

# Celebrating unity - but what about diversity? <sup>1</sup>

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This year Indonesia marks its 60th independence anniversary. Given the diversity of this nation of about 220 million people, we have every reason to pride ourselves that we have remained as one nation, through good and bad times, for six decades now.

This year's Aug. 17th Independence Day will be celebrated in a special way, just as we do every time we commemorate another decade of our national independence. We can reflect on the struggle that our founding fathers went through to secure our independence, and the subsequent struggle to build this collection of peoples of different races, ethnicities, cultures, languages and faiths, as one free nation called Indonesia.

Much blood, sweat and tears were shed by our predecessors, some of them long dead, some still alive, some recognized and honored as heroes, many others anonymous, forgotten or even banished. It is to each and every one of them, the known and the unknown, that we owe our gratitude. We should honor and respect their part in making Indonesia a united nation.

While we may rejoice at six decades of unity, we cannot, unfortunately, rejoice too much concerning our diversity.

There are still too many individuals and groups in our society who continue to face persecution, as well as discriminatory policies, practices and harassment because of their religion, their political beliefs, the color of their skin, their culture or language, their educational background, their wealth (or lack of it), their gender and even their sexual orientation.

For six decades now, we have learned that our diversity is a source of national strength. But we have also learned that this diversity, from time to time, from one corner of the archipelago to another, has become a source of tension and friction that has often erupted into ugly and bloody conflicts.

Just as we cannot take our unity for granted, we should also not take our diversity for granted.

Indonesia may be a diverse nation, but ours is far from being an ideal pluralist nation.

Going by the broad definition of pluralism -- a framework for interaction in which groups show sufficient respect and tolerance of each other that they can fruitfully coexist and interact without conflict or assimilation -- then Indonesia is, at best, an imperfect pluralist nation.

Melani Budianta of the University of Indonesia calls it "selective pluralism" because while the state may try to promote pluralism, it restricts some groups, such as the minority Chinese and people holding convictions outside the five religions recognized by the state, from this process.

Since the proclamation of our independence in 1945, every single administration has worked hard at forging the unity of the Indonesian state. Very often, especially during the 32 years of President Soeharto's tyrannous "New Order" regime, such unity was imposed upon the nation through the use of violence.

But even after Soeharto's downfall in 1998, subsequent Indonesian leaders elected through democratic processes remained obsessed with forging Indonesia's unity, and less with its diversity, and even less again with its pluralism.

The only president who showed some concern towards pluralism was Abdurrahman Wahid. He was the one who did away with the ruling that banned Chinese New Year's celebrations and most other measures that led to the unsuccessful experience of forced assimilation of the minority ethnic Chinese during the Soeharto years. Gus Dur's attempt to remove the official ban on the spreading of communist teachings was foiled, and it marked the beginning of his unpopularity that eventually led to his impeachment in July 2001. So much for pluralism.

Subsequent presidents, Megawati Soekarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as well as most of our elected leaders today, appear to be far more concerned about our unity.

This is clear from their continued obsession with maintaining Indonesia's "territorial integrity" under the concept of *Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia* (NKRI -- the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia).

The emphasis has always been on preserving Indonesia's territorial claim "From Sabang to Merauke", that is from the westernmost town in Aceh to the easternmost town in Papua.

Rarely has the NKRI concept been discussed in terms of the diversity or plurality of the people who live in this territory. On the contrary, the overemphasis on unity has often come at the expense of suppressing the diversity and pluralistic nature of our nation.

Pluralism is not even part of the vocabulary of our leaders and politicians today.

Hence, Indonesia marks another milestone in its independence this year at a time when many of its people -- as individuals or groups -- live in constant fear and suppression because of what they are or because of what they believe.

Ask people in Maluku and the Central Sulawesi regency of Poso, where Christians and Muslims are still fighting and killing each other; ask people in Papua and Aceh, where they live in fear because of the war between the Indonesian military and

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial in the Jakarta Post of 3 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Endy M. Bayuni is chief editor of The Jakarta Post.

armed separatist rebels; ask Madurese and Javanese migrants who were the target of violent ethnic cleansing campaigns in West Kalimantan and Aceh respectively; ask the minority ethnic Chinese who fear more anti-Chinese riots; ask the minority religious communities who are prevented from building their houses of prayer because the dominant community says they can't; and ask women and other marginalized groups in society who continue to face harassment and discrimination in their daily lives. Ask them what is the meaning of this year's independence anniversary. For most, there is little really to celebrate come Aug. 17th.