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Special Column: Guest bloggers

## The Urgency of Teaching Political Literacy

by [Jennie S. Bey](#) on Tuesday, February 19th, 2008 at 7:42 am

Recently, we have been hearing about many things in Indonesian political arena. Most of them call themselves as participants in Indonesia's reformation era. All consider themselves as noble participants. They want Indonesia to be a better place. A better place for those who believe in their causes.

Such occurrences are understandable, even when fundamentalism and radicalism movements find it an opportunity to use the momentum in making their marks. The fall of Suharto in 1998, which was believed to be the best thing that ever happened to Indonesia at that time, has not been able to create a more trustworthy government today, despite the recent Democracy Award.

Today, it is very hard for citizens to trust their well-being in the hands of central and local government officials whose integrity is questionable. It is known that not all Indonesian officials are corrupt or untrustworthy, but a simple poll or survey could have been proven the assertion that many, if not most, of them are. It is an embarrassing fact that many officials, including those who are posted in foreign countries—thus are assumed to be of “international standard” in handling diplomatic issues with the host country and Indonesian community members residing there—have yet to show their best qualities.

Last year, in a World Affairs Forum seminar in San Francisco, in which Prof. Donald Emmerson of Stanford University's SEAF was present, the current Indonesian Ambassador to the United States Sudjadnan Parnohadingningrat, was asked a simple question, “How is the current state of minorities in Indonesia?” He answered in an astonishing manner, which was an affront to his own intelligence, “There is no more minority issue, we now have Imlek (Chinese New Year) celebration.” Sure, it is a good point and it is well taken.

Another question was asked on the raise of radicalism and fundamentalism movements in Indonesia, which he answered, “Only one percent of radicals and fundamentalists in the midst of more than 230 million people who are moderates, so why bother? Let ‘the market’ determines.” As concerned citizens, the seminar participants were astonished. One of them was surprised, “Does it mean anarchy?” Still, he reiterated his answer.

Many of the seminar participants were politically literate people and we were disappointed to hear that. We know what to expect when one asks such a question. Alas, the Excellency Mr. Ambassador perhaps has been used to with constituents who are not politically literate, which could be in the number of hundreds of millions in Indonesia.

For us all, the citizens of Indonesia and the world, to understand how we are represented by the government, we need to educate ourselves to become literate politically. At this point, it might be a wishful thinking for Indonesian government to educate us because, apparently, many of the officials are not statesmen in the truest meaning of the word. It is very hard to find honest statesmen like the late founding father Dr. Muhammad Hatta and Prof. Dr. Daoed Joesoef nowadays.

Educating ourselves to be politically literate in a democratic country is quite simple. And by “political literacy,” it refers to a set of skills necessary for citizens to participate in society's government. In short, there are abilities what

we all need to master, so we can stand tall in front of those government officials who may have prejudices against their constituents and behave not in a respectable manner. It does not mean we aim to be a career politician, but to think and to act as an informed constituent. After all, those government officials cannot become who they are without us.

### **First and foremost, representation.**

A citizen is the one with power, hence being a constituent. The notion of a “government official” should be separated from the notion a “government.” In the minds of constituents, it is imperative that we see the “government” as a group of people who have received a special mandate from the people to act on their behalf. Thus, the real power lies in the hands of the people, in our hands.

### **Second, participation.**

In a democratic country, no matter how patriarchy the culture is, every individual regardless of age, gender, and other social backgrounds is equal before the law. Thus, when there are laws that do not adhere to this fundamental principle, they are not acceptable and we can change them with a strong will that are channeled properly. In the United States, the power of writing is one of the most useful. With people-managed petitions, there are many things that can be accomplished. Perseverance, of course, is likely to pay off. The key is a winner’s mentality in attesting our conviction.

### **Third, recognizing bias and “framing” statements.**

Politicians are notorious for their ability to say things with metaphors and pretentious dictions, as George Orwell said in his masterpiece *Politics and the English Language*. He said, “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better.”

### **Fourth, the rule of law and legal systems.**

The simplest form of the rule of law is that no one is above the law. And the highest form of ethics is the truth. Truth must be honored in the highest manner, not dishonesty in any manner. In Indonesia, there are three legal systems –western continental, Islamic, and native adat — that clearly show how the society is not only stratified but compartmentalized. Horizontally and vertically. Understanding the history and how each legal system came into existence is key in understanding the current and predicting the future state of Indonesian laws and regulations. After all, a civilized society is one that is ruled by law.

At last, let me cite John Wayne who said to John F. Kennedy, the elected president whom he did not vote, “I didn’t vote for him, but he is my president. I hope he does a good job.” And by being politically literate constituents, we are one step closer to a more just society where people’s equality is not merely rhetoric but a reality for all to enjoy.



Jennie S. Bev is an author, entrepreneur, and educator based in San Francisco Bay Area. She has over 1,000 articles and 60+ print and electronic books published in America and Asia under her belt and was named an EPPIE Award finalist for excellence in electronic publishing under Non-Fiction How-To category. Among others, she has written articles for, been featured and quoted in Entrepreneur, Canadian Business, San Francisco Chronicle, The Independent, Teen People, Home Business, Audrey, The Jakarta Post, About.com, FabSugar.com, Femina, Fit, and Dong (France and Germany). She is a regular columnist for several publications.

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