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ROCK AND *REFORMASI*: INDONESIAN STUDENT CULTURE AND THE DEMISE OF THE NEW ORDER

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The dramatic collapse of President Soeharto's autocratic New Order government in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis shattered widely held assumptions about the weakness of Indonesia's civil society and the strength of its totalitarian state. At the time, observers both inside and outside the country marveled at the seemingly instantaneous evaporation of a culture of timidity, fear, and docility. In its place emerged a democratic cacophony of unruly, competing voices in a thriving, contentious public sphere. The pivotal role of university student protesters in the regime's downfall and in Indonesia's subsequent democratic transition caught many observers by surprise. Yet commentators who had commonly dismissed Indonesian middle-class youth in late New Order society as materialistic, self-interested, apolitical conformists clearly overlooked developments in the student-oriented popular music of the time. This paper will discuss how the performative politics of indigenously produced underground rock music helped establish an affective groundwork for an oppositional consciousness among Indonesian students – one which later found expression in the grassroots protest movement responsible for toppling the Soeharto regime.

The involvement of Indonesian students in the political upheaval that resulted in Soeharto's downfall and Indonesia's transition to democracy was hardly unprecedented. Prior to the quiescent years of the mid to late New Order, Indonesian students had historically played a crucial role in national politics. Student demonstrations in Jakarta helped to topple the New Order regime just as they had pushed nationalist leaders to declare independence from the Netherlands in 1945, and just as they had hastened the removal from power of Indonesia's first president, Soekarno, in the wake of a failed coup attempt in 1965. Even during the New Order, major student demonstrations against the government erupted in both 1974 and 1978.

Thus while numerically small – there are approximately 2.4 million university students in Indonesia, out of a total population of 225 million (Arnold 2002: 88) – and occasionally the object of envy by the impoverished majority, university students in Indonesia have long been at the vanguard of social and political change. However, in contrast to earlier historical moments, young Indonesians during the post-1978 New Order were relatively inactive, due in part to a concerted attempt by the government to eliminate dissent on university campuses. James Siegel (1986) has observed that in the early 1980s, prior use of the politicized label "*pemuda*", (youth) in popular culture texts gave way to the more consumerist and "teenybopperish" term "*remaja*" (teenager). This new label implied a concern with fashion and lifestyle, and a preoccupation with consuming the diluted Western styles offered by the national popular culture industry.

Underground music was among the main forces which disrupted this comfortable, somnambulant youth-consumer subjectivity.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Indonesian high school and university students inspired by the socially conscious folk-rock of Indonesian artists such as Iwan Fals and by the current generation of Western hard rock groups, began to record and perform local versions of "underground" rock music. In contemporary Indonesia "underground" (usually pronounced *andergraun*) is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of imported rock music genres on the louder side of the spectrum. These genres, called *aliran* ("streams"),[i] include *hardcore, punk, death metal, oi* [skinhead music], *grindcore, ska, Gothic, grunge,* and *black metal* (English terms are used). Western bands who played underground rock genres gained popularity in Indonesia starting in the late 1980s, their audio and video recordings attracting an enthusiastic audience of predominantly male, middle class, urban youth. These fans learned about underground rock genres first from commercial crossovers promoted in the global media, and later from their own forays into the transnational grassroots network of small independent recording labels, mail order distributors, and low budget fanzines. From these networks and the flows of knowledge they channeled, Indonesian underground scene members gained access to the metacultural framings of independently produced underground music: its philosophical underpinnings and hierarchies of aesthetic value. Most importantly, they learned of the "DIY" or "Do It Yourself" approach to musical production and distribution, which permitted underground musicians to wield the creative freedoms that the mainstream Indonesian music industry denied them.

Some Indonesian underground music fans began to form bands dedicated to "covering" their favorite Western groups' songs, with vocalists approximating the sounds of the English lyrics they contained. Shortly thereafter, a few groups began to compose their own songs and to record them. Such a process is akin to what Greg Urban (2001) terms the "replication" of cultural objects within a metaculture of newness. Since 1991 or so, a loose network of bands, small record labels, fanzines, and performance venues dedicated to underground music has existed in Indonesia, with full-blown local "scenes" emerging in most major cities by the end of the 1990s.

The emergence of the Indonesian underground cannot be understood without reference to two related developments in 1990s Indonesia: increasing cultural globalization and mounting exasperation with the brutality, corruption, and arrogance of the New Order regime. Over the last decade underground rock music has provided an ideal vehicle for Indonesian students' ambivalence about, admiration for, and antipathy toward various sources of hegemonic power. Additionally, underground rock was a cultural form that at once represented modernity and modernity's palpable discontents. And it was this music, more than any other, that supplied the soundtrack for a successful transition from authoritarianism to fledgling democracy.

As with its counterpart underground scenes in the West, however, from the beginning opinion within the Indonesian underground movement was divided regarding the appropriateness of mixing music and explicit political messages and whether a

coherent progressive politics is, can, or should be articulated by underground music. A group of Moestopo University students in Jakarta once told me that the only ideology the underground movement really possessed was an "*ideologi pembebasan*"—an ideology of liberation. Yet such an ideology, however inchoate, had significant political ramifications under a military dictatorship where all dissent was suppressed. Indeed, the artistic and social freedoms celebrated in the underground scene were fundamentally at odds with the practices of a totalitarian government. While the regime never cracked down on underground artists[ii], most scene members adopted an oppositional stance towards Soeharto's rule, and many underground music fans with whom I spoke argued that the anger and negativity of underground music resonated with many young Indonesians who grew up under an oppressive regime which regularly engaged in violence against its own citizens. However, underground opposition to the Soeharto regime did not commonly extend to the regime's prominent overseas supporters such as the United States. Therefore, underground scene members generally did not perceive a contradiction between embracing elements from global popular culture and opposing a dictatorship propped up by global capitalist interests.

Expressions of political protest in the underground increased in the months before the New Order's downfall, as the movement for Reformasi (reform) gathered momentum. Some scene members were active in the student movement that helped topple the New Order, and locally produced fanzines covering underground scenes started to contain articles in plainspoken Indonesian explaining various streams of leftist thought, ranging from feminism to anarchism to animal liberation. These fanzines, once sources of biographical and discographical information about Indonesian and foreign bands but little else, began to include articles with titles such as "Does Development Cheat the People?" and "The Organizational and Power Structure of an Anarchist Collective" alongside essays on standard topics such as opposition to major record labels, and "selling out" versus maintaining artistic integrity.

Dominant political themes in the underground movement included resistance to capitalism, to racism, and to militarism; I also learned that many scene members were familiar with the ideological movements that emerged from within Western underground subcultures themselves, such as "straight edge" (a punk-based movement for voluntary abstention from promiscuity and substance abuse) and the anti-racist skinhead movement. In contemporary post-New Order Indonesia, where left-of-center thought is still routinely equated with reviled Communism, the active presence of leftist political discourse in Indonesian student culture stems in part from such discourse's associations with underground rock music.

Explicitly political lyrics have been especially prevalent in Indonesian punk, hardcore, death metal, and grindcore songs--all genres which tend to take on political and social themes in the West as well. It is worth noting that impassioned and courageous indictments of the Soeharto regime and the military were common in underground music well before the regime fell. For example, on a song entitled "*The Pain Remains the Same*" released in 1997, the Surabaya-based death metal band Slowdeath sang (in English), "*There is no difference between Dutch colonialism and the New Order*!", a

statement that could have landed the band members in prison. Moreover, the often-violent imagery found in the songs of many Indonesian underground bands was frequently supplemented by cover art and album graphics that incorporated press photographs of atrocities committed by the Indonesian army or police.

A few bands such as Bandung's Puppen have been courageous enough to write aggressive political lyrics in Indonesian. The band's anti-military song "*Hijau*" (Green) contains the refrain, "*Hijau seharusnya sejuk*" (Green is supposed to feel cool).[iii] According to Arian, Puppen's lead singer and lyricist, "green" is a reference to the Indonesian army, which wears green uniforms.[iv] He explained that while green things like leaves and plants are cool and calming to the touch, the army's hot tempers and violent acts during student demonstrations were quite the opposite. The following musical example, a recording of *Hijau*, demonstrates that the power of underground music does not inhere solely in lyrics—the sonic assault of Puppen's music is itself a catalyst, a wake-up call, and a form of transgressive affective expression. (the lyrics to the song and a translation are included on your handout).

[play musical example, approximately 2 min.]

While such social critiques are likely to interest popular music researchers preoccupied with the relationship between music and social change, underground scene members themselves did not attribute an active political role to their music, perhaps because they perceived the music more as an expressive form than as an instrument for coordinating group action. For instance, Arian Tigabelas from the veteran hardcore/metal band Puppen explained to me that he writes lyrics about his feelings, and that *sometimes* those feelings are his reactions to political matters. For the most part, underground songwriters claimed that they write for themselves first, and only secondarily for any listeners who feel that the music "represents" them. The songwriters tended not to relate their music to larger political or social goals. In their music, politics followed from affect, not vice versa, and affective rather than didactic language dominates in song lyrics.

But who were these students who, rather than remain content with the national mass cultural products readily available to them, embraced an obscure, imported cultural form and harnessed it for their own project of cultural resistance? In his classic 1960 monograph on East Java, Clifford Geertz described members of what he termed "the emerging 'youth culture'" in the Indonesia of that time: "…a group of restless, educated, urban young men and women possessed of a sharp dissatisfaction with traditional custom and a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the West, which they see both as the source of their humiliation and 'backwardness' and as the possessor of the kind of life they feel they want for themselves…"

Painfully sensitive, easily frustrated, and passionately idealistic, this group is in many ways the most vital element in contemporary Indonesian society…They are the Republic's hope and its despair: its hope because their idealism is both its driving force and its moral conscience; its despair because their exposed psychological position in the avant-garde of social change may turn them rather quickly toward the violent primitivism of other recent youth movements in Europe

whose inner need for effective social reform was greater than the actual changes their elders were capable of producing for them (1960: 307-308).

Many of the young idealists Geertz described were to succumb to this "violent primitivism": hundreds of thousands of young Indonesians proceeded to partake in the horrific events of 1965-66 as perpetrators or victims of mass murder. Over three decades later, student activism reemerged once again in Indonesia, though this time as a more positive source of social change, and the activists I encountered in Jakarta fit Geertz's description—written about members of their parents' and grandparents' generations—remarkably well.

The politically active students I met were knowledgeable and socially aware. Through hanging out, listening to, composing, and playing music as well as debating ideas, they forged a collective identity for themselves. Unlike their more apathetic classmates, these students responded to American and Indonesian popular culture not with longing but rather with a critically engaged stance, well aware of both the injustices and the emancipatory possibilities of the contemporary world. What was quite striking was the importance of underground music in developing this critically engaged stance: while Noam Chomsky and other leftist writers' words provided a guideline for oppositional thought, the music of American rock group Rage Against the Machine, and of the numerous Indonesian groups that band influenced, supplied a sense of what being oppositional *feels* like. Moreover, among Indonesian underground fans interest in bands with political messages often preceded interest in progressive theorists. Wendi Putranto, a political activist and underground metal fanzine editor who was one of my chief consultants, credited Rage Against the Machine for first teaching him about "ideology and oppressed people", the band's music providing an impetus for his political engagement.

During the tumultuous four years since the fall of the Soeharto regime, Indonesia's economic and political woes have persisted. Many journalists and pundits now accuse the student movement of losing its focus and effectiveness. Meanwhile, there has yet to emerge a leader in the nation's formal political sphere who truly represents the utopian, cosmopolitan vision of the student movement. In official Indonesian politics, the only current alternatives to Golkar—the despised, formerly dominant political party of Soeharto—have been Islamic fundamentalism (of the sort that has been recently linked to global terrorist networks) and the conservative nationalism of current President Megawati Soekarnoputri. The ethic of democratic pluralism exemplified by former president Abdurrahman Wahid has been marginalized in the political establishment, as has the moderate, progressive variety of Islam that he championed. This situation has been complicated considerably in the past year and a half by international uproar following revelations of major terrorist operations in Southeast Asia and by the fallout from last month's bombing massacre of Western tourists in Kuta Beach, Bali. It is difficult to predict whether a critical mass of grassroots protests like those that helped topple the Soeharto regime can be attained under these circumstances.

Notes

[i] Interestingly, as Clifford Geertz noted in his well-known study *The Religion of Java* (1960), *aliran* was also the term people used to describe the different "streams" of Islamic practice in 1950s East Java. The religious undertones of the underground movement are also apparent in the use of the word *kiblat*, which literally means toward the direction of Mecca, to describe the musical orientations of underground bands. So a grindcore group like Tengkorak strongly influenced by the British band Napalm Death is said "have a kiblat toward" (*berkiblat ke*) Napalm Death. One Indonesian fanzine even refers to Ian MacKaye, a Washington, D.C. based punk musician who became the de facto founder of the "straight edge" hardcore movement, as *Nabi* (prophet), a title usually reserved for figures like Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad. More could certainly be said about the similarities between the spread of world religions and the spread of music-based subcultures to Indonesia, but such a topic lies beyond the scope of this paper.

[ii] Why this crackdown never occurred is unclear, given the New Order's history of suppressing dissent and censoring popular culture (see Yampolsky 1989). Most likely, the underground scenes at the time were too small to attract the government's attention and the preponderance of English lyrics in underground songs appeared to limit the reach of the music's politically subversive aspects to a small, and elite, minority.

[iii] The phrase literally means "green should be cool." The gloss used here is based on Arian's own suggestion when I e-mailed him a draft of my translation of the song.

[iv] The Bandung hardcore band Injected recorded a similar song entitled *Coklat* (Brown), a reference to the color of the uniforms of the national police. The lyrics (originally in Indonesian) are somewhat less "poetic" than Puppen's and include the lines:

Coklat, coklat oppresses people
Although sweet, what's sweet is still hated
Coklat, coklat is pigfaaaaaaced [*bermuka babiiiiiiiiiiii*]!

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Lyrics to “Hijau” by Arian Tigabelas (Puppen).

Hijau	Green
Hijau menindas menekan secara represif	Green oppresses, pressuring repressively
Rebut hak yang terampas, cukup sudah ketakutan	Snatching away rights that have been trashed, fear is already enough
Hijau menekan, korban pun berjatuhan	Green represses, victims too fall
Takkah sadar t’lah menuai bibit-bibit perlawanan	Not aware [they] have grown the seeds of resistance
Rebut, rengkuh, hijau seharusnya sejuk (2x)	Seizing, tearing, green is supposed to feel cool
Hijau membungkam, membungkam tanya alasan	Green silences, silences questions why
Menyebar ketakutan, membangun penjajahan	Spreading fear, developing colonization
Hijau menindas, semua ditenggelamkan	Green oppresses, all is drowned
Rebut hak yang terampas, cukup sudah kita tertindas	Snatching rights that have been trashed, we’ve been oppressed long enough
Rebut, rengkuh, hijau seharusnya sejuk (2x)	Seizing, tearing, green is supposed to feel cool
Tolak kehadiranmu, terlampau banyak sakitku	Reject your presence, too great is my pain
Luka dan derita: hijau seharusnya sejuk (2x)	Wounds and suffering: green is supposed to feel cool
Cukup sudah kita tertindas!	We have been oppressed long enough!