

Indonesia: Six Unique Observations Before New Year

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My eyes grow unusually big and round in Indonesia as I hungrily feast them on my surroundings. Things are just different in Jakarta or Jogjakarta than they are back in Kuala Lumpur or Petaling Jaya where I'm from. As a traveler, I am constantly learning new things about Indonesia with every visit and it's interesting that this brimming modern-meets-

traditional-life nation has so much information to offer me.

Although these observations may seem common and very everyday to the average Indonesian, they nonetheless struck an awe chord with me. Here were **six** things of interest that I observed from a recent trip back there (December 2002).

1. Shops with *Pribumi* signs

One of the first places we stopped at after my arrival at the Soekarno-Hatta international airport on Xmas

day was Taman Anggrek mall in western Jakarta, an enormous, posh mall with apartment complexes built right on top of it. After a hearty lunch, we drove out of the mall and into a nearby housing area in a district (which I believe is) called Slipi. I saw rows of shops, and one in particular had a sign sprayed in paint on its front door: *Milik Pribumi*.

As I saw this sign, I was instantly reminded of the incidents which took place in 1998 when Indonesia was facing one of its most devastating economic and ethnic crises. It was during that time that the Jakarta skyline was once filled with flames and smoke from burning buildings that resulted from irresponsible rioting. Chinese Indonesians became scapegoats and perceived catalysts for the occurrence of the monetary crisis (*krismon*) in Indonesia, and many who owned shops and businesses lost them to fire purposely set by irresponsible indigenous (*Pribumi*) Indonesians who felt jealousy and resentment towards them for supposedly owning a lot more wealth. In order to avoid angry mobs from burning their shops, indigenous Indonesians who ran businesses would paint their doors in large letters with the word *Pribumi* on them.

That one shop in Slipi still had the *Pribumi* sign on it, as faded and weatherworn as it was. To me it was just one sorrowful reminder of that dreadful year of 1998 when Indonesia was undergoing extreme political reformation. The car I was in moved quickly down the road, making it impossible for me to snap a picture of the shop with the *Pribumi* sign. It will be forever etched in my mind.

2. *Ketok Magic* – The Cheap Alternative to Expensive Car Repair!

Ketok magic is an inexpensive body-repair service in Indonesia that you can get done if you have a minor car accident. I was told that they do marvelous body-repair work and the cost of repair is dirt-cheap. *Ketok magic* service clientele includes mischievous youngsters who take out their mommy or daddy's car without permission and somehow manage to knock it into something!



The whole deal with *ketok magic* service is essentially this: when you send your car to the workshop, you are not allowed to watch the car in repair

progress; this is considered part of the contract between you and the people running the *ketok magic* business. The doors of the workshop will be shut while the hammering (*ketok*), repairing, etc, take place. You only get to see your car before and after the repair, so the repair will seem like it happened by magic, hence the phrase *ketok magic*.

However skillful the repairs may seem or how cheap the bill adds up later, *ketok magic* sounds a bit suspicious to me. Whatever goes on behind the scene while your car is being repaired away from your watchful eyes is something to be weary about. Heck, I'd be worried if I am not even allowed to see my car being repaired if I wanted to. So my advice is, don't

send your car for *ketok magic* if you're not willing to take the risk. Paying a cheap price for something skillfully done may actually entail a higher (and hidden) price, especially in the case of *ketok magic* service. You might want to monitor for missing or exchanged internal car parts after sending your damaged car to the *ketok magic* workshop!

3. The Indosat Demo

I was cruising around Jakarta one evening when I saw a scene that caught my attention: Tons of people holding giant signs and chanting! *Great! My first first-hand view of an Indonesian demonstration*, I thought (*hehe*). At an office building not too far away from the *Istana Negara*, hundreds of people gathered around to protest the purchasing of a S\$1.2 billion major stake telecommunications company Indosat by Singapore Technologies Telemedia (STT) - in fact Telekom Malaysia was one bidder who lost the contract to STT.

The demonstration was peaceful in nature, nothing frightening or anything, in fact lots of people were laughing away merrily while the police force stood guard in case somebody decided to do something stupid. The protest was held by the employees of Indosat who, among other things, felt that the purchasing transaction was not transparent and that Indosat was selling their dignity to foreigners, *menjual maruah bangsa* so-called.

A lot of people in Jakarta hate *demos* though: they cause traffic jams!

4. Pertamina, the Petrol Monopoly

If you ever needed to refuel car petrol, there is not much in choice as far as petrol kiosks or gas stations are concerned in Indonesia. In fact there is only ONE brand of petrol to choose from, Indonesian government-owned PERTAMINA. I don't know why it took me several trips to the country before I even realized this, I just thought everyone liked using Pertamina petrol because it's affordable or something, but it's a fact of life there: you have no choice! I'm so used to seeing many choices for petrol in Malaysia and in the US such as Petronas, Shell, BP, Caltex, Amoco, etc, that going to Indonesia and watching my friend Fibi refuel her Toyota Starlet as I learn of this monopoly, well, was quite eye-opening.

Car lovers with a preference for petrol brand are going to have a hard time finding what they want back in Indonesia. But I guess Indonesians *gak pernah pusing* (free of headaches!) trying to decide on which petrol kiosk to pull up to...!

5. Blow your trumpets everyone!

We were zooming happily on our motorcycle another evening towards Jalan Thamrin in Central Jakarta when I noticed many street vendors neatly lined up on both sides of a particular road, selling rather curiously-colorful items: paper



trumpets for celebrating the upcoming new year! A whole slew of vendors selling practically the same thing on a single road, I think there were at least 30 of them. Wow, Indonesians sure know how to make a living and how to party.



I rest my case. And oh, happy New Year 2003 everyone.

6. Prepare for a "blast" at McDonald's!

My last cool observation but not the least: As I made my way to go have a cup of coffee at this McDonald's on Jalan Thamrin, we were greeted by a screening-machine at the entrance, very much similar to the ones used in airports. This was a new dining concept: scan before you eat!



There were policemen present, occasionally checking people's bags that triggered off the screening machine's sirens, just to make sure no one was bringing in bombs into

the American fast-food franchise. The Indonesian bomb squad, GEGANA was also present, just in case something looked or sounded funny. I believe this act of extreme precaution was triggered by the bombing incident that took place in a McDonald's in Makassar, Sulawesi sometime during the Muslim festive month of *Hari Raya Idulfitri* this year. The city of Jakarta certainly didn't want to be the next potential target. Indonesia: simply amazing!