

BRC--35
The Silent Election

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

I started out early this morning, just as the polls opened. Surabaya was already held in that tight, strange grip of silence which was to dominate election day.

Walking down Tundjungan, we were solitary figures on a broad street which usually roars and shouts with traffic at eight a.m. Today there were no rickshaws, no cars, no people. Shops were closed and boarded.

A truck barreled up the middle of the street, filled with armed police; they were to find no use for their arms on this day of remarkable order and discipline.

We were almost to the first polling place ten minutes later. Two bicycles passed. Youngsters too young to vote, solemn and quiet.

The first polling place on my schedule was on the corner of Tegalsari avenue. This is in a district of large white houses fronting on the avenue, with narrow allies leading back into the packed lower class living quarters. Two long lines of voiceless voters stretched back from the poll entree, one for men and one for women. No talking, no laughing. An extraordinary Indonesian crowd.

It was an open-air polling area, a broad enclosure on a small field, the grass burnt dry for these three desert months. At the corner of the area, a lone flame tree made a brilliant orange-red umbrella for the stately ceremony below.

Quietly and quickly, the voters were slipping through the entrance gate in the enclosure. Two inspectors were checking their names off the registry and looking at their credentials. A few waited on the benches inside, but not for long. A steady stream was passing by the committee chairman's table at the center, receiving ballots and walking to the four voting booths at the edge of the enclosure.

They were voting quickly, out of sight of those who waited their turn.

Each punched his or her ballot with a nail through the symbol of a party, or wrote the name and number of a candidate at the bottom. The voter then took his folded ballot to the ballot box near the committee table. The outside of each ballot was checked to see that the three committee signatures had been written in. It was like a long-rehearsed dance; walk to the ballot box as an Indonesian would walk, straight and poised; lift the ballot over the slot; pause while the official looks; drop. Now walk quickly to the exit, lift the hand to be marked with red ink. Go home.

Outside the enclosure, the single policeman was patrolling with the eight student assistants assigned by the city government. The security area--a radius of fifty meters around the polling place--was empty except for waiting voters.

On down the street, we passed a polling place set up in the lobby of a two-story private school. The voters were crowding the door and we didn't stop. Only voters and election officials could go in. Even the security guards and police were forbidden entrance except on the request of the committee.

Down the street, we spied Soeparta's car with its identifying sign, "Surabaja Election Committee". He stopped and we drove with him to his own polling place. Now we were with an official guide, so we would be permitted to see the voting from inside.

Soeparta looked tired but relieved. He is the chief of the Information Bureau of Surabaja Metropolis, the one man most directly responsible for the training of the city's 616 election committees and the political education of its half million voters. This was his day. He had been up until three o'clock in the morning touring the polling places, ending his exhausting preparation work with a final burst of energy. He had been working twelve to fourteen hours a day for weeks, cajoling, explaining and even losing his temper. This valuable and effective official was now on his way to take part in the drama he had helped direct. Like anyone else he took his place at the end of the silent line.

A military jeep pulled up at the end of the street. It stopped at the line marking the security area. Three soldiers checked their weapons and walked up to the entrance gate. The committeeman refused them special privilege and pointed to the end of the line. A police inspector with gold bars on the epaulets of his tan uniform sauntered up to the same committeeman and showed his papers. He made no more impression than the soldiers; he too was shown the end of the

men's line. He walked away stiffly.

It was nine o'clock and a few women at the end of the line began to whisper, then it was quiet again. The three men at the committee table in the tiny polling enclosure were doing their work rapidly. The first was taking the "invitations" which the voters had received the day before, then checking their names off a registry like that at the entrance. The chairman in the center was taking a ballot off the top of the ballot pile. He signed his name on the outside, then handed it to the first committeeman to sign. By then the voter was at the end of the table and received a ballot from the end man, who then took time to put his signature on the ballot for the next voter.

Directly in front of the committee, the four polling booths were visible. We could see in from our position behind the committee and watch the voters punch. Many were punching symbols on the bottom line, probably for the Catholic Party candidates who would receive a heavy vote in this Chinese-Eurasian district. A spry old Indonesian woman stepped into a booth and opened her ballot with shaking hands. It was upside down, but she found the hammer-and-sickle easily. She punched, folded, walked a few steps, dropped her ballot and walked out. Her face broke into a snickering smile.

When Soeparta finished voting at ten, we got into his little Fiat and drove four miles through this city of a million inhabitants. We saw several pedestrians and a few bicycles. I was so thoroughly immersed in the silence of the day that I caught myself wondering who had given these few permission to be out on the streets. But no order had been given by any official authority to vacate the streets. The silence and emptiness of the city was puzzling. Was it because of the rumors that violence might make Surabaya unsafe on election day? I had heard the rumors and disbelieved them.

We drove past a large army billet. Trucks and Sherman tanks were parked in front, but there wasn't a soldier in sight. We were now down by Red Bridge, that aptly named connection by which Chinese business men could walk from the pro-Peking Chinese commercial area, across the refuse-clogged canal, and over into the slum section controlled by the Indonesian Communist Party. I wondered how much money had crossed Red Bridge during the last two years to help the communists court and win the support of the usually boisterous poor of Surabaya. Prophets from all camps are now predicting a solid communist victory in Surabaya. It will have been an expensive victory.

We had turned right from Red Bridge toward Perfect Street, leaving behind us the deserted foreign banks and trading companies. An immense white square of a building shared by Stanvac and Internatio was looking stolidly down at the sea of election campaign bill-boards

on the grass square below. Today the foreign firms were locked and empty; foreign schools were on a one-day holiday. For once, no Dutchmen were visible on Surabaya's streets. We continued down Perfect Street into the communist section.

Before the election campaign ended on September 26 (by order of the East Java Security Committee), the people of Perfect Street had seen several months of bitter campaigning between Communism and Islam. One night last week, mass meetings were held by the Indonesian Communist Party and the Muslim Anti-Communist Front within shouting distance on this street of tiny shops and dark slum dwellings. The communists had put on another one of their "people's parties", a gay fiesta of songs, Indonesian boxing, and folk opera (ludruk) in a small field decorated with hammer-and-sickle flags and paper lanterns. The party began with a short political speech which repeated the attractive and successful communist campaign line: national front, friendship with all parties, distaste for political conflict and character assassination, spiced with ridicule and abuse for Muslim politicians who ridicule and abuse communist politicians.

Only a few hundred heard the communist speech. Down the street, thousands were listening to the fiery Muslim speaker, a former red labor leader who had left the communist cause after a trip to Moscow. In the opinion of the young leader of the neighborhood security patrol--a communist--the local people had attended only out of curiosity and applauded only to drive the leader on to further ridiculousness. After the Muslim meeting ended, most of them had gone over to the communist celebration. Many stayed on until morning to watch the ludruk performance, and many returned on the three following nights the fiesta continued.

Today would tell whose campaign tactics were sounder. I remembered the Anti-Communist Front rally out in Modjokerto the Sunday before. Indeed, the aggressive, abusive speech had failed to attract that Sunday afternoon crowd. At least a thousand had left the meeting during the speech. A few of them told me that such aggressiveness was "unpleasant" and un-Indonesian. The Masjumi and its militant Anti-Communist Front had carried on a humorless campaign, without guitars, jokes or female impersonators.

The communists had fought on a "pinchers" campaign, relying heavily on entertainment to attract the potential voters and on clever organization to bind them. In Surabaya, their success had been in utilizing a wide variety of associations, ranging from the SOBSI labor unions to the communist-controlled "neighborhood system" (like the Chinese Pao-Chia), with its security patrols and neighborhood governments. The Communist Party had poured great wealth into this campaign of wooing and intimidating. From all appearances, it is the wealthiest party in East Java. Perhaps it is the most successful.

We came to a polling place down one of the lanes off Perfect

Street. It was an auto repair shop housed in a high shed of corrugated iron sides and roof. On the front section of the cement floor, hundreds of voters were crammed together--a sea of shiny black hair and solemn faces above the brilliant green, blue, yellow and orange of holiday clothes. On any other day, such a mass would be surging and dangerously alive with the explosive tensions of Surabaya city. Today, the crowd was tame and evidently awed by the significance of the occasion. I felt no threat as I elbowed my way through them toward the polling area in the rear.

The chairman asked our business and gave us permission to watch. Each voter had to face the chairman to get a ballot. He was a short wiry figure, with eyes radiating electric authority. He was a communist. For the first time, I actually realized how the very presence of such a man could intimidate the voters. My earlier questioning had shown that few uneducated voters really understood that their ballots were secret, and that the Polling Committee chairman could not know their choice.

The committee was working more slowly than in the wealthier polling district uptown. We saw the cause of delay. A young girl was coming out of the polling booth, gaudy in her purple blouse and batik sarong. She looked confused as she approached the ballot box. The crowd spotted her and shouted, "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" She had folded her ballot so the symbols were showing on the outside. A committee member told her to return to the secrecy of the booth and fold the ballot again. In a minute she came out again. "Wrong! Wrong!" She was rattled now. Four more times she made a variation on the same error. A committeeman started to approach her, but the chairman stopped him. If she could not fold the ballot right, it was her own loss. Finally she got the ballot right and passed out of the voting area. A man in the next booth was now folding his ballot for the third time. When he dropped it in the box, his hand was shaking. The voters started moving through again and the crowd was silent. The system of community control seemed to be working well, without infringing on the secrecy of the voting.

We left Surabaya at noon on the train. As we raced over the flat baking plain of the Brantas Delta, the silence and desertion of the fields was eerie. No one in sight. A field of rich gold rice, half harvested. Finally, near Krian, a lone figure--a child playing in a field of rice stubble. Past the fields of cane, the sugar factories, the small market towns of the delta--no people, no carts, no cars, no oxen. Even the chickens and goats were gone.

It was late in the day and most of the voters had finished at the polls. Where were they now? I found that the phenomenon seemed to have multiple causes. Some said they stayed home "as a service to the State". Others said that the local Election Security Committees had advised them not to go around visiting on this important day; they had obeyed. Still others claimed that they were afraid of disorder

or "trouble". Perhaps their vague fears were a sign that the election campaign--generally mild by western standards--had indeed created an atmosphere of fear and impending conflict. I had heard of the rumor in the Madiun area that election day would signal the start of another Madiun Rebellion, in which communists and Muslims would again spill their blood in the frightened villages. The silence was a compound of awe, obedience and fear carried to the level of a great symbolic act of restraint.

We got home to our village of Mlirip at two. I saw one person along the little village lane leading from the highway. When I arrived at the house, I learned that the Polling Committees were still using my jeep, so I started walking on foot through the powdered blown dust of the road. After twenty minutes, I arrived at the polling place near the village headman's house, dizzy and blinking from the glaring sun. The voting had been completed by eleven o'clock. Counting had started at two and ended in fifteen minutes. Committee members from the various opposing parties were chatting at the center table, while the security guards tied up the bundles of unused ballots. Their task was finished and the day had been a great success, with no incidents and no protests.

In another hour, I had the results of the voting in Mlirip. The first surprise was the extraordinary turnout; nearly ninety percent of the registered voters had gone to the polls. The second surprise was in the counting:

Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI)	283
Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)	273
Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)	140
Masjumi	23
Permai	21

The margin of the PNI victory was surprisingly narrow in this PNI village. Why? I know that the villagers had not heard much about the disgraces attending the fall of the PNI Ali cabinet, but PNI strength had fallen fifty percent since the village election in spring. And how had the communists managed to pick up such strength since the Mlirip sub-branch of the PKI was organized last December?

As I wind up this letter, I have received scattered election results from our area. Voter turn-out was apparently ninety percent in Modjokerto city, ninety-five percent in Tarik Sub-District. The communists were piling up surprising pluralities in some polling places. No incidents have been reported from any area in East Java. Order and discipline had been extraordinary. Voting and vote counting have been carried out with great organizational precision. The reports continue to come in, and in a few days we shall know the trends.

Election day has ended now. Organizationally, it has been

a brilliant achievement for the election workers, officials and information officers of Surabaja, Modjokerto and Tarik. The day has shown how far a political institution of the west can be infused with the rich cultural character of Java; order, respect for authority and individual restraint have given this election its special flavor in our area.

It has been an especially tame election, just as the election campaign was particularly gentle. The people were asked to vote and they voted. They were asked to disagree with each other and participate in formal ceremony of choice. It is not clear yet that the people of Java and the other islands of Indonesia want and demand the right to speak their minds as they have done today. It is not clear that they prefer this controlled institution of political conflict to the authoritarian systems they have known before. The election has been the gift of their westernized leaders and "papas". The electorate has apparently accepted the gift with typical Indonesian grace.

On election night we cannot fail to be impressed by the manner in which the events of the last twelve hours have been organized. Yet somehow the order and discipline of the voters has given an air of unreality and tentativeness to the procedure. The election in this area has been, above all, an expression of obedience and response to the organizational skill of the electoral committees and government. It has been a public demonstration of national unity, with conflict well hidden in the polling booths. The election results will expose this conflict and test the capacity of the Indonesian nation to accept the consequences of the democratic act which they have carried out so splendidly today.

Yours sincerely,

Boyd R. Compton
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