I have given my congratulations (laughed). There is much difference here. Here, everything is sold to foreigners, including national industries. I do not understand why.

There were even plans to sell the small islands ... extraordinary corruption. Even the mind is already corrupt.

Yazid: Shifting our attention to the East so that we will not be too fanatical about the power of the West. To you, it is a new economic strategy by Malaysia but it has started to yield results.

Pram: This was what was envisaged by Sukarno - independence, the ability to stand on your own feet - but it turned out to be an empty dream in Indonesia. The ways used by Dr Mahathir and the results achieved, all these were the things fought for by Sukarno.

But the entry of Suharto spoilt everything. Indonesia has become a beggar ... along the way, its people are begging.

(END)