RESISTANCE TO HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDONESIA:
ASIAN VALUES AND BEYOND

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1. Introduction

More than a decade after the peak of the Asian values debate in the 1990s, its strongest proponents like Singapore’s Lee Kwan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad are no longer in power. In Indonesia, Suharto’s authoritarian regime collapsed in 1998. Indonesian politicians also added their voices to the “Asian values choir”, most notably the late former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Alatas. Central to the Asian values argument was the position that human rights and Asian values were not really reconcilable. In hindsight, however, at least in the academic discourse, the Asian values argument has more than anything come to be seen as part of an attempt to legitimise authoritarian rule.1 Today, with the authoritarian regime in Indonesia gone, one could imagine that the process of implementing human rights in the country would progress smoothly. Indeed, in international forums Indonesia has made an effort to be seen as an active promoter of human rights, more recently by chairing the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 2005 and by ratifying both the

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International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights the same year. In 2007 Indonesia was elected to serve on the United Nations’ Human Rights Council. Despite the profound political and administrative changes that have taken place in Indonesia since the heydays of the Asian values debate and the apparent political backing human rights seem to enjoy, opposition to human rights still persists. There seem to be some “…deeper processes that tend to work against a liberal convergence of values in the region”.

Below I attempt to identify some apparent dispositions that I argue contribute to foster reluctance towards human rights among various groups in Indonesia. I argue that this resistance to human rights is not so much a rejection of the idea of rights as such, as it is related more generally to people’s perception of the state, and to how power is conceived: my first line of reasoning is that, in a state that is not modelled on the idea of a social contract, human rights will not perform the same function and play the same role as it does within state systems where such a conception is generally adhered to. My second claim is that human rights often tend to be portrayed and perceived in such a manner that they appear as a quasi-religion or an alternative belief system. Thus, human rights emerge as a competitor challenging existing belief systems, ideologies and religions.

Admittedly, contrasting Indonesian values, norms and conceptions about human rights to “Western” ones implies ample over-simplifications. Applying the “Asia-versus-the-West” dichotomy sets in motion orientalist as well as evolutionist overtones. Inoue Tatsuo has raised the point that by applying a “We-and-They” dualism one risks a “retelling of the Orientalist narrative”. Tatsuo’s Said-inspired critique of the believed epistemic hegemony where “The West is the knowing agent and Asia is the object to be known” and where “Oriental dualism is disguised as an empirical generalization” may also be a relevant objection to the manner I put forward my position in this article. Without embracing Kipling’s ultimate Orientalist position that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” I will, however, claim that certain aspects of what is popularly considered to be part of Indonesian culture contribute to obstruct

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4 Id. at 38.