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Goenawan Mohamad [Indonesia, Editor of Tempo]

Goenawan Mohamad

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Interviewee: **GOENAWAN MOHAMAD**

Interviewer: Nancy Chng

Date: 17 Nov 2014

Location: Jakarta, Indonesia

00:00:20

Nancy Chng

Goenawan, can you please tell us, as a leading light of Indonesian journalism, literary, and culture and the arts scene, you are a leading figure, just run us through how it all started?

00:00:35

Goenawan Mohamad

I'm not sure about the light, but yes, I have some years of working as journalist and writer. I started when I was, actually when I was in high school. I got my poem, actually (it's) a translation of a poem published in (a) Jakarta newspaper first (in) 1958, when you were not born, right? Well then, I got some recognition from (the) Jakarta literary circle by being published in a literary journal called Sastra in the early sixties. But then the situation was very tense. It was the beginning, it was the years of the "Guided Democracy" introduced by Soekarno. When we got our independence, there was free expression, totally. So, writing, journalism, poetry – all free. Then in 1958, Soekarno decided to change the political system into a Guided Democracy, and he became the leader of the revolution, and the press was controlled. Other expressions were controlled. But politically, I was so intense, which was one of the memorable things of that period.

So, Soekarno was the person who decided all things in the country, (he) was more inclined to follow the model of Socialist countries. (The) economy was being controlled and the cultural section was also being controlled. At that time, the Communist Party was on the rise. (It was) the most organised, the most dedicated people running the party. The problem with the Communist Party was that it had elements of Stalinist line in culture. During Stalin's time, there was an idea called "Socialist Realism". The idea of putting literature and other cultural activities under the leadership of the party, to promote the party's policy in creating and promoting the five-year plan of the Soviet Union at the time. But this policy had become very stringent and very repressive.

That kind of repression was to me alarming, and if it was introduced, or enforced in Indonesia, it would kill the cultural landscape. That's why we started to, tried to argue not to adopt that. So, we drafted this Cultural Manifesto.

00:03:42

Nancy Chng

We is who, in this case?

00:03:44

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

With a lot of friends – writers. I was young, when I was young, I was twenty-three. There were older writers who were involved, but actually the young were behind this movement, the old just follow – me, Arief Budiman and others were behind this policy, this activity. Then the Cultural Manifesto was banned by Soekarno in 1964 I think. As a consequence, we were not allowed to write. We had to use pseudonyms. I couldn't get my works published. I couldn't even attend a meeting. I was a kind of pariah. This kind of situation lasted until '65 and there was a coup, there was a change, a major bloody change of Indonesian history.

00:04:39

[Nancy Chng](#)

But then, at that time, LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat. Translation: People's Cultural Institute) was also active...

00:04:43

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Before. LEKRA was very active in banning the Cultural Manifesto. But then in '65, '66, when the Communist Party was purged, LEKRA people were jailed or killed, and detained, well, many were exiled.

00:05:04

[Nancy Chng](#)

How did it impact the writing scene in the sixties?

00:05:09

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

The New Order was not very much interested in literature. They didn't even read books. All the generals were never good readers. But they didn't touch poetry fortunately. So, poetry was not, not...

00:05:28

[Nancy Chng](#)

...monitored.

00:05:29

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

...monitored, and there was no time to monitor for them. There was no instrument. (It was) different from the Communist Party that had this LEKRA,

which knew what it was all about. The military did not know, they just arrested people who were suspicious, whom they were suspicious of. But you could sense that the debate of things was very restricted, increasingly so, especially in newspapers.

00:06:00

[Nancy Chng](#)

And that led to your wanting to become a journalist?

00:06:03

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Well, I had to be a journalist to earn money, to earn my living. But I worked and started Tempo magazine with some friends.

00:06:14

[Nancy Chng](#)

What kind of ideology led you to start this, and did you want to pursue a certain political bent, or just have an objective magazine?

00:06:29

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

No, the magazine is objective. We wanted to have a different kind of journalism. The language, the Indonesian language, which is very important for us during Soekarno's time, was very much demarcated. There were a lot of slogans, acronyms, repeated slogans, acronyms and clichés. During Suharto's time it was even more. So, we wanted to liberate the language actually. We wanted to have more lively, free expression. It also implies that we want to have more ways of expressing ourselves. Because with a strict, with a very constricted language, you cannot express yourself freely. So, Tempo in a way, is trying to liberate Indonesian journalism from these clichés, freedom in language, also from the temptation of fixed ideas. That's why our way of telling stories are different. We modelled ourselves after Time magazine, Newsweek, also in France, L' Express, and Der Spiegel in Germany. That's the ideology. It was not political in a sense, but it was also political in other senses. Political in the sense of wanting to liberate things for public liberty.

00:08:03

[Nancy Chng](#)

So, you had this idea to start Tempo, and you didn't know how successful Tempo would become...

00:08:11

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

No.

00:08:12
Nancy Chng

... at that time.

00:08:12
Goenawan Mohamad

I thought it would collapse in three months. My friends said it would collapse in three months. Don't worry, don't worry, we'll make history anyway.

00:08:23
Nancy Chng

And coming to the role, as you became Editor in Chief for many years in Tempo, how do you assess Tempo and the various governments?

00:08:34
Goenawan Mohamad

Tempo was banned twice by Suharto. The second time we didn't want to return. We refused. So, some parts of us, some parts of us went underground. Some worked in other magazines, etcetera. We refused to compromise anymore. In the first ban, when we were got banned first, we tried to compromise to survive. But the second time I said, "No, that's the end of it. Enough is enough."

00:09:09
Nancy Chng

You were prepared for it to close?

00:09:09
Goenawan Mohamad

Yes.

00:09:10
Nancy Chng

Despite people losing jobs?

00:09:12

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

This was very painful for me. But they were ready. I admitted, I told them, “You have to choose to lose your job and join magazines sponsored by the regime or join me.” The majority of the reporters joined me. The majority of the administrative (staff) entered the new magazines sponsored by the government, and it broke my heart actually seeing people losing jobs.

But some eventually got jobs. At that time, it was not very easy, because the Journalists Association prevented them from getting jobs. They could only work in a magazine sponsored by the government, and we refused. Then, some young journalists started the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI).

00:10:14

[Nancy Chng](#)

As a separate entity?

00:10:15

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes. It was very courageous, because it was illegal. It was really illegal. We did it very... well, clandestinely. But we announced it. We published a magazine called Independence, without license. In the end, our friends were arrested, jailed. But we made a statement and it was important to do that. People said that I started AJI, no – the young people started AJI. I just followed them.

00:10:52

[Nancy Chng](#)

You just supported it.

00:10:54

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

They were courageous, and courage was infectious, like fear.

00:11:00

[Nancy Chng](#)

Goenawan, you talked about a lot of challenges that you have gone through in many decades. Can you tell us more about your motivation? What pushed you, why were you so persistent in your beliefs, in your principles?

00:11:16

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

It's a very hard question to answer, because sometimes I'm not aware, you're never aware of what motivates you, am I right? But there was a time when I tried to answer that. A minister of the government, Suharto's, asked me, "Why did you refuse to compromise?" I said... suddenly I said, "Because of my self-respect, and he was shocked. Maybe that was my motivation. I didn't really think about it, before. But there was a time also when Prabowo and his family offered to bail out Tempo with the condition that they would control Tempo, and we refused.

00:12:04

[Nancy Chng](#)

What year was that?

00:12:05

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Right after the banning. 1994. We refused. We knew it was going to be the end of Tempo, because who would think that Suharto's regime would collapse in five years? We thought, when we started the underground, we thought he would survive twenty years, so we were ready for the long haul. But then when we refused, the first thing I thought when we... the first thing that came to my mind before I made the decision was my children. They were young, but I didn't want them to see me as a coward. The principle here is that we have to fight. My father died for that. So that...

00:12:59

[Nancy Chng](#)

You still feel very strongly and passionately about it.

00:13:02

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes.

00:13:02

[Nancy Chng](#)

People were trying to repress you when you...

00:13:03

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

No, in a country where corruption was so rampant, and repression was so easy to be practised, people all started to lose their self-respect, and everything could be negotiated and...

00:13:21

[Nancy Chng](#)

What? By money?

00:13:22

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Money and fear, and increasingly, there's a loss of hope. I don't believe that, I'm not an optimist. I'm not a pessimist either. For me, pessimism and optimism are irrelevant. I have always believed that hope is not something you expect to come, but something you have to create. The Chinese...

00:13:49

[Nancy Chng](#)

Lu Xun?

00:13:49

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Lu Xun. He said that hope is like a road in the wood. It was not there before, but when many people walk on it, the road opened. That's my belief. I believe that if you did something for the common good, you created hope. Because if you started to compromise and only think of your safety, people get really pessimistic about the nature of other people.

What is bad about corruption is not taking money from the public, it's destroying social trust. You cannot trust your friends because of corruption. You always talk with people, and you think they are going to buy you, or you are going to buy them. That's very bad. And that's what's happening, happened in Indonesia. That's why you have to insist that it should not happen to you, and your friends and your family.

00:15:01

[Nancy Chng](#)

Did you lay down the law for Tempo reporters never to accept money on the job? Was that part of the rule?

00:15:09

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, yes, it was. It's always been there. We are not the first but...

00:15:16

[Nancy Chng](#)

But it was very common practice?

00:15:18

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, accepting money? Bribes? Yes, yes. Journalism is... Actually, Mochtar Lubis started to clean it up, but he didn't create a system. PK Ojong and Kompas did it. We also followed that step, but then we created a system how to prevent that from happening. Besides telling... you tell your journalists not to get bribed, but if you don't have a system to monitor or to prevent it, it may not happen. Luckily, we could create a system and a sense of solidarity. That's very important. When you... you talk about leader, *leadership is solidarity*.

00:16:08

[Nancy Chng](#)

Talking about leadership qualities, I would like to ask how you assess the different leaders in the different times of Indonesia, starting with Soekarno. He was the father of unity. He united Indonesia, but then he became quite leftist. Was he the type of leader that Indonesia needed at that particular time to rally against the Dutch?

00:16:32

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

I always believe the leaders do not create people, people create leaders. Soekarno didn't shape the Indonesian consensus. Indonesians' pain and hope became part of his *raison d'être* (transliteration) and that's why he became a very effective leader. Because he could grasp that.

00:17:01

[Nancy Chng](#)

But he was very charismatic as well.

00:17:04

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, yes. He was charismatic. The problem with Soekarno was (that he) was not a very good manager, CEO (Chief Executive Officer). He was a very entertaining speaker, very smart. He was incredible... a lot of ideas.

00:17:23

[Nancy Chng](#)

He was captivating.

00:17:24

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Very much. Very much. I remember when I was a kid, every seventeenth of August, his speech was broadcast all over the country through radio. People

would stand around the radios listening to him, every part of it. Then, so... it was part of Indonesia's legend, to have this person who really captivated you, from time to time.

Then we have Suharto. He was a very good manager, CEO, first class. But he started his regime, administration actually, from violence. He killed... many people were killed and jailed. So, it was rather easy for him to run the country in that kind of fear.

Why did they manage to rule the country for so long? Because of fear. Suharto, Suharto made use of that, and sometimes very effectively. But as many leaders are, he was also weak in his handling of power. The longer he stayed, the less careful he was. So, the children started to be annoying and corrupt, and the regime which was based on fear and corruption, Suharto not only scared people, but also bought people. That kind of regime was basically weak.

00:19:20

[Nancy Chng](#)

So, it grew weaker as he became more powerful?

00:19:22

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes. Also, because if you had the support of just the military and the people you bought, the basis was empty, and very easy to crumble.

00:19:33

[Nancy Chng](#)

No foundation.

00:19:34

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

No foundation, and it collapsed. I thought it would stay, his regime, not him, for twenty years but actually after five years, after the banning of Tempo, he fell.

00:19:53

[Nancy Chng](#)

And after Suharto, the Reformasi period, were there any outstanding leaders?

00:20:00

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Habibie was very brief, very ambitious. But it turned out that he did a lot of good things like the Press became free under him. Political parties became free under him. East Timor was being freed under him. In the case of the press, he was

aware that it should be free. Basically, he is a very nice person. He has no bitterness, and he is very gallant. When he was defeated by Gus Dur, he saw Gus Dur to the chair, the Presidency and the Parliament. The first time ever, a defeated leader in Indonesia handed his power (over) gracefully. That was Habibie.

00:20:48

[Nancy Chng](#)

Coming to SBY (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono). People said that his first term was much better than the second. What happened?

00:20:56

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

That's a mystery. But that again proves the theory that the military academy was the place where leaders were created was wrong. The myth was not true. It was false, because all the graduates from the military academy were bad leaders. Prabowo, SBY, who else. Military officers will only be effective because you have soldiers who are trained to say yes.

00:21:36

[Nancy Chng](#)

To obey.

00:21:36

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

To obey. When you become a political leader, you deal with different kinds of people, and that's going to be very difficult. He is very smart, incredibly smart, well spoken. But he was... I think he tried to please too many people. In the end, I don't know what happened to his second term. He should have been more...

00:22:09

[Nancy Chng](#)

Forceful?

00:22:10

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Forceful, or experimental, no he didn't. Basically, he was not a very courageous person.

00:22:17

[Nancy Chng](#)

Took the easy way out.

00:22:18

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

I don't think he listened to people well. That's the problem with leaders. Power not only corrupts but makes you stupid. It was Kissinger who said big power demands make you suffer dementia. I think that's true. SBY only listened to his voice. I don't know why he didn't run this country as a CEO. Somebody said, from the Cabinet, he was the laziest President. So, he...

00:22:52

[Nancy Chng](#)

Did the least.

00:22:53

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Did the least. He presided a meeting, spoke for a while, he didn't control, didn't create a plan. Suharto is different, Suharto was very effective in that sense. But the best leader is Ali Sadikin to me.

00:23:08

[Nancy Chng](#)

Ali Sadikin? When he was Governor?

00:23:11

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes. Exceptional.

00:23:12

[Nancy Chng](#)

He dared to do things?

00:23:14

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, he was charismatic, he was a very good CEO. He plans things, he supervised things in detail. He managed people. He was daring to do new things. I think he's the only leader we have (who's) really first class.

00:23:36

[Nancy Chng](#)

And he did for the interest of the nation, not for himself.

00:23:39

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes. He was rich, but not corrupt. Not known as corrupted, no.

00:23:46

[Nancy Chng](#)

Can I move you forward to the current situation now, how do you assess Jokowi as the President? Are you hopeful that Jokowi will be a breath of fresh air for Indonesia, as a leader?

00:24:00

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, I supported him entirely. He came here to, with all the musicians here, sat down there, watching songs dedicated to him. You see [his] picture there, at the kedai (Translation: shop), the stadium.

00:24:19

[Nancy Chng](#)

Thousands of people were there?

00:24:20

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, and very cheerful, very peaceful, but very enthusiastic actually. Nobody told them to come, but they came. There was no violence except a bit, despite the strength. The band was there, many other musicians. Prabowo thought that they were all paid. Nobody could pay them all because everybody would go bankrupt.

00:24:47

[Nancy Chng](#)

Tens of thousands?

00:24:48

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, but first-class musicians in the country. They did it free, and for Jokowi. Jokowi was an amazing. I didn't know, well I didn't think he was charismatic. He was not like Ali Sadikin, or very handsome, very proud, dignified. Jokowi's a very humble person. He is. And why he got this thing? I don't know. An Australian anthropologist once asked me... he returned from Australia... from Papua, eastern part of Indonesia, he asked me what do you think? What's the mystique of Jokowi? I said I don't know. Because when he ran for Mayor (Governor) of Jakarta, I didn't support him. I supported Faisal Basri, Basri because he's my

friend, and he's honest. But I never had antagonised him because I know he did a lot of things in Solo. But I don't think he's charismatic. But this... people worshipped him, from Papua to Jakarta.

00:25:55

[Nancy Chng](#)

But he's a common man. He's from the masses.

00:25:58

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Maybe because he is authentic.

00:26:02

[Nancy Chng](#)

The real thing.

00:26:03

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Sincere, and very accessible. He was there...he's just lovable.

00:26:11

[Nancy Chng](#)

Is he what Indonesia needs at this stage?

00:26:15

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

That Indonesians elected him, of course they need him. But I never saw people supported the politician like they did with Jokowi. I have a driver who worked for him for the campaign voluntarily. He distributed leaflets to every single toll road station, he went to create networks with bajai drivers, and there was a... and why he did it? He saw that Jokowi did things to Jakarta. The roads, people didn't... he hasn't done a lot, but you could see it. Next to our door is Pasar Minggu, it used to be chaos. When you pass the street, you couldn't see the shops, because all the sidewalk vendors crowded (it). Now, it's clean. And next to my... very close to my place was a swamp, now (it has) become a park, in a very short time. So, he worked hard, like Ahok.

But somehow, he is captivating. In the last days of the election (campaigning) he was almost lost, right? Suddenly it was reborn. Because people were told he was going to lose. So many volunteers walked door to door...

00:27:58

[Nancy Chng](#)

Last minute?

00:27:59

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, last minute. Walked all over the country, without pay.

00:28:03

[Nancy Chng](#)

There were some comparisons to when Obama won his election in 2008, when he became President. Do you think some kind of similar situation will happen because people later became disillusioned with Obama, and thought that he was not decisive enough, and turned that he was not that great leader of change that he championed?

00:28:28

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Well, Obama was a great leader of change, but he was chained by the Republicans. That's what Obama said to Jokowi, in Indonesian, when they met. He said, in Indonesian, quoted by Tempo, "Sama sama kita." (We are the same)

00:28:47

[Nancy Chng](#)

In Indonesian?

00:28:48

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Yes, he spoke some, yes, not really good Indonesian. Jokowi is comfortable with Obama.

00:28:56

[Nancy Chng](#)

And Ahok is a good leader?

00:28:57

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

He is. He talks too much, but he's a good leader.

00:29:01

[Nancy Chng](#)

And he's brave?

00:29:03

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Oh definitely, he's like Ali Sadikin. But Ali Sadikin was a marine. He could hit you. Ahok is not a marine. He's a double minority, but it's incredible.

00:29:17

[Nancy Chng](#)

He stands up for what he believes in. He almost gives the impression that he's not afraid to die.

00:29:22

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

He was not, he is never afraid to die. You know what he told me what he did? He had a samurai sword in his office. He showed me that he could fight, he would fight violently if they attack him. Of course, he dramatised things, but he has no fear. He's very angry and I can understand, because the bureaucracy is so corrupt in his office.

I'm going to tell you how Jokowi dealt with bureaucracy in Solo. I think he did it here in Jakarta, and I think Ahok experienced the same thing. When I met Jokowi for the first time in Solo, he told me that when he was first elected as a Mayor, he entered his office and was shocked, because so many people worked there, with no work at all.

00:30:22

[Nancy Chng](#)

Just show up.

00:30:23

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Not only show up. There was one woman who cut vegetables for her home cooking, to spend time. So, he was shocked, he returned to his home and thought – what kind of office am I running? I asked him, "How do you deal with it?" He said, "Well, I couldn't fire them because there is no rule... the civil servant..."

00:30:48

[Nancy Chng](#)

Cannot be fired?

00:30:48

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

No, it's a very stupid law, but they succeeded then in defending themselves. So, he just picked up five percent of the civil servants working for him, chose the good guys, and left the rest in limbo. "How about the woman cutting vegetables?" "I let her do that continuously." "Didn't you try disturbing them?" "No," he said, "if I disturb them, they would disturb me." During Ali Sadikin's (time) when I went to City Hall, nobody looked idle.

00:31:32

[Nancy Chng](#)

Everybody was working.

00:31:34

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

Ali Sadikin created a system that's an amazing system. That's why he's not only a charismatic leader, but a CEO. He could check the revenue of Jakarta just by pushing a button, at the same time, real time. Because he created information systems, which was excellent. Then after that it derailed.

00:32:00

[Nancy Chng](#)

Well, you have done a lot to contribute to the development of your country, we feel. Thank you very much, Goenawan.

00:32:08

[Goenawan Mohamad](#)

My pleasure. It's good to see you again.