

Bio of Goenawan

I was born on July 29, 1941, in a small town in Central Java, Indonesia. I was brought up in a political family. The Dutch colonial government exiled my parents in 1927-1930. My father was involved with the left wing nationalist movement. After three years spending in a remote West Irian camp, they were allowed to return to Java. But in 1946, the Dutch occupying force executed my father. The rest of the family fled to the mountainous areas where a brother joined the Indonesian revolutionary army.

After the world recognized Indonesian independence in 1948, I had the time to finish my elementary and secondary schools in Pekalongan (a bigger Central Javanese town) and in 1960 I was accepted as a student of the Department of Psychology of the Indonesia University in Jakarta, the capital city.

In 1961, a prominent literary magazine published my piece; it was the first sign of “national” recognition of my writing quality.

The political climate of the early 1960s pushed me further into literature. After over a decade of parliamentary democracy, in 1959 Indonesia was put under Soekarno’s “guided democracy” during which many newspapers were banned and political opponents jailed. The regime, with its left wing persuasion, and supported powerfully by the then powerful Indonesian Communist Party, gradually tried to impose control over the arts and literary writings as well, using Stalinist “socialist realism” as a model.

In response to this, in 1963 many writers and painters signed a manifesto attacking “socialist realism”; I was one of the signatories of the manifesto. Soon, it was condemned as being “an counterrevolutionary act” and in 1964, the regime banned works written by people like myself. At the age of 24, I had my first encounter with state censorship. I left the Department of Psychology, and to escape the stifling political atmosphere of the country, in 1965, I flew to Belgium, with the help of some friends, to get a scholarship at the College d’Europe in Bruges; it was, and still, a school for future European technocrats. I took classes on European politics.

In October 1965, a dramatic political change took place in Indonesia. The political rivalry between the Indonesian Army and the Communist Party reached its climax when a group of left leaning army officers kidnapped and killed several high ranking officers – and provoked a fear of total communist control of Indonesia. The army struck back; they arrested and killed all members of the Party’s leadership. With the help of non- and anticommunist political parties, the army purged every one suspected as “communist” and a blood bath followed. Hundreds of thousands people were massacred or jailed. Gradually it was the Army that took control of the country, by pushing President Sukarno, who defended the Communist Party, into a corner.

Students and intellectuals, believing that Sukarno’s “guided democracy” would soon end and a more open Indonesia was ready to be born, took the street attacking Sukarno’s autocratic rule. Sukarno fell from power in 1966 and was detained by the Army until his death in 1971. In 1966, Soeharto, the general who unseated him, became the president.

In 1967, after finishing my classes at the College d’Europe, I returned to Jakarta to join Harian Kami, a daily close to the antigovernment movement consisting of students and intellectuals. I was one of its editorial writers (in 1974, the newspaper was closed down by the Soeharto’s regime).

In 1970, I became the chief editor of a weekly news magazine, Ekspres. After barely one year in business, the owner of the magazine, who became a government’s appointed chairman of the supposedly independent journalist union, fired me because of my different opinion about the government’s interference in the union. As a result, reporters, writers and associate editors quit in protest. This incident obliged me to set up a new magazine.

Working closely with my colleagues from Ekspres, I started Tempo. To prevent future conflicts with proprietor(s), we decided to get funding from a non-profit foundation but the employees controlled 50% of the share. I became its chief editor.

The magazine is not only a journalistic achievement. I think is also a kind of “school”. Today, many chief editors of Jakarta-based media were former Tempo’s journalists.

In 1984, the Soeharto’s regime banned Tempo because of its coverage on the mess created during the election campaign of the ruling party. The government revoked the ban after two months. In 1989, I went to Harvard University as a Nieman fellow.

In 1994, again the government closed down the magazine, this time for good. Students and intellectuals took the street to protest in several places of Indonesia. To deflect further criticism, Soeharto also set up a Tempo-like publication, but under the control of his closest business crony, and put pressure to Tempo’s staff to join. Most of the journalists refused. They decided to stay unemployed, or change jobs, or, join me at ISAI.

ISAI is an institute I set up one year after the banning of Tempo. The acronym means that it is a center to study the flow of information, but actually it was a cover organization to create a network of underground publications and a clandestine news agency on-line. We thought the regime would stay in power for the next 20 years.

But we were wrong. In 1998, after a large-scale student’s protest, Soeharto left the stage. His regime collapsed, or transformed. The media became free. Former Tempo journalists decided to revive the magazine, and they asked me to be its editor again. I agreed but I also told them that I would step down after no more than two years in the job.

In 1999, after making sure that Tempo was in a very good shape, I asked my colleagues to put a younger person in my place. Since then I have focused myself on writing my weekly column – something that I have been doing since early 1980s – also on writing literary and philosophical pieces. Incidentally, I have also become a librettist of some sort. In June 1999, my piece, “Kali” was staged as an operatic work at On The Board theatre, in Seattle, WA. In November, my long poem, “The King’s Witch”, was used as the libretto of a musical piece by Tony Prabowo, an Indonesian composer, for a Julliard School of Music’s concert at the Lincoln Center, New York.

Since 1999, I have also since become a full-time manager of a “community”, called the Utan Kayu Community, (to which ISAI now belongs), which is a network of media, cultural and political activists to promote freedom of expression and thinking. The “Community” is now an internationally recognized center for media training, radio journalism, and also an alternative site for artistic and intellectual works.

The following are more data that maybe of use: In 1992 I was a guest lecturer at The Royal Institute of Technology, Melbourne, NSW, Australia. In May 1992 I received The Teeuw Award, from University of Leiden, Netherlands. May 1997: the Louis Lyons Award, Harvard University. November 1998: The International Press Freedom Awards, from the Committee to Protect Journalists. May 1999: The International Editor of the Year Award, World Press Review, and USA. Fall 2001: the Regents Professor of University of California, attached to Dept. of History, UCLA.

I published four small volumes of poetry and several books of literary and philosophical essays (e.g. *Kata, Waktu*. (Words, Times, Jakarta 2001). My latest collection of poetry received the first “Katulistiwa” (Equator) Award, November 2001.