

**The New Dis-Order:
Parodic *Plésétan* and the ‘Slipping’ of the Soeharto Regime**

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When thousands of Jakarta students boisterously took over the Parliament building in the final days of the “May Revolution,” the atmosphere was, by all accounts, intoxicating. The heady mix of exhilaration and fear leading up to Soeharto’s unexpected resignation generated a “carnival-like” feeling, in the words of many observers. Though certainly unprecedented in the students’ lifetimes, the revelry in the halls of Parliament strongly resembled insurrectionary moments experienced in many nations around the world, and even in Indonesia’s own revolutionary past. James C. Scott, in the closing chapter of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), vividly describes the “saturnalia of power” that accompanies such rare political junctures. Scott outlines how the long-silenced discourse of a subordinate group – its “hidden transcript” – may explode into an electrifying public declaration. This defiant act of transgression is depicted as an eruption of sentiments that have been created and developed “offstage,” away from the surveillance of the dominators. In cases where the hidden transcript has had a long incubation period in the form of “infrapolitics,” its initial expression in public acts of defiance “sets in motion a crystallization of public action that is astonishingly rapid” (Scott 1990:223). Thus, according to Scott, when the latent political energies of the hidden transcript are unleashed in one eruptive moment, the results may be revolutionary.

Though Scott's model of resistance to domination has been criticized as simplistic and unduly romanticized, the denouement of the May Revolution seems to accord well with his portrayal of the "hidden transcript" and its first open declaration. But even in the case of Indonesia, Scott's framework has its limitations. This is especially evident if we examine the emergence of the political discourse among student activists critical of the New Order apparatus, a discourse that – to many observers' surprise – proved astonishingly effective in galvanizing the public renunciation of Soeharto. What is most intriguing is how the students' angry calls for Soeharto's resignation did not simply emerge from the brash speeches of particular charismatic figures as depicted in the final chapter of Scott's book. Rather, the eruption of anti-Soeharto sentiment grew out of 'leaderless' linguistic skirmishes against the New Order administration, taking the form of increasingly popular parodic reinterpretations of public symbols that successfully undermined the authoritative discourse of the state.¹

The Indonesian term usually associated with the punning reinterpretations discussed here is *plésétan*, literally a 'slip (of the tongue).' The word is a nominalized form of the root morpheme *plését* ('slip, lose one's balance'). But this term for slippage is, fittingly enough, somewhat slippery, conveying a subtle referential range of intentionality. If one is described as *terplését* or *keplését* (prefixing the root with *ter-* or *ke-*, both 'accidental' or 'non-volitive' passive verbal prefixes), one has unintentionally slipped up and has made an error beyond one's control. But a volitive verb

¹ It should be noted that the parodic reinterpretation of official state discourse is not particularly new in Indonesia. Perhaps the most remarkable example is the iconoclastic language of the Saminist movement that developed in Central Java at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though no longer a serious threat to the Indonesian state, members of the Saminist communities continue to irk administrators by constantly employing the Javanese "folk-etymological" technique of *keratabasa* to discover unintended meanings in authoritative discourse (Widodo 1997:285-6). For a discussion of similar strategies in Sundanese and their relation to Indonesian *plésétan*, see Zimmer 1999.

(*memplésétkan*) can also be formed from the same root, paradoxically denoting a “slip” that is willfully made, an accident that is not accidental. Thus the nominal form *plésétan* can refer to anything from an innocuous ‘speech error’ to an intentional play on words, in which ‘accidental’ phonological or orthographic associations are manipulated for parodic aims.²

The elastic nature of this term was well demonstrated by an incident in 1995, when then-Minister of Information Harmoko took part in a *wayang kulit* festival in Solo. Harmoko, while performing as an amateur *dalang*, included a recitation of *Al-Fatihah*, the opening verse of the Qur’an. But Harmoko bungled the recitation of the verse (or, according to some reports, made bawdy Javanese puns out of the Arabic), and news of his ‘*plésétan*’ quickly spread. A hotly contested debate arose in Islamic circles over whether Harmoko intentionally ridiculed the verse (an act of blasphemy, punishable by Islamic law) or simply ‘misspoke’ (an act of stunning incompetence for a self-proclaimed devout Muslim like Harmoko, as the verse must be repeated 17 times a day in the course of obligatory prayers). After attempting to silence the media from reporting on the event, Harmoko eventually was forced to issue a public apology for committing an “accidental” *plésétan*, although Muslim students continued to protest the incident as blasphemous (Harsono 1995; Suara Independen 1995).

University students at the end of the Soeharto era did not have the same luxury as the Minister of Information to disown potentially punishable acts of *plésétan*.³ One

² The flexibility of the term *plésétan* seems to conform with the observations of Freud (1960; 1966) on the underlying similarities between ‘parapraxes’ (slips of the tongue) and punning jokes. But whereas Freud views the wordplay of both parapraxes and puns as emerging from a prediscursive unconscious, the case of *plésétan* raises the question of whether the perceived “consciousness” of these acts may be subject to speakers’ discursive strategizing, political or otherwise.

³ Students protesting Harmoko’s ‘slip of the tongue’ pointed to the double standard regarding Indonesia’s blasphemy laws. In a case similar to Harmoko’s in 1993, two college students emceeding a rock concert in

student demonstrator languished in jail for more than four years for committing a *plésétan* that was deemed insulting to President Soeharto. The student, Nuku Soleiman, was arrested during a 1993 protest of the national lottery, euphemistically dubbed SDSB (*Sumbangan Dana Sosial Berhadiah*: Philanthropic Donation with Prizes). His crime was distributing stickers reanalyzing SDSB as *Soeharto: Dalang Segala Bencana* (Soeharto: mastermind of all disasters). Nuku was released only upon Soeharto's resignation, when he became one of the first political prisoners granted amnesty by Habibie (Jones and Jendrzeczyk 1994; Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International 1998).

Indonesian student activists of recent years, no doubt wary of the fate of Nuku and others, have made effective use of a new medium of communication that has allowed them unparalleled dissemination and anonymity: the Internet. Since 1996, numerous Internet service providers have sprung up in the country's major metropolitan centers, catering largely to the children of the newly emerged middle class affluent enough to afford their own computers and modems; Internet *warungs* have also appeared in many cities (Hill and Sen 1997). Internet-savvy university students (overwhelmingly composed of middle-class males) forged an unprecedented political forum for pro-democracy activism, contributing postings on widely distributed electronic mailing lists and newsgroups. Though members of the Soeharto government closely monitored these postings for subversive activity, anti-government messages were usually untraceable, submitted anonymously or under pseudonyms (Randall 1996; Hill and Sen 1997:77).

Central Java were sentenced to two and a half years on blasphemy charges for committing punning *plésétan* on Qur'anic phrases (Human Rights Watch 1993).

Many analysts have attributed the success of the ‘leaderless’ 1998 student movement to mobilization via the Internet (Marcus 1998; Lintner and Craddock 1998).

In the newfound openness and anonymity of electronically mediated discourse, the wordplay of *plésétan* emerged as a potent vehicle for playful anti-Soeharto criticism, its practitioners unfettered by fears of the reprisals suffered by Nuku Soleiman. In February 1998, when students began organizing their massive pro-reform demonstrations on university campuses across the country, one popular target of criticism was Soeharto’s proposed policy to alleviate the country’s monetary crisis. At the urging of a U.S. economic advisor, Soeharto for several weeks advanced a financial panacea dubbed the Currency Board System, or ‘CBS.’ Notably, the president and his deputies had not even bothered translating their new abbreviatory mantra into Indonesian, and ‘CBS’ quickly became an object of ridicule on the Internet. Via mostly anonymous postings, about a dozen possible ‘hidden’ Indonesian readings of the abbreviation were circulated, including: *Cuma Bo’ong Saja* (just a pack of lies), *Cari Bahaya Saja* (only looking for trouble), *Cuma Buat Sementara* (just a temporary measure), and most portentously, *Cara Bobol Soeharto* (Soeharto’s road to ruin). One such reinterpretation, “*CBS = Cuma Bualan Saja*” (CBS = just a lot of hot air), was featured prominently on a banner at a student protest in the city of Bandung on February 25 (Anon. 1998; Tempo Interaktif 1998; Majalah D&R 1998; Pengamat ekonomi 1998; Warta FIM 1998).

In February and March of 1998, both *plésétan* and blunter forms of criticism flourished on the Internet. In public protests, however, student demonstrators were apparently still too apprehensive to unveil their most explicit invective against Soeharto, either shouted in slogans or displayed on banners. After years of crackdowns and self-censorship, the first publicly sanctioned debates about the post-Soeharto era were only

beginning to surface in the lead-up to the March 10 presidential election. During this transitional stage, the Internet remained the safest haven for potentially dangerous political messages. The initial wariness of students to express their sentiments openly is evident in an Internet posting on February 10, which stated that the popular student slogan *Turunkan Harga!* (Bring down prices!) was actually a not-so-secret *plésétan*, encoding a deeper threat. The word *harga* (price), it was explained, stood as a tacit acronym for *Harto dan keluarga* ('Harto and family'); thus the slogan meant "Bring down Soeharto and his family!" (Kabar dari Pijar 1998; Human Rights Watch 1998)

But in April and May, increasingly emboldened protesters no longer concealed anti-Soeharto messages in the form of *plésétan*, as all types of self-censorship were unceremoniously abandoned. By early May the chants had changed to "Hang Soeharto!" and "Soeharto is a dog!" Students at one Jakarta protest held a mock trial for the president, declared him guilty of various crimes against the country, and hanged him in effigy. Such an unbridled outpouring of anger on campuses would have been unthinkable just months before, when even politically loaded *plésétan* had been seen as potentially seditious. The fatal shooting of four students at Trisakti University on May 12 only provoked more drastic demonstrations, climaxing in the raucous five-day occupation of the Parliament.

If we adopt Scott's framework of "hidden" and "public" transcripts, what are we to make of the transitional period of electronic activism, when the circulation of Internet postings laid the groundwork for the tumultuous events of the May Revolution? The political discourse engendered by the mass mediation of the Internet seems to combine both "hidden" and "public" elements. Like Scott's hidden transcript, the Internet postings were often heavily cloaked in anonymity and couched in the indirect play of

punning *plésétan*. But the postings were also “public,” written for the open appreciation of a literate audience and thus existing outside of Scott’s much-vaunted face-to-face “oral culture.” Further, the postings, though usually anonymous, were subject to constant surveillance by suspicious New Order officials, who indeed had gone so far as to blame the riots of July 1996 on the instigation of Internet communication (Hill and Sen 1997:76-8). How “hidden” or “offstage” could such a transcript be?⁴

Though Scott’s dichotomy of “public” and “hidden” transcripts is not entirely useful here, we may still salvage from his argument the notion of “the arts of political disguise” typifying “voice under domination.” The parodic disassembling of the authoritarian discourse of the New Order through *plésétan* fits well with Scott’s portrait of “the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity,” where “nothing is entirely straightforward” (Scott 1990:137). Scott depicts such “disguised” speech as strategically ambiguous; the expression of resistance must be “sufficiently indirect and garbled that it is capable of two readings, one of which is innocuous” (Scott 1990:157). The parody of *plésétan* evinces just this sort of ‘plausible deniability,’ evident in the term itself, which camouflages political criticism as harmless slips of the tongue. One is reminded of Hildred Geertz’s description of the psycholinguistic disorder *latah* in Java, in which the afflicted speaker (usually a lower-class, older woman) involuntarily blurts out obscenities, often parodically mimicking her superiors and transgressing Javanese linguistic etiquette: “the fact that her actions are involuntary excuses her from the usual disapproval, and makes this transgression of moral norms not offensive but entertaining”

⁴ Gal (1995:415-7) puts forth much the same argument in terms of other mass media, but the case of Indonesia’s “Internet revolution” presents an even starker counterexample to Scott’s paradigm of face-to-face oral interaction.

(Geertz 1968:101). Though *plésétan* is not as extreme as *latah*, in both phenomena the full subversive impact of a transgressive utterance is shielded under the guise of a humorous ‘speech error.’

An excellent point of departure for appreciating the subversive potential of *plésétan* may be found in Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of the work of Rabelais, in which he presents a rich portrait of medieval parody and the “popular-festive laughter” of the carnival and the marketplace. Bakhtin provides a basis for studying parodic language as carnivalesque inversions of official discourse by demonstrating how authoritative modes of scholarly wisdom – religious, legal, and grammatical – can be lampooned according to “the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’” (Bakhtin 1984:11). As Bakhtin elaborates in “Discourse in the Novel” (1981:324ff.), such parody turns the ideally monologic voice of authority into “double-voiced discourse.” Hence, any analysis of a parodic practice must demonstrate how it “dialogizes” a unitary voice of linguistic authority, all the while remaining “within the boundaries of a single language system” (Bakhtin 1981:325).

In Indonesia, a key element of the authoritative voice parodied by *plésétan* is the production and circulation of official abbreviations. Since the days of Sukarno, governmental and bureaucratic discourse has been peppered with an unending litany of acronyms and initialisms.⁵ More pervasive than simple initialisms (like CBS and SDSB above) are acronyms formed from the initial syllables of words in a phrase, such as Sukarno’s favorite buzzwords ‘Nékolim’ (*néokolonialisme*, *kolonialisme*, *imperialisme*) and ‘Nasakom’ (*nasionalisme*, *agama*, *komunisme*). Considering the continued prevalence of such acronymy it is not surprising to find that practitioners of *plésétan* have

⁵ According to the editors of one dictionary, 450 new acronyms and initialisms enter the Indonesian language every month (Parsidi 1992).

regularly parodied the names of top political figures *as if* they were acronyms. Thus, in the long years before his resignation, Soeharto was turned into an acronym for *sudah harus tobat* (should have repented by now); Habibie became *hari-hari bikin bingung* (befuddles daily); and Harmoko became *hari-hari omong kosong* (bullshits daily).

Not only have *plésétan*-makers travestied the names of officials as carnivalesque acronyms, they have demystified sacrosanct acronymic mantras, often carefully constructed to coincide with preexisting apposite words. One such example plays on ‘Supersemar’ (*Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret*, the March 11th Letter), the name for the notorious 1966 document that transferred executive power from Sukarno to Soeharto. The acronym was considered apt because it could be read as ‘Super-Semar,’ Semar being the earthy yet powerful *wayang* clown character with whom Soeharto identified himself (Bresnan 1993:49). After the downfall of Marcos in the Philippines, a popular *plésétan* developed for ‘Supersemar,’ painting a different picture of Soeharto: *sudah persis seperti Marcos* (he’s become exactly like Marcos was) (Schwarz 1994:144). The acronym received yet another *plésétan* resignification in early March 1998, when former Vice-President Walter Mondale arrived in Jakarta as a special envoy from the Clinton administration. Then students at the Bandung Institute of Technology used ‘Supersemar’ to state what they hoped Mondale would tell Soeharto: *Suruh pergi seperti Marcos!* (Tell him to go, just like Marcos!) (Human Rights Watch 1998).

Indonesian students who invented and traded puns ‘misreading’ New Order acronyms and initialisms were involved in serious wordplay, subverting and inverting the authoritative assignation of meanings by offering alternative competing resignifications. The practitioners of *plésétan* hyperbolized the mania for acronyms cultivated in the discourse of New Order bureaucracy by extending authoritative acronymy in unintended

carnavalesque directions, even acronymizing the acronym-makers themselves. Through the use of *plésétan*, student activists foregrounded the arbitrary nature of New Order linguistic authority. When Nuku Soleiman's *plésétan* was deemed an insurrectionary act worthy of a five-year prison sentence, the New Order apparatus powerfully asserted its authority to dictate what could be read as a slip of the tongue or harmless joke and what was a punishable offense. But the very act of punishing Nuku so severely was perhaps an indication of the fragility of the Suharto regime's hold on linguistic authority; after Nuku's imprisonment the coinage and circulation of dissident *plésétan*, rerouted to the shelter of the Internet, only grew in popularity and potency.

It is an open question whether the resignifications engendered by anti-Suharto *plésétan* are simply reactive or can serve as a tenable model for the assertion of new linguistic authority in the post-Suharto era. The penchant for acronyms and initialisms in political discourse certainly shows no sign of abating; the rallying cry of pro-reform activists is currently 'KKN,' shorthand for the enduring evils of the New Order: *korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme*. Notably, though, this initialism is actually a 'misappropriation' by the student movement of a preexisting government program: KKN previously referred to *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* (Real Work Course), the state-sponsored program of rural social work mandatory for all university students. The reanalysis of the initialism has been so successful as to render its previous signification unserviceable. Due to the new negative connotations of 'KKN,' educators are considering renaming the program KPM, for *Kuliah Pengabdian Masyarakat* (Public Service Course) (Pikiran Rakyat 1998).

The continued reliance on acronyms and initialisms, albeit resignified, calls into question how subversive the practice of *plésétan* has truly been. Though parody in the Bakhtinian sense is fundamentally ambivalent, simultaneously "denying" and "asserting"

(Bakhtin 1984:11-2), the question remains: for a given parodic practice, is the ultimate effect one of transgression or recuperation? As Judith Butler (1990:139) frames the dilemma, we must determine “what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony.” No doubt sufficient distance must be gained on the political and social upheaval of the ‘New Dis-Order’ to reach this determination for anti-Soeharto *plésétan*. Nonetheless, it is clear that the parodic reinterpretations of early 1998 were unusually successful vehicles of subversion.⁶ It will be instructive to follow the trajectories of *plésétan* in the post-Soeharto era to determine the lasting repercussions of the parodic practices that contributed to the ‘slipping’ of Soeharto into history.

⁶ By way of contrast, Achille Mbembe (1992) describes very similar carnivalesque “poaching” of government acronyms in post-colonial Cameroon and Togo, but he finds these practices indicative of “zombification” rather than resistance to linguistic authority.

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