Language, Religion, and Identity in Indonesia

Social, political, and economic turmoil now make it easy to forget that just two years ago Indonesia stood out amongst ethnolinguistically plural na-
tions, as both a nationalist and development-
talist dynamic. And as recently as the mid-1990s, In-
donesian modernization seemed to be unimpeded by religious tension.

President Suharto and his New Order gov-
ernment received international praise for econ-
omic progress among a diverse, peace-
fully coexisting citizenry of Muslims, Bud-
dhists, Protestants, Catholics, and Hindus. But over the last two years bloody civil un-
rest, mostly along ethnolinguistic lines, has arisen out of conditions of economic reces-
sion and political uncertainty. Some see par-
allels between this unravelling of Indone-
sia’s social fabric, and the strife in the Balka-

ns following the end of the Cold War. With the demise of Suharto’s authoritarian state, by the dawn of the new millennium ‘race’, ‘minor-
dinal’ ethnolinguistic hatreds have been al-
lowed to emerge. But current events can also be plausibly read as effects and even con-
equences of the less praiseworthy as-
pects of New Order rule.

Fear and violence which now feed each other in many parts of Indonesia have clear antecedents in the massacres of hundreds of thousands which occurred in the dark days of 1965, and which underwrote the le-
tune to be committed with impunity. Nonetheless, language is integral to the re-
ligious identities involved, and will continue to be crucial for any brighter, less bloody Indonesian future. Re-
ligious, not only on my own experiences in Central Java, I sketch the linguistic grounds of ethnicity, national-
ism and religion, not just in Central Java, but in the whole of Indonesia.

From its inception in 1945, the New Order government promoted and protected a single national language — that is, a language native to some part of the wider island, which was spoken natively in several other countries, and by a few million subjects in the colonies. But since 1965, knowledge and use of Indonesian across Indonesian territor-
ies has spread. At a 1990 conference, the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture asserted, not implausibly, that 83 percent of citizens of the island now speak Indonesian. And that by 2010, all Indonesia-
ses would speak the national language. So Indonesian is a national language — not natively by relatively few Indonesians. Most know it as a second language lacking pri-
mordial links to a distinct group of native speakers. This paucity of native speakers makes Indonesian less a non-native lan-
guage — that is, a language native to some part of the wider island, than an un-
native language, that is, devoid of anti-
historical roots in some ethnic, religious, or ter-
ritorial identity.

The New Order also zealously promoted Indonesian-ness through the five principles of the Pancasila (which count together as a summary ideology of official Indonesian nationalism. Most relevant here is the first principle, which establishes monolinguism as both a condition of citizenship and a para-

meter for religious tolerance. In effect, it rec-
ognizes national unity with religious plural-
ism to be a constitutive feature of the national language. The broad point, then, is that the Indonesian language enjoys a special status in the condition of religious pluralism and re-

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