

Fighting Words

Neither prison nor the passing of years has weakened Pramoedya Ananta Toer's passion for justice in Indonesia

Yenni Kwok in Jakarta



To have one of his books in your possession is to invite a stiff jail sentence. Even so, Pramoedya Ananta Toer views the outlawing of his work with pride. “Every book that is banned is a badge of honor,” he says. Others think so too – copies of his work are circulated widely, but clandestinely in Indonesia. Pramoedya smiles and takes another puff of the clove cigarettes that never seem to leave his hand. The soft-spoken grandfather is a thorn in the side of President Suharto’s New Order government, and has been for decades.

For Pramoedya is celebrated as much as an ex-prisoner of conscience as a writer. His advocacy of social justice and left-wing sympathies made him a natural target in the anti-communist witchhunt following the 1965 coup that brought Suharto to power. The 14 years behind bars and barbed-wire fences failed to sap Pramoedya’s spirit. “I’ll do as I please,” he says. “My mind is not to be imprisoned.” The uncompromising response is typical. Too typical for his wife, Maemunah Thamrin: “I tell him, ‘Don’t be so stubborn. It is the family who has to suffer.’ But he is still defiant.”

Because of his persistent calls for open debate and political change, the 73-year-old writer remains a potent symbol of dissent. In 1996, for example, the now banned People's Democratic Party presented him with a trophy – a mark of their respect, says the inscription, for a “true fighter and democrat.” That was as evident after he was released as before he went to jail. In 1979, Pramoedya was placed under city arrest, forbidden to leave Jakarta. Not that it has deterred him. He has slipped out of the capital on several occasions, most recently in February, when he visited his home town of Blora in central Java.

The curbs on Pramoedya's personal and creative freedom have also boosted his international profile. A regular nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature since 1981, he was conferred a Magsaysay literary award three years ago and more recently received U.N. recognition for promoting non-violence and tolerance. His banned but acclaimed *Buru Quartet* – novels written during his exile to the eponymous prison island – are must-reads for anyone interested in Indonesia's history. Pramoedya's prison memoirs, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu (A Mute's Silent Song)*, are a more recent prohibition. An English translation to be published by Hyperion Press next year may meet a similar fate in Indonesia.

When Part I of the memoirs was first issued in 1995, the government had to pay for the privilege of imposing a ban. Pramoedya, who published the work himself, refused to submit copies for the censors' approval. Officials ended up having to buy their own from the author. *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* makes harrowing reading. Forced labor, torture and humiliation were routine. Yet the work is more than a chronicle of the treatment that Pramoedya and other political prisoners endured. It is also an intellectual journey, an attempt to understand the injustices he faced (Pramoedya draws a parallel between his experience and that of the anti-fascist forces fighting Franco's regime in Spain). The second and last volume of his memoirs was published last year.

These days, novels take second place in Pramoedya's life. In fact, *Tailalat (Mole)*, a short story written in 1996, was his first work of fiction since leaving Buru. Having been silenced for so long, he is keen to give voice to others. His energies are currently focused on putting together an anthology of writing by the prisoners of Digul. A mosquito-infested swamp in Irian Jaya, Digul is notorious as a place of exile for nationalist leaders locked up by the Dutch colonialists during the 1930s. Among the authors: members of the outlawed Indonesian Communist Party – a provocative choice, considering how dearly Pramoedya paid for his past

associations with them. But Pramoedya says he's not afraid of retaliation. "Why should I fear? [These writings] are part of Indonesian history. They will be forgotten if not recorded," he explains.

There is an unmistakably Javanese politeness to Pramoedya's manner. Dressed in a casual shirt and a sarong, he invites a visitor into his simple home. His wife had it built during his prison years with the little money she scraped together from making and selling cakes. Pramoedya, whose body seemingly exudes clove oil fragrance due to his chain-smoking, listens carefully to each question, cupping a hand behind his left ear. He lost his hearing in the right ear when soldiers beat him one night, more than 30 years ago.

It was a Thursday evening, he recalls, an unlucky alignment according to Javanese belief. Six generals had been killed a fortnight earlier and the hunt was on for suspected communists. A stone-throwing, knife-wielding mob gathered outside Pramoedya's home, screaming abuse. Before he could find out what the crowd wanted, the military and the police turned up. They were taking him in – for his own safety, they said. But he soon found himself tied up and hauled into a waiting car. That was when the rifle butts rained down on his head.

The military took everything that he had. Books, manuscripts, his precious library. Before they drove him away, Pramoedya pleaded with the men to save his papers. "If necessary, give them to the government," he had begged. But all the writings were destroyed. Some were burned, others ended up as wrappers for market vendors. Almost a year passed before his wife learned where he was being held. In the first four years, he was shunted across Java from one jail to another. Then on August 16, 1969, the eve of the 24th anniversary of his country's independence, Pramoedya was shipped to Buru island, in the Moluccas. As a "birthday gift," he remarks wryly, to the Republic of Indonesia.

The miserable conditions at the infamous island proved a particularly effective spur for Pramoedya's imagination. Prevented from writing – he was allowed neither pencil nor paper – Pramoedya fell back on the oral tradition of Java. His tales were like soothing bedtime stories for his fellow prisoners, men whose hopes of getting out faded with each passing day. They had been jailed without trial, and they had no way of knowing when they would be released, if ever. Everyone lived in terror.

But from the cruelty emerged Pramoedya's masterpiece. Set in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Buru Quartet is an epic about the birth of

Indonesian nationalism. It follows the coming of age, politicization and incarceration of a journalist named Minke. The character is based on a reporter who lived during that period. After countless nights, the storyteller of Buru got his first, and perhaps most treasured, reward. “The prisoners' fear diminished,” says Pramoedya. “I was happy. The stories were to uplift their spirit.”

Later, Pramoedya was allowed a pencil. But the dispensation did not signal any government softening. If the missionaries at Buru hadn't been able to smuggle out his manuscripts, the world would never have known Minke. The prison authorities destroyed many of Pramoedya's drafts, including the novel, *Pusaran (Whirlpool)*. “I will never forgive the New Order,” he says, bitterly recalling the loss of his manuscripts.

After all these years, the grand old man of Indonesian literature is still labeled a communist. An official pariah. Pramoedya shrugs. “I don't follow any kind of ‘isms,’” he insists. “If there is one, it will be Pramism.” He is a loner, he says. Pramoedya fights for justice in his own way. And with his weapon, the written word.

The article was originally published in Asiaweek (www.asiaweek.com), 24 April 1998. Eight years later, on 30 April 2006, Pramoedya passed away in Jakarta at the age of 81.