

A Young Female Leader that I Know

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In 2006, I was invited to the prestigious St. Gallen Symposium as one of the “Leaders of Tomorrow”. This is where young talents from all over the world congregate, each representing the next generation “leaders” of their respective countries.

But I didn’t do much to deserve this honor. I was qualified because I wrote a 2000-word essay about a given topic, and the panel of distinguished judges happened to find my writing to be of sufficient merit.

Don’t get me wrong. I am extremely thankful for the opportunity. I learnt much from the Symposium, where I listened to world leaders and exchanged ideas with fellow students. But I was bothered by how easy it was for one to be called a “young leader”, without having done anything concrete to prove one’s worth outside academia.

In Indonesia, there are easily 10 different conferences, organizations or groups of “young leaders.”ⁱ They have stringent admission criteria, so much so that becoming part of such organizations becomes almost an end in itself. So, at which point does substance (actual leadership) become diluted by form (“young leaders” label)?

But a recent meeting with a 25-year-old woman restored my faith in young Indonesians.

She was born and raised in a small village in Bukittinggi, Indonesia. In her village, there was only intermittent electricity supply. Black-outs happened every other day, so studying late at night was a massive challenge.

Despite that, she finished her schooling years and passed a highly competitive national state examination to gain entry to the best university in Indonesia—the University of Indonesia. At 19, with her parents’ blessings, she left home for the capital city. That was the first time she left her village, with no intention of coming back until she “makes it” in life.



A Young Female Leader in Indonesia

On her first day on campus, she wrote a list of things she hoped to achieve in her undergraduate years:

“Get into the Dean’s List.”

“Be part of the University Student Senate.”

“Go for overseas student exchange program to Singapore.”

“Become the best graduate in the faculty.”

“Do Masters in Johns Hopkins University.”

She misspelled Johns Hopkins due to her poor English. Her roommate, a city girl with a privilege to learn English from her early years, laughed.

“No Novi, this is not how you spell Johns Hopkins. It’s J-O-H-N-S. And there is an ‘S’ behind Hopkin. Johns Hopkins. You need to improve your English.”

The derisive tone has stayed with her until today.

Fast forward five years ahead. This girl graduated from the University of Indonesia as the best graduate at the Faculty of Public Health. She went to Nanyang Technological University in Singapore for an exchange semester. She also volunteered at a Singapore NGO, Nusantara Development Initiatives, to bring light to rural villages with no access to electricity—villages not unlike the one she grew up in.

This fall, this village girl will be starting her postgraduate studies at Johns Hopkins University on a Fulbright scholarship. She will be doing a Masters in Public Health, so she could come back to Indonesia to work among the people to improve their health and well-being.

The word “future leader” never once slipped out of her mouth.

In Indonesia, I observe two kinds of “young leaders”. Those who wear this prestigious label like a badge of honor, often identified by their academic supremacy, but have not done much for others. And then there are those who toil hard tenaciously, doing real works for the betterment of society, but often go unheeded. They never see themselves as young leaders; they are just doing what their moral compasses tell them to.

In Indonesia there is a saying, *“bagai ilmu padi, makin berisi makin merunduk.”*ⁱⁱ Perhaps true leaders are those who never consciously see themselves as one.

ⁱ To name a few, these are Forum Indonesia Muda (Young Indonesian Forum), Young Leaders for Indonesia, Indonesian Young Leaders, Indonesian Youth Conference, Youth Leaders Institute Indonesia, Tunas Muda Pemimpin Indonesia (Budding Leaders for Indonesia), Indonesia Young Leaders Forum, XL Future Leaders, Indonesian Future Leaders, Future Leaders’ Summit and Indonesia Leadership Development Program.

ⁱⁱ Literally: “Like a rice plant, the heavier it is, the lower it bows.” It means the more knowledgeable one is, the more humble they are.