

The Indonesian Popular Music Industry

Navigating Shadows of Politics and Cultural Uncertainty

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At the beginning of 2019, limitations on expression and creativity became a hot topic in Indonesia. There is a general anxiety among Indonesian musicians regarding the emergence of the Proposed Bill on Music (RUUP), which would limit musical expression. There are several pros and cons towards RUUP which eventually led to discussions that proposed a review of the draft. Restrictions on musical expression, as seen in several examples both in Indonesia and internationally, are commonly aimed at popular music genres that intersect with the local and national industries. Political interests and competition form the root of the problem. This chapter discusses the journey of the Indonesian popular music industry since the colonial era in the early 20th century: Sukarno's "old order" era (1945–1965), Suharto's "new order" era (1965–1998), and the post-Suharto reformation era (1999–present day), overshadowed by the political context that characterised each governmental period. Given that Indonesia's popular music industry is tied to the socio-political condition of each era, the discussion considers history and phenomenology in order to diachronically analyse the banning of Indonesian popular music, following the timeline of the four socio-political eras. The investigation considers the ups and downs of the political context in Indonesia, as well as its consequential influence which led to cultural uncertainties that decorate the world of the national popular music industry.

Introduction

Although the RUUP (Proposed Bill on Music) recommended in 2019, which had been largely criticised by Indonesian musicians, was revoked, it has remained a popular topic of discussion. Among all clauses, clauses 5 and 50 are considered the most problematic. Statements such as "*membawa budaya barat yang negatif*" (lit. "bringing negative Western cultures") and "religious blasphemy", appearing in these two clauses, are indeed very ambiguous. Within this globalised world, in which every individual is connected as part of a single "global village", how can we measure Western or Eastern influences? Which one between those two dichotomies is (and gives) negative and positive influences? Which norm and which "religion" can gain superiority and be placed as the sole authority of music?

This ambiguity is the reason why these two clauses are often considered as "*karet*" (lit. "rubber") clauses which could be easily manipulated by religious and political authorities. Another

problematic statement such as “*membuat musik provokatif*” (lit. “composing provocative music”), as an example, could be manipulated to arrest some musicians such as Swami who composed a song entitled “*Bongkar*” (lit. “Taking Apart”), Efek Rumah Kaca with their “*Mosi Tidak Percaya*” (lit. “Unfaithful Motion”), and Navicula with their “*Mafia Hukum*” (lit. “Law Mafia”). These songs are just a few among many examples of Indonesian popular songs with lyrics that poetically criticise injustices of the state.

This contemporary case reminds Indonesians of Soekarno’s era (1945–1965) when he banned Western music which he called “*ngak ngik ngok*” (lit. “noise”) music and which he also considered imperialistic with the power to destroy the spirit of nationalism at the time. A famous music group, *Koes Plus*, whose music resembles that of The Beatles, was arrested for this reason. The popular music genre that received support and was distributed was the music loved by Soekarno: *Irama lenso* (“local music”). Another restriction on creativity took place during the new order era (1965–1998) when Soeharto banned the distribution of Rhoma Irama’s songs.

Following these events, I will analyse popular music in Indonesia as intrinsically linked to the shadows of the ever-dynamic Indonesian politics. The examination is presented diachronically to discuss the development of “popular” music from the colonial period to the present era. This method is built following Foucault’s (1964) thesis in “Madness and Civilization” inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s masterpiece, “Untimely Mediations”, which presents alternative readings of history(ies). As “a philosophical historian” (Foucault’s term), one looks back to the past to help sort out urgent issues of the present. Thus, I dive into the chronic Indonesian context of political uncertainty shadowing the life of Indonesian popular music to find the concept and idea of a *Nusantara* (another term referencing the archipelago) music industry in the past, present, and future.

The Music Industry During the Colonial Era

The colonial era was the embryonic period of the Indonesian industry of popular music entertainment. Between 1903 and 1917, record labels, such as Gramophone Company, Odeon, Beka, Columbia, Graphophone Company, Parlophone, Anker, Lyrophon, and Bintang Sapoe flourished. Yampolsky reported that Odeon produced 2,614 singles, while others such as Bintang Sapoe and Gramophone produced 1,140 and 632 singles (Yampolsky 2013). The popular music industry has thrived since the early 20th century with record labels and local companies. Among other private enterprises, Tio Tek Hong began his business in 1904 by importing and distributing phonograph cylinders throughout Indonesia. Popular songs recorded with Tio Tek Hong include Tjente Manis, Boeroeng Nori, Djali-Djali, Tjerai Kasih, Paioeng Patah, Dajoeng Sampan, Kopi Soesoe, and “Sang Bango” among others.

The most significant historical record of Tio Tek Hong’s company is Indonesia’s National Anthem, “*Indonesia Raya*”, composed by W.R. Supratman. With this record, every Indonesian throughout the country had access to “*Indonesia Raya*”. Despite its high demand, bought mostly by some elites, several “*Indonesia Raya*” tape records had been banned by colonial authorities. After the second congress of PNI (Indonesia’s National Party) on 20 May 1929 claimed this song as the national anthem, the Dutch became afraid of the song’s influence (Sularto 1985, 166).

The German record label, Beka, came to Indonesia in 1905. After their record tour in Burma, India, and Egypt recording their local music, they arrived in Indonesia to document music of the Nusantara region, ranging from Javanese *gamelan* to *stambul* music. Following this success, Odeon arrived in the archipelago in 1907 and successfully bought Beka’s share in 1911. After 1928 Columbia Graphophone Company dominated the scene and eventually changed

their name to become EMI records. The popular music recording industry swiftly developed to cater to a Nusantara scene and its musical endeavours.

Shaping the Nation: From the Old to the New Era

Most references on the history of the music industry in Indonesia show the dynamics that began in 1951 when a local company named Irama started producing LP recordings. In 1954, record companies Remaco and Dimita also participated in the industry. Some years later, Lokananta, a state-owned record company founded in Solo in 1955, flourished and dominated the domestic record industry focusing on Javanese music. Its short dominance due to technological changes in the following year resulted in the inclusion of new companies and production techniques in the music industry around the world including Indonesia (Sen and Hill 2000, 195). During this era, under President Soekarno, the presence of foreign culture was, however, considered dangerous, with the potential to damage the struggle of the nation that was looking for an identity. *Pancasila* (lit. “five pillars”, namely, belief in the one god, humanity, a united nation, democracy, and social justice) and NASAKOM’s (lit. Nationalism and Communism) ideals served as a middle ground and strong foundation for Indonesia to face the challenges of globalisation (Dahm 1987).

President Soekarno’s speech entitled “Rediscover Our Revolution” read on 17 August 1959 urged the young generations to stand against neo-colonialism and Western imperialist cultures. The Liverpool pop band The Beatles was considered incompatible with the ideals of the new Indonesian nation. The government assumed that The Beatles’ songs could have devastating effects on Indonesian young generations. As a result, Koes Bersaudara was imprisoned for singing Beatles songs and composing Beatles-like songs.

The political changes in Indonesia from the Old Order to the New Order in 1965–1966 reopened the national music market to receive Western products and encouraged the growth of new pop bands. Western songs previously banned were heard once again. Songs from Western bands such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Deep Purple, and groups from Indonesia such as Koes Brothers, The Rollies, and God Bless, were constantly played on amateur radio stations along with musical performances in major cities in Indonesia crowded with spectators (Sen and Hill 2004). The Koes Brothers, imprisoned during the Soekarno reign, reappeared and became the pioneer pop and rock ‘n’ roll group in Indonesia under the name Koes Plus in 1969. The popularity of this group soared and the group managed to release twenty-three albums in 1974. They released six albums in 1975 and ten albums in 1976.

The prominence of Western bands did not only influence Indonesian pop bands. Rhoma Irama with his Soneta group concocted the genre now known as *dangdut* from applying Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple influences to Malay rhythmic songs. In 1970, *dangdut* was modernised because the politics in Indonesia during that time allowed Western cultural influences such as electric guitars, percussion, saxophone, and electric organs. Musical instruments paved the way for new variations of *dangdut* music. In 1977, Rhoma Irama brought *dangdut* music to be at par with rock music through the “Duel Concert” of God Bless vs. Soneta Group at the Istora Senayan, Jakarta. The event confirmed the position of *dangdut* music in Indonesia, which was later separated from the Malay music genre and became known as Indonesia’s national popular music genre.

Rhoma Irama with his Soneta group won a place in the hearts of Indonesian citizens. The emergence of Rhoma Irama in the Indonesian world of music and film supported his fame. Posters were installed in village houses and his music was sung everywhere. As a musician, Rhoma became a phenomenon. Not only did he make distinct rhythms with a touch of *melayu*

rock music, but *dangdut* songs also depicted social conditions with poetically embedded criticism. In addition to music, Rhoma was also very interested in Islam and eventually Soneta became a platform to chant pitched songs of *da'wah* (Islamic summons).

Following his success in music and movies, Rhoma stepped into politics. It is not surprising that, as a person who fought for Islam, Rhoma joined the PPP (Islamic Party)¹. “I defend PPP *lillahitaala* as a Muslim, I have to choose a Muslim leader too”, Rhoma said to the media (Sikumbang 2014). Under the PPP, Rhoma naturally had an overwhelming number of supporters. During the two electoral seasons in 1977 and 1982, Rhoma was able to convene millions of people to come to the PPP campaign arena.

Rhoma Irama's political affiliation, which did not align with the government's GolKar party, resulted in his being banned from appearing on TVRI (National Television Station). His songs were removed from playlists of RRI (National Radio Station), the circulation of cassettes were inhibited, and acquiring concert permits became increasingly complicated.

The highlight of the Rhoma Irama music controversy took place when he received the *fatwa haram* (forbidden under Islamic law) from the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in 1984. Rhoma was forbidden to include scriptural verses in his music. From that year, Rhoma and Soneta Group stopped performing for five years. However, when they re-launched a new album, Rhoma Irama did not soften his criticism in his lyrics. Their fifteenth album *Gali Lobang Tutup Lobang*, released in 1989, criticised foreign debt as follows:

<i>Gali-gali-gali-gali-galilobang</i>	Digging a hole,
<i>Gali-gali-gali-gali-galilobang</i>	Digging a hole
<i>Lobang digali menggali lobang</i>	The hole is dug to dig a hole
<i>Untuk menutup lobang</i>	To close the aperture
<i>Tertutup sudah lobang yang lama</i>	After closing an old hole
<i>Lobang baru terbuka</i>	A new hole is opened
<i>Gali lobang tutup lobang</i>	Dig a hole close a hole
<i>Pinjam uang bayar hutang</i>	Borrow money to pay a debt
<i>Gali lobang tutup lobang</i>	Dig a hole close a hole
<i>Pinjam uang bayar hutang</i>	Borrow money to pay a debt
<i>Gali-gali-gali-gali-galilobang</i>	Digging a hole
<i>Gali-gali-gali-gali-galilobang</i>	Digging a hole
<i>Gali-gali-gali-gali-gali</i>	Dig-dig-dig-dig-dig
<i>Walau makan sederhana</i>	Although eating humbly
<i>Ikan asin sambal lalap</i>	Salted fish spicy sauce side dish
<i>Walau baju sederhana</i>	Although clothes are simple
<i>Asal menutup aurat</i>	As long as private parts are concealed
<i>Walau makan sederhana</i>	Although eating humbly
<i>Walau baju sederhana</i>	Although clothes are simple
<i>Walau serba sederhana</i>	Although mostly simple
<i>Asal sehat jiwa raga</i>	As long as with a healthy body and soul
<i>Dan juga hutang tak punya</i>	And also without a debt
<i>Itulah orang yang kaya</i>	Those are rich people

Every criticism of the government made by Rhoma Irama with Soneta Group echoed widely, not just on the radio and on television, but also during public events such as concerts. As the ruling party, GolKar had to consider the popularity of Rhoma Irama. After the 1997 election, Rhoma crossed over to join GolKar and reaped a sharp rebuke from his devotees who were mostly supporters of the PPP party. However, Rhoma had myriad reasons to embrace GolKar. For Rhoma, a party that is Islamic was not enough to fight for Islam. Therefore, Rhoma chose to

take shelter under the “Banyan Tree” (GolKar’s symbolic logo). “PPP is indeed voicing aspirations of Islam, but because PPP is not in a winning, superior and dominant position, the results are less effective”, (Sikumbang 2014) Rhoma stated in the media as the reason for his move.

From that moment on, *dangdut* became a means to mobilise political parties every five years during national elections from the New Order era until the present day. A *dangdut* singer can sing for any party as long as the singer and group are paid well. *Dangdut* politicisation was also considered a potential threat to the authorities when the “King of Dangdut” Rhoma Irama supported political parties during the New Order era. The banning of various Rhoma Irama’s concerts was instituted by the authorities at the time. However, the connection between *dangdut* and political elections does not mean that *dangdut* has ideological ties with politics. *Dangdut* functions as the messenger used to mobilise various groups and interests, yet its identity remains autonomous.

According to musical sociologist Andrew Weintraub, *dangdut* music is native to Indonesian culture, and its character is representative of Indonesia because the themes of the songs are close to the lives of people in Indonesian society (Weintraub 2012). The lyrics and music of *dangdut* mirror the birth of blues music in the United States as seductive and full of miserable life stories of the underprivileged. The term “*dangdut* as folk music” is an inherent social identity of the middle and lower classes which constitute the majority of Indonesian citizens. The Koes Brothers, with their “global flavours” of musical choices, were considered inconsistent with the ideology of a nation that was crawling in search of an identity. However, Rhoma Irama was able to blend the rhythm of the Malay and rock genres successfully, receiving a positive response from Indonesians transitioning from regional to global citizens.

Towards Indonesian Reformation

With the collapse of the New Order regime, political reforms were initiated to attempt to change the previous order by starting to think about social justice through a systematic decentralisation of the government. The change from a Javanese centralised system to regional autonomy inevitably changed the voyage of Indonesian popular music industries. The transition resulted in the emergence of regional pop music industries. In line with technological developments that facilitated independent music production systems, major label companies no longer monopolised the distribution market, and indie labels began to grow from local to international distribution.

Prior to the reformation era the Indonesian music industry was monopolised by international distribution companies. This evoked a spirit of anti-“mainstreamism”, which became known as the “indie movement”. Some indie pop music groups were considered capable of changing the views of the community about the market situation of the music industry in Indonesia. In the midst of a capitalist ideology that dominated the Indonesian pop music industry, emerging streams of music were produced in the name of freedom. This movement set indie groups apart from the intervention of capitalists while presenting entertainment to a society that was hungry for entertainment. Behind the rise of Indonesian pop music, there was a flow of artists in Indonesia that carried creative musical approaches against the interests of the cultural industry. Freedom of expression is one reason why this music genre is called “independent music”. Starting from the production process to the distribution of the album, everything is done independently. Unlike pop music that became a mass-produced commodity, the indie movement provided a different colour and message amidst national pop music uniformity.

At the same time, songs with the theme of resistance began to fill the music market in Indonesia. Disappointment with the ruling regime mobilised the masses to unite people and crush social injustices. Songs with critical lyrics became a powerful weapon to incite the spirit

of the masses to take action. Iwan Fals's and Slank's popularity represent this phenomenon very well.

One of the largest indie groups in Indonesia is Slank. Slank began in December 1983, with the initial name of Cikini Stone Complex (CSC), performing songs from the Rolling Stones, the British group that Slank members idolised. Slank combined pop, rock 'n' roll, blues, and ethics with simple lyrics. Slank's first album in 1990 exploded on the market with the hit song "Maafkan" (Forgive) and received an award at BASF as the best newcomer. In 1994, Slank founded its own label called PISS Records which then turned into Slank Records. From then on Slank launched work independently. Slank has a large number of fans known as Slankers scattered all over the country. The number of registered Slankers has reached three million people, with the number of fans on social media reaching seven million.

Slank read the zeitgeist and depicted existing social conditions which made every album break sales records. The four main themes of Slank's albums are social politics, love, the youth movement, and the environment, conveyed through simple and straightforward lyrics. The peak of Slank's events took place on the streets with a resistance song and supported by a large number of Slankers in a demonstration calling for political reformation. Given their power to control masses, members of the group were approached by many politicians to enter the world of politics. However, given their indie spirit and their philosophy, Slank remained independent, but not for long.

The Democratic Fiesta and a New Chapter of the Indonesian Music Industry

At noon in 2014, under a bright sun, the Gelora Bung Karno stadium in Jakarta was filled with millions of people wearing the colour red. On the day of the last round of the presidential campaign, candidate Jokowi-JK was enlivened by hundreds of artists. *Revolusi Harmoni, Konser Salam Dua Jari* (lit. The Harmonious Revolution, Two Fingers Greeting Concert) was the title. Musicians openly declared themselves supporters of the presidential candidate. Slank, the most prevalent Indonesian rock band whose lyrics are infused with social criticism, were not to be missed as they openly declared their support of Jokowi-JK.

At first, the survey institute said that the probability of the presidential candidate ticket of Prabowo–Hatta winning was superior. However, everything changed when the musicians joined the *Revolusi Harmoni* and declared their support for Jokowi-JK on 11 June 2014. Of the many musicians who joined the *Revolusi Harmoni*, the most striking was the three-decade long group Slank. The guitarist of Slank, Abdee Negara, stated, "Because we see that there is hope for the future of Indonesia to get better, becoming bigger as it should be, through the idea of a Mental Revolution initiated by Jokowi-JK" (Sikumbang, 2014). Abdee Negara also mentioned that as a form of support for Jokowi-JK, the *Revolusi Harmoni* community for the Mental Revolution created a song titled "*Salam Dua Jari*" ("Greeting with Two Fingers") made specifically by Slank to invite the masses to support Jokowi. The number two was set by the Election Commission for Jokowi-JK. The signs "two" and "two fingers" signify "the second candidate" of the 2014 Indonesian presidential election (Jokowi-JK) arranged by the Election Commission of Jokowi-JK for their campaign. Two fingers are often associated as a symbol of peace used by Slank to signify social power for change. Slank could not be underestimated: the Jakarta-based band had millions of fans throughout Indonesia. After the concert, Jokowi's position skyrocketed upward to 47.8 percent compared to Prabowo–Hatta with 44.2 percent (Antara June 2014).

Support came not only from national musicians. The day before the presidential election, Arkarna, through the @arkarna official Twitter account, wrote on 8 July 2014, "Vote Jokowi

for better and stronger future in Indonesia! Say Yes to Democracy Arkarna Vote Jokowi #Jokowi9Juli”. Additionally, other renowned musicians such as Jason Mraz and Sting also provided support for Jokowi. Jason wrote in his twitter account @jason_mraz, “To my friends in Indonesia, this week you are empowered with your vote! Get involved in democracy & be heard! #Jokowi9Juli #yes!” While Sting wrote “Use your rights – every vote counts #Jokowi9Juli” on his Facebook account www.facebook.com/sting.

Jokowi won the presidential election. The General Elections Commission (KPU) determined that of thirty-three provinces, Jokowi-Kalla earned 53.15 percent or 70,633,576 votes while Prabowo–Hatta won 46.85 percent or 62,262,844 votes. Within this new political sphere, the involvement of musicians on the political stage increased and became increasingly public. Aside from support, many musicians also tried to become politicians. Fame became a form of great capital for the distribution of music. Political support both from local and international groups indicated unique patterns of the new digital millennia. Slank was no longer “independent” and had allied itself with one political party.

The New Order era passed while the Reformation Era arrived at its peak. The hegemony that had been collapsing for more than three decades gave Indonesian citizens a taste of freedom. The acquired freedom has had a major impact on the music industry in Indonesia. Songs with themes of love affairs and infidelity have adorned the music in Indonesia since the early 2000s. Indonesian society experienced a period during which the decline of confidence in the government brought distrust among couples. Aside from love affairs and infidelity, themes of Indonesian songs also became vulgar and described sexual relationships that were once taboo but became very prominent. At the same time, groups that seemed to be anti-government slowly took sides with different political parties.

Market logics and pop music operate as an inseparable dualism. Both have major implications in the formation of ideology and in building supporters. These implications, according to Adorno (1997), are the starting point of the cultural industry logic movement that developed as a project of homogenisation of taste. Concretely, this effect is evident from how tastes, attitudes, styles of dressing, and identity construction are chosen and conducted almost entirely with the same mindset. It is a representation of a collective identity that reflects the nation. Pop music consumed by society depicts a significant similarity where it becomes “standardised” both in terms of musical patterns and lyrics (Adorno 1997). The simplicity of the lyrics reveals the lives of people, a revelation that at times becomes the role of the music industry in Indonesia (Aryandari 2018, 89).

Conclusion

The constellation system of music and politics in every era of Indonesian history displays complexity. However, the patterns become clear when the history is read diachronically. During the colonial era the national anthem, “Indonesia Raya”, ignited the spirit of nationalism and was considered dangerous by the powerful colonialists. However, the emergence of the record industry made the distribution of the national anthem and other local songs possible so that the Dutch could not control music. The colonial era was then followed by the Old Order era, a time when the search for identity as part of a newly constructed ideology became the reason global music with Western influences was banned. Music from America and the West were considered inconsistent with the *Pancasila* and *Nasakom* (Nationalist and Communist). The search for Indonesia’s identity was contested and the concept of multiculturalism became a wise middle ground.

Unlike the previous government, the New Order government tried to open the veil by beginning to accept Western and American cultural influences. As a result of this shift, a hybrid music industry became a national alternative for embracing global influences. However, national media stations (TVRI and RRI) were used as a mouthpiece for the government to influence mass opinion. Thus, musicians who were not aligned with government views were not allowed to enter TVRI and RRI circuits. The Reformation era offered freedom and regional autonomy that made musicians known to a wider community with a growth in both national and regional industries. Despite decentralisation and regional autonomy, the national industry continued to reside in Jakarta with a new marriage between music and politics. This music industry pattern during the Reformation era questions the notion of an intrinsic decentralisation.

Lastly, starting from the striking phenomenon of the 2014 presidential election, music became a universal language capable of mobilising the masses. The attachment of music to surrounding industries made music not only mere “entertainment” but also a vehicle with a message that could spearhead the ongoing formation of the Indonesian nation. The music industry in Indonesia has always been in the shadow of dynamic Indonesian politics. To understand the dynamics of the national music industry is to understand the dynamics of Indonesian politics.

Note

- 1 During the New Order Era there were three parties, namely Golongan Karya (GolKar), PPP (Islamic Party), and PDI. GolKar was the biggest party and always won the democratic fiesta followed by PPP and PDI.

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