

When the the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDI-P) came out of the general elections with the majority of votes, and the popularity of its leader Megawati Sukarnoputri increased day by day, it pushed the issue of “gender” right into the centre of the nation’s attention.

Sentiments against a woman filling the position of the nation’s president were expressed by a number of religious and political leaders as well as individuals. The ensuing debate then reached a point where a group of women deemed it urgent to issue a statement refuting the use of religious dogma to discredit a woman’s political right to become president. In less than 48 hours, the statement, which was released on 22 June 1999, received support from over 300 individuals—women and men—and organisations who agreed that women’s political rights should be honoured in line with the 1945 Constitution and the law. The group, named the Civil Society for the Political Rights of Women, stressed the significance of upholding justice and democracy and rebuild the political rights of Indonesian women regardless of age, class, education, religion,

ethnic background and political beliefs. Specifically, the statement says there is no explicit stipulation in the Al-Qur’an that a woman cannot become a leader.

Signatories included human rights activists like Saparinah Sadli and Marzuki Darusman, Dharma Wanita Presidium head Hartini Hartarto, gender specialist Mayling Oey, noted lawyers Rita Kolibonso and Todung Mulya Lubis, the National Mandate Party (PAN) Deputy Chair Toeti Heraty Roosseno, respected economist Mohammad Sadli, playwright Ratna Sarumpaet, NGO activist Erna Witoelar, political scientists Chusnul Mar’iyah and Smita Notosusanto.

But more than anyone else in the long list of signatories, the names of Siti Nuriyah

Indonesian Women Reclaim Their Place Under the Sun

by Carla Bianpoen



Women Demand: Stop the Violence, a rally held in conjunction with the International Anti-Violence Day on 25 November 1998

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Wahid, Omi Komaria Madjid and Khofifah Indar Parawangsa caught attention. Siti Nuriyah is a Muslim activist, the head of over 200 *pesantren putri* (religious boarding schools for girls) and is also the wife to Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid. Omi Komaria is well versed in the teachings of her religion and the wife of Muslim scholar Nurcholis Majid. Khofifah Indar Parawansa, a former legislator, was then a proponent of the National Awakening Party.

Khofifah, in a subsequent television commentary, said that nowhere in the constitution nor in any law or regulation was gender specifically mentioned as a requirement for the presidency, and neither had there been any objections to these legal provisions.

The statement, which received media coverage, triggered a continuous flow of supporters. Yet, this did not help much in the final manoeuvres of political players.

Even Abdurrahman Wahid, the leader of over 30 million members of the Nahdatul Ulama, who had initially said he had no problem with a woman becoming president and had staunchly supported Megawati, became her opponent in the eleventh hour. Political manoeuvring further led the way to his election as president in what is called the most democratic election since 32 years ago. From a gender perspective, this was a blow to the cause of gender, and democracy.

Noted women's activist and legislator Nursjahbani Katjasungkana, for one, expressed her profound disappointment though she was not a fervent supporter of Megawati. "I do feel very sad," she conveyed

to reporters immediately after the vote count. Her disappointment particularly referred to the political manoeuvring to prevent Megawati from becoming the President. In fact, many women who had initially been critical of Megawati came to back the defeated presidential frontrunner. That she has won the vice-presidency gives reason to rejoice. Yet, from a gender perspective, the whole process was disappointing and telling of the position of women. Particularly so, as the women dynamics in 1998 were leading towards the political arena. But frankly, at that time, hardly anybody was imagining such a dramatic unfolding of the gender issue.

1998-A Change in Dynamics

The year 1998 will remain as a year of shattering experiences. It will also be remembered as a year in which women's dynamics emerged in an unprecedented force, uniting women of all walks of life, of the most diverse ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds, including the active participation of Catholic nuns and Muslim scholars. This immense upsurge in women's dynamics led the breakthroughs that would have been unimaginable in the previous 32 years. No doubt it was the tumbling economy, the ensuing political turbulence, and an overall oppressive apprehension that had provoked women's inner strength. While the word "revolution" may be too strong a term to describe women's reaction, it does reveal the sentiments prevailing at that time.

An early sign of women's "changing" dynamics was evident when women demanded at least 20 percent of women's participation in the govern-

ment's World Bank-supported labour-intensive projects that were to accommodate laid-off workers as a result of the economic and monetary crises. The demand was made to the World Bank president and the National Development Agency by members of the Lotus Foundation in co-ordination with other NGOs. The Lotus Foundation is essentially a lobby group that pursues women's rights as human rights.

But it was a mix of continuous price hikes, the overall mood of oppression and sombre apprehension, and the dark fear of popular explosions, that made women realise they needed to do something to prevent bloodshed. At that time, the only safe thing to do was to act under cover of the traditional concept of the role of women. On 23 February 1998, the Suara Ibu Peduli or the Voice of Concerned Mothers (SIP) decided to hold a peaceful rally at the roundabout in front of Hotel Indonesia at the city centre. As concerned mothers, they prayed and sang songs typical of everyday mothers, but also urged the government to provide food and milk at affordable prices.

The initiative came from young women intellectuals together with long-time feminist Toety Herati Roosseno, a professor of philosophy, who assumed that as mothers, they would not be shot at. Indeed they were not, but three of them were harshly taken to the police station where they had to undergo a 23-hour interrogation. The warrant was presented only an hour before their release. Their case attracted massive local and international attention, introducing a new wave of young women to prominence.

The investigation at the



Mari Berdamai means Let's make peace. The two women are Saparinah Sadli, 73, chair of the National Commission on Violence Against Women and Herawati Diah, 83, chair of the Women's Movement for Voters Education

police office and the legal procedure in court drew sympathy from the public and received wide media coverage, with pictures of Karlina Leksono and Gadis Arivia appearing in almost every news media.

SIP persisted in the role of mothers, providing affordable milk for children under five and the elderly. Their effort received much support with donations flowing in, and housewives from other parts of Jakarta started grouping, requesting SIP to allow them to use the logo to support milk distribution in their specific area.

While SIP persisted in the mother's role, they also continued to support political aspirations, playing a key role in the supply of survival food for the students who persisted on parliament building, and pursuing the fall of Suharto.

Groundbreaking, though not widely known, was the interfaith women's prayer held on 8 March 1998, the International Women's Day that authorities never acknowledged because of its alleged leftist associations. Seruni was a spon-

aneous gathering of women from all walks of life. Breaking traditional barriers of ethnicity, religious and class backgrounds, they came together at a time of overall oppression when gatherings were looked at with great suspicion.

Not surprisingly, the location was held secret up to the last possible moment. Another unique and important feature was that the prayer was for all, putting to the fore the virtues of bold and courageous women from the history of all religions. It expressed a united and impassioned critique of prevailing injustice and unlawfulness. Today, Seruni continues to organise women in peace-making efforts.

Perhaps the most known and publicised during that year was the Women's Division of the Team of Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes. Tim Relawan became instrumental in informing the public about the massive rapes occurring during the anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta in May 1998. Working with other NGOs, they provided counselling and other services for the victims and their relatives. Un-

daunted by death threats, anonymous letters and harassing phone calls, they continued helping the victims in whatever form possible, and have been untiringly speaking out against violence on women. Their revealing reports of the violence and the wide media coverage were instrumental in actions taken to put pressure on the government. Although the most published names were Ita F. Nadia and Karlina Leksono, they stand for numerous others who often risked their lives or livelihood because of their involvement in the team.

While the entire people underwent a kind of shock at the revelations on the massive rapes, government authorities persisted in denials that it had happened at all. But the more they denied, the more people came together in a united front.

In less than one month, the statement drafted on 16 June by about 16 women of interdisciplinary academic and professional backgrounds found support from 4,000 people, later called the Civil Society on Violence Against Women. But President Jusuf Bacharuddin Habibie remained silent.

Following further deterioration of the social situation, women decided to see the President. A delegation of 22 women was received on 15 July. Led by senior activist and human rights defender Prof. Saparinah Sadli, they succeeded in making the president realise the urgency of an official statement of condemnation. There and then, President Habibie, together with the women, formulated the Statement and issued it to the media, much against the advice of his aide who had recommended consulting the Cabinet before is-

suing the statement.

The formation of the National Commission on Violence against Women was another important result. It is headed by Saporinah Sadli, who is also a member of the National Commission on Human Rights.

Different from the above-mentioned groups were the activities of those who proceeded directly into the political arena. The women of Gema Madani (Echo of Civil Society), for one, started their actions in early February. When Emil Salim's candidacy for the vice presidency did not take off the ground despite long deliberations among supporters, three women turned the scale and launched the movement which gave courage to thousands of people. Saporinah Sadli, a staunch women's rights activist and head of the postgraduate programme on women studies of the University of Indonesia, Mayling Oey, a gender specialist and founding member of the Lotus Foundation, Tini Hadad, an activist and then director of the Indonesian Consumer's Foundation (YLKI), together with Agus Purnomo, who is also the director of the Foundation of Worldwide Wildlife in Indonesia, organised a brainstorming meeting with about 40 selected invitees on 11 February to launch economist and one-time minister for the environment Emil Salim, as an alternative candidate for the vice-presidency.

Suggesting a candidate other than the ones whose official nomination had been announced was, at that time, a bold act of courage that generated a commotion both in the general public and in the usual political discourse. Gema Madani incited new hopes for the common people and spurred the dynamics of a civil society

at a time when opposition was a bad word.

Another group that broke away from the traditional image of women was the Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan dan Demokrasi (Indonesian Women's Coalition for Justice and Democracy), formed on 18 May 1998. The situation in the country was fast deteriorating. About 62 women's groups and individuals from various educational, ethnic, religious and professional backgrounds subscribed to the demands of the coalition which was to bring down Suharto and reject Habibie. Having contributed to the stepping down of Suharto, the women's Coalition went on to seek wider unity among women throughout the country.

They first took the International Anti-Violence Day on 25 November as an opportunity to co-operate with local NGOs throughout the country and facilitate the organisation of anti-violence rallies held simultaneously throughout Indonesia. Then they organised the 70th anniversary of the first Women's Congress in December 1998 to push for the first Women's Congress since the downfall of Suharto.

Pursuing to unite women from all walks of life regardless of their educational, religious, ethnic, or professional backgrounds, the Congress aimed to solidify a women's force strong enough to become a pressure group for mainstreaming gender concerns in the political arena, and to prepare a joint platform for justice and democracy. Overwhelming enthusiasm brought around 600 women from all over Indonesia to the historic town of Yogyakarta, a number hardly expected by the small executive

team, which had only two months to organise. At the forum, euphoria reigned supreme after 32 years of repression. However, democratic principles of participation were still new, and mutual suspicion that was a remainder from the past, strongly coloured this auspicious event.

Yet, the Congress managed to confirm the Indonesian Women's Coalition for Justice and Democracy, electing a Presidium who in turn elected Nursjahbani Katjasungkana, a noted lawyer and women's activist, as Secretary General. The inclusion of representatives in the Presidium of controversial minority groups like lesbians and sex workers was a new development, but caused some uproar after the Congress, particularly among the members of the Kowani, until then the national umbrella for about 70 women's organisations. Kowani was initially an outflow of the first Indonesian Women's Congress (1928), but had developed into a government-linked organisation. Kowani also charged the organisers of the Congress of leftist (communist) aspirations, especially after its chairperson sat next to a surviving member of the Gerwani at a panel in a seminar previous to the Congress. Gerwani was one of the largest women's movements in the late 1950s to the early 1960s. They were banned due to their affiliation with the outlawed Communist Party. The Congress organisers were, however, united by the vision that as women, they had the right to have a voice and be heard.

Today, the Coalition has branches in several parts of the country, and is on its way to become a strong alternative to the Kowani as an umbrella for women's organisations. Their Secretary General Nursjahbani is a

member of the MPR, the People's Consultative Assembly, while their demand for a quorum of 30 percent for women's participation has become an all-women's call.

The first of its kind was the Gerakan Perempuan Sadar Pemilu (GPSP), which confirmed the significance of articulating women's political aspirations.

The then upcoming general elections (June 1999) provided a timely opportunity. Herawati Diah, a popular senior figure, in co-ordination with Debra Yatim of the Women's Coalition, initiated the movement that was to inspire women who used to stand outside the activist movement. With the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), GPSP in April 1999 covered over 80 locations in the Jakarta area. In August 1999, their activities went as far as Sumatra and Kalimantan, while their news bulletin *Suara Perempuan* reached 8,250 people in seven provinces. As UNDP's assistance came to an end, the movement transformed into a self-sustaining foundation, with activities taking a wider political focus. Since November 1999, the re-formed foundation works under the name of Gerakan Pemberdayaan Swara Perempuan, the Movement for the Empowerment of Women.

For women in the arts, politics has usually been too far-fetched. But the May rapes brought a change of sentiment. The works of 16 Indonesian women artists displayed under the title "Women in the Realm of Spirituality," which had a preview exhibition in Jakarta before they went off to Rome, made that very clear. Particularly, senior artists Wiranti



Nuriyah is Siti Nuriyah, the current First Lady, rallying for Peace in May 1999, before she became the first lady. Her lower body is paralysed, but that has never prevented her from joining in anti-violence actions.

Tedjasukmana and Ratmini Soedjatmoko completely changed their style and orientation, while others took women's issues as the theme of their resistance.

The initiative of the exhibit of 18 artists (men and women) held in early December at the Cemara-6 Gallery in Jakarta also broke away from the usual manner of exhibition by taking women's human rights and violence against women as a central theme for the exhibit and for the week-long seminar highlighting several aspects of women in the arts, theatre and literature. Another significant reaction came one year later, when Arahmaiani held her solo exhibition "Rape 'n Rob" in which the unbalanced distribution of power was viewed as a basic cause of the May rapes. Arahmaiani said these works were inspired by the May rapes.

Before anyone else, noted playwright Ratna Sarumpaet, the only woman playwright in Indonesia, had been drawn to the

cause of the disadvantaged. Her play about a female labourer who was killed defending the rights of her colleagues relays the sentiments raised by injustice. But going beyond the stage, she, together with her troupe Satu Merah Panggung, created the SIAGA that promoted political figures Amien Rais and Megawati Sukarnoputri in an effort to bring down the Suharto regime. She organised the People's Summit to coincide with the Government's People's Consultative Assembly, and formed the National Forum for Democracy, a coalition of 167 groups and non-government organisations that gained the support of many prominent opposition figures.

The last prisoner under President Suharto, Sarumpaet was the first to be released after Suharto stepped down from power. Since then, Sarumpaet has been involved in Jejak, an independent institution to foster reconciliation by opening up selected human rights cases, and by bringing justice to victims under the past regime. The first case for which Jejak organised a "theatre of the real," a kind of tribunal to provoke testimonial evidence from the common public, was on Marsinah. New evidence in the case led Jejak to demand that the case, closed some years ago, be re-opened. However, Sarumpaet reveals she has received no response so far from the authorities.

The upsurge in women's dynamics is certainly not limited to Jakarta. Everywhere in the country, women have grouped and acted against prevailing violence.

In Makasar, South Sulawesi, a basic stronghold of support for then President Habibie, women have taken the courage to act against public

opinion. Pemerhati Masalah Perempuan, Forum of Observers of Women's Concerns, which has been active for several years, held anti-Habibie demonstrations when he visited the region. Led by Zohra Andi Baso, 10 members of the Forum attended the presidential elections, calling on political factions of the People's Consultative Assembly to speak out against the re-election of Habibie. In the troubled region of Aceh, Flower Aceh, an NGO for the empowerment of women, gained strength in mid-1998. Suraya Kamaruzzaman and her peers are beacons in the midst of violence, providing counseling and seeking access to decision-making for women. Their outspoken critique of religious-based practices perceived to violate the human rights of women was met with hostility from fundamentalists.

Concluding Remarks

Today, as we stand at the end of the 20th century, the unfolding of the presidential elections and a declining percentage of women in parliament demonstrate that the struggle for women's cause has still a long way to go. Yet, there is a ray of hope, as the placement of three women in the current Cabinet is a break from the traditional. It is the first time in Indonesia's history to have a woman for vice president. As well, this Cabinet breaks away from assigning women to what are considered as feminine ministerial positions. In addition, much support can be expected from the First Lady, who comes from an activist background.

Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri as the second in command of this country holds the second highest position, and

unlike her predecessors in this job, she will oversee a large part of the presidential responsibilities, among others human rights. It is expected that she will be working in tandem with the Human Rights Minister and the Minister for the Empowerment of Women, as well as with women's groups and NGOs.

Erna Witoelar as Minister for Human Settlement and Regional Development holds the key to integrate the gender perspective into the usual, one-sided male perspective in these domains. A former NGO activist with a long national and international experience and a founding member of the environmental NGO Walhi and the influential consumer NGO Yayasan Lembaga Konsumen Indonesia, Erna has also been an active supporter of the Statement on Women's Political Rights. "It is very important that I introduce gender-sensitive development in the whole set-up of this department," she said in a recent interview after meeting with the media at her ministry. She envisions that "this will result in a more humane, more environmentally sound, more pro-poor, and children-friendly as well as elderly- and disabled-friendly development."

Khofifah Indar Parawansa has accepted the post of Minister for Women's Affairs on condition that the post holds more authority. At 34, she is the youngest in the Cabinet but one with a long experience in politics. An activist, former legislator, known for her boldness and outspoken critique of the office of the Minister for Women's Affairs and a proponent of the People's Awakening Party, Khofifah was also a signatory of the Statement on Women's Political

Rights. Her first act as minister was to change the name of the ministry to reflect its change in direction. Thus the State Ministry for the Role of Women is now the Ministry for the Empowerment of Women. In relation, Minister Khofifah introduced what she calls a one-roof policy, meaning that all policies impacting on women from all ministries must pass her office and the monitoring of the implementation will also be done by her office.

There is also Siti Nuriyah, the current First Lady. In an interview five days after she entered her new "position," she declared that she will not limit her role to being her husband's "pendamping" (escort). A woman's activist before she became First Lady, she holds a postgraduate degree from the University of Indonesia's postgraduate programme on women's studies, and is a board member of the National Commission on Violence Against Women. She is also involved in re-interpreting the *Kitab Kuning* a book on, among others, relations between men and women, which is compulsory reading in the *pesantren* boarding schools for Muslim children. As well, she was a supporter of the Statement calling for Women's Political Rights. The First Lady says she will focus on violence against women, which implies a wide range of gender issues. ☺

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STOP KEKERASAN, an anti-violence rally in central Jakarta