

9 ENTERTAINMENT, DOMESTICATION AND DISPERSAL: STREET POLITICS AS POPULAR CULTURE

Ariel Heryanto

*'Clearly, elections are important but perhaps for reasons
different from those asserted in formal democratic theory'
(Taylor 1996: 5)*

In an afterword to Robert Taylor's *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (1996), the late political scientist Daniel Lev expressed relief at discovering that 'culture' had been entirely ignored in the collection of essays. Lev was obviously dissatisfied with the previous efforts of some of his contemporaries who had analysed elections in Southeast Asia in general – and Indonesian electoral politics in particular – from a 'culturalist' standpoint. However, both Lev and those he criticised appeared to recognise only some outdated conception of 'culture'. In their view, 'culture' was something static, unique or essential to a particular society. Presumably Lev and his counterparts were unfamiliar with the growing body of literature in anthropology, gender and cultural studies where culture – as a concept and practice – is critically problematised, instead of being essentialised or avoided. To this day, many political analysts continue to ignore, overlook or underestimate the cultural aspects of electoral processes, leading to a serious gap in the scholarship on elections and their meaning for citizens' daily lives. This chapter attempts to fill this gap by offering an alternative perspective on elections in Indonesia, highlighting key trends since the downfall of the New Order government in 1998.

My discussion focuses on the street politics of non-elite groups – often conveniently referred to as 'the masses' – during the election campaign period. The political and electoral dynamics of the post-Suharto period have produced a new kind of disempowerment – one that is marked by

the dominance over the electorate of the entertainment industry and its values. In addition to the rise of the politics of entertainment, the populace has been seriously fragmented by the heightened political competition among its members. As a result, Indonesia's contemporary masses appear to have voluntarily become dispersed and domesticated. Ironically, this is a situation that the New Order strongly desired but was incapable of achieving. Under Suharto, the masses often engaged in rowdy activities when elections were held, eventually worrying the authoritarian government. The regime's attempts to curtail the actions of unruly male youths during election campaigns largely failed. This trend points to an interesting paradox of power relations: systematic state repression does not necessarily generate total powerlessness, passivity or docility among the masses; and conversely, greater political liberalisation does not automatically increase the power of the masses.

The chapter is divided into four main parts. In the first section, I introduce the notion of Indonesia as an orality-oriented society, in which personal interactions and a collective predilection for interactive media predispose citizens towards a different concept of elections than in more literacy-dependent nations. Second, I demonstrate how the new rules in the 2009 elections have both empowered and dispersed the masses, with an unprecedented level of competition among candidates eroding the sense of a 'unified' mass at the grassroots level. By way of contrast, the third part describes the role of the masses during New Order election campaigns, when macho motorcyclists celebrated the violation of traffic rules as a form of subversive act of hyper-obedience to the regime (see more on page 189). Fourth, I analyse the role of the entertainment industry in the 2009 elections, with campaigns copying the formats of television shows and the masses exchanging political participation for the ultimate domestication of politics by entertainment. I conclude by emphasising the irony that the subversive power of the masses has been dissipating at a time of deepening democratic consolidation in Indonesia.

INDONESIA: AN ORALITY-ORIENTED SOCIETY

It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss this body of literature in detail, but a few of its core features in relation to Indonesia need to be highlighted. Indonesia has a high official literacy rate (92 per cent in 2009, with the country ranked 61st in the world).¹ Statistics aside, however, the official literacy rate refers primarily to the ability to recognise,

1 Figures based on the UN's 2009 Human Development Index. See 'RI still propping up Asian list on UN's quality-of-life gauge', *Jakarta Post*, 6 October 2009.

rather than a preference for maximum use of, the alphabet and mathematical figures. In this chapter, the reference to Indonesia as a primarily orality-oriented society implies a fairly low rate of *functional* literacy, as opposed to the *nominal* literacy indicated by the statistics.

Compared to their counterparts in more literacy-dependent societies, people in Indonesia, including the literati and graduates of higher education, prefer to share important information and messages through face-to-face communication. This involves the physical presence of the interlocutors, expressing themselves through words, clothing and body language, in the immediate spatial and temporal ambience of 'real-time' interactions. In such a society, everyday life tends to be communally oriented, with little or no space for privacy.² In contrast, in more literacy-dependent societies, separation between author and audience as two separate, autonomous beings is widely celebrated, and accuracy together with a great reliance on objectified text is highly valued. A sacred oath is commonly used to formalise an agreement in an orality-oriented society, whereas a written contract is used in a literacy-dependent society. Silent reading in a busy public space is normal in the latter, while conversations with strangers about family matters are standard practice in the former.

Obviously, no society is in reality either purely orality-oriented or literacy-dependent. Rather, in any given society the different modes of communication are in competition with each other, with certain historical periods more marked by one than the other. The rapid development of digital media technology was more confronting to the older generation in the highly literate societies that produced them (Fernback 2003) than to the rest of the population. The same technology easily finds a warm reception in orality-oriented societies like Indonesia, as it fits better with existing norms and social practices (Heryanto 2007).

Like the modern nation-state itself, elections as we know them today are the product of a highly literate social order. This does not mean, however, that elections or democracy are essentially incompatible with non-Western societies. Among the orality-oriented and formerly colonised peoples in Asia and Africa, elections have been held with varying degrees of success. Regardless of whether or not coercion was involved in their introduction to these orality-oriented societies, elections have often encountered difficulties beyond technical or logistical issues. To date, the standard administration of elections has involved legislation written in the highly analytical language of the literati; a procession

2 Strictly speaking there is as yet no word for 'privacy' in Indonesian. With the relentless march of capitalism in Indonesia from the 1980s, there has been a serious struggle to introduce and legitimise the notion of 'private property', with limited and partial success.

whereby voters go to the voting booth as individuals and read and mark the voting paper in solitude; and bureaucratically organised vote counting. Elections may, of course, take on a very different shape and process in the future with the expansion of digital technology, in ways already anticipated by, for instance, the voting procedures used in reality television shows (see more below). Against this background, the following sections will discuss the specific features of the 2009 elections in Indonesia and point to their historical differences to their predecessors.

THE 2009 ELECTIONS: POPULAR EMPOWERMENT AND DISPERSAL³

As in most previous Indonesian elections, the outcome of the 2009 national parliamentary ballot was highly predictable, although the precise degree of the winning party's triumph was a subject of speculation prior to voting day.⁴ The victory of the Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat, PD) – and the subsequent re-election of incumbent president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono – also meant a continuation and indeed a strengthening of the political status quo.⁵ One important innovation that did distinguish the 2009 elections from their predecessors, however, was a new regulation that allocated seats won by parties to the nominees with the highest number of votes, not those ranked highest on the party list. This open party list system was the result of a decision by the Constitutional Court in December 2008 to declare party list rankings unconstitutional. The new rules had two contradictory effects on the general population: in a very complex way, they were both empowering and disempowering at the same time.

Popular empowerment

Despite a host of logistical problems (see Schmidt in this volume), the 2009 elections had an empowering effect in that they extended or reinforced the political education of all citizens. Through a wide range of

3 I gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Ahmad Faisol and his team from Institut Studi Arus Informasi (ISAI), Jakarta, in collecting a large amount of empirical material on the 2009 elections on my behalf, which I use in this section.

4 The outcomes of the 1955 and 1999 elections, which both took place at moments of crisis, were less predictable.

5 Taylor (1996: 4) observes that this is the general outcome of elections in South-east Asia. It should probably be added that the same is true of many other countries outside the region.

means, Indonesians – especially the socially disadvantaged – were informed about the basic principles and values of elections as an essential component of a democracy. This was not a particularly new experience, however. Even at the height of the New Order's politics of depoliticisation, some information on the practical skills and knowledge required to participate in elections had been made available. From 1999, in the absence of state authoritarianism and the former top-down style of propaganda and indoctrination, political education – particularly regarding elections – took on a more democratically conscious character. Most significantly, this change was accompanied by a high degree of voluntarism and bottom-up participation.

Before the 2009 elections, officials from the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU) and the political parties travelled to remote areas to explain the new rules and procedures. Many of these activities were designed specifically for targeted audiences from a wide variety of geographical, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and most were highly orality-oriented. Consequently, the information sessions relied heavily on face-to-face interactions, including the use of traditional performing arts (with human actors or other visual aids), modern music concerts and ceremonies in the vernacular language, mostly within the framework of casual gatherings. Some KPU and party instructors travelled on foot to traditional markets so that they could communicate with locals face-to-face.

In several places, vans fitted with loudspeakers travelled slowly through the villages, broadcasting important information over their speakers. The attempts to educate the masses even reached people who were too young to vote. In Central Jakarta, for example, teachers from six elementary schools spent many hours training hundreds of pupils in the basic concepts of political elections. The training involved not just lectures and discussions, but also simulation activities in which pupils in grades 5 and 6 experimented with mock elections. The students delivered campaign speeches from lecterns in the school yard, designed posters, engaged in open debates about policy, cast votes by secret ballot and assessed the validity of ballot papers. Activities such as these took place across the archipelago, making the 2009 elections a remarkably instructive and inclusive experience for many.

Popular dispersal

While the elections had energising and empowering effects on ordinary Indonesians, these were counterbalanced by the centrifugal tendencies triggered by the new electoral laws. Most importantly, the new regulations pitted candidates from the same party against each other. One of

the most obvious effects of the new laws was to eliminate the longstanding convention of party leaders putting themselves at the top of the party rankings and thus securing their (re-)election. Under the new rules, these politicians had no choice but to invest in new and extensive campaign efforts in order to maintain their positions. As a side-effect of this more competitive electoral system, a new type of candidate emerged to challenge the dominance of old party functionaries: the 'celebrities', referring to television and film actors, musicians and comedians.

Overall, 61 celebrities ran for parliamentary seats at the national level,⁶ and 18 of them were successful. In some cases they did much better in the elections than senior politicians. For instance, television drama actor Rieke Dyah Pitaloka obtained the single largest number of votes for PDIP in the West Java II electoral district, leaving party leader Taufiq Kiemas behind. Similarly, former film star Nurul Arifin ranked first in West Java VII district, defeating senior politician Ade Komarudin from the same party, Golkar.⁷ Not to be outdone, comedian Mandra came in ahead of the incumbent House speaker Agung Laksono (Bayuni 2009). In 2008, actors Rano Karno and Dede Yusuf had respectively been elected deputy district head of Tangerang and vice-governor of the province of West Java.⁸ The considerable success of celebrities was only partly related to the new electoral laws and regulations, however. Other factors were at play as well, as will be discussed later.

An equally significant effect of the amended electoral law was to encourage an upsurge in the desire among ordinary citizens to run in the regional elections. One observer has described Indonesia's 2009 parliamentary elections, which were held from the central down to the provincial, district and municipal levels, as 'the world's largest single-day election':⁹ 11,219 candidates competed for the 560 seats in the national parliament; 32,263 nominees tried to obtain one of the 1,998 parliamentary seats at the provincial level; and 246,588 candidates contested 16,270 seats at the district/municipality level.¹⁰ On the one hand, these figures seemed to contradict widespread reports about the prevailing apathy among the general population. On the other hand, the same figures confirmed people's cynical suspicion that something other than genuine

6 'Music meets politics', *Jakarta Post*, 8 April 2009.

7 'Dari panggung hiburan ke senayan' [From entertainment stage to parliament], *Koran Tempo*, 26 April 2009.

8 'Pencitraan masih tanpa isi' [Image building still lacks substance], *Kompas*, 1 June 2009.

9 'Successful election marks a decade of democracy', *Jakarta Post*, 9 April 2009.

10 'Selamat berpesta demokrasi Indonesia!' [Enjoy the Indonesian festival of democracy!], *Kompas*, 9 April 2009.

interest in a political or moral cause must have been driving so many people to join the contest.

Entry to electoral politics by citizens with little or no political experience in formal state administration is not new in Indonesia. Especially after the fall of the New Order in 1998, party officials recruited thugs and other underworld figures to act as political fixers or to mobilise voters. In contrast, the 2009 elections saw a significant number of ordinary citizens—including some fragile-looking elderly people—running in the elections. Many of these people did not have any meaningful economic power, political experience or institutional support. Examples abounded across the archipelago: they included *becak* (tricycle) driver Abdul Wahid in Tegal; *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) driver Soleeman Mooi in Kupang; street vendor Erni Wahyuni in Samarinda; vehicle washer Joko Prihatin in Kudus; public parking assistant Sukardji in Ponorogo; and *angkot* (local van) driver Benedictus Adu in Jakarta. Representing the low-income classes of Indonesian society, these candidates claimed to fight not only for themselves, but also for other people in a similar position.

Closely related to the participation of ordinary citizens in the 2009 elections was the emergence of lone campaigners. Apparently, many Indonesians were led to believe that anyone could run in the elections, regardless of their financial and political resources. They also believed, it seems, that campaigning could be done effectively on an individual basis. This did not mean that their election-related gatherings featured a star performer as the focus of the event. Rather, it meant the candidate putting on a one-person show in public, sometimes without the presence of organised supporters. For instance, Enteng Sanjaya, dubbed 'Manusia Contreng' (Man with a Voting Tick), had his whole body painted yellow and white to represent the colours of the ballot paper. He danced alone in the middle of the main street in Pasuruan (East Java) and pushed his bike around the town to spread information on the voting procedure. In the same vein, Sragen-born *ojek* driver Agus Suwarno toured the nation on a bicycle to raise support for his party. In Banten, another lone campaigner, Hudi Yusuf, donned a super-hero costume to gather support for his candidacy. In combination, these individualised activities signified an important shift away from previous campaign practices, which had drawn their strength from impressive displays of mass power.

On the face of it, the increased involvement of commoners and enthusiastic lone performers gave the impression of higher levels of political mass education and more sophisticated campaign strategies. I will argue, however, that this phenomenon has much more consequential external aspects, which are linked to Indonesian politics generally as well as the expansion of the new media and entertainment industry. From this perspective, the competitive individualisation of elections has coincided

with the emergence of entertainment and celebrity-driven campaign formats, leading not to the political empowerment but to the dispersal and domestication of the masses. As I will discuss in the next section, this dispersal was something the New Order had tried—but had been unable—to achieve.

THE NEW ORDER: THE MASSES IN THE POLITICS OF APPEARANCE

During much of the New Order, elections were held regularly. However, there was barely anything that resembled a contest of political parties. The outcomes of six successive elections during the New Order were the same and always highly predictable. Nonetheless, the government took the trouble of engineering some rhetorical appearance of popular participation and political contest. It mobilised the masses and attempted to make them appear to be supporters of rival political parties. In reality, however, it transpired that the masses behaved in ways that were very different to what the government wanted—and indeed different to what many urban intellectuals and distant observers have generally understood.

In contrast to the situation since 1999, when scores of contesting parties have fragmented the loyalties of the politically active masses, the masses in post-1971 New Order elections were mobilised behind no more than three officially sanctioned electoral machines. The large concentrations of rival crowds made it possible for members of each group to *imagine* and *act as if* they were part of an overwhelmingly powerful force, even if some crowds were larger than others. This was particularly remarkable since, outside the election period, the regime offered no public space for independent political forces. In an ironic inverse of the post-New Order situation, the masses barely had any power *between* the five-yearly elections, but in the brief moments of the elections they transformed themselves into a gigantic public force. From the perspective of the regime, the elections were intended to be no more than a make-believe spectacle. But in reality, the presence and actions of the masses were real and forceful.

These masses manifested their power not only through their sheer presence in immense numbers in the streets, stadiums and town squares, but more importantly through loud noise and strong colours. This power was not consciously political, ideologically driven or organised along any identifiable structure. It had neither the capacity nor the desire to challenge, let alone replace, the incumbent government. Nonetheless, the effects of this display of power were threatening to the political elite

and the politics of appearance ('stability and order') that the government prescribed. The unruly behaviour of the masses took different forms, but one stood out: convoys of motorcycles without mufflers. Macho male motorcyclists in elaborate costumes roamed the streets and flaunted their multiple violations of traffic rules and conventions. More than the allowed maximum of two persons would ride on a single motorcycle, none wearing helmets and some even standing on the seat. They ignored all rules pertaining to traffic direction and lane division. Speeding well above the limit, they performed spectacular moves. Others rode on overloaded trucks, usually playing loud music over their loudspeakers. Predictably, these activities caused traffic jams, accidents, and brawls with non-participants or supporters of other political parties.

It was the down-to-earth, highly masculine festivity and the flaunted illegality of the event that appeared to matter most to the participating masses. The process and results of the election that had provided space for their activities in the first place were simply irrelevant to them. In contrast to the urban intelligentsia and political activists who took the elections seriously and denounced the results as illegal or lacking in credibility, the masses seemed not to care in the least about electoral manipulation or state pretence. What 'these politically alienated and economically exploited masses' cared about was that 'once every five years [they] became the supreme anonymous subjects that dominated the public space for several nights and days' (Heryanto 2006a: 151). To understand these masses, however, we need to go beyond the McLuhanist conceptual framework of orality-oriented societies. Instead of reading their activities as a form of political resistance, perhaps we should understand them—with Jean Baudrillard (1983: 43)—as an unintended subversion on the part of the 'apolitical' masses, who 'accept everything and redirect everything *en bloc* into the spectacular ... without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance'.

Cultural politics has been sorely understudied or misunderstood in Indonesian studies. Accordingly, this unintended subversion by a kind of hyper-obedience on the part of the New Order masses has largely gone unnoticed or has been seriously underestimated by the Indonesian intelligentsia and distant observers. In contrast, the regime itself was more cognisant of the potential force of the masses. It must be recalled that the New Order state came to power in 1966 on the back of the successful instigation of mass hysteria against and massacres of the left. With support from the world's liberal democracies, Suharto's regime maintained its power for the next three decades with a significant measure of thugery. As a result, Suharto knew that:

... dictators can go to sleep at night lulled by roars of adulation and support
... only to wake up the next morning to find their golden calves smashed and

their tablets of law overturned. The applauding crowds of yesterday have become today a cursing, abusive mob (Mbembe 1992: 14–15).

Thus, from the 1992 elections onwards, the New Order government attempted to curtail what it had initially sponsored, namely the mobilisation of the urban masses to enliven otherwise dull sham elections. In its place, the government proposed that future election campaigns should be conducted within the confines of a demarcated space (a well-guarded hall or stadium), and preferably through the tightly controlled mass media (particularly television). By keeping the masses at a distance from the campaign venues and turning them into passive spectators of the mass media, the government hoped to maintain 'order and stability'.¹¹

As with many other state policies, the proposed restrictions on motorcycle convoys were never fully enforced across the nation. Instead, gradual restrictions were imposed on an ad hoc basis, with uneven results. For instance, in Yogyakarta in 1992 the local government made sporadic and inconsistent attempts to restrict the motorcycle convoys. In hyper-obedience, the masses from all parties responded in unison. Not only did they refrain from running the convoys and confronting the security forces, but they went further by removing all signs and appurtenances of the election campaign, thus threatening to destroy the political spectacle the regime liked to call the 'festival of democracy'.

Until the New Order was formally ousted in 1998, the motorcycle convoys were never totally absent from street politics, and during the first post-New Order elections in 1999, the urban masses unleashed some of the greatest convoys ever. Ironically, it was not until 2009 – when the elections had become more liberalised – that the massive crowds dispersed voluntarily, the convoys thinned and became few and far between, and the underclasses were atomised. Thus, when successive post-New Order governments effectively tried to ban motorcycle convoys, this move was already redundant. Few in the population seemed interested either in opposing the restriction or in revitalising the convoys. While motorcycle convoys could still be observed in the 2009 elections, they were far less frequent, attracted much smaller numbers of participants and had none of the previous exuberance of style. In their place, there was a surge in the use of glossy multi-media electoral campaigning. Inadvertently, this trend fitted precisely with the New Order's proposal in 1992 to curtail the kind of disorderly mass participation that it had failed to control.

11 There is another layer of irony: the same government attempted to prohibit the publishing of any reports on election campaign activities in 1977 (van Dijk 1977: 12–13).

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AS POPULAR CULTURE

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the trends in the 2009 elections cannot be attributed solely to the competition-inducing nature of the new electoral laws. There is no direct causal relationship between the new laws and the galvanisation of enthusiasm among the underclasses to run for election. The expansion of the new media and entertainment industry must have played a significant role as well. This section will elaborate this point.

Scholars of media studies have long been aware of the Janus-faced effects of media technology. The new media technology is both socialising and alienating, empowering in some areas and disempowering in others. The 2009 electoral laws made democratic procedures more equal, leading many to the illusion that all citizens are politically equal in elections, regardless of their socio-economic strength and connections. In 2009, many individual villagers ran in the parliamentary elections, splintering their local communities and foreclosing the possibility of meaningful mass support for any one candidate. In a separate but intersecting course of development, the new media technology has transformed the brave new industrial world of the mid-twentieth century into what McLuhan called the 'global village'. What McLuhan did not foresee, however, was the inherent countereffect that comes with the dispersal of digital media gadgets. As more and more people separated by large distances have easier, quicker and more affordable access to intimate communication around the clock, they often remain distant strangers to their next door neighbours.

Recent studies on elections and popular culture in Indonesia have highlighted the role of performers in party politics and the growing interest of professional politicians in singing or dancing in public. Newspapers and magazines as well as scholarly works have documented, for example, the incumbent president's success in attracting potential voters through songs he has written himself. Most writing on the connections between politics/politicians and popular culture/artists focuses on the use one makes of the other, or the involvement of one group of professionals in the domain of the other (see Kartomi 2005; Lindsay 2007, 2009; McGraw 2009). Often these studies focus on prominent artists and politicians, and how they 'manipulate' the masses. However, I wish to consider two distinct yet closely related processes. First, I look at the overwhelming impact of the entertainment industry in facilitating the growth of the spectacle and entertainment aspects of elections. Second, I consider the appeal of the 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) spirit to the general population, a recent trend accelerated by new media developments. Both discussions draw less immediate and less personalised connections between politics

and popular culture than have generally been emphasised in the existing literature. The connections between the two processes are more fundamental and have more far-reaching implications than most studies have indicated thus far, because they represent a new modality of perspective and outlook. Both focus on disadvantaged groups of people.

From 1998, Indonesia experienced a decade of unprecedented media expansion. Driven by the lifting of restrictions on press freedom, the period saw a quantum leap in many directions. The number of print media tripled, the number of national television networks doubled and 200 local television networks sprouted across the archipelago.¹² The number of officially registered radio stations grew from 700 in 1997 to more than 1,200 a decade later,¹³ with unregistered stations adding several hundred more to that number. From 1998 to 2008, the total number of hours of television broadcasting increased nearly fourfold (from 42,029 to 159,097 hours per year), while the number of households with a television set nearly tripled to almost 16 million. Given the communal style of television consumption in most households, the number of viewers is probably four times that figure.¹⁴

At the same time, ownership of mobile telephones jumped more than tenfold to 42 million, and private access to an internet connection increased more than 11 times to well over 14 million.¹⁵ As an estimated 65 per cent of internet users went online without owning a computer, instead using a computer at one of the mushrooming internet cafes, the number of Indonesians *owning and using* a personal computer with an internet connection would have been far smaller than the actual number of Indonesians accessing the internet. In 2008, there was a 645 per cent increase in the number of Indonesian Facebook users, to 8.52 million, making Indonesia the world's seventh-largest nation of Facebook users (Eldon 2009).

All the above developments were matched by equally phenomenal growth in the entertainment industry. For the first time in history, a new generation of Indonesian musicians sold well over a million copies of

12 The number of well-established local television networks operating regularly is probably somewhere between 30 and 50. See Heryanto and Adi (2002), Heryanto (2008: 6) and Pradityo, Titiyoga and Khafid (2008).

13 'Radio: a friend of yours?', *Jakarta Post*, 20 June 2009.

14 According to a survey conducted by *Kompas* in 2007, less than 5 per cent of respondents watched television while not in the company of family members. See 'Rating tak cerminkan mutu sinetron' [TV ratings do not reflect the quality of soap operas], *Kompas*, 30 December 2007.

15 For details of mobile phone and internet access as well as television broadcasting and consumption, I am indebted to the generous assistance of Hellen Katherina of AGB Nielsen Media Research (private communication, 2009).

their albums. New Indonesian film titles set new records well beyond the popularity of films from any other country, including top Hollywood blockbusters (Grayling 2002; van Heeren 2002; Heryanto 2008: 6). On television, melodramatic *sinetron* (drama series) and reality shows have become the most popular programs, dominating the total broadcasting hours.¹⁶ Of the various subcategories of reality television, talent shows for singers such as *Indonesian Idol* (RCTI) and *Akademi Fantasi Indosiar* (Indosiar) stand out.¹⁷

The increased power of the media and entertainment industry in Indonesia's economy and politics has gone hand in hand with a marked process of feminisation of public life. This goes beyond the appearance of women in election campaigns and the election of women to parliament. For too long, the entire corpus of the modern nation, including post-colonial Indonesia, had been focused primarily on the masculine-biased history of nation-state building and modernisation, or the impediments to this: militarism, human rights abuses, rampant corruption, violent ethno-religious conflicts and, latterly, Islamist jihadism (Heryanto 2008: 7). Pop culture, especially in the form of televised entertainment, had been relegated to the secondary 'private' or 'domestic' sphere, mostly for women. From this followed a familiar, if deeply problematic, sense of division between the masculine world of news, scholarship and conferences versus the feminine world of soap operas, gossip magazines and family matters.¹⁸ In 2009, however, as the macho motorcycle convoys faded away, a new set of election festivities was evident in its formative stages.

It is important not to romanticise either the macho convoys of New Order street politics or the more feminised and mass-mediated, entertainment-focused politics. Both have had serious consequences for Indonesian society. The testosterone-driven convoys often prompted violent confrontations between ordinary citizens, sometimes with fatal consequences. The media-based feminisation of social life, on the other hand,

16 According to an AGB Nielsen survey conducted in July–September 2007, 72 per cent of all soap opera viewers come from households with monthly incomes of less than Rp 1,500,000 (about \$160). The survey also found that 'people with a monthly income of below Rp 500,000 spend the most time watching TV, whereas those who make more than Rp 3 million spend the least'. See 'Middle class prefer information to soaps, says survey', *Jakarta Post*, 24 November 2007.

17 See Penelope Cutas's fascinating analysis of these programs in the 2000s (Cutas 2008).

18 According to the 2007 *Kompas* survey (see footnote 14), almost half of all respondents indicated that the children in the family had charge of the remote control for the television set, and more than 20 per cent said the mother was in charge of it. This was well above the number saying that the father or someone else had charge of the remote control.

has led to a situation in which Indonesians adopt the common parameters of a television show to organise their daily activities, conduct casual and formal conversations, and plan future projects. What is occurring in contemporary Indonesia is, in effect, a reality show in reverse: instead of television programs projecting an image of unscripted events involving non-professional performers as an alleged mirror of real life in real time, ordinary people have begun to mimic television programs in the way they act, speak or sing. One common example is found in the way meetings and social gatherings, including formal ceremonies, are hosted. Two young people, one of either sex and equally smartly dressed, emulate the behaviour of television show presenters when hosting such meetings. Mimicking the kind of patter one hears on TV, they take it in turns to speak and finish each other's sentences. They make light jokes and comments on the event, in an attempt to be as entertaining as a television host. Often without the slightest intention of consciously parodying television programs, they use formulaic expressions popularised by TV anchors to, for instance, announce breaks during the meeting: 'Don't go anywhere. Stay with us after these messages' (Heryanto 2006b).

Against this background, it is not at all surprising that the 2009 election campaign was characterised more by entertainment than by political education and propaganda. Traditional and modern genres of performance were deployed to attract the masses, to a greater extent than in previous elections. The images of national pop musicians (Dewa and Slank) as well as internationally famous figures (Barack Obama, David Beckham, Osama bin Laden and Superman) were hijacked and superimposed on campaign posters. Particularly striking, however, was the use of cheerleaders in Bengkulu and fashion shows in two other cities for election campaign purposes. In one such fashion show sponsored by the Temanggung local electoral commission, young girls posed in their glittering sexy dresses, imitating professional adult models seen on television. In Medan, Golkar candidate Himatul Fadillah sponsored another fashion show featuring 50 older Muslim women (all above 45 years old) modelling Muslim dresses. One would encounter great difficulty in finding any content-related connections between the election campaign goals and these shows. The medium was the message – entertainment reigned unequivocally over the entire campaign.

Of all the entertainment formats derived from television programs, *Indonesian Idol* was the one that appealed most to campaigners in the 2009 elections. The program was highly popular on television because of its 'emphasis on the "democratic" voting system via SMS to "elect" the *Idola*' (Coutas 2008: 113). Just as television shows like *Indonesian Idol* have tended to imitate politics, candidates in the 2009 elections moved to imitate this hit television program. This was more than merely a matter

of campaign strategy; such shows gave many candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds the inspiration and hope to run in the elections in the first place. Regardless of the ideologies, platforms or even the empty rhetorical styles of the parties they represented, it was the ideology of *Indonesian Idol* that dictated the course of events. This was an ideology – already nationally and internationally upheld – that persuaded people from all walks of life to believe in both the possibility and the desirability of anyone at all venturing out upon their own rags-to-riches story. This ideology had spread widely together with DIY sentiment, spearheaded especially by the first generation of indie musicians and independent film makers.

Unfortunately, the individualisation, DIY spirit and feminisation that marked the 2009 elections had some tragic consequences that came in rather unexpected forms. As the macho motorcycle convoys and associated violence receded into the past, the increased competition among the swelling number of candidates inevitably led to a new phenomenon. Not only were the masses split and dispersed, but many people who did not win seats in the elections experienced great distress. The mass media reported psychiatric wards being overwhelmed with former candidates who were experiencing mental disorders following their defeat in the polls. Employees in one hospital in the city of Solo had to work double shifts when 200 patients in this category arrived in a single day (Bayuni 2009). Elsewhere, a significant number of failed candidates decided to commit suicide. According to one study, women were overrepresented in these cases (Buehler 2009). As in their favourite show *Indonesian Idol*, it appears that many contestants had been lured by false promises of extraordinary success and paid a high price when reality finally hit home.

CONCLUSION

Myths and irrationality are commonly found in all elections (see, for example, Taylor 1996; Heryanto 2006a: 149–53; Chua 2007). Yet, these costly political rituals are held across the globe as a prerequisite for the almost universal commitment to a modern utopia called 'democracy'. Too many of us imagine democracy to be something real, and zealously promote it as universally desirable (Heryanto and Mandal 2003; Lev 2005; Heryanto 2010). This obsession with ideal types of democracy has often led to misunderstandings about the behaviour of the masses in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. In this chapter, I have shown how, during the series of sham elections under the New Order government, the masses behaved in ways that might at first appear vulgar and unruly. But considered within the specific political context of that time,

their behaviour can be regarded as much more rational and subversively powerful than has usually been portrayed, more so indeed than the political activism of the urban intelligentsia. In 2009, however, the political setting had altered significantly, and so had the country's electoral laws and procedures. The subversive power of the masses dissipated, ironically at a moment when Indonesia's democracy had become more liberalised.

This new development should not be taken as an anomaly. Benedict Anderson (1996: 14) has noted that 'under normal circumstances, the logic of electoralism is in the direction of domestication'. As Indonesian politics becomes increasingly 'normalised' (Aspinall 2005), it is only to be expected that the great majority of the people would be further 'domesticated'. How the process of domestication via elections unfolds varies across different socio-historical settings. Contrary to Lev's concerns (cited in the opening paragraph of this chapter), in no way does this chapter suggest that the Indonesian case constitutes something uniquely or essentially Indonesian. Rather, it has identified and analysed three specifically historical factors that appear to have contributed significantly to the serious fragmentation of the masses: the new electoral laws in 2009, which forced candidates of the same party to compete against each other for votes; the engulfing effects of the new media, particularly the televised entertainment industry; and the broader context of orality-oriented modes of interaction in Indonesian society.

In 1992, in an attempt to contain the reckless masses that had taken over its 'festival of democracy', the New Order proposed that all campaign activities be moved to the state-controlled mass media. Neither the masculinist and repressive New Order government nor its more democratic successor governments had the capacity to domesticate the powerful masses, which they initially intended to mobilise for their own purposes. In 2009, however, the soft power of the media industry came to their assistance. Gaining momentum from the new electoral laws in 2009, the media industry extended its entertainment ideology and commercial empire into street politics and into the elections. Ultimately, these media companies have had the last laugh.

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