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**The power and abuse of language in politics***Opinion and Editorial - February 20, 2008***Jennie S. Bev**, San Francisco

Language is a powerful tool in politics and politicians are its most superfluous users, both for good and bad purposes. As George Orwell once wrote in his masterpiece *Why I Write*, "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

At the apex of such usage, the politics of amnesia, a term coined by Therry Eagleton, transpires. When it does occur, benevolent conscience is no longer apparent, nor mindful understanding of what truly has happened in front of our eyes. Because when such amnesia occurs, the language of politics has reached its most gruesome function: to kill and to win in totality without any recollection. The perfect crime.

Indonesia is no exception. Language has been used in an ad nauseam manner to create an environment of fear and insecurity since the beginning. While such manipulative usage is understandable to a certain degree, it is not acceptable when power-oriented intentions are palpable. After all, regardless of one's ideology, a true politician is a statesman, whose interests revolve around his or her constituents' well-being and welfare instead of obtaining as much power as possible. In an ideal world, the people must be protected, not periclitated.

Combine this phenomenon with Indonesia being a "soft nation", a Weberian term as put forth by Azyumardi Azra, a notable Indonesian Islamic scholar in *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy*, where democracy is still in its infancy and the majority of the population are highly affected by rampant patrimonialism, corruption, cronyism and nepotism; the tendency for unifying multiple elements from religion, religiosity, to politics, the power of political language is magnified in a manner that is indoctrinating and brainwashing. Above all, low levels of education, which is evident with a mere total of 5,000 doctorate degree holders in a country of 235 million in population, serve as fertile soil.

There are many examples from which we can clearly see how the political elites have been steering the people's perceptions in order to maintaining their status quo. The term *pemerintah*, which is Indonesian for "government", itself is a fallacy as it literally translates as "one who gives orders". "One who gives orders" is a concept of complete opposite of "one who represents the people", because when one represents, the higher power rests with the people, not the other way around.

The May 1998 incident is a good example. The term *kerusuhan*, which means "anarchic riot", clearly indicates from whose perspective this condemnatory terminology was coined. If we closely pay attention to

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the actual happenings under the surface, the people who suffer the most are victims in the truest meaning of the word. Both the so-called "rioters" and the "riotees" were victims of an orchestrated political scenario. And, for all who possess some good conscience at heart, it would be more appropriate to address such an incident as a "tragedy" instead of a "riot". The anarchic-looking incident was simply the surface of an occurrence, not the substance.

When we address something, we need to adhere to substance, not to what is seen on the surface. While it is acceptable to say it like it is prior to a full understanding, making amends at a later date is still not too late. The key is to think clearly before using any terminology, especially one that is steered -- one that is used to frame an incident or a phenomenon.

In other parts of the world, such as the United States, politicians' rhetoric serves both good and bad intentions as well. While rising political star Barack Obama has been able to use hopeful rhetoric in a bipartisan manner, President George W. Bush has been using the language of politics to place his ideological haughtiness in a narrowly partisan perspective.

Obama has shown how being an inspiration to "a nation in distress" gives hope and motivation to make meaningful change. Bush, on the contrary, whose rhetoric may sound utterly self-righteous, clearly shows a self-serving purpose that has placed the United States at its lowest point in terms of popularity.

Still, I would not judge Obama as a better man than Bush. Because, after all, both are politicians, whose language skills may differ in advancement from one another, but they are what they are, nonetheless. Unless, of course, time has unmistakably proven their truest colors.

At last, let us all try to comprehend the ruling elite's tendency to use language to attain political goals, because only this way will we be able to maintain an awareness of politicians' agenda, both hidden and out in the open. After all, we live in a democracy, which is based on the mediocre majority, as Aristotle once said. And such a claim of "mediocrity" or its antithesis can only be verified with time.

Whenever a political term is introduced, we need to listen to our conscience and ponder it. By increasing our political literacy through careful usage of words, we heighten our awareness as human beings.

*The writer is a columnist, social commentator and an adjunct professor based in Northern California. She can be found at JennieSBev.com.*

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