

## Commentary

# Johannes Nugroho: Indonesia, 'Negara Pejabat'

6-8 minutes

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The wedding of President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's daughter Kahiyang Ayu to Bobby Nasution dominated both conventional and social media last weekend with the popular hashtag in the Javanese language #jokowimantu (Jokowi gains a son-in-law). As images of the reception reached the public domain, many expressed their surprise and admiration that the couple's reception in Solo was a "humble and down-to-earth" affair for a presidential wedding, dubbed by those who were present as "pesta rakyat" (reception for the people).

Comparisons were made with the presidential weddings of Jokowi's predecessor's era, President Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), who held sumptuous and elitist receptions for both his sons at the presidential palaces of Bogor and Cipanas. Although Kahiyang's wedding may not be in the same prestigious league as those of SBY's offspring, it was by no means a tawdry affair. For one, not many Indonesians can afford to hold a reception catered for around 8,000 guests. So the reception was in fact worth a king's ransom by most Indonesians' standards.

So why did many people think it was down-to-earth? The answer lies in the ingrained mentality of most Indonesians as subjects within the "Negara Pejabat" or the Bureaucratic State. In the "Negara Pejabat" a bureaucrat who is an unelected government official has always been important with seigneurial powers and privileges, often behaving like a small overlord in his or her fiefdom. The "pejabat" is expected to derive perks and unofficial stipends from his or her position in government.

Occupying an exalted position, the Indonesian bureaucrat is a social better to most and is always seen as such by his inferiors. Accordingly, social events hosted by the pejabat must necessarily be exceptional, replete with the "wow-factor" for the "ordinary folks" to marvel at. It was within this frame of mind that Kahiyang's wedding was judged. The absence of outlandish (possibly foreign) culinary concoctions and its dogged refusal to be over the top was simultaneously admirable and disappointing for many.

The "Negara Pejabat" mentality, laughable as it may be, is inherent in Indonesian society. By sheer historical ignorance or generalization, elected representatives and public officials such as members of parliament are also seen as "pejabat" by the populace, which has done nothing but

encourage "the people's representatives" to behave like feudal lords, just as their counterparts in the civil service often do.

At the top of the hierarchy is the presidential family, often treated akin to royalty, which explains why some TV commentators described Kahiyang's wedding as Indonesia's "royal wedding." When the lavishness of SBY's eldest son, Agus Harimurti's wedding reception at the Bogor Palace was revealed, the Indonesian public begrudgingly acquiesced as a matter of form, because a "royal" wedding could not be anything other than magnificent.

In many ways, Jokowi has challenged this otherworldly view of the presidential family. He took the internet by storm when he was found to be flying economy class to Singapore to attend his son's graduation. Three years into his presidency, he has fitted into the presidential mold better. Never is he now seen to be flying economy anymore—for obvious security concerns—but his immediate family members are still often seen to be doing so, including his wife the First Lady.

"Negara Pejabat-ism" is so pervasive that it is difficult to not encounter it. At its heart is the expectation of almost feudal respect for the "pejabat." The new deputy governor of Jakarta, Sandiaga Uno, for example told the media how he had been spoken to rudely by an ojek rider (taxi-biker) during his morning jog to the town hall. Sandi, as he is popularly known, even made a slip of the tongue by saying that the taxi-biker obviously did not recognize who he was and that such disrespect "against the head of state" was surely in breach of some regulation.

Sandi's conjecture that he had failed to be recognized as the deputy governor – hence the nominal overlord and social better of the insolent taxi-biker – means that being recognizable as a "pejabat" is important as such recognition confers the respect due to him or her by right.

The Indonesian "pejabat" must be set apart from the rest of his or her compatriots, which is probably why the Indonesian Civil Service chooses to put its members in uniforms. A mayor or a governor wears the full white military style uniform on his or her inauguration day while the rest of the world – with the exception of Britain where the lords mayor still wear their chains of office – is happy to let their civil servants be dressed, well, like civilians.

Another classic example of Negara Pejabat-ism is enshrined in a photo circulated in social media of the new Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan talking on his mobile phone on his hands-free while an assistant (or an adjutant as he is known in Indonesia) holds his mobile phone, even when his other hand is visibly free. A "pejabat" is simply too important to be doing menial things, except when he or she wants to impress the public with the image of humility.

And what does "Negara Pejabat-ism" mean for the rest of us? On a jocular note, it means being treated to the farcical and the ridiculous, such as seeing a picture of a man incapable of holding his own mobile phone without help while on another occasion the same man uploaded a picture of himself on the humble motorbike taking his son to school.

On a more somber note, it means that the corrupt mentality afflicting Indonesia's bureaucrats and other office holders is more ingrained than we would like to admit. Negara Pejabat-ism means that those in power would almost always feel that they deserve to use whatever means at their disposal to further their own interests as part of their "rights, perks and privileges."

On the other end, it also induces the "ordinary folks" to assume that a "pejabat," being their overlord, must behave with noblesse oblige towards them, such as by granting them personal or group favors and coming to their monetary assistance, something the "pejabat" can hardly accomplish without abuse of power.

The combination is invariably fatal as it tends to perpetuate the cycle of corruption, collusion and nepotism.

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