



Indonesian President Joko Widodo poses for a selfie with the classmates of his son in a Singapore high school.

# Random Thoughts from Yogyakarta

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**N**ani Zulminarni, a woman activist and head of PEKKA, a local NGO working on the empowerment of female headed households in Java, does not let the headscarf and full-sleeve tunic stop her from leading a group of young women and men in rendering a rousing Javanese song and joining in a lively cultural evening of songs and dances in honour of the international participants from the Asia Pacific countries in what was called a Festival of Learning.

The festival was held in Yogyakarta on November 18-21, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), a forum of national education associations from the region, dedicated to promoting adult and basic education. Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) of Bangladesh, a leading member of ASPBAE, sent a strong delegation of five members headed by its Executive Director, Rasheda K. Chowdhury.

Nani, with her infectious enthusiasm and unbounded energy, led her colleagues in PEKKA,

mostly young women wearing their Muslim headscarf and tunic, but unyielding in standing their ground in debate and discussion and doing their share in fieldwork and training activities along with men. These women in a provincial city of Indonesia appear to represent what is called "a moderate and progressive Muslim society."

Yogyakarta, also spelled as Jogjakarta, is the capital of the Special Administrative Region in Java, some 300 kms from the capital city Jakarta. It is renowned as a centre of education and culture, classical Javanese, ballet, drama, music, poetry, puppetry, batik printing and fine arts. It was the capital of Indonesia during the Indonesian National Revolution from 1945 to 1949.

Sukarno was the leader of his country's struggle for independence from the Dutch colonial rulers. He was Indonesia's first president, in office from 1945 to 1967. A charismatic leader who helped to unify the sprawling archipelago of 8,000 islands and helped to adopt the Bahasa Indonesia as the national language, crafted out of the Malaya dialects spoken widely, but

undeveloped as a lingua franca. It was a semi-feudal society comprising many ethnic and language groups, having been exploited by Dutch colonisers for over three centuries.

In the chaos of the Second World War and the Japanese invasion, the nationalists led by Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta launched the independence movement. Independence was declared from Jog Jakarta on 17 August, 1945, though it took another few years before control was established and the capital was shifted to Jakarta in 1949.

After a chaotic post-independence period, Sukarno established a system of "Guided Democracy" in 1957 that ended the instability and brought rebellions under control. He veered towards leftist political ideology with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as the ally. Sukarno, along with post-colonial leaders, Nehru, Nasser and Nkrumah raised the voice of non-alignment, refusing to be controlled by either of the rival hegemonist power blocks of the West or the East. Sukarno's vision was of a secular, progressive modern Indonesia with equity and

decades of military rule was marked by the ascendancy of armed forces in every sphere of society, controlling economy and civil administration, and enriching themselves through corruption with impunity and political control. The corrupt regime, however, failed to deal with the severe economic crisis of 1987 and a mass uprising toppled the Suharto regime. Meanwhile, the military rulers had worked overtime to make sure that a generation of Indonesians grew up not knowing what the founding leader and independent Indonesia stood for.

The recent history of Indonesia shows a striking parallel to that of Bangladesh. Disgruntled and self-seeking military personnel staged a coup and killed the father of the nation in Bangladesh in 1975. But other military officers waiting in the wings took advantage of the situation, took over power and ensured that the legacy of the founding father and the ideology of secular, progressive and just society is forgotten.

The downfall of Suharto was followed by constitutional reform and effort to rebuild democracy in Indonesia.

The forces of vested interests, religious intolerance, a self-seeking political culture, and degeneration of institutions nurtured through more than three decades were hard to overcome. Indonesia continues to suffer from the legacy of autocratic rule. The country struggles to build the values and practices of democracy. The post-Suharto elections that put the leaders in power including the daughter of Sukarno, Megawati Sukarnoputri, for one stint had a hard time cleaning out the Augean stable of misrule and corruption.

A new President, Joko Widodo, has been elected in July 2014, who had earned a reputation as a down-to-earth popular governor of Jakarta. He was elected through a fair and democratic election. The majority of the electors seem to have responded to his pledge to take Indonesia back on the track of a progressive, democratic and equitable nation. He appears to be more circumspect about religious issues. Once the genie of religious intolerance in the name of true faith is unleashed, it is difficult to put it back into the bottle.

We in Bangladesh have managed to dig ourselves into a deep hole in 15 years of military rule, rather than 30 years in Indonesia, and are facing an equally difficult struggle to build democratic norms and culture that would serve peoples' aspirations.

The young women in Jog Jakarta represent the ambivalence and fine balancing act in which they have to engage in their march to the future. Women and men in Bangladesh face the same challenge. They can also benefit from the leadership and foresight that Joko Widodo embodies.

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Nani Zulminarni at the Festival of Learning.

justice for citizens. His political position did not endear him to the Western powers or the privileged classes at home.

On September 30 1965, a military coup tried to topple the fledgling government of Sukarno. The next day, an ambitious general, Suharto, quietly waiting in the wings, took advantage of the military rebellion. In the name of restoring order, Suharto, captured and killed the six rebellious generals, put Sukarno in custody, and declared himself the ruler. The new military rulers led and encouraged the Islamic religious organisations and other privileged groups to unleash a campaign to hunt down and massacre PKI members across the country, who were blamed for all the problems and unmet expectations of the country. It is said that half a million PKI members, sympathisers and their leaders were killed and thousands more fled into exile.

Thus began the 32 years of military-backed autocratic rule of Suharto. Sukarno remained in captivity and died quietly in 1970. More than three