



“DEMOCRACY IS AN INDIVIDUAL CHOICE”
Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Presented and translated by Romain Bertrand
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"Call to the Young Generation / Students. Congratulations to you and your struggle ! With the achievement of your initial victory, it is called for here - for the sake of justice, truth and upholding Indonesian human dignity - to carry out further efforts in every corner of the motherland, including the New Order's occupied territory, East Timor; to document families whose members have been butchered, abducted and lost or returned, the theft of basic rights including the rights to freedom, property, livelihood and self-defence against accusation and slander, that the New order has committed from 1965 to the present. I'm with you!"

Jakarta, May 22, 1998
Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is undoubtedly the most famous Indonesian writer. Eldest child of a prominent member of the Boedi Oetomo, one of the first nationalist organizations in the Netherlands East Indies, he went to colonial schools and worked for the Japanese news agency Domei during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. In 1945, after he heard the Proclamation of Independence, he joined a pemuda paramilitary organization, then was

enrolled in an army unit of the Siliwangi Division (East Jakarta). From July 23 1947 to December 18 1949, he was imprisoned by the Dutch. In the 1950s, he was a prominent member of the LEKRA, the leftist Institute for People's Culture, and edited the magazine *Kunang-kunang* [Firefly]. He was thus suspected of communist convictions. From October 13, 1965, to December 20, 1979, he was imprisoned and exiled in Tangerang, Nusa Kambangan and Buru (August 1969-November 1979), where he wrote the *Buru Quartet*. In 1995, Pak Pram won the prestigious Magsaysay award, a kind of Asian literary Nobel prize. All his books have been banned, including historical inquiries such as *Sang Pemula* [Hasta Mitra, 1996]. Pram himself denounced the politics of censorship in a renown text : "Literature, Censorship and the State : To what extent is a Novel Dangerous ?", that can be downloaded at : www.access.digest.net/~bardsley/censor. According to a Human Rights Watch'report, over 2.000 books were banned by the New Order government since 1965. Pram was placed under house arrest during the 1980s. Pak Pram kindly received us in his house in South Jakarta, on August the 23rd, 1998. In this interview, he voices his concerns about the future of his country and expresses his hope that the "young generation" will be able to carry on its freedom quest.

NB. The *Buru Quartet* has been translated in english and published by Penguin Books under the titles : *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*. The *Buru Quartet* is the story of the tormented life of a young journalist in the Netherlands East Indies at the beginning of the XXth century.

Les oeuvres de Pram disponibles en français sont les suivantes :

- *La vie n'est pas une foire nocturne*, traduit et présenté par Denys Lombard et Henri Chambert-Loir, Paris, Gallimard, Connaissance de l'Orient, Paris, 1993.
- *Corruption*, traduit par Denys Lombard, Editions Philippe Picquier, Paris, 1991.
- *Le fugitif*, traduit par François René Daillie, Paris, Plon / Coll. 10/18 No 2828,1991.

INTERVIEW

Q. How did your political experiments and commitments influence your work as a novelist ?

A. Since my birth, I've been a leftist-nationalist [nasionalis kiri]. But literary work is a very individual matter. Literature actually has nothing to do with politics: it is just the expression of private beliefs and concerns, of existential reality. Literary work may contain some political matters, but it is always part of the personality of the writer.

Q. What is the way artists and novelists should react to the current political situation ?

A. If the writer's political tendencies exist deeply within himself, they must be voiced through his work.

Q. Do you think that the fall of Suharto is going to modify the way people inside the state apparatus will afterwards exercise power ?

A. There's been no change at all. What was in the past still carries on today : new structures, but old devices [dulu orba, sekarang orba-ba]. The army is still in power, the system has not been changed. Only young people [angkatan muda] can change it. In the modern history of Indonesia, changes always came from young people.

Q. Do you think ordinary people [rakyat kecil] have learnt to act according more democratic values ?

A. Here in Indonesia, democracy is just a theory, but not a practice. We're not like Philippine people who were given a chance to put democracy into practice. Because the principle of democracy should start from within each individual [harus dimulai dari setiap individu]. No study has yet been written in order to show that no individual act in Indonesia today is truly democratic.

Q. When you wrote the short novel "Korupsi", did you think that corruption was a matter of individual wrongdoings, or that it was a structural problem ?

A. Corruption practices in Indonesia are general phenomena since the colonial period. Corruption was an ordinary administrative practice when Western people were still ruling our country. People working inside the indigenous bureaucracy [birokrasi pribumi] can't rely upon any tradition of autonomous creation or production. What they only do is to steal the people. That's why ministers don't want to leave their office !

Q. If culture is thus so strongly binding for individuals, where is their freedom of choice ?

A. This is the fight between the two forces. But according to me, modern people should be able to give birth to their own freedom. They should not wait for opportunities to act in a free way. In the Western countries, everything is already established for hundred years, but here, in the developing countries, writers should take part in the nation-building process. That's the difference. National morals is the yardstick for developing countries.

Q. Are you afraid by the risk of the disintegration of Indonesia ?

A. It is not only a fear: it can be a reality tomorrow or the day after. This is because of the colonial heritage of Java-centrism [Jawacentris]. Even during the "New" Order, everything seemed to happen in Java, or in Jakarta, because Jakarta means Java. Up to now, areas outside Java had to support the lifestyle of Jakartanese people. Areas outside Java never received anything for themselves. That's why the late Sukarno wished to move the capital from Jakarta to Kalimantan, right in the middle of the archipelago, in order to spread people throughout the country and make disappear Java-centrism.

Q. Do you think that this is a legacy [warisan] of colonial policies ?

A. Yes, it's a colonial heritage. Dutch people saw Jakarta as the center of their business, of their shipping operations, and thus it became the capital of the Republic.

Q. Is this the reason of your deep interest in the colonial period ?

A. Yes, I wrote so many stories about the colonial period because I wanted to know the background of Indonesian history. Why and how all this could happen ? I wrote all my books in order to find the answer to this question. I studied a lot about the role of Indonesian language in the process of identity-seeking, but all these books have been burnt by the government.

Q. Is the choice of one language the sign of the unity [kesatuan] of a nation ?

A. Yes, this process of linguistic unification has been going on naturally since the sixteenth century.

Q. Do you think that Indonesian journalists today can learn a lot of their predecessors, like Tirta Adhisoeryo, one the first native journalists whose biography you wrote in Sang Pemula ?

A. It looks like they won't do that. The language they use now is not based on what was written in the past and so they repeat the mistakes done by people in the past. When I look

at the schoolbooks of my grand-children, I see that it's not relevant to the language we need. We make a lot of mistakes in the way we teach Indonesian language nowadays.

Q. Can the future of a nation be read in the way it uses and defends its own language?

A. We have to make a lot of changes in the way we teach our language. Even under the Japanese Occupation, Japanese forbade people to learn other languages than Asian ones. But in doing that they also provided books and newspapers for people to read. So they helped you to learn these languages. The period when Indonesian language was best learnt and practised was thus during the Japanese occupation. Today, writers use too many foreign words. From an empirical point of view, the language used today by journalists is worst than the one used in the 1930s because they want to look sophisticated. We have to create a modern language, but not by using harsh methods. We need a natural development of our language.

Q. What is the main image you keep of your childhood ?

A. I was born in a family who is traditionally left-oriented. We resisted the pressure of the Dutch. We learnt to dislike the colonial government and the military personnel. I had to defend my parents when they were persecuted by the colonial government. My mother was also very active in the nationalist movement and that's why she died when she was only 28 years old. I was implicated, but I was an independent individual, I was free from political organizations. I went my own way.

Q. Do you think that a new leftist-nationalist movement could be created now ?

A. Indonesia is currently engaged in a multi-dimensional problem because nobody has yet made real studies about the past. For example, Indonesia is a maritime state, but what we have is the army: this is an absolutely wrong way to deal with the question. We should give more power to the naval forces, not to the army [angkatan laut, bukan angkatan darat].

Q. Do you think that the study of history is an important thing in Indonesia today ?

A. Yes, because if we don't do that study, we won't be able to understand why things go this way in our country today. Why do the army kill people all the time ? We should banish the army, because they have already committed too many sins. That could happen. Japanese only have naval forces. The whole army should be dispersed, banished: this may happen, because we do not really need them. I did not believe in Suharto's New Order, and I do not believe in the New New Order and in all the coming Orders. I only trust the young generation, who successfully brought to its end the New Order. But with all these new parties, the force of the young generation is about to be deeply divided.

Q. Do you think that reformasi is just another empty motto ?

A. The emergence of the parties during the 1950s was the logical consequence of the exit out of the colonial period. But we don't have a real experience of democracy, so new parties cannot be a yard-stick for the people. Before we had full independence, people were living in poverty. Now, everybody is fond of democracy [semua tergila-gila dengan demokrasi waktu itu]. But excesses are bad. That's why Sukarno decided to choose guided democracy, and not liberal democracy.

Q. Do you think that the birth of islamic political parties is a threat [ancaman] for national unity ?

A. I'm really worried about this, because for three hundred years before we won our independence, they have had a lot of opportunities to control the country. But now, only a few of them are educated. Maybe just one or two of them went to universities. But I don't really think there's a threat because a modern, democratic, nation should be based on universal laws and regulations and not on group interests [bukan negara kelompok-kelompok].

Jakarta, 28.08.1998