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The Social Construction of Indonesian Children: The Family, the School and the Media

IGAK Satrya Wibawa¹

Communications Department, Faculty of Social & Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga

ABSTRACT

The identity of Indonesian children, during the New Order period, was constructed through dominant systems: the family, the school and the media. These institutions were deliberately set up to support the New Order's political system in order to represent Indonesian children as a model of citizenship. The New Order created a national identity for Indonesian children through the family system, which is influenced by dominant Javanese culture, and extended this identity through the school. Thus, the schooling system recreated the patriarchal family structure in the classroom, placing children into a subordinate position, as they are in the family. Furthermore, the media, which was controlled by the state during the New Order, was also used in constructing a socially and culturally acceptable idea of childhood, systematically building the image of Indonesian children as ideal citizens. After the fall of the New Order the patriarchal family model remains in place in Indonesian political discourse. The family, in this context, is conceptualised as part of the political structure.

Key words: Indonesian children, identity, social construction, citizenship model, Javanese family system

Childhood – a temporary state – becomes an emblem for our anxieties about the passing of time, the destruction of historical formations, or conversely, a vehicle for our hopes for the future. The innocent child is caught somewhere over the rainbow – between nostalgia and utopian optimism, between the past and the future. (Jenkins 1998: 5)

I start this paper by relating one of my own experiences as a primary school student in Kuta, Bali, in the 1980s, a time when the New Order was at its peak. One day during art lessons our teacher set the theme as free drawing. However, this 'free drawing' was in practice not free because the teacher gave us an example of what he meant and instructed us to copy it. Our teacher's example was a landscape, which had two big green mountains side by side, surrounded by white clouds and birds against a background of blue sky, and in the foreground there was a road, trees, electricity poles, and, of course, rice fields and small houses. We would be required to reproduce this picture in every free drawing lesson, even using the same colours! All students would draw the same picture and none ever questioned the practice. I did not even think to ask a question; this was simply the way we learnt.

Later, when I became a judge at a children's drawing competition, I found the same type of pictures. At first I thought this was odd, because the children were accompanied by their parents, and some of the parents gave instructions to their children. I remember this particularly, because when I and other judges gave our evaluation speech, we criticised those parents who instructed their children. Then, I realised that all this was not so odd after all.

This anecdote shows the power of teachers and parents to indoctrinate students. In this sense, it illustrates Parker's argument of the way the New Order constructed citizens, children in particular. The New Order, according to Parker (1992), promoted the concept that:

The state assumes that its inhabitants are not necessarily born as good citizens; children must be taught and socialised by the state to become good citizens (p. 42)

A 'good citizen' is defined by the New Order as one "who would be knowledgeable and committed to national development" (Kitley 2000: 113).

Parker (1992) also points out that the New Order expects the children to learn how to be good citizens through two basic social institutions: the

¹ Correspondence: IGAK Satrya Wibawa, Communications Department, Faculty of Social & Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga. Telephone: 0315011744. E-mail ketutsatrya@yahoo.com.au or satrya.wibawa@unair.ac.id

school and the family. While children have to be taught an identity as Indonesian citizens through schooling, James (1993) stresses that family life is also a contributor to the construction of children's national identity. Citizenship implies the concepts of belonging and loyalty of people to the state, while encouraging general thoughts and ways of life that suits the national identity and confirms an individual's membership to the state (Wilkin 2000).

Scourfield, Dicks, Drakeford and Davies (2006) identify that the identity of children is built through two approaches. Firstly, children have a cultural identity constructed by the family and the society. Secondly, the state formally constructs their identity through schooling as part of its political agenda. Similarly, Wyness (2006) argues that the family and the school are socializing agents that strongly influence children's identity in society, with the family establishing a mutual relationship with the schooling system in guiding children to enter the wider community. Children are seen as "unfinished projects who require the continuous involvement of socializing adults before they are complete and can enter the society as full members" (Wyness 2006:121). In addition to these basic institutions – the school and the family – the New Order also utilised the media to construct its citizen's sense of identity. Sen & Hill (2000) argue that the New Order used the media as "vehicles for the creation of a national culture that would allow uncontested implementation of its development policies and more generally its authoritarian rule" (p. 11).

Such state-based strategies, directed to the construction of Indonesian children's sense of identity, are discussed in detail in this paper. I examine the construction of Indonesian children in the New Order period era through three specific systems: the family, the school, and the media. Firstly, I will discuss the way in which the New Order constructed a notion of children through the family system and how this was extended through the schooling process. Further, I will examine the use of schooling to inculcate a national identity into children. Finally, as the media was controlled by the state during the New Order, I will also discuss the use of the media in constructing the social and cultural identity of children.

The New Order and the Politics of the Family

According to Shiraishi (1997) in Indonesia the dominant concept of family is influenced by traditional Javanese culture. In Javanese culture

a family is a morally unequal institution that encourages respect for a hierarchy, with the father at the apex (Mulder 1996). Each member of the family should consider his or her responsibility: parents must guide their children and children are obliged to obey and follow the guidance from their parents as their patrons. In this family system, the father holds the highest honour in the hierarchy and has authority in and over it. The family culture places children at a low level and sees them as controlled by the father. Top down communications apply within the family, which means that parents tell their children what they are supposed to do, while for the children there is no opportunity for questioning or even discussing their parents instructions. This patriarchal family model is replicated in the New Order political system. The father or "*bapak*" figure is considered as a patron who personifies a paternalistic vertical relationship (Chalmers 2006). This figure is not unlike the Victorian idea of the father: authoritarian, resistant, and "imposing structure, but unconcerned with nurture" (Carpenter 2002: 196). In contrast, Javanese culture places mothers as "appendages of their husbands and casts female dependency as ideal" (Suryakusuma 1996: 98). Suryakusuma calls this State *Ibuism* (p. 98) and describes it in the following terms:

It derives from the most oppressive aspects of both bourgeois 'housewifezation' and *priyayi* [white collar Javanese] *Ibuism*. As in *priyayi* *Ibuism*, it commands women to serve their men, children, family, community and state. As in 'housewifezation' women are assumed to provide their labour freely, without expectation of prestige or power (1996: 101–102)

Furthermore, according to Suryakusuma, *Ibuism* is integrated in the New Order political concept of family:

Given the image of the state as family, one might call the predominant gender ideology *Bapak Ibuism* (father motherism), with *Bapak* [father/man] as the primary source of power and *ibu* [mother/woman] as one medium of that power. (Suryakusumah 1996: 102)

Suryakusumah's concept of *state ibuism* assures the lowest position of children in the family hierarchy. I point out that while the figure of mother is constructed to serve children, she is also a medium that represents the power of father as supreme in the family. Children, in this context, are placed as passive, non authoritarian objects in the family.

The relationship between construction of the nation-state and the family has been discussed by Hearst (1997): the significance of the family is marked by the state as being an important institution to produce proper citizens, and as a mediator in socialising people towards the state's values. In terms of nation building, the New Order assured the importance of the family in its political agenda and this was represented in its national program, *Panca Krida*:

The family household is the smallest unit of a nation [...] The (nation) state can only be strong if it is made up of strong families. A just nation can only be achieved through a just arrangement of families. For that reason, building a family implies participation in the building of the foundation of a nation (cited in Suryakusumah 1996: 97)

I believe that the notion of family in the New Order national program does not reflect a concept of family as a proportional form of each member in the family hierarchy. Children, in this context, will only be used to maintain the power of father at the centre of the family, and in certain cases only be used as a tool to reflect a father's dominance. In fact, according to Shiraishi (1997), former president Soeharto directly included terms about children in his political agenda. For example, in his biography, Soeharto describes the relationship with his ministers as a father–child relationship:

In my eyes, there is no favourite child (*anak emas*), and also no child (*anak*) whom I do not like. None. All of them, each in his/her own duty and field have the same trust from me. (Cited in Shiraishi 1997: 9)

Soeharto uses the word “child” to show his supremacy over his cabinet ministers. By setting his ministers as his children, he then places himself as *Bapak Presiden* or father president (Shiraishi 1997: 9), that is, as the power source of Indonesia. As a result, he was free to run the state as if it were his own family. Shiraishi goes on:

Yet, it is important to underline the oddity about all this: Soeharto runs the state and guides the nation as Father President; his officials as well as citizens follow him as children; and the entire nation is imagined as a family. (Shiraishi 1997: 11)

Thus in Shiraishi's argument, the use of family terms demonstrates the way paternalistic culture has been utilised by the New Order to support the

political power. Furthermore, in making Indonesia a nation, Soeharto utilized his political power to portray himself as the one “who connects people to each other...forming (thereby) the vast array of acquaintances ... thought eventually to lead from remote parts of the archipelago to seats of authority” (Siegel 2002: 212). Similarly, according to Spyer (2004), Soeharto used terminology related to the family both to show his power as the father of the nation and in order to transform every citizen into a member of the Indonesian family.

However, well after Soeharto, this use of a family metaphor remains strong in Indonesian political discourse. The fourth Indonesian president, Megawati Soekarnoputri projected herself as a mother to her followers (Parker 2003). Indeed, in her presidential speech on 21 October 1999, Megawati expressed:

To my children throughout the homeland, I ask that you return wholeheartedly to your work. Do not act emotionally, for at this podium, you can see your mother standing here (cited in Parker 2003: 269)

Megawati places herself as a “mother” who calms down her “children”. As did Soeharto, she uses a notion of family. Thus, the state conceptualised as family, according to Parker, extends the concept far beyond a ‘natural’ institution to a political structure (2003:269). Shiraishi (1997) explains the place of the family system in the New Order's political strategy:

The family network has developed [by the New order] as a way of overcoming powerlessness and vulnerability of the citizenry. The protector [*bapak* – father] has to be ready to shoulder the potential danger. (p. 34)

Therefore, the relation between the State and its citizens is similar to the father-children relationship in Javanese family culture: father takes control of children in the name of protection. In this context, citizens likely are used only for strengthening the state's power.

In certain cases, the state even takes control of family matters for national purposes. For instance, the family planning program became an integral component of the New Order's development program. According to Hull & Jones (1997), the New Order utilised the family planning program to maintain the regime's stability. The program was socialised nation-wide, and in many ways the family was forced to be cooperative. The New Order related the advantages of family planning to positive values of national development, such as family welfare and

growth of national economy. The family planning program seemed to conceptualise children as a form of family capital that should be controlled and in this sense, supported the New Order's need to maintain the stability of the state. Thus by promoting the ideal model of family—a father, a mother and two children—nation-wide through school curricula and the media, the New Order propagated the image of Indonesia as a grand family.

The Family Discourse and the Schooling Process

The school is another institution that significantly affects children's lives. As in most other countries, schooling is an important method in Indonesia for children's socialization as it supplies them with materials that prepare them to enter adult life (Shiraishi 1997; Aitken 2001). According to Wyness (2006), schooling has similar powers to those of the family to prepare children to become adults. Firstly, the school implements formal rules and procedures. Secondly, the school establishes formal relationships between children as students and adults as teachers. Thirdly, the socialization process is more easily carried out in a formal environment that is controlled by authority figures. In this sense, at school the children encounter characteristics that are not necessarily different from those defined by family life.

According to Shiraishi (1997) and Parker (2003), the Indonesian schooling process builds a strong mutual relationship with the family system through the education of children. For instance, at school children are taught a model of the Indonesian family as a small, modern, nuclear, social unit in which the type of occupation of each member is differentiated along gender lines. Additionally, the concept of the nuclear family, which defines the national family planning program, is incorporated into language lessons. Indonesian language textbooks, for example, describe a single model of family constituted by an office worker father, a housewife mother, and three children, with one of the boys being highlighted as the central character in the narrative. While a recent version of the language textbook presents the central character as female, it nevertheless continues to promote the same ideological framework through a narrative of harmonious family life in which families live together in a model village (Shiraishi 1997). Indeed, this ideal model of the family is defined as a main goal in Indonesian development programs.

Shiraishi (1997) describes the learning process in the classroom:

Teaching Indonesian at school involves constructing and reconstructing the family anew and, in its extension, the nation. The classroom is constituted as the space separate from the family where, in fact, the mothers are politely excluded. In the Indonesian textbook, however, it is this family that is constructed and plays the cardinal role (p. 130)

As Shiraishi observes, while (real) mothers are excluded, the learning process creates a new form of family which is constituted as a temporary family at school, where the teacher becomes parent. Classroom instruction, according to Shiraishi (1997) follows a similar pattern to family instruction, in that a hierarchy of teacher as parent and student as child is created. This hierarchy is represented by two significant features: firstly, students address the teachers as *bapak* and *ibu*; secondly, the teacher stands in the front of class while students sit properly and wait for instructions. Indeed, this teacher-student relationship models the Javanese family culture of high respect for elders (Mulder 1996). Furthermore, the hierarchical pattern in the classroom is such that teachers place themselves as the representatives of the state. As a result, teachers transfer the ideology of power within a dictatorial situation rather than building an open democratic learning environment that empowers students in the class room. Meanwhile, students have to be loyal to the teachers, their lessons, the curriculum, and ultimately, the State. This process represents the traditional approach in education in which teachers form and establish positive values, as expected by the state (Benninga 1997).

As in the formal textbook, the model of the ideal Indonesian family life is also found in Indonesian children's fiction. The story presents: "the authoritative – all knowing father, the ever giving – never angry – and also all knowing mother, and obedient children whose mistakes start in stories and are corrected by the parents at the end" (Shiraishi 1995: 170). These narrative and discursive patterns produce a uniform image of the family that is, of course, not necessarily reflected in Indonesia's social reality.

The abovementioned teaching and learning process reflects an autocratic society that has a powerful authority figure who pressures children through a system of punishment or reward (Dreikurs 1998). In the New Order's schooling system,

children were placed in a subordinate position where adults had all the authority to control their lives. Critical thinking was not necessarily seen as important because students were only required to repeat and act passively. Therefore, there was no space for challenging or questioning what the teacher presented (Parker 1992). As reflected in my story at the beginning of this chapter, the New Order constructed children as controlled followers, and no longer as protected citizens, because their inferior status was strengthened by the rules, values and routines of their school lives (Wyness 2006).

Creating Proper Citizens within the Class Room

The school plays a significant role in producing children both as full members of society and citizens for the state. The schooling system, in setting up role models in the New Order, is described by Parker (2003) as a series of “overwhelmingly powerful institutions of national culture and state power” (p.206). The State, according to Gellner (2006), provides in this way a systematic national education system that encourages children to endorse national values. In this approach children are seen as apprentice citizens who are to be filled with adult values.

The New Order set the objectives of national education to serve the political purposes of the state, which was to unite citizens under one political ideology and to supply the demands of economic development (Leigh 1999). As discussed above, Indonesian students are treated as passive learners with very little opportunity for discussion in the classroom. The state exacerbates this situation by setting up a curriculum that shapes loyal students into apprentice citizens who believe in the schooling process as the foremost mechanism of accomplishing personal improvement. Leigh (1999) refers to this process as “enclosing of intellectual commons for the purpose of the state” (p. 52).

Scourfield, Dicks, Drakeford and Davies (2006) concur that the State stimulates nationalism deliberately through the schooling process, where the discourse of national identity is targeted to children. In Indonesia, the New Order managed to create a sense of uniformity among Indonesian students in spite of their diversity, and at the same time helped to shape students’ ideas about Indonesian identity. While children come from different backgrounds and cultures, the Indonesian government continues to counter this diversity by instructing children to

wear uniforms, buy and read the official textbooks, and study and speak in *bahasa Indonesia* (Keane 1997; Shiraishi 1997). Furthermore, school imparts citizenship lessons at all levels through the official subject *Pendidikan Moral Pancasila* (Pancasila Moral Education). Citizenship education through schooling emphasises both the importance of school and promotes acceptable thoughts and behaviours (Wilkin 2000). In some circumstances, according to Wilkin, citizenship education is mostly associated with political campaigns and propaganda to build a strong support for the nation’s existence. *Pancasila* is seen as a vital aspect in constructing ‘proper citizens’ in the classroom in order to integrate them into Indonesia as a nation (Leigh 1991; Parker 1992; Vicker & Fisher 1999).

Indonesian Children also learn to embrace their country and its values, by saluting the national flag, singing the national anthem every Monday morning, and acknowledging their national heroes, and all the cabinet ministers (Shiraishi 1997). Additionally, while the students learn that their national icons are part of their identity, they are pressured by the education system to work harder (Parker 2003). By third grade, Indonesian students understand *Bahasa Indonesia*; all symbols, mottoes, songs, pledges and photos; the state’s chain of command; and the meaning of citizenship. According to Parker, students at the end of primary school will be familiar with the Indonesian provinces and capital cities, the structure of the Indonesian bureaucracy, the content of the Constitution and the complete history of Indonesian independence. Knowing the icons of the State is an integral requirement for a proper citizen. Furthermore, a good Indonesian citizen is modelled by teachers through their roles in the classroom. Parker found that teachers equate class orders and rules with values of good citizenship. According to Parker:

[T]he teacher’s monologue enmeshed the fields of health, civility, self-and social respect, hygiene, diet and civic responsibility. It was clear that proper, modern, educated Indonesian citizens had a responsibility to exercise, to eat well, to have only two children, to dress circumspectly, wear shoes, say good morning and piss in the toilet (p. 256).

It seems the teacher’s monologue simplifies the idea of an ideal (Indonesian) citizen. However, I argue, the monologue implies the power of the New Order to dictate its policy through the figure of teacher. In other words, the teacher as an element of

the education system is deliberately used to impart the State's agenda.

The relationship between the education system and the State's political agenda appears unequal (Buchori 2005). In fact, while the education system is encouraged to fulfil both individual and state purposes, the State's highest priority is its political agenda of constructing a national identity. Thus, national identity as a political obligation of citizenship reflects the idea that children as future citizens are not outside of adult's political agendas; more likely, children will experience the politics of nation during their everyday lives (Coles 1986, as cited in Stephens 1995). The myth of innocent childhood in view of the relationship between children and the state is described by Jenkins (1988) in the following terms:

Too often, our culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent, and in the end, waiting to be corrupted or protected by adults (p. 3–4).

Jenkin's idea of the myth of innocent childhood is useful to explain the way the New Order utilised the image of children and in the same way, constructed the identity of Indonesian children for its own political agenda

The New Order, according to Leigh (1999), has successfully constructed and conveyed the idea of the Indonesian state and citizenship in students' minds through the schooling process. Recently, the State has modified the citizenship curriculum at school to promote democratic values among students (Fearnley-Sander, Moss & Harbon 2003). The new curriculum proposes a democratic approach to building citizenship commitment to the State. It also purports to reduce the totalitarian approach by integrating the State and its citizens under a "national philosophy" (p. 205).

Creating a Discourse about Children through the Indonesian Media

As discussed earlier, the New Order also utilised the media to define and disseminate its discourse on citizenship. Sen (2003) points out that:

The hand of the state in the construction of the Indonesian national culture in the Soeharto years does not need to be analytically uncovered: it was there for all to see. Newspapers and films were censored,

television until 1987 was entirely state owned and private radio and television had to broadcast the state station's news bulletin several times a day. (p. 155)

Furthermore, Alfian & Chu (1981) describe how, during the New Order, television was set up to achieve three main objectives: "(1) the promotion of national unity and integration; (2) the promotion of national stability; and (3) the promotion of political stability" (cited in Kitley 2000: 4). These objectives intently sought to create a single national identity. In the words of Sen and Hill (2000):

[I]f national identity is 'as much about exclusion as about inclusion', then our reading of Indonesian media policy suggests that the New Order's vision of national culture was about excluding regional cultures, local specificities and local allegiances. In the New Order's curious battle against the 'local', global imports and foreign images were lesser threats than local languages and images that might show up cracks and contradictions, even just differences, in the national body-politic" (2000: 219)

Local identity for the New Order is seen as a threat for the existence of national identity. In this context, I agree with Sen and Hill's argument of the New Order's vision of national identity, which is excepting the differences and forming a single homogenous national identity. After the resignation of Soeharto in 1998 and the New Order's regime is less dominant, Irawanto (2004) finds that

"Although a nationally pervasive image of the urban middle-class theme is predominant in *sinetron* themes, some *sinetron* successfully utilise local culture and ordinary life of lower-class people in their themes. In this context, Betawi television serial (*sinetron*) are prominent among *sinetron* with a local culture theme." (p. 112)

Similarly, Ida (2006) finds that another Betawi television serial, titled *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan* (Doel, A Student) which successfully attracts Indonesian television viewers, also highlightings on Betawi ethnic's culture. Ida emphasises that "this drama is unusual in Indonesian television as much of the dialogue is in Malay dialect mixed with popular urban Betawi slang, peculiar to the Betawi people" (2006: 178)

In the context of children's identity, Kitley (2000) argues that the media, in particular the state television station or TVRI is used to manage "a development of children into competent adulthood and citizenship"

(p. 115). Indeed, children are often used to convey various commercial purposes and political views in Indonesian media; for example, TV commercials present children promoting commercial products and TV drama represents children in various narrative roles. In this respect, Strassler (1999) argues that children were used as “national subjects” of the New Order’s propaganda in the series of banners that were placed in school areas, at elementary schools in particular. According to Strassler:

One (in 1997) read ‘I am an Indonesian Child: I Love my Family, my People, my Country’ (*Saya Anak Indonesia: Cinta Keluarga, Bangsa, Negara*). Another (in 1996): ‘I am an Indonesian Child: Disciplined and Prosperous’ (*Saya Anak Indonesia: Disiplin dan Sejahtera*)”

Similar with Parker’s observation of the way the teacher dictates the ideal image of Indonesian citizenship as discussed previously, I argue this propaganda tends to build an identity which formally fits with the New Order’s political agenda.

The use of children as innocent ambassadors to convey political ideas was evident in one particular children’s TV program: *Si Unyil* (Kitley 1999, 2000). *Si Unyil* was a popular puppet television series in Indonesia from 1981 to 1993. The series presented a schoolboy figure named *Unyil* (Little) who lived happily with his family in a harmonious neighbourhood in *Sukamaju* village. In fact, *Si Unyil* was produced to teach children Pancasila values within the context of an entertainment series (Kitley, 1999). This role then was adopted formally by the New Order, which promoted the advantages of the series in the National Development Plan. The series, according to Kitley, promoted national values through *Unyil*’s everyday life. *Si Unyil* was a model of a proper citizen: an innocent, loyal Indonesian child located in the context of a model Indonesian community.

Kitley (2000) argues that *Si Unyil* conveys the New Order’s aspiration to create a single expression of loyalty to the State. In Kitley’s words:

[*Si Unyil*] acknowledges cultural differences but erases their range, specificity and potential political significance to produce a unitary, homogenous national family. (p. 114)

In addition, according to Kitley (2000), the New Order-defined objective for *Si Unyil* was to create the ideal image of Indonesian children, who wish both to serve and show loyalty to the State. Kitley

further explains that *Si Unyil* achieved this objective by figuring the child in three ways: firstly, by constructing ideal characters within a homogenous community and presenting patronage relationships between children and adults; secondly, by presenting the community as a family whose obligation is to develop the country; and thirdly, by presenting local content to balance out the imported programs dominant on Indonesian television. Furthermore, in *Si Unyil* the New Order proposed a genuinely Indonesian national identity. In this respect, Kitley (2000) observes that:

the desire to create an ‘authentic’ or ‘identifiably Indonesia’ series by drawing on indigenous aesthetic content and the decision to use a children’s series to popularise and build consent for national development priorities have been problematic for producers. Overly didactic episodes foreground the production conditions of the series and contribute to a perception that the series sought to manipulate audience (p. 144)

Yet, *Si Unyil* not only features an ideal image of Indonesian children but also proposed the New Order’s national family planning. The series – in a way similar to that of classroom practices discussed earlier – presents an ideal model of family: a father, a mother, and two children. This model is promoted as a better family form for a better future through the slogan “*norma keluarga kecil bahagia dan sejahtera*” (a norm of happy and wealthy small family).

Conclusion

The identity of Indonesian children, during the New Order period, was constructed through dominant systems: the family, the school and the media. These institutions were deliberately set up to support the New Order’s political system in order to represent Indonesian children as a model of citizenship.

The New Order created a national identity for Indonesian children through the family system, which is influenced by dominant Javanese culture, and extended this identity through the school. Thus, the schooling system recreated the patriarchal family structure in the classroom, placing children into a subordinate position, as they are in the family. Furthermore, the media, which was controlled by the state during the New Order, was also used in constructing a socially and culturally acceptable idea of childhood, systematically building the image of Indonesian children as ideal citizens. After the

fall of the New Order the patriarchal family model remains in place in Indonesian political discourse. The family, in this context, is conceptualised as part of the political structure.

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