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Human rights and international support

Goenawan Mohamad, a well-known Indonesian journalist and poet, co-founded Tempo, which became one of Indonesia's leading weekly news journals.

After Tempo was banned in 1994, Goenawan Mohamad helped found the Alliance of Independent Journalists and established the Institute for the Studies of the Free Flow of Information, which combats censorship.

It has become an established trend to put the issue of human rights on the agenda of international diplomacy. I am speaking particularly of the relationship between countries commonly referred to as the "West" and those belonging to an assemblage of nations usually grouped under the name of "the Third World".

It is, of course, quite a promising development. In 1994, when Tempo and two other publications were banned by the Indonesian Government, concern was expressed by foreign diplomats and leaders. It has not helped put Tempo back in business, but it has put pressure on the Indonesian Government to take a less cavalier attitude towards infringements of society's right to be informed.

At the least, an international gesture of protest and outrage can make victims of human rights abuses feel that the world has not abandoned them. Nonetheless, there is a risk of letting the issue of human rights become predominantly a problem of international relations, to be negotiated in meetings of government officials and diplomats. The issue is increasingly perceived as a kind of foreign assignment in countries that have no means to refuse. Hence the recurrent debates of "cultural differences", of the imperial expansion of Western values.

I believe that the debate can be quite misleading. We have to bear in mind that the issue is not initially a matter of internationally sanctioned precepts and principles. In the beginning it should be, and essentially is, a story of violence and suffering.

Let me tell you the story of a murdered woman named Marsinah. On 8 May 1993 a woman's body was found in a peasant's shack in a forest in the eastern part of Java. She had apparently been murdered. There was a gaping wound in her belly and they found traces of savage violation of her vagina. Marsinah was only 23 when she died.

At the time of her murder, she was an employee of a watch manufacturing plant in the small town of Sidoarjo in east Java. On 3 May 1993 Marsinah and her friends staged a strike to demand a wage increase so they could earn US \$1.25 per day. On 5 May, 13 of the people on strike were summoned to the office of the local military command. The intelligence officer in charge accused the workers of holding "illegal" meetings and told them to resign from their jobs. Marsinah was not on the list of people asked to resign, but, probably angered by such an arrogance of power, she tried to protest. There has been no conclusive account of what happened to her later in the evening of 5 May, but on her way home from a visit to one of her friends, she disappeared. Three days later, her body was found.

Her fellow workers smelled foul play. They whispered their suspicions to a few visiting reporters. The story, published by local and national newspapers, reached the ears of student and human rights activists. A special committee, called "Committee of Solidarity to Marsinah", was set up to galvanize support and publicity. Thanks to the print media, the case of Marsinah's murder was not easily closed. Honest lawyers and human right activists as well as the emerging Indonesian working class didn't stop talking about it, and the press didn't stop quoting them.

I'd like to suggest that the Marsinah story is a case in which people, particularly workers in Sidoarjo, started to press the authorities to deal with the murder openly, not because they were aware of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or were influenced by some virtuous Western values, but because they found the murdered woman so close to their daily life — because they themselves could also become victims. In other words, to them the face of the

victim is an immediate reality. From this point, further demands followed — the need for a freer press, a fairer trial and greater respect for the due process of law, as well as an acknowledgment of workers' rights to strike and organize themselves. This is a case in which the victims speak louder than the UDHR.

This reminds me that on 15 July 1945, three years before the UDHR was adopted, a leader of Indonesia's nationalist movement argued strongly at an historic meeting, where Indonesia's first constitution was being drafted, for the right to express one's opinion, to freely assemble and to write freely. His name was Mohammad Hatta, an economist who later became Vice President of the newly established Republic of Indonesia. He argued that these rights "are necessary so the state will not become a state of naked power, of repression and [where] people live under a cadaver-like discipline". Let us remember that the meeting took place towards the end of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, which was a period of military brutality and repression of individual freedom.

Today, many people in Indonesia fail to remember Mohammad Hatta's advice. To them, human rights are just an international protocol that the West wants the "Third World" to comply with. They have nothing to do with a genuinely internalized need. Curiously, this is a view which many people in the USA, Europe, Japan and Australia, including liberal-minded intellectuals, share. Anxious not to offend other people (notably from the lower scale of "development"), they defend their positions, agreeing on the essentially different national values.

I don't think you can talk of values with a definite national boundary in mind. Moral values are the expression of an internalized process of learning to judge what is good and what is bad in human behaviour. It is a process that supposedly takes centuries to take shape. In contrast, our national boundaries are the outcome of a recent historical accident. To use Benedict Andersen's famous words, a nation is "an imagined community".

I also have a problem with a concept such as "Western values". Especially when one refers to the concept in its relation with the idea of freedom and human rights, it has the smell of European self-conceit. It has created something which I call "the Flash Gordon syndrome". In the comic strip story created by Alex Raymond decades ago, Flash Gordon is the blond superhero with an Aryan look who travels in outer space, confronting the tyranny of Ming, a ruler with an "Asiatic" look who reigns the Planet of Mongo. The story ends happily when Flash Gordon appears as the liberator. You see, the binary thinking about human values (those of the white race and of coloured people) goes deep in the popular mind.

To me, this is a "segregationist" approach to values. It draws clear, entrenched and final lines between people of different backgrounds. Gradually, imperceptibly, the word "culture" has become a euphemism for "race".

I believe that we have to deconstruct this "segregationist" approach to values. This is an urgent undertaking, especially today. We are living in a strange era intensely immersed in identity politics. British historian Eric Hobsbawm sums up the end of the century mood pointedly: "What holds humanity together today is the denial of what the human race has in common."

If you deny that there are a lot of things the human race has in common, you are bound to look at human rights as something created to serve a partisan interest. Probably they are. Things are made even more difficult by the fact that many human rights watch agencies are based in the USA and the United Kingdom. In Indonesia, a Muslim leader impugned these agencies ("the West") as "hypocritical" after the 1995 riots in East Timor. During these riots, East Timorese youths lashed out at Muslim communities in the area, which can be interpreted as violence against a religious minority, but Western human rights advocates have so far not said a word about it.

The accusation of hypocrisy naturally leads to another disturbing question: in advocating human rights, in condemning violation of the rights, who will cast the first stone? But I believe this is another mistaken way of posing the problem. We cannot talk of a country as an unchanging,

univocal entity. No nation has a common past, common guilt and common indifference. A nation consists of victims, murderers, bystanders, fellow-travellers, and what have you.

Viewed this way, you cannot expect that a German businessperson or a US spy will raise issues of human rights when they meet their Indonesian counterpart. They have their own things to worry about. This applies also to government officials. A meaningful international support for the cause of human rights will eventually depend on how people with the same concern help each other internationally.

Ultimately, of course, it is the people who are directly affected by human rights abuses who will decide what their survival will have to rely upon. At the end of the day, it is their fight. It is their duty. As Gandhi, the great Indian mahatma, put it, "Rights that do not flow from duty well performed are not worth having."

This article is one of a series of opinion pieces written for Amnesty International's campaign to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UDHR. The views expressed do not necessarily represent Amnesty International's position.

Find out more about Amnesty International's campaign to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — visit [www.amnesty.excite.com](http://www.amnesty.excite.com)

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