

Writing is a Struggle for Life  
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Under the Suharto regime, if a writer who was accused of being a member of the cultural organization Lekra were fortunate enough not to be killed, he would be put into prison. His pen would be broken then crushed to bits under Suharto's boots. In the prisons, the authorities regarded the possession of paper or pen more dangerous than if the prisoner had a sharp knife. With such rules-along with the harshness of the cells and of the prison conditions generally-the Suharto regime revealed its strategy: to dehumanize its opponents.

But a writer struggling for human rights and dignity will never stop writing, even if he must write on sky, clouds, and wind-on light and darkness. Oppression, insults to human dignity, starvation, sadistic torture, and killing will be recorded by whatever means possible, even when these actions occur in the hidden cells of a prison. Prison is a place that affords time for deep spiritual reflection.

I am like water calming down after a storm, reflecting and regaining perspective. The detainees that live in my books were from many backgrounds and professions. They embodied many disciplines and experiences, they were rich with various traditions and conflicts, colored by nuances of a humanity that emerged naturally in their daily routines. Today, it seems to me that a stone has sharpened my pen so that I can record the oppression they suffered. What kind of generation is born under the heel of such a regime? An arrogant and dwarf generation?

I was released from prison, but I was not totally freed. I was merely moved from a small prison to a much larger one. Like a hatchling turtle on the beach before it reaches the sea, I was in danger. As an ex-detainee, I was discriminated against not only by the state authorities, but also by the so-called arts authority. Many regulations were created to abuse and create obstacles for people like me. We carried identification cards stamped with E.T-Eks Tahanan Politik, Ex Political Detainee-and so we were forbidden to be teachers, journalists, narrators for traditional shadow plays, and priests; and without a permit we were forbidden to travel within the country and abroad. I fought against those regulation in my own way.

In the name of state security, our writings were banned from publication and public performance. To enter a writing contest organized by State Television (TVRI), for example, I was required to have a certificate stating that I had not been involved in the 30 September affair [the purported coup attempt in 1965 which began the country's nightmare], so consequently my manuscript was thrown out before ever reaching the jury. For similar political reasons, none of my writings were published in anthologies of Indonesian literature.

Remembering and recording ten years of imprisonment frequently aroused bitter feeling in me, so that sometimes I had to stop writing and let my emotions cool. Moreover, sometimes I felt myself censoring my own words, because of the subconscious fear that controlled me. I felt deeply that the Suharto regime had made me spiritually brittle. As I continued to write, I felt my intellectual honesty being put to a test. I came to realize that I had to speak from my conscience, not only for myself but for the sake of my generation, to restore honest thinking, and to bring attention to the years of oppression against human beings.

After my return from Europe in 1990, I was rearrested. Apparently, despite the repressive conditions that had prevailed while I was away, one or two magazines had nevertheless published my writings: one of my short stories had won a third prize in a short-stories contest, and I had taken second place in another contest, winning a prestigious Kalpataru award.

Writing is a struggle for life, and one by one my works will resound with opposition.