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Feminism in Indonesia under siege by Muslim conservatives



LINAWATI SIDARTO

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The talk: Author and activist Intan Paramaditha (left) is in discussion with organizer Willeminj Lamp (second left) and some of the audience members in Amsterdam. (Wim Manuhutu/File)

Author and activist Intan Paramaditha's striking appearance – a bright red dress matching her lipstick – might be the first thing noticed by the dozens of people who came to hear her speak about the state of feminism in Indonesia.

However, it did not take long before her words transported the audience at Perdu, a cultural venue in the heart of Amsterdam, far across the ocean to contemplate the challenges and triumphs of the feminist movement in the world's largest Muslimmajority country.

“In the past few years, the direction of women's activism in Indonesia has been largely shaped by emergency cases, such as rising conservatism and growing pressure on feminists and others such as the LGBT community,” says Intan, who wears many hats: academic, fiction writer and activist.

“These conservative groups have not only launched street protests against what they call deviant groups, but have also taken legal actions against them.”

Intan, a lecturer in media and film studies at Sydney's Macquarie University, is in the Netherlands on a short fellowship provided by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) to write about Indonesian cinema.

In her talk, titled “Womens Resistance through Arts and the Media in Indonesia,” she spoke about her country's women's movement in the past two decades.

During Soeharto's New Order period, Intan described the situation in Indonesia as “state ibu-ism” (state motherhood), a term coined by seasoned feminist and writer Julia Suryakusuma.

“In state ibu-ism, women were discouraged from participating in politics, and their appearances in public were limited as mothers and supporters of their husbands,” Intan explained.

The period following the end of Soehartos dictatorial rule in 1998, called the Reformasi (reform) era, “opened trajectories previously closed in society, including in the area of gender and sexualism”.

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Starting in the late 1990s, a number of women broke through into previously male-dominated arts sectors like literature and cinema. “Writers such as Ayu Utami, Fira Basuki and Djenar Maesa Ayu were known for their exploration of the themes related to sex, bodies and sexuality,” she said.

In Indonesian cinema, Intan pointed out, women had been practically non-existent: between the 1920s and 1998, only four female directors were documented. However, since the advent of the Reformasi era, dozens of women directors and producers have begun to “make mainstream, independent and documentary films.”

“Shanty Harmayn, who was the co-founder and director of JIFFEST [Jakarta International Film Festival], incorporated a women's section in the festival,” said Intan, who holds a PhD in cinema studies from New York University.

She also praised director Nia Dinata, whose films touch on sensitive subjects such as polygamy and homosexuality. Her 2002 film *Arisan* (The Gathering) was regarded as the first Indonesian film that showed a realistic portrayal of gay characters. “It generated a lot of public discussions about homosexuality,” she says.

At the same time, however, religious conservatism has also surged in the Reformasi era.

Soeharto’s regime, Intan explains, “carefully contained Islam, limiting it to the realm of personal piety.” In the Reformasi era, the rise of Muslim political parties “constantly promote the roles of Islam in public.” The post-1998 landscape has also seen the rise of religious vigilante groups, most notably the Islam Defenders Front (FPI).

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A stark example of the clash between the feminist and the religious camps was the formation of the Pornography Law, which was hotly debated for years prior to its ratification in 2008.

While organizations such as the FPI, who do not shy away from violence, are known as grassroots groups, “they do influence law-making. Their voice is taken into account by policymakers,” Intan points out.

In the past few years, the influence of the religious conservatives has continued to grow. “Many women increasingly feel family and peer pressure to wear a hijab [headscarf],” she says.

Intan says she was particularly dismayed when a minister last year called on universities to bar LGBT students from entering, “and not one single university countered the statement.”

Arguably the most formidable challenger for secular feminists are religious conservative women. Intan points to groups such as the Family Love Alliance (AILA), “which easily attracts the middle class with their message of family, religion and morality.” AILA has been calling for a review of the laws on homosexuality and non-marital sex, “and demand the criminalization of non-normative sexualities in the name of family values.”

The feminists, on the other hand, have certainly not just stood on the sidelines in the past decade.

In the arts, books, plays and movies have continued to push the boundaries of gender and sexuality, like the transgender superhero movie *Madame X*. A younger generation of female artists have been using digital media to spread their message – such as on the *Bersama* (together) Project – through music, videos and blogs.

On the religious side of the feminist camp, organizations such as *Rahima*, an Islamic information and training center headed by Farha Ciciek, an advocate of women’s rights in Islam.

Intan admits, however, that the conservative side has been better organized. “They are politically astute, and savvy in using social media.” The aim of the secular feminist movement, therefore, is to increase its voice in the mainstream, including in government. “We cannot be the voice of opposition forever.”

Another key step, Intan continues, is to increase dialogue between different women’s groups, including the religious ones. “Even though there are many Muslim women involved in the

movement, dialogue with Islamic feminism – the Islamic movement which is anchored in Islamic texts and discourse – remain limited.”

Willemijn Lamp, who organized the talk, points out the importance of a Western audience getting a multi-dimensional perspective on Indonesia.

“The general view the Dutch have on Indonesia is fairly superficial: it’s either considered as a backpackers paradise, or we read in the newspapers about mass demonstrations of radical Islamists,” says Lamp, who is co-founder of international annual literature festival Read My World.

“Intan compels people to contemplate the complexities of Indonesia, and introduced us to important voices that are not so visible in the mainstream media instead of merely thinking in slogans and stereotypes.”

She adds that many in the audience stayed on for further discussions after the talk, “and they have become curious to know more about the groups of activists and artists that Intan had mentioned.”

Among those in the audience were university students Ecesu Erol from Turkey and RuthMarie Henckes from Belgium, both of whom knew “practically nothing about Indonesia.”

Ecesu was fascinated to find so many similarities between her country and Indonesia. “Both seem to struggle with secularism and Islam,” she says. Ruth-Marie, who has traveled extensively in East Africa, noted how “relatively open and tolerant Indonesia seems to be. In countries like Tanzania and Uganda, persecution of gays is much worse.”

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