Situating Anti-LGBT Moral Panics in Indonesia: Homophobia, criminalisation, acceptance, and religiosity

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On 13 July 2019, four scholars, whose research focuses on issues of gender and sexuality in Indonesia, convened for a one-day symposium hosted by SOAS University of London. Entitled 'Gender, Sexuality, Religion: Thinking Beyond LGBT Moral Panics in Indonesia', the event aimed to examine the emergence of sexual and moral panics in the archipelago. The sessions included papers by Ferdiansyah Thajib (Freie Universität Berlin), who explored the affective dimensions of anti-queer sentiments in Indonesia; Saskia Wieringa (University of Amsterdam), who examined the linkages between 'Communistphobia' and homophobia in Indonesia and discussed sexual moral panics as a political project; and the two co-editors of this special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay Word*. Ben Murtagh (SOAS University of London) presented his research on imagined queer worlds in Indonesian cinema, whilst Diego García Rodríguez (University College London) analysed emerging contestations to heterosexism and homophobia through progressive Islam in Indonesia. The event was generously funded by the UCL, Bloomsbury and East London Doctoral Training Partnership.

Following the conclusion of the symposium, and in light of the vibrant discussions emerging during the sessions, we felt that it was important to materialise the ideas explored that day into a series of articles where the results could be shared more widely. Almost three years after the event took place, and despite the challenges of the pandemic, this special issue brings together articles by six interdisciplinary scholars critically engaging with themes around gender and sexuality in contemporary Indonesia. While our gathering in 2019 put the focus on the events taking place in Indonesia after the 2016 anti-LGBT moral panics, this special issue expands its scope to engage with wider debates on homophobia, the criminalisation of minorities, notions of acceptance, and religiosity.

On sexual and moral panics

As noted above, this special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay World* is not looking to explore LGBT moral panics per se, but instead analyse what the consequences of such events have been for queer people, and their allies, by exploring both the antecedents to these panics and the current environment in post-2016 Indonesia. Prior to discussing what happened in 2016, it is important to discuss what the concept of moral panic refers to in this context in order to situate the overall discussions that this special issue contains.

What is 'moral'? Nachman Ben-Yehuda, drawing on Lidz and Walker, has described morality as referring to 'the range of social standards and values used by social actors to evaluate objects, behaviour and goals as good or bad, desirable or undesirable' (1986, 495). These norms are useful to ensure that there are limits, for example, to what one can and cannot be, and to one can and cannot do as a member of society. When a person, or a group of people, do not seem to be aligned with such standards, they might be defined or identified as a threat to the societal order through moral panics. Sometimes this can occur through particular discourses (e.g., which may employ, among others, religious values, or the opposition of 'local culture' against Western values) which continuously or intermittently position specific subjects as a peril to the social order.

What marks these events as 'panics' is the extent to which these 'societal and personal expressions are out of proportion with the threat posed by the so-called "folk devils" (e.g., masturbating children, unwed mothers) and "evil-doers" (e.g., homosexuals) groups' (Herdt 2009, 1-2). As Cohen explains, moral panics can lead to, among other issues, stereotypical portrayals by the mass media and diagnoses and solutions provided by 'socially accredited experts' (2011, p. 2). As he elaborates, the object of the panic might be fairly novel, while other times it might be something 'which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight' (ibid). Beyond these public discussions, moral panics can have direct consequences for the group(s) portrayed as 'immoral' (e.g., transgender people, sex workers, teenage mothers) in the form of psychological and physical violence as well as the loss of their rights, as we have witnessed in the Indonesian context.

Sexual panics have emerged as moral fears increasingly targeting non-normative genders and sexualities. These panics might manifest in textual and visual representations of certain subjects as sources of disgust and repugnance, as well as discourses supposedly based on care and safety to validate the violent

delegitimisation of sexual and gender minorities (as we see in Ferdiansyah Thajib's article in this special issue). As Herdt explains, once sexual threats and fears have been fabricated, the sexual 'folk devil' has its rights removed, and the population begins to be preoccupied with concerns about what evil sexualities will do to destroy civilisation and future generations (2009, p. 5). The way that this preoccupation has manifested in social media and in news coverage in Indonesia is the particular focus of the articles by Hendri Yulius Wijaya and Benjamin Hegarty. However, when this happens, people might also react to such discourses by speaking out against the erosion of rights that those at the centre of the panics experience. This point is explored by Diego García Rodríguez, whose article in this issue focuses on the case of allies of queer Muslims in Indonesia.

The Indonesian context illustrates the power that sexual and moral panics have in building certain subjects as threats to the established social order: the 'moral', righteous people, must be saved, according to such discourses, from those constructed as deviant. Our brief exploration of moral and sexual panics is relevant to understand the background to our special issue, the wave of anti-LGBT hysteria that took place in Indonesia in 2016. In the next section, we consider some of the key events related to the emergence of anti-LGBT discourses since 2016, in order to situate the analyses presented in the following articles. As we have noted before, while not all the articles focus on the homophobic events occurring post-2016, this context is useful to understand a landscape where sexual minorities can also imagine more tolerant worlds (as we read in Ben Murtagh's article), while others use religion to their own benefit against conservative interpretations (as Terje Toomistu demonstrates).

Post-2016 Indonesia

Much has been said about the events of 2016 in Indonesia. Scholars have described the situation by using concepts including, among others, moral campaigns (Wieringa 2019), moral panics (Listiorini et al 2019), and anti-LGBT panics (Davies 2016, Harsono and Knight 2018). What all these terms have in common is their description of increasing levels of anti-LGBT sentiment across the archipelago. As Hegarty, Wijaya and Thajib all note in this issue, attacks against sexual minorities had taken place prior to 2016 (see also Boellstorff 2004). So too as Murtagh notes in this issue there had been instances of censorship of films representing non-normative

sexualities on screen. However, the public magnitude of statements made by government officials in 2016 marked this year as the start of an increasingly oppressive scenario for those who might be identified as LGBT. The spark igniting the wildfire that would create this anti-LGBT hysteria was the rejection of an official permit for the Support Group and Resource Center on Sexuality Studies (SGRC), thus preventing it from functioning under the banner of the Universitas Indonesia (UI) in January 2016.

Following the publication of a number of media articles which discussed the issues facing the members of the SGRC, former Minister for Technology, Research and Higher Education, Muhammad Nasir, declared that 'the LGBT community corrupts the morals of the nation, while a university should be able to uphold moral values and the values of the ancestors of Indonesia' (The Jakarta Post 2016). This was followed by statements by a range of other political actors in January 2016. For example, Zulkifli Hasan, former speaker of Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly, said that homosexuality 'should be banned because it does not fit with the culture of Indonesia.' Nasir Djamil, a politician from the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera or PKS), also contributed to the construction of the LGBT community as a dangerous group, saying that, 'the LGBT community is a serious threat to the nation. It should not be allowed to grow or be given room to conduct its activities.' A month after these anti-LGBT statements began to emerge, in February 2016, Ryamizad Ryacudu, the former Defence Minister, went a step further to compare the LGBT community to nuclear weapons (Tempo 2016). As he said:

> It's dangerous as we can't see who our foes are; out of the blue everyone is brainwashed. Now the [LGBT] community is demanding more freedom, it really is a threat. In a proxy war, another state might occupy the minds of the nation without anyone realizing it. In a nuclear war, if a bomb is dropped over Jakarta, Semarang will not be affected; but in a proxy war, everything we know could disappear in an instant—it's dangerous.

Homophobic vitriol continued to increase in the following weeks: from Bandung's Mayor to the Social Affairs Minister, lawmakers, and members of the House of Representatives, everyone had an opinion to express regarding how dangerous the LGBT 'community' were for the survival of the Indonesian nation, culture, and religions.

Even though the LGBT-phobic frenzy calmed somewhat in the following months, threats against sexual minorities have continued to emerge intermittently. Since 2017, numerous universities started prohibiting students from joining organisations that could be assumed to have the slightest connection with LGBT issues. For example, the rector of Universitas Gajah Madah in Yogyakarta said that even though there are no regulations that prohibit LGBT people from enrolling in state universities, he forbade sexual minorities from carrying out activities on campus (Hadi 2018). In 2018, rallies took place across the country protesting against the LGBT 'community' just months before the Indonesian general elections were held in 2019. In addition to protests on the streets of cities and at universities, women suspected of "being lesbians" in Sumatra and men accused of running online groups for same-sex couples in Bandung were arrested (Knight 2018). Private parties and saunas frequented by gay men have been raided by the police in various cities in Indonesia and, as Hegarty discusses in this issue, the reporting of these raids created media events that took on a life of their own. In 2019, news emerged that a student press at Universitas Sumatera Utara in Medan had been prohibited from publishing a story about LGBT people (Tempo 2019).

These events have translated into discussions around legislation. In 2016 the organisation Family Love Alliance (Aliansi Cinta Keluarga, AILA) proposed a revision of the Criminal Code (Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana, KUHP) to criminalise consensual same-sex acts (see Ferdiansyah Thajib's and Hendri Yulius Wijaya's articles in this special issue for further analysis). Following this, the House of Representatives also considered a similar proposal, and the so-called 'LGBT Article' (Article 495) is still part of the most recent KUHP draft, making it 'a criminal offence to perform 'indecent acts' (*perbuatan cabul*) with a person of the same sex in public'. As Bambang Soetsatyo, the current Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly, explained in 2018, 'it was agreed that LGBT would be included in the criminal act as a 'same-sex obscenity' (*tindakan pidana perbuatan cabul sesama jenis*) and the state was obliged to regulate it. He argued for this based on his conviction that the 'KUHP must be based on a religious spirit (r*uh keagamaan*)' (Tempo 2018). While this provision is still being considered, there have not been any recent prominent discussions about this matter.

A distinction should be established between AILA's proposal to the Indonesian Constitutional Court and discussions taking place at the People's Representative

Council (DPR) to revise the entire criminal code, or KUHP. AILA's petitions, which were rejected by 4 out of 7 constitutional judges, were based on modifying clauses at the criminal-law level. The discussion at the DPR is aimed at revising the current KUHP to substitute it with a new one that, as an Indonesian activist explains, 'is supposed to be inspired by Indonesian values as a replacement of the Dutch colonial-era one'[1]. The proposed new clauses include criminalising all extra-marital sex, both within heterosexual couples, and surely within homosexual couples, since gay marriage is not legalised in Indonesia.

There are other problematic new drafts laws being proposed at the moment. Since 2020, the draft of the Family Resilience Bill has been debated, which could potentially include legislation forcing sexual minorities to attend rehabilitation centres to be 'cured' of their non-normative genders and sexualities. More recently, in November 2021, politicians rejected the Act for the Prevention and Handling of Sexual Violence (PPKS) that aimed to tackle sexual violence on Indonesian university campuses due to concerns that it would not only lead to free sex but also encourage the growth of the LGBT 'community' (Detik 2021). Another draft bill currently being discussed is on anti-sexual deviance propaganda, which could ban all foreign funding for LGBTIQ advocacy work if passed. These actions seem to be occurring with little transparency. Discussions, described by parliamentarians as 'civil society consultations', are being held in certain universities without any invitation extended to rights activists to participate in such forums. As an activist told us, 'it seems that the parliamentarians in charge of this do not want the public to know too much about the process, especially the pro-democracy civil society'[2].

Even though the events described above reveal the existence of a variety of forces working together towards the oppression of sexual minorities in the archipelago, the Indonesian LGBT population and their allies have also responded to such hostility in multiple ways. It is across the analysis of this oppression and struggle that this special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay World* locates itself. We are interested in exploring the forces leading to the discrimination and delegitimisation of sexual and gender minorities, as well as in understanding how queer people and their allies have reacted to this, including the role of film and popular culture in engaging with dominant

[1] Online conversation with Indonesian activist based in Jakarta, Monday 17 January 2022.
[2] Online conversation with Indonesian activist based in Jakarta, Monday 17 January 2022.

discourses that seek to marginalise and isolate queer Indonesians. The following section introduces the articles of this special issue, noting their particular significance at this moment in time, which is so challenging for many queer Indonesians.

Themes in this issue

The articles in this special issue can be divided into three clusters. The first one puts the focus on the post-2016 escalating trans- and homophobic punitive landscape in the archipelago. In this group, Ferdiansyah Thajib explores the affective dynamics creating anti-LGBT campaigns, Benjamin Hegarty explores how media reporting is harnessing a relationship between sex and crime as a form of entertainment related to LGBT, and Hendri Yulius examines digital homophobia in post-2016 Indonesia. The second cluster pays attention to the intersections between religion and non-normative genders and sexualities in various ways. While Terje Toomistu analyses the bodily negotiations of *waria* against the background of their religious sensitivities and aspirations for belonging, Diego García Rodríguez moves the focus to the allies of sexual and gender minorities in Indonesia by locating the forces inspiring the advent of pro-queer religious activism. Lastly, Ben Murtagh's article takes a step back from everyday events to engage with a range of Indonesian films united by an engagement with the difficulties of being lesbian or gay in Indonesia.

Ferdiansyah Thajib's article opens the special issue by considering the role of emotion in the intensification of anti-LGBT discourses post-2016. This article explores recent events in contemporary Indonesia by tracing patterns of marginalisation as they have existed in previous years, notably during Suharto's New Order regime. As he explains, 'the climate of hostility does not manifest as an all-encompassing phenomenon since different meaning making processes and emotional consequences take place.' In particular, he tracks how attempts to delegitimise individuals associated with the LGBT 'community' have seen what he describes as 'affective shifts from shame and fear to care and protection'. Paying particular attention to the petition filed by the Family Love Alliance (AILA) to the Indonesian Constitutional Court, Ferdiansyah Thajib evidences the shifting nature of rhetoric as the language of anti-LGBT campaigns evolves from the inflammatory to the benevolent, though nonetheless underpinned by violence.

Post-2016, an increased number of raids on the LGBT 'community' have taken places on saunas and on parties taking places in private residences. Benjamin Hegarty focuses on one particular raid, which occurred in Kuningan, Jakarta in 2020 at which 56 men were arrested. Hegarty explores how images from crime reconstructions and police press conferences link crime and LGBT as a form of entertainment in Indonesian news media. Drawing on Karen Strassler's (2020) work, Hegarty argues that such images have political force, exploring how the broadcasting of these images and their further dissemination (often in re-edited form) on social media platforms, are fundamental to the shaping of the meaning of LGBT in contemporary Indonesia. Hegarty argues that what he describes as the 'image event of LGBT', while playing into the current moral panic regarding non-normative sexualities, must also be understood in terms of a broader contestation regarding ideas of belonging to the Indonesia public sphere.

With a particular focus on social media, Hendri Yulius Wijaya pays attention to the emergence of digital homophobia in Indonesia, which he defines as 'an assemblage of homophobic discourses imbued with a language of urgency, technological infrastructures, and punitive laws on non-normative sexualities.' The timely nature of his article is obvious in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led people all across the globe to intensify their work online, allowing both queer activists and their detractors to strengthen their online activities. Focusing on the latter, Wijaya reveals how technologies have facilitated Indonesian netizens to harass and discredit LGBT people while also using these technologies to urge the government to enact corrective laws on non-normative genders and sexualities through online petitions. Crucially, as Wijaya argues, this digital homophobia also has real effect beyond online spaces, impacting the activism and material lives of queer Indonesians.

The next two articles bring together gender, sexuality, and religion by paying attention to two specific groups of actors. Against the normative homosecularist expectation that religion is at odds with non-normative gender and sexuality, the articles in this cluster provide an alternative to such approaches by demonstrating that these forces can not only coexist, but also positively impact each other. Firstly, Terje Toomistu's ethnographic study at the Pondok Pesantren al Fatah Waria, the Islamic

religious school in Kotagede, Yogyakarta, explores the practices of Muslim *waria*[3] to elucidate the bodily negotiations they engage in by paying attention to their embodied expressions of religiosity. This is a significant piece of work particularly given the limited attention paid to religion in the field of trans* studies (though see also (Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza 2019 and García Rodríguez 2019). Toomistu describes the practices of *waria* Muslims to reveal how despite that religious sensitivity can be a major cause of anxiety among Muslim *waria*, their faith and spirituality nonetheless equips them with frameworks which enable acceptance of their own embodied subjectivities.

Expanding the discussion on gender, sexuality, and religion to introduce alternative forms of activism emerging in contemporary Indonesia, Diego García Rodríguez's article moves the focus from sexual minorities to their allies. Rather than simply present the strategies developed by the actors he calls 'allies' of queer Muslims, García Rodríguez elucidates what 'Progressive' Islam represents in the Indonesian context, and locates the forces inspiring the emergence of pro-queer religious activism. In using the term ally, he refers to heterosexual cisgender individuals who found inspiration in a range of organisations, including student groups, interfaith forums, and Gusdurian networks based on Gus Dur's political thought, to develop human rights discourses which are inclusive of sexual minorities. Despite representing a small island in the vast Indonesian archipelago of thought, these allies are an active one, and have devoted considerable efforts towards supporting marginalised groups through alternative religious discourses.

Benedict Anderson, in his celebrated work *Imagined Communities*, described the nation as an 'imagined political community (…) because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (2006, 35). As it happens with citizens of nations across the world, LGBT individuals often come to their subjectivities as, for instance, *gay*, *lesbi*, or *waria* through imagined memberships to a

[3] Toomistu defines the term *waria* as "male-bodied and feminine identified subjects". The term is a combination of the words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man) (Murtagh 2013: 5). Scholars have defined *waria* as "male to female transvestites who are male bodied but generally describe themselves as having a female soul" (ibid), and more recently terms such as the English "transgender" or "*transpuan*", a compound of transgender and *perempuan* (woman) have been used in the Indonesian context (García Rodríguez 2019).

wider ‘community’, one to which both positive representations and negative discourses (such as the ones explored in the first cluster) contribute.

In this context, Ben Murtagh’s article concludes this issue by considering the emergence of ‘imagined worlds’ in a number of Indonesian films. In the face of the challenges and struggles of living gay and lesbian lives in Indonesia, Murtagh shows how film characters use their imagining of potential queer worlds in Indonesia and beyond to queer their own spaces of the lived city. While his discussion focuses on *Selamat pagi, malam* (In the Absence of the Sun, dir. Lucky Kuswandi 2013), his article also analyses other films including *Janji Joni* (Joni’s Promise, dir. Joko Anwar, 2004); *Coklat Stroberi* (Chocolate Strawberry, Dir. Ardy Octaviand 2008), and *Arisan! 2* (The Gathering 2, 2011 dir. Nia Dinata). Without explicitly mentioning all of the aspects discussed by authors in the other two clusters, Murtagh’s work seems to bridge the political discourses explored by Hegarty, Wijaya, and Thajib and the everyday practices described by Toomistu and García Rodríguez, by identifying alternative realities through which film characters imagine alternative lives. This is done in a manner that is reminiscent of the strategies employed by Indonesian queer people to create spaces where they can express themselves freely despite increasing homophobic rhetoric.

It is hoped that the collective body of work presented in this special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay World* will further discussions about the ways in which the sudden accentuation of anti-LGBT discourse in early 2016 continues to resonate in Indonesia. Social media, news reporting, personal and online security, creative expression, activism, and religiosity continue to impact the lives of queer Indonesians through the ongoing reverberations of this particular wave of homophobic discourse. Even though the consequences of this have clearly been negative in so many ways, we invite fellow researchers, students and general audiences to approach these articles in the spirit of resilience, resistance and creativity shown by so many queer Indonesians and their allies.

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