

# From the City of Brotherly Love:

## Observations on Christian-Muslim relations in North Sulawesi

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A *bule*<sup>1</sup> voting for the Christian contender competing against a Muslim candidate might seem predictable enough. But that, combined with the summer's increasingly heated protests against the US support of Israel's military aggression towards Palestine, made my image likely to have shades of meaning that went well beyond that of a simple spectator. Would they recognize that I was voting for Dirly because he was the hometown hero, not just because of a perceived automatic affinity for the Christian and "Western-facing" characteristics that are often attributed to the ethnic Minahasans?<sup>2</sup> I tried to sink into my chair in front of the movie screen set up in the mayor's office at Manado city center, a little relieved that we were at a rally for the crowning of the 2006 winner of *Indonesian Idol*, and not at a rally for a political candidate.

The *Indonesian Idol* competition that summer was a beautiful expression of the complex nexus of issues that exist in the Minahasan region of North Sulawesi regarding religion, ethnicity, nationalism and the influence of a unique colonial history. The summer's *Idol* competition had culminated in a deadlock between Dirly, the local Manado boy raised on gospel tunes, and Ihsan, a Muslim from Medan who favored cheeky

performances of traditional religious tunes from his region in North Sumatra. Both sufficiently cute to hold the attention of young girls across the nation, and with enough vocal talent to handle everything from rock songs to Bollywood-esque ballads, the final competition morphed into something that wasn't just about whose dance moves were better. There were bigger issues at stake: loyalties to religion and region, and the place of minority religious or ethnic constituents vis-à-vis the Muslim majority. And these were being beamed out across the country from what had become, in essence, a national stage.

Back in Manado, things seemed much simpler on the surface. I was certain, as were my neighbors in the row behind me, that everyone in the crowd now numbering over three or four hundred that was gathered at the mayor's office to watch the *Idol* competition would be voting for Dirly, whether they were Christian or Muslim. During a commercial break, Mayor Jimmi Rogi made an announcement: the mayor's office would be handing out *Simpat* cell phone cards to everyone in the audience, so they could be sure and have enough minutes on their hand phones to call in a vote. Every single vote was important, we all understood, since we

might have been the only ones voting for Dirly, pitted against the weight of a country full of people who might be more inclined to ‘vote Muslim,’ even if they were from neighboring regions on the Eastern side of the archipelago. Certainly our numbers were puny compared to the voting power of Java alone, and Dirly was an underdog despite his good looks and the faith local women had in his superior training singing in front of the pulpit with GMIM (Evangelical Church of Minahasa) youth choirs. One thing was certain: this was a time when loyalty to a regional ethnic identity should trump loyalty to religious affiliations, as Mayor Rogi reminded the audience with the self-proclaimed regional slogan “*Torang Samua Basudara*” as he stood on the stage waving a handful of *Simpati* cards.

*Torang Samua Basudara. We are all brothers.* The words were splashed across the worn banners that festooned streets in the city center, and framed the ubiquitous answer to any questions about religious relations or the relative peace of Manado compared with other cities in Sulawesi, such as Poso to the south, that were infamous for incidents of ‘religious’ violence. What had begun as an interpretation of Christian ideology introduced by Dutch missionaries in their project to unite eight disparate regional tribes into a coherent and governable whole was transformed into an important aspect of local ethnic character that succeeded in joining together the different peoples of North Sulawesi.<sup>3</sup> People rarely cited the predominance of Christians in number and political power as the key to avoiding the violent instability of other regions where there is an even division of Christians and Muslims. Minahasans relied instead on the mantra of ethnic solidarity and a joint commitment to protecting the Minahasan homeland, in order to explain the relative peace of the region. This was something that was just as salient for the local Muslims I spoke with as local Christians. Families from both religious backgrounds, as well as local officials, were quick to mention the work of BKSAUA (*Bekerja Sama Antara Umat Agama*, the Association for Cooperation between Religious Communities), an organization formed in 1969 to foster inter-religious dialogue and cooperation of “all of the religions allowed by the government,” meaning the five religious traditions codified in the national ideology of Pancasila: Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The most visible manifestation of their work was the installation of local church

leaders outside area mosques during holidays and other religious events; Muslim elders performed the same function during Christian celebrations. People claimed that this deterred any type of mob violence or retaliatory acts like those that occurred in other parts of Sulawesi or Ambon, since these local leaders were an embodiment of the united ethnic front that was essential and *special* to the region. Their efforts only reinforced the feelings that ensured Manado and the surrounding areas were not plagued by inter-religious confrontations.

Manado seemed to embody perfection at the institutional level when it came to religious harmony. Official meetings began with the predictable Muslim greeting *Salam* but then veered into oddity with the addition of *Shalom*, a reference to relations local Christians feel with the holy land of Israel. The long-winded introductions and opening speeches found at any *acara resmi* (official ceremony) were closed with Muslim and Christian prayers, and no one seemed to find this in the least bit incongruous. At the summer’s birthday celebration for Manado city, the wives of local officials stood resplendent in their matching yellow and white *kebaya*<sup>4</sup> with the coconut tree regional crest, the only markers of religious identity being the occasional color-coordinated *jilbab*.<sup>5</sup> During a tour of a local primary school, the principal extolled the virtues of the school’s religious education program and how it went above and beyond what was required by the Indonesian state curricula. This curriculum was meant to promote religious harmony and education in cross-religious history. A few afternoons a week, students were sent out into the community to attend religious seminars to learn about religious traditions and ceremonies different than their own. But it wasn’t until the end of the afternoon that someone thought to ask where the children were given instruction in religions other than their own. It became clear that the children were not exposed to alternative religious ceremonies at all. The principal was dismissive of our suspicions about the reality of cross-religious education, being that they were never given the opportunity to visit the other religion’s place of worship. How would the mystery surrounding what the student sitting next to them did on those afternoons outside the classroom be dispelled if they had never witnessed it? What would happen if there was a mixed-religion family? The absurdity of this question was communicated by the principle’s raised eyebrows.

Although the choice of religious tradition was a student's, the principal assured us that once it was chosen there was no question of conversion or even reconsideration. This made religious identity seem just as immutable as a regional one.

Principles of balance between Islam and Christianity were not only the domain of institutional practices, but were part of the everyday praxis that constituted local life and local aspirations. When I pressed a friend to elaborate on her hedged admission that there was some metaphysical force afoot in the region that maintained its peaceful demeanor, she explained that the sincere and sustained prayers of local residents were the secret currency that had bought North Sulawesi years of calm and prosperity. I was caught off-guard by her indignant "of course!" when I asked if Muslim prayers contributed to this force-field generated by the faithful. I thought about a number of Saturday visits made to *Bukit Kasih*, "The Hill of Love," where Muslim and Christian families gathered to picnic in the shadow of giant statues of Lumimu'ut and Toar, the mythical progenitors of the Minahasan people, and then run breathless up the mountainside to Minahasa's version of *Taman Mini*,<sup>6</sup> complete with a miniature Catholic church, miniature mosque, and miniature Buddhist temple. And about how the dawn hour outside my window was heralded by the Muslim call to prayer colliding with (friendly?) competition from a nearby church broadcasting the names of their faithful congregants over a loudspeaker. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised that Muslim and Christian prayers were joined in people's minds just as the sounds of worship mingled on the streets.

But the ideology of ethnic solidarity didn't entirely obliterate the tensions of religious relations, and the very different trajectories of Islamic versus Christian global politics sometimes forced the theme of regional brotherhood to take on strange permutations, as people tried to reconcile aspects of global religious narratives with the local. During a late night conversation, a retired Christian teacher began to conspiratorially whisper theories about the recent natural disasters on the Western side of the archipelago, insinuating that until Muslims on that side of the country recognized Jesus Christ as their savior, their luck would never get better. I reminded him that an hour earlier he had given a long and impassioned speech about the unity of all people in the eyes of God, and therefore his theory

couldn't possibly be true. However that didn't deter him. "But ah" he said, leaning closer "then I was talking about people here, in Minahasa. You see, the Muslims here are different. They're like us." People often said things that situated them in reference to global religious narratives that seemed contradictory, in my opinion, to the principles of ethnic brotherhood in Minahasa.

For example, one of the narratives most discordant with ideas of ethnic brotherhood was related to the way Minahasan Christians imagined their place in a global story of Christianity. This narrative centered on the relationship local Christians feel they share with Israel. Like it does for many other Christians worldwide, the holy land of Israel represents a touchstone of Christian faith, and local Christians often referred to Manado as *Israel kedua*, or the "second Israel," instantiating North Sulawesi as centrally located in a global Christian tradition. The affirmation of my American identity to someone on the streets of Manado often received a rousing reply of "Go Israel!" because local interpretations saw George Bush and Americans as protectors of Israel, and Christianity, in the field of global politics. How such Christian (and tacitly anti-Islamic) imaginaries fit with ideologies of ethnic brotherhood was sometimes difficult to for me to conceive. At times it seemed like the insistence on Manado as the "second Israel" was never stretched to its "logical" conclusion, one where it made a statement about the Christians in Manado versus their Muslim neighbors. However, it's likely that I misapprehended how linkages to global religious narratives might have little in common with local religious relations in the minds of Minahasans. This was evident even in the ways in which local followers of Islam also focused on a positive relationship with the West and specifically the United States, asserting those characteristics that linked ethnic Minahasans in a common bond, including their "forward" or "Western" facing personalities, regardless of the fact that they were often opposed to America's support of Israeli aggression against Palestine. When I asked people to explicitly address the differences between Christians and Muslims in Minahasa, they often countered with responses that *linked* the religious traditions – monotheism and shared religious texts: Moses and Abraham. These encounters contextualized experiences I had conducting fieldwork in Indonesian Christian churches in the United States, where the congre-

gations I worked with were predominantly from North Sulawesi. People had often quietly informed me that there were a number of Minahasan Muslims who regularly attended church activities. When I asked one of the pastors to explain their presence, she had replied simply: “They feel like they are a part of us. And we welcome them.” Perhaps the idea that people’s orientation to global political/religious narratives necessarily dictates the logic of everyday interaction on an intimate local level was one that referenced my own Western bias more than it exposed some sort of incongruity in Minahasan ideologies.

However, application of the ideal of ethnic brotherhood did not always have positive effects at level of local politics, especially for those perceived to be “outsiders” to the region. Perhaps most illustrative of this was an incident that occurred in a local street market known as *Paal Dua*. Located near the waterfront, behind Manado’s very suburban main street called the Boulevard, Paal Dua is more of a typical *pasar* than the nearby Boulevard Mall complex, with crowded streets and labyrinthine paths weaving in and out of small, individually run booths selling everything from bootleg CDs to fruits and vegetables. Loud and chaotic, *Paal Dua*, which is serviced by the local blue public transport buses called *mikrolet*s, is filled with people soon after sunset and well into the night. It’s everything the Boulevard, with its clean new buildings and Western restaurants like A&W Root Beer and Pizza Hut, is not.

The market made a good night spot for anyone out to saunter or people watch or to pick up a few *oleh-oleh* (souvenirs) to send home. However, after class one afternoon our program head announced that we should avoid the area until further notice since there had been “riots” earlier in the day, making it unsafe. We couldn’t seem to get any information about the riots other than the fact that a rock lobbed by one of street merchants in the area had sparked an unaccustomed moment of violence, that the police had been involved, and that the market was closed until further notice. It took a day or two in which to sort out why a small incident had swiftly metamorphosed into something with such disturbing undertones. Our tutors and other mentors seemed hesitant to discuss the underlying causes, and as non-native speakers we had trouble deciphering the commentaries and rumors swirling about the event.

The story we slowly pieced together was one that pitted city officials against the merchants at *Paal Dua*. The city of Manado had recently introduced a goal to become the self proclaimed “Tourist City of the World,” and the need to be an attractive destination for Europeans and Westerners led to the city’s desire to “clean up” the area. *Paal Dua* was one of the first targets in removing all traces of the street economy away from what was to be a budding new center of tourism. When police threatened that they would begin to forcibly disassemble the plywood coverings that made the merchant’s mobile carts into a ramshackle permanent structure, a rock was thrown in frustration. That was enough of a motivation for the police to clear the area by force.

Something seemed awry with the city’s willingness to take such drastic measures to eradicate this street market and ignite a controversy that would last well through the summer’s end. Who were these merchants, commonly known as *pedagang kaki lima* (PKL), who the local government had no qualms about violently and publicly relocating and who inspired little sympathy among the city’s inhabitants? The situation was disconcerting when juxtaposed against the focus on regional harmony, hospitality and neighborliness that was evident in so many other aspects of life in Manado.

The real problem with this particular group of PKL was not that their mobile carts had mushroomed into an eyesore, although that didn’t help their case. Instead, it seemed that people’s underlying disdain for the situation at *Paal Dua* stemmed from the fact that most of these merchants were itinerants from the newly reconfigured *propinsi* Gorontalo,<sup>7</sup> a predominantly Muslim center about a 12-hour drive to the south. The Gorontaloese were outsiders twice over, hailing from another region that was no longer even peripherally connected to Minahasan political affairs and outside overt political control. This was certainly a factor in local official’s decision to take such decisive and aggressive action to clear the marketplace. Their actions exacerbated a tense situation but media coverage and nationwide scrutiny caused the local government to adopt a much more conciliatory tone in their dealings with the group.

These events were not, as it might easily be assumed, just the machinations of a Christian dominated local government trying to quietly run a group of Muslim

merchants out of town. What people invoked over and over when I questioned them directly about their approval of relocating the PKL from *Paal Dua* was a sense of the danger emanating from regional outsiders, people who didn't know or respect the covenant that Minahasans, both Christians and Muslims alike, had to protect and promote the peace in their homeland. How could these men, who came from a region that wasn't populated by streets where mosques and churches coexist peacefully side by side, be trusted to maintain what Minahasans worked and prayed so hard to protect? Would they understand the affinity many Minahasans feel with Westerners and extend that special sort of hospitality to the droves of tourists that locals were anxiously hoping would arrive? What was at stake, as far as local residents were concerned, was if the PKL could really be trusted to understand something they believed was essential to Minahasan life, and was worth protecting.

These issues touched on questions of faith, something I heard a lot about during my stay in Manado. Not faith as it applied exclusively to any one religious tradition, but a perseverance of belief in the principle of ethnic brotherhood, an unshakable conviction that dedication to this principle would (and does) see it realized. Like any true faith, it is partially blind and certainly naïve, overlooking everything from the little inconsistencies to the glaring omissions that it encompasses. I encountered just as many contrary examples to the slogan *Torang Samua Basudara* as I did complimentary ones, making it difficult at times to understand how they all existed in the same universe. But as we sat in the mayor's office that night, Muslim, Christian and Westerner alike rooting for Dirly against the odds, I could see that despite its sometimes overly optimistic cast on local relations, I could not discount the belief that people shared in the intangible ideal of Minahasan brotherhood. At least in that respect we were essentially all the same.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Bule* is common Indonesian slang that refers to a white foreigner.

<sup>2</sup> Minahasa is an ethnic term describing people who live in the region of North Sulawesi, the fifth and smallest province in Sulawesi. Minahasa also refers to a political geographical designation that is used to describe the areas of Bitung, Manado and Minahasa regency, three of the five administrative units in North Sulawesi Province. Manado is the capital city of North Sulawesi province. A number of languages are spoken in the region including Indonesian, a Malay based creole called Manado Malay or *Bahasa Manado*, Tountemboan, Toulor, Tonsea and Tombulu. Although people may refer to village or sub regional identities, most people identify themselves as part of the *suku Minahasa* (Minahasan ethnic group).

<sup>3</sup> The word Minahasa itself first appeared in VOC communique 1789 referring to a meeting of *walak* or regional tribal heads in the area of North Sulawesi controlled by the Dutch, according to historian David Henley. Henley also notes that Dutch missionaries promoted the idea of a unified regional ethnic identity in order to unite the eight disparate tribes in the area under Dutch control into a single unit. In Henley, D. 1993. Nationalism and Regionalism in Colonial Indonesia: the case of Minahasa, *Indonesia* 55:91-112.

<sup>4</sup> Local traditional dress for women

<sup>5</sup> Indonesian term for the head covering worn by Muslim women

<sup>6</sup> Taman Mini Indonesian Indah (Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature) a theme park in Jakarta that has miniature replicas of regional ethnic structures from all over the Indonesian archipelago

<sup>7</sup> Gorontalo seceded from the North Sulawesi province and became its own province in December of 2000.