

A NOTE FROM THE SOUTHEAST ASIA FORUM (SEAF)

At SEAF's initiative, the noted Australian translator, author, and activist Max Lane gave a talk at Berkeley, co-sponsored with University of California, Berkeley's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, entitled "Indonesia's Revolution: Is It Starting up Again? A Perspective Inspired by the Ideas of Pramoedya Ananta Toer," the renowned Indonesian novelist familiarly known as Pram. The event was held on 28 April 2006. Two days later, Pram died.

For the information of visitors to this website who are interested in hearing the audio of Max's talk, here is a piece he wrote—a eulogy of sorts—on Pram's death and life for the radical Australian paper, *Green Left Weekly*.

Understandably in the circumstances, Max does not mention the controversies that surrounded Pram prior to his arrest, imprisonment, and exile by the brutally anti-leftist regime of General Suharto, who rose to power in 1965–66 and stayed there until 1998. These controversies have been alluded to elsewhere, however. Another Australian, historian M. C. Ricklefs, for example, wrote in his book, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200* (3rd ed., Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 314:

In October 1956 Pramoedya Ananta Toer was so impressed by a visit to Beijing (Peking) that he began to take up the PKI [Indonesian Communist Party] cause among intellectual circles. His favourable impressions of China were strengthened by a second visit in 1958–9, at the start of Mao's Great Leap Forward. Pramoedya became a leading figure in the PKI artists' and writers' organisation Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, People's Cultural Institute, established 1950), which was shortly to become a major instrument of intellectual repression.

Lekra and the rest of the PKI's affiliated organizations were destroyed by Suharto in the bloody transition from Sukarno's autocratic "Guided Democracy" to his own more thoroughly authoritarian "New Order"—a calamity noted by Max in the essay reproduced below.

Green Left Weekly, Issue cover-dated May 10, 2006.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer: Indonesia's Greatest Novelist

By Max Lane

Scores of activists and young writers, as well as family members, were at the Karet Bivak cemetery in central Jakarta on April 30. Many were crying, tearful. The loss was felt greatly, a burden. But they rallied their spirits to also sing songs of struggle to farewell the man who they had just laid to rest:

Pramoedya Ananta Toer. They sang the Internationale and they sang that most moving of all songs that grew up during the struggle against the 1966–98 Suharto military dictatorship: *Darah joang* ("Blood of the struggle"). The acclaimed author and democracy campaigner had died that morning after suffering a week or more of declining health. He had been taken to the emergency ward of a major Jakarta hospital and was then moved to an intensive care unit.

Finally he asked to go home, to stay in the family house in the Jakarta suburb of Utan Kayu.

On the third day at home, after pushing aside the tubes and equipment that got in his way, he asked for another of his beloved kretek cigarettes. He passed away at 9.15am that morning.

Indonesian custom requires that burial takes place as quickly as possible after death, Pramoedya was buried later in the afternoon. Those who had received news of his death via text messages and could get there, did so.

Already there are plans in Indonesia for activities to commemorate Pramoedya's life and work. Here in Australia, the *Inside Indonesia* magazine is planning a special issue around Pramoedya.

Many Australians know Pramoedya primarily from his novel *This Earth of Mankind*, which I translated in 1980. Many people still send letters saying how much they enjoyed reading it or how their lives may have been changed by it. Others are familiar with its sequels—*Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*. The first novel in the series is now in its 15th printing in the United States. The novels have been widely adopted into all kinds of courses in world literature in U.S. universities.

In Indonesia itself, all of Pramoedya's books are still formally banned, although the state seems to be turning a blind eye to the fact they can easily be found in the major bookshops.

Pramoedya was 81 years old when he died. He was a literary and political figure whose presence in Indonesian political and cultural life had lasted for more than 40 years. As a young man, he had taken up arms against the Dutch colonialists, had been captured and spent two years in prison. While in jail, he wrote some of his early well-known short stories, which were set in the midst of the violent upheaval of an anti-imperialist revolution.

After the armed struggle ceased in 1949 and the Netherlands accepted Indonesia's independence, Pramoedya became one of the country's most prolific writers. He was stirred by the injuries that people suffered as a result of their involvement in the revolution, at others' hands or at their own.

His orientation began to develop further as the country moved towards the end of its first decade of independence. His stories began to bring out the realities of failed social change, of injuries to humanity flowing from the stubbornness of corruption and injustice in spite of the country having won independence. Pramoedya's stories in the collection *Tales from Jakarta* ring with a disappointed and cutting humanity.

From the late 1950s, he began a new journey, posing the question: Why had political independence not delivered the justice and prosperity for which so many had given their lives in the revolution? Pramoedya joined millions of others who were steadily rallying to the cry: The revolution is not finished!

He threw his political support behind President Sukarno, whose political legacy Pramoedya embraced for the rest of his life, and who was then leading the movement to rally people behind this cry. Tens of millions eventually joined under this banner, joining the Communist Party, the Nationalist Party or other, smaller, parties or one of the many mass organisations rallying to the call.

Pramoedya worked with the Peoples Cultural Network, which soon had thousands of members and also the *Bintang Timur* (*Eastern Star*) independent left newspaper.

He gave his support to this movement in more than one way. He buried himself in the work of hunting out the origins of Indonesia's cultural problems, finding them in a characterless elite with no backbone, with an inward-lookingness and a too-quick abnegation before authority. But he also sought to uncover the source of dynamism of the new Indonesian culture, the source of the revolutionary energy exploding in the 1960s as every kind of art and literature began to burgeon. Where did that come from?

Among other things that influenced Pramoedya, Maxim Gorky's essay *The People Must Know Their History* stirred him. From the late 1950s, Pramoedya became Indonesia's first self-taught full-time historian. No source was alien to him—government documents, diaries, what a barber knew about his long-term customers (among whom was perhaps a political figure), the

daily newspapers, detective novels. Pramoedya was even the first historian in Indonesia to use tape recordings of oral histories, borrowing a tape recorder—then a rare piece of equipment—from a friendly small business.

Pramoedya became a prolific essayist in Bintang Timur, writing hundreds of essays on history and politics. His unique contribution to helping finish the revolution was interrupted in October 1965 when he was arrested along with hundreds of thousands of others. The right-wing of the army, under the command of General Suharto, seized power, making use of a failed attempt by left-wing officers to seize control of the army.

The Suharto coup marked the interruption, for nearly 40 years, of the Indonesian national revolution. More than a million workers, peasants and other left-wing activists were killed. Tens of thousands were imprisoned for one or two years and another 20,000—including Pramoedya—were imprisoned for 14 years without charge and without trial.

Fourteen thousand prisoners were sent to the barely inhabited and barren island of Buru in eastern Indonesia, where they were forced to build their own barracks, clear the savage land with their own bare hands and start their own agriculture.

Many died in the initial years. It was in these demoralising years that Pramoedya began to draw on the memory of his work to tell the story of a 14-year-old Javanese girl, Sanikem, sold by her money-grubbing father to a Dutch plantation owner as a concubine and how this young girl transformed herself into a woman of strength and capacity, Nyai Ontosoroh—far superior to that of her coloniser—and how she educated the first generation of Indonesian revolutionaries. The story inspired the prisoners and helped restore their morale.

Later when he obtained a typewriter and was allowed to write, Pramoedya churned out eight novels, a play and scores of essays while on Buru Island. When he was released in 1979, he was not supposed to publish. Such activities were illegal for former political prisoners. But Pramoedya, and two other former prisoners—Joesoef Isak and Hasyim Rachman—defied the dictator Suharto and began publishing Pramoedya's prison novels, starting with *This Earth of Mankind*, based on the story of Sanikem and Nyai Ontosoroh. This was followed by the other great historical novels *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*. All are available in Penguin book editions.

Then came Pramoedya's novels set in the prequel period to these four novels—*Arok and Dedes*, a story of rebellion set in the 13th century, and *Arus Balik*, an epic novel of maritime politics set in the 16th century.

These were his greatest works, explaining the origins of the Indonesian revolution, with more than half of them translated into more than 50 foreign languages. These later works were an expression of Pramoedya's commitment to finish the revolution after his release from prison in 1979.

In the last 20 years of his life, Pramoedya repeated again and again in speeches and interviews the same call to Indonesia's younger generation—the revolution is not finished. He joined the small radical Peoples Democratic Party (PRD) to emphasise this meant political commitment and joining a political organisation. He never tired of saying that reformasi (reform) was not enough. What was needed was “total revolution.”

In the soon-to-be-published long interview with Pramoedya, entitled “Exile,” he makes his stance clear: “Capitalism is the same everywhere. Its only purpose is to make as high a profit as it is allowed to. I believe in each country's right to self-determination but, in reality, such rights are not being honoured. Everything is determined by big business, even the fate of nations. Can the present situation change without a revolution? It can't. There has to be a revolution!”