

BOOK REVIEW

GRAF, Arndt. 2010. *Bahasa Reformasi: Political Rhetoric in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. Volume 6 of Frankfurter Forschungen zu Südostasien. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, pp. 1–202. ISBN: 9783447063913

This book was conceived as a result of the author's close monitoring of the profound political changes assailing Indonesia in 1997/1998. The author hypothesises that the liberalisation and democratisation process that swept through Indonesia during this historic moment would bear a deep impact on the "political communication among Indonesians." Numerous incidents observed by the author during this time such as the "pro-democracy rally" which was staged by Indonesian students in Hamburg one day before President Suharto's resignation, the use of a new textual genre such as poetry recitation as a form of cultural expression by his Indonesian colleagues, the participation of the new Indonesian President, Abdurrahman Wahid, in a televised variety show, and political writings via the print media, prompted him to study the political rhetoric of the post-Suharto period in order to find out whether political communication in this changing times was reflective of a grass root level kind of communication or whether it was increasingly being professionalised.

The study was also interested to determine the extent to which communicative practices of Suharto's New Order era (1965/1966–1998) affected the rhetoric of the *reformasi* era (1997/1998) or what is also known as the period of transition. This era lasted till 2001 when President Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur, as he was affectionately known, was forced to resign from office. The study draws its inspiration from the concept of rhetorical analysis as espoused by Ueding and Steinbrink (1994). It is an approach to textual analysis that finds its relevance as well to the fields of literary criticism, political communication, media studies, and linguistics.

This book which is divided into three parts has seven chapters in all. Part I comprises two chapters: Chapters 1 and 2. These chapters provide an important backdrop to the study and an understanding of the study's conceptual tools. In Chapter 1, the author points out the similarity between the aims of the *reformasi* era and the "archetypical post-tyranny situation" of many other countries and periods before this. This is then followed by a discussion of the importance of rhetorical analysis, political and communicative education since antiquity. A similar wave of democratic conscientisation was also seen to be sweeping over Indonesia. This was observed with the founding of the journal *Forum Keadilan*

(Forum of Justice) which encouraged a free and open discussion of issues which were of public interest. In addition, a number of other media publications, intellectuals, religious leaders and university students participated in the struggle for greater freedom of speech and provision of human rights. Together they paved the way for the eventual liberalisation of Indonesia.

The author then argues that these were not the only players that had contributed to the development of the political rhetoric in post-Suharto Indonesia as professional politicians of all camps began to seize the discursive space that had been fought for and created by the *reformasi* grass root level and utilised it for their own political purposes. As such, it is indeed interesting to examine the political rhetoric of post-Suharto Indonesia or what is also known in local parlance as *Bahasa Reformasi*, a discourse that is contestatory since it reflects varying perspectives, agendas and interests. In this chapter, the author discusses as well scholarly studies that have been conducted on the political rhetoric of New Order Indonesia in particular the state speeches of President Suharto.

It is found that the state speeches adopted a serious style and tended to highlight the developmental aims of the government. This was in contrast to his predecessor as Sukarno accentuated the theme of nationalism in his speeches. Suharto's speeches and addresses tended to use similar lexis, phrases, tone, style and register. This similarity could be due to the fact that, unlike Sukarno, Suharto employed professionals at the State Secretariat who were asked to compose the different parts of the speech which were then put together. Such a mechanical method of crafting a state speech was a far cry from the rich oral cultural traditions of the Malay or Javanese speech makers and writers of yore. Scholars such as Matheson-Hooker rightly points out that Suharto's state speeches were much more "ordered", "planned" and "impersonal" and they mirrored the governing style of the New Order administration.

Chapter 2 discusses the rapid changes in the political rhetoric of *reformasi* politicians after Suharto's forced resignation. It also demonstrates the influence of western concepts of political marketing on the discursive character of New Order campaigns and, later, political communication during the *reformasi* era. Limitations of the political market in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Indonesia were also discussed. As pointed out by the author, repressive laws implemented by the New Order regime created a counter-discourse to Suharto's hegemonic discourse. However, after Indonesia's liberalisation this kind of binaric world view crumbled as the Indonesian political landscape had transformed into one that included many political players, each competing with the other for electoral support. Familiar grass root protest genres such as poetry recitation and secretive social gatherings were replaced by other communicative genres. In competing for

attention from potential voters, the various political players or professional politicians had to master a new language, one that was appealing to the masses.

Instead of reinforcing the good versus evil theme championed by the New Order administration, the professional politicians begun using the language of negotiation entertaining the possibility of seeking coalition with opposing camps. The importance of political rhetoric was highlighted by Amien Rais, one of the top leaders of the *reformasi* movement, in a number of his media interviews. Clearly, he had embraced political marketing when he used the term "captive market" in one of his statements. This is a word that clearly alludes to the field of political marketing as it is not part of the register of grass root or traditional Islamic and Javanese discourse. In this chapter, the author also rightly cautions the readers about the wholesale application of Western concepts of political marketing in any study of Indonesian political communication because of the country's diversity and heterogeneity. Indonesian political market is highly fragmented and distorted as it consists of diverse ethnic groups who are distanced from one another linguistically, geographically, culturally and also in terms of religion. Factors such as poor infrastructure, lack of access to information, negative campaigning and political violence further distanced the people from the centre and encouraged the development of local and regional political markets. As such, as the author rightly concludes, empirical methods have to be employed to analyse political communication in Indonesia because of the erratic nature of the political market.

Part II consists of Chapters 3 and 4. These two chapters show how *reformasi* imagery that was used at grass root level was reformulated by professional politicians as metaphors in their media interviews. Poets and students had used this *reformasi* imagery to destabilise the hegemonic discourse of the New Order regime and replaced it with a counter discourse. This counter-discourse which was articulated via poetry had used images of decay, falseness and lawlessness to depict the negativity of the outer world, in essence, the world of New Order politics. Such images of the outer world were also reflected in the inner world, one which was constructed as being in a perpetual state of conflict, confusion and chaos.

In response to this situation of despair, Amien Rais, one of the key *reformasi* players, conveyed messages of inner peace which were connected to Islam. This was communicated through Arabic loanwords and Islamic metaphors. In addition, he had also used a significant number of body and house metaphors which helped to reinforce a gendered and patriarchal world-view. Through these metaphors, the male politicians and the military were masculinised whilst the Indonesian people were feminised. Such metaphors functioned to cast the former as adults whose role was to protect and look after the latter who were depicted as

young children. Amien Rais had also used the trope of a family to represent the Indonesian nation. Metaphors pertaining to nationalism and modernisation were utilised as well. In addition, attempts were also made to evoke a regional identity by using Javanese words and expressions. The above were some of the rhetorical strategies deployed by Amien Rais in his efforts to reconfigure the layperson's concerns in order to gain electoral support.

Part III comprises the final two chapters. These chapters analyse the various sophisticated strategies employed by key *reformasi* representatives when reworking the grass roots' *reformasi* impulse. A computational methodology was applied as these strategies were not easily discernible in the corpus. For this purpose, the author had collected data that included printed interviews with Megawati Sukarnoputri (PDI-P), Akbar Tanjung (*Golkar*), Abdurrahman Wahid (PKB), Amien Rais (PAN) and the then President, B. J. Habibie (*Golkar*). These were obtained from a number of important magazines and the internet. Based on the frequency of word usage, it is found that these professional politicians possessed their own ideological intent and inclinations. It was also found that the level of sophistication varied as the experienced politicians, in particular Amien Rais, Akbar Tanjung and Abdurrahman Wahid were much more adept in their use of rhetorical strategies than their less experienced counterparts, namely, Megawati Sukarnoputri and B. J. Habibie.

Chapter 6 discusses the use of humour, a subtle persuasive strategy, by Abdurrahman Wahid in his performance in a televised variety show. The use of humour sets him apart from his predecessors as, unlike him, they preferred a much more serious and formal style. It was a viable strategy as the jokes and clownish behaviour brought him closer to the people especially when he identified himself as Semar, a popular Javanese mythological hero. In his final chapter, the author succinctly sums up the study by saying that *Bahasa Reformasi* was essentially "a system of textual devices" that had combined a number of genres and persuasive strategies. The role of rhetoric cannot be downplayed here as it had significantly contributed to the transformation of the political landscape of Indonesia.

This is a relatively new and unexplored terrain as most studies on *reformasi* have been viewed from an exclusively media, sociological or political science perspective. In this regard, the author should be commended as he had effectively combined all these perspectives in his study of *reformasi*. Such a multi-disciplinary book would make it relevant to scholars, researchers and students working in the related fields of linguistics, literature, media studies, history and politics. Those who view rhetoric as a study that belongs to antiquity and hence irrelevant to modern times would change her/his mindset after reading this book. This is because a rhetorical analysis would require a researcher to possess sound

analytical and interpretive skills. In addition, it also requires the researcher to have a critical and enquiring mind. Such skills and competencies were clearly demonstrated in the author's reading of the different forms of grass root cultural expressions and political interviews with top *reformasi* politicians. This book shows that images and metaphors are not mere linguistic ornaments that are used to enhance the aesthetic appeal of a text but that they function as effective purveyors of ideologies and worldviews. Likewise, the mixture of genres in the political communication of professional politicians is not just a matter of style but also fulfils important communicative functions.

The book is very well-structured and organised as it provides a macro perspective on rhetoric and *reformasi* before presenting an elaborate and detailed analysis of the rhetoric used by the various *reformasi* politicians. Past scholarly studies have been reviewed in a comprehensive and critical manner. This shows that the study has been well-thought out and contextualised. The author should be commended for drawing up a valuable framework as it was successfully used to study the hybrid nature of political communication in the *reformasi* era. The use of quantitative computational methodology to complement the textual analysis is a novel idea. The combined methods help to provide further validation of the research findings and enhance the research objectivity.

On the whole, this is a worthwhile read as it provides a clear understanding of an important historic moment in Indonesia's history as well as the changes in political communication during that time. As such, scholars, researchers, students and even the general public would find this book highly useful and informational.

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