

Humour in Indonesian Politics

A Case Study of the Political Marketing of Gus Dur

Research >
Southeast Asia

Among the many astonishing aspects of Indonesian democracy in the early Reformasi era (1997–2001) are the rather unusual public appearances of several of Indonesia's top politicians. A prime example of this would be Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur's) first appearance on a variety show during his time as President of Indonesia (1999–2001). During the programme, broadcast on TPI (*Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia*) in 2000, the Indonesian President portrays himself as a jester, telling one humorous tale and/or joke after the other.

By Arndt Graf

Below is an example of the special character of these tales/jokes told during the programme.

Wahid: 'The funniest one is from the PR China. Once ... not in my times ... there was a military delegation lead by America. It was lead by the Joint Chief of Staff. Okay, they come. He talks very long, that Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Very looong.... But it is translated just in one very short sentence, and everybody is laughing. ... So he asks You are an amazing translator, my looong speech you could translate in only one short sentence, and everybody laughed..... what is your secret? ... The answer is: well, that's easy. I just said that this person was telling a joke, so please everybody laugh' (translation: AG).

What makes the joke so funny for Indonesian audiences is that it plays on and reconfirms two stereotypes in one. The first is the stereotype of the militaristic and self-important American, illustrated by the evocation of military might (a Chief-of-Staff, or head of a delegation) and by emphasis on the very long speech, an indication of a self-



Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) joking during his visit to Iran.

aggrandizing aspect. The other Indonesian stereotype reinforced in this joke is that of the witty Chinese who knows how to save himself work by not giving a long translation, and therefore treating a joke like any other economic activity. Does this mean that Abdurrahman Wahid, then acting President of Indonesia, is relentlessly reaffirming ethnic and national stereotypes? Initial impression of the joke might suggest such a reading.

Interestingly, there is also a printed version of the above humorous tale published in one of the many compila-

tions of Gus Dur's jokes. Here, national stereotypes apparent in the televised joke are reversed. In the printed version the main figure is not a big-mouthed American general, but rather Gus Dur himself. The witty translator is not Chinese, but Arab; the scene now taking place in Qatar rather than China.¹

My research departs from a close textual analysis of this and other of Gus Dur's jokes in the above mentioned television show, as well as in the printed joke collections. One observation from the variety show is that Gus Dur concentrates his jokes into the first third of

the interview. It seems that, in rhetorical terms, his joking has an introductory function, bridging the social gap with the interviewer, while serving to ease possible tensions and gain public sympathy. In classical Latin rhetoric, one would call this strategy the *captatio benevolentiae* (getting the goodwill of the audience). In the interview, it is also reminiscent of a communicative strategy often employed in Indonesia and Malaysia in which the speaker humbles themselves in the introductory sentences by saying how unimportant their own contributions are, or by making fun of themselves. The interlocutor should, of course, not misunderstand these humorous passages as a sign of weakness: the opposite is the case.

For my research, these observations serve as a starting point for a deeper, culturally specific reading of Gus Dur's special kind of humour. A central notion in this is the popular Java scholar's interpretation of the humorous president as Semar, the clown-servant and half-god from the world of the Javanese shadow-theatre, *wayang kulit*. Apparently, the image and importance of Semar has shifted in Javanese and Sundanese society since the beginning of the New Order. This populist character did not just replace Gatotkaca – popular during Sukarno's presidency – as the main hero of the shadow-theatre. The servant Semar, according to some reports, now even sometimes exerts functions of power.²

The climax of the *wayang* is the *gara-gara* scene, when the earth undergoes great political, social, cultural, and cosmological turmoil. It is here that Semar, the joking clown-god-servant, usually appears in a central role. In these circumstances, Semar serves as a wise orientation figure whose joking wit helps to bring the audience safely through all kinds of dangers.

During Indonesia's early Reformasi era, with all its economic and political problems, many Javanese may have been reminded of the *gara-gara* in the *wayang*. Given his physical appearance and his continuous joking, as well as his high social and religious rank, Gus Dur appeared, for many, to be very similar to Semar. Seen in this perspective, the humorous performance of the Indonesian President in a variety show probably made sense to many viewers. In addition to the growing popularity of this image in popular culture, the notion of Gus-Dur-as-Semar was also popularized by certain intellectuals who might have had their own agenda

regarding the Javanese belief system, *kejawen*.³

However, Gus Dur's heightened public use of humour can also be explained in Islamic terms. Historically, humour has played an important role in Islam: probably a much more central role than it has played in the spreading and teaching of Christianity. This is especially true for the Sufi versions of Islam that strongly influenced Indonesia during the early period of Islamization in the archipelago. Even today, many religious leaders (*kyai*) in Gus Dur's home region of East Java are notorious for their use of humour in spreading Islamic messages. There seems to be even a special genre of *pesantren* humour, named after the religious boarding schools of the *kyai*. From this perspective, Gus Dur's humorous performance in a TV variety show is again not as unusual as it may seem in the first place.

Having said this, it is important to note that the clowning performances were also criticized by voices from other traditions within Indonesian Islam. Apparently, the understanding and perception of blending humour, Islam, and politics is a point of contestation and debate amongst, on the one side, reformist Islam and, on the other, more traditional Islam. This is in line with the findings of Peacock, who discovered something like a watershed-line between the Islamic currents of Indonesia regarding their particular sense of humour.

Finally, one should perhaps also take into account the marketing character and function of Gus Dur's humorous performance. There is some reported evidence that he was advised by his assistants (spin doctors?) to emphasize the notion of a humorous president. This may have been part of a strategy to present him as an unconventional politician who would be the right representative of the people (*the rakyat*) in the partly chaotic turmoil of the (early) Reformasi era. ◀

Dr Arndt Graf teaches at the Indonesian Department, Asia-Africa-Institute, University of Hamburg, Germany. He was an IIAS affiliated fellow (24 February – 31 March 2003) researching 'Humour as a tool of political marketing in Reformasi Indonesia'. arndtgraf@yahoo.de

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- 1 Basyaib, H., and F.W. Hermawan, *Gitu aja kok repot! Ger-geran gaya Gus Dur*, Jakarta: AlvaBet, (5th ed. October 2000), p. 57.
- 2 Foley, Kathy, 'The clown in the Sundanese wayang golek: democratization of a feudal ethos', in: C.P. Epskamp et. al., *Scenarium, Deel 9: Theater of Java* (1985), pp. 88–99.
- 3 Bonneff, Marcel, 'Semar révélé. La crise indonésienne et l'imaginaire politique javanais', *Archipel*, 64, (2002), pp. 3–37.