

Indonesian Women Find a Virtual Space of Their Own

By Nani Buntarian

JULY 1998. Jakarta was scorched and ravaged. The longest reigning Indonesian president Soeharto stepped down in late May after 32 years of uncontested and uninterrupted rule over the third largest nation in Asia with a population of more than 200 million people.

Suppressed voices found their liberation in the let-loose spirit of the catch-word of the day, "reformation." The effect was deafening and often, violent. Demonstrators, military personnel and hooligans ruled the streets of large cities. Taking advantage of fear-stricken citizens, mobs literally helped themselves by looting and straightforward vandalism. The economy simply plunged into a roller-coaster ride with dismal hope of achieving stability soon.

It was at this grim instance in recent Indonesian history that women activists emerged with increasingly stronger voices. Silenced during the

iron-fisted rule of Soeharto's New Order regime, their voices burst out with such forcefulness when they rallied behind the demand for the military's transparency on hundreds of reported cases of sexual atrocities during the May 1998 riots. Hundreds of ethnic Chinese women were gang-raped and murdered during the burn-and-loom rampages in Jakarta and several other cities.

Weeks before the president's resignation, around 75 women activists converged in Jakarta—almost furtively to dodge security authorities—to sign a petition demanding Soeharto's resignation as a precondition for reviving

democracy in the country. They called themselves the Indonesian Women's Coalition for Democracy and Justice.

When Soeharto did finally step down, the coalition's members decided to get together regularly to organise follow-up actions to ensure women's equal participation in the decisions made for the future of the country. The meetings took place once a week, every Wednesday.

These meetings were held in borrowed small rooms, several times at individual homes with participants chipping in for refreshments and snacks. Constantly on the move, the meetings were amazingly steady enough to serve as the hatching ground for the most productive minds in the Indonesian women's movement.

It was during one of those Wednesdays in July 1998, when sparks of ideas filled the crowded room, that the suggestion of a "clearing house" was thrown in. If there were decisions taken, they needed to be shared with as many other women activists as possible. With women activists spread across the many islands of the extensive Indonesian archipelago, it was crucial to identify a means of distributing and exchanging information speedily at the lowest



courtesy of Indonesian National Commission for Anti-Violence Against Women

An Indonesian women's anti-violence rally held in Jakarta in 1999

cost. Naturally, the idea of an electronic mailing list as a “virtual clearing house” popped up.

E-mail, along with mobile phone and pager, had played a dominant role in organising the Indonesian activists’ movement during the uprising against the “New Order” government. Two most active mailing lists were maintained by the opposition groups offshore <apakabar> and <SiAR>. E-mail forwards from these mailing lists were flying around freely in the local Net space. For many Indonesian activists, first contact with a mailing list message was probably made at this time.

Attendance sheets on those Wednesday women’s meetings showed that most of the regulars had E-mail addresses. The mailing list started with these and acquired bulk as it went along. Since everyone had seemed pre-occupied with issues of the real world, no one commented much on the idea of a virtual space. Anything that could help the cause was welcomed. Naturally the person who suggested the idea ended up with the job.

The group had neither money nor home. Everything would have to be practically no-cost. None of the participants had an organisation that ran a server, so a Web-based free mailing list service was the only feasible option. Makelist.com (which eventually became eGroups.com) was randomly chosen on the merits of its visibility and ease. A few other Indonesian mailing lists were already listed on the service. The new set-up, simply called the Rumpun Email Perempuan (Women’s Mailing List), was launched on 12 July 1998 with a

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humble user base of 32 subscribers consisting of individual activists and women’s organisations.

It took quite a stretch of time for members to acknowledge the value of the mailing list. By consistently and actively inviting new members, the list slowly grew to around 250 subscribers by mid-2000. Owned and maintained by an individual activist with no affiliation to any organisation, the list runs on independent means, with the owner limiting herself to the task of gatekeeping and housekeeping.

Never intended to serve as a moderated discussion list, Rumpun Email Perempuan was virtually left to grow and shape itself organically as a community. The only common understanding shared by subscribed members was its description as an Indonesian women’s movement electronic networking space, entirely left open to collective building and process of elimination.

Average monthly message turnover grew from 70 during the second half of 1998 to 193 in 1999 and 269 for the first eight months of 2000, with peak turnover at 379 in June 2000. Content ranges from action alerts, announcements, news clips, statements, press releases, and im-

promptu discussion topics. A high degree of temperance and selectivity in distribution materials has been voluntarily applied by members to create a space strictly for women’s issues and activism. Through time, Indonesian women activists acknowledged the space as a neutral ground and began to call it their own in voicing minds and hearts freely

Hearts? This may bewilder women who have been told not to get “personal” on their mailing list. Rumpun Email Perempuan seems to defy this restriction. Experience has proven that the most supportive responses are generated by those messages that touch the heart. Exchanges on this human level, such as personal messages of condolences to a member activist who just lost a parent, have served as the most effective way of creating a bond among members of the list.

The luxury of being in touch with each other, and thereby experiencing virtual bonding with other activists, is essentially the core appeal of Rumpun Email Perempuan. It is a space that allows Indonesian women activists to gain a sense of oneness, of being in it together, though every challenge that can be drawn from this seemingly fragile virtual body has time and again proved to be valuable to the whole movement.

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