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**VERNACULAR SECURITY:
GOVERNMENTALITY, TRADITIONALITY
AND ONTOLOGICAL (IN)SECURITY IN INDONESIA**

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Abstract

Tracing the political history of the global concept of ‘security’ through a variety of national and regional inflections in Indonesia, this paper argues for the analytical usefulness of the concept of ‘vernacular security’. Entailed in this is a proposal to treat the concept of security as a socially situated and discursively defined category that needs a politically contextualised explication rather than as an analytical category that needs refined definition and consistent use.

While the securitisation of global governance that we have witnessed in recent years is built on new ontological ideas about what it means to be safe, global governance is not seamless in its global extension. The apparent universalism of the ontology and politics of global governance therefore breaks down into a more complex pattern upon closer inspection. Based on material from Indonesia, the paper suggests that the ‘onto-politics’ of security have global, national and local refractions, the interplay between which might be worth a second look.

Introduction

This paper deals with the political imagination in Indonesia. In particular I will claim that recent changes in the vernacular concept of security in Indonesia occurred in the wake of financial crisis and political reform on the one hand and as a result of the new global politics of post-9-11 on the other. While the first set of events has undermined the legitimacy of the state and led to a process of decentralization, the second has established a platform for the reassertion of the state vis-à-vis secessionist and Islamicist groups, and thus led to the re-initialisation of a statist process of securitization. Both processes, however, have been full of contradiction. Thus decentralization has to some extent opened up for new forms of political imagination that see localism and tradition rather than national citizenship as the basis for legitimate and safe political rule. But rather than weakening the nation-state, decentralisation has instead meant the enculturation of bureaucratic neo-patrimonial politics at the micro-level (Ferrazzi 2000). The tough stance against secession and terror has also been a double-edged sword that President Megawati has had to wield carefully in order not to lose her Muslim constituency or be seen as planning the return of New Order centralism.

At stake in these dilemmas is the legitimacy of the state and the new social imaginaries by which Post-Suharto Indonesia attempts to reinvent itself. There are at least two competing versions of these imaginaries, each with its own political conception of security. One is that of 'bureaucratic rationalism' which has order as the central problem of the state. It is out of this 'official' style of politics, which continues a colonial preoccupation with social order, that security has become a concern. A second political imaginary, which I have been looking at, is more paradoxical: this is the political cultivation of localism by former bureaucrats with some sort of 'traditional legitimacy', in my case in the form of sultanate titles. For these 'traditionalists' social order is not the result of a rational calculation of social probabilities, which they see as a reinvention of New Order centralism albeit enveloped in the new rhetoric of 'risk' and hidden dangers. Rather they see the essence of democracy and order to be contained in the divine sanction of tradition and customary society. Against the rationalism of 'securitization', these neotraditional bureaucrats are constructing an alternative political imaginary in which what they see as a truly democratic tradition ensures 'ontological security'.

The two varieties of vernacular security, despite their current political opposition in Indonesia, also overlap, however. State rationalism appeals to socio-cosmological ideas of stability, just as neo-traditionalist notions of 'the just king' extend a long political history in Indonesia of seeing cosmological power as the prerequisite for political stability (see Anderson 1990; Karto-

dirdjo 1970). This vernacular insistence on the intimate relationship between cosmological and political order may be different from the tenets of global governance. It is evident, however, that the global paradigm of security governance also has entailed a simultaneous reconfiguring and recombination of contemporary notions of political order and ontological (in)security.

Political security and ontological security

In an age of ontological uncertainty, security has become one of the main concerns, a master trope for the post-development age along with concepts like participation and partnership, democratisation and autonomy.

Security has all the definitional vagueness of all other, truly powerful discursive phenomena. In its conventional forms, 'security' may be defined as a 'freedom from danger and risk', as a freedom from 'care, apprehension, or doubt', as well 'the precautions taken to guard against theft or sabotage' (Webster's 1994: 1290). Security in other words deals with the problem of order and disorder, being both the *ontological condition* of order, in the sense of an absence of doubt, danger, risk, and anxiety, and the *political means* of this ensuring order. The political popularity of security during the 1990s and in particular after 9-11 has to do with this duality. 'Securitization', as one might term this shift, is a kind of governmentality. Security is a taming of ontological uncertainty through the calculation of socio-political probabilities and consistent political action (Giddens 1991; Hacking 1990). It is both a model for and model of the new political imagination that has taken center-stage in the global risk society (Beck 2002).

Security is simultaneously a political means and a political ideal: a secure society through organized management, a management that clearly involves the state, as the revitalization of the state after 9-11 demonstrates, but that also goes far beyond the state. Security is thus a concern also for private industry, NGOs and multinational organizations (MNOs). A quick scan of the academic and policy-oriented literature reveals how 'securitization' has touched a wide variety of domains. Within development research there are discussion about food and nutrition security, household livelihood security, information security, social security, employment security, energy security, and environmental security – all encompassed by one of the new buzzwords of UN speak: 'human security' (UNDP 1994). The problem of security is not only multi-thematic – a relevant concern in all areas of the social body – it is also multi-scalar. There is global security, regional security, national security and community security, as the magisterial three-volume treatise by Dewitt and Hernandez on the topic in Southeast Asia

highlights (Dewitt and Hernandez 2003a; Dewitt and Hernandez 2003b; Dewitt and Hernandez 2003c)

Global in extension and requiring minute consideration in a growing number of areas, security, I would argue, is the governmentalisation of a particular set of ontological concerns, and an attempt to tame uncertainty by constructing its absence as a variety of 'freedom'. The all-embracing and governmental tendencies of the concept are perhaps most clearly marked in the latest manifestation of the concept, namely that of 'human security' which is the absence both of threat and of 'sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of everyday life' (see Paris 2001: 89). Coined on the basis of a legitimate critique of a narrow militaristic definition of security, the concept has colonised all areas of social life, making 'it difficult to determine what, if anything, might be excluded from the definition of human security' (*ibid.*: 90). Proponents of the concept see this definitional vagueness as one of the main strength of the concept (UNDP 1994: 24), and in a way they are right: the 'all-encompassing' and 'integrative' qualities of human security make it an apt policy concept – the positive policy tool to handle uncertainty in the global risk society (see Beck 2002). As a risk-handling device suitable for all domains of life, it establishes governmentality 'all the way down'.

The same definitional vagueness also surrounds the broader concept of security (see for instance the debate between Thomas and Tow 2002 and Bellamy and McDonald 2002). This makes 'security governance' inherently paradoxical: the concept of security has gained immense discursive power on the global, political scene at the same time as even its proponents struggle to define its essence. Anthony Burke discusses this 'onto-political' paradox of security as a global political technology through an interesting use of Jacques Derrida's concept of 'aporia'. Aporia is one of Derrida's many concepts to describe the inherent contradictions that emerge when language is assigned the function to represent reality. It describes 'an event that prevents a metaphysical discourse from fulfilling its promised unity' (Burke 2002: 4), emphasising both the predictable failure of language to achieve identity with the real and the possibility of an opening up onto an 'interminable experience' not given in language. The convolutions of French intellectualism aside, I agree with Burke that the notion of aporia is useful in relation to security, because it points to the contradictions inherent in the security discourse, which shape particular forms of sensible, political actions but which in doing so points towards an unarticulated and contradictory ontology. The discourse of security thus makes oblique but constant reference to the idea of insecurity, the overarching concept of our time, and establishes itself paradoxically as the political technology to calculate the incalculable (degree of risk) and manage the unmanageable (character of uncertainty) (see also Dean 1999). Security, Burke argues,

becomes a powerful signifier of an ideal political, economic, and cultural order, opposed to “others” designated as inferior or threatening. Yet its promise breaks down when we consider that, because “security” is bound into a dependent relationship with “insecurity”, it can never escape it: it must continue to produce images of “insecurity” in order to retain meaning (Burke 2002: 20)

From this perspective, the ontology of risk is constantly being evoked and reproduced in the new security paradigm. Security, ‘one of modernity’s most stubborn and enduring dreams’ (ibid: 1), is thus the vaguely defined panacea for an ontological insecurity that it helps reproduce. The paradigm of security is intimately linked to the contemporary reproduction of a constant state of emergency (Armitage 2003; Steinmetz 2003). This perpetual sense of crisis is onto-political: crisis and insecurity have become key components of a pervasive cultural condition, and as a result a redefinition of politics is seen to be necessary.

The installation of security as a pivotal concern in a new development paradigm has thus, as Mark Duffield (2002; 2004) notes, entailed a radicalisation of development and global politics (see also Paris 1997). Concerns about security, whether in the forms global threats like terrorism or more localised forms like the ‘new wars’, have made development ‘political’ in a new and much more intense way. This includes ‘a new willingness to countenance a level of intrusion and a degree of social engineering hitherto frowned upon by the international community’ (Duffield 2002: 1050). Far from embarking on the path of ‘post-development’, prophesied by some in the early 1990s (see for instance Escobar 1995), the reinvention of security in the first years of the new millennium has given the development paradigm new vigour.

Securitisation has in other words become an integral part of the new paradigm of development and global governance, and it is as such that the concept reached the shores of Indonesia with particular force after the country was stunned by the terrorist bombs near two Kuta Beach nightclubs in October 2002. The political response to these bombs initiated in Indonesia a somewhat louder version of the ‘quiet revolution in security governance’ that began globally after September 2001 (see Lippert and O’Connor 2003: 331).

Nevertheless, security has a long, vernacular history in Indonesia, and it was within this history that recent changes to the meanings of security have come to make sense. If China can be said to have its own ‘security concept’ (Baiyi 2001), so perhaps can Indonesia.

Society as a risk to the state: the history of security in Indonesia

Security – in the sense of a social order guaranteed by the state – is not a new concept in Indonesia. Rather its genealogy can be traced back to the preoccupation of the late colonial state in the Dutch East Indies with ‘peace and order’ (*rust en orde*) (Anderson 1990: 119; Cribb 1994: 1).

Taught a lesson from the heated and divisive politics of the 1950s during Indonesia’s brief fling with democracy (Geertz 1995), the New Order regime that came into being in 1967 when President Suharto formally seized power from Sukarno, the first president of the independent country of Indonesia, accommodated the colonial idea of statist security and made ‘safety and order’ (*keamanan dan ketertiban*) the basis of its high-modernist, neo-patrimonial rule.

In the political imagination of the New Order, the state was the true representative of ‘the people’ (*rakyat*), which by nature was apolitical. Security and order were maintained to the extent society conformed to the societal ideals of the state, while disorder was defined by politics outside of state control (see Tsing 1993: 24). ‘Security’ was thus more than anything else a bureaucratic attempt to calculate the risks and dangers from within civil society to the state (as the true representative of the people). As a consequence, the state had to maintain constant vigilance (*waspadai*) on behalf of the people against the ‘subversive forces’ from ‘certain quarters of society’ that threatened the safety and order of the state. These imagined forces – which often were equated with communism but which often remained vaguely defined as ‘certain quarters’ (*pibak tertentu*) – served an important political function as the legitimisation for maintenance of a rationalist form of ‘political paranoia’ (Bubandt forthc; Lindsey 2001). The rationalist paranoia was institutionalized in a number of ways.

The dual function of the army (*dwifungsi*), established at Independence in 1945 and only partly dismantled in the post-Suharto era, was one such way (Rinakit 2004). The dual function ensured that the army (ABRI) had both a military role as a defender against foreign enemies and a ‘socio-political’ role as an active force. A truly ‘total social institution’, the mandate of this socio-political role was explicitly said to cover ‘the ideological, political, social, economic, cultural, and religious fields’ (Army Doctrine from 1965 cited in/Crouch, 1978 #603: 25). During the New Order the army was allocated one-fifth of the seats in the House of Repre-

sentatives (DPR), many ministers and most governors of the 27 provinces came from the ranks of ABRI. The army took its socio-political role important and a system of army officers mirrored the hierarchy of the civilian political system at all levels of government, right down to the non-commissioned officer, the *Babinsa*, who was affiliated to the village government. The main role of the *Babinsa* – as reflected in the last two syllables of the acronym (*binsa*) – is to act as a political ‘guide to the village’ (*pembina desa*). The *Babinsa* ensures the political stability of the village at the same time as he tries to encourage people to partake in the development efforts of the government. In the univertford body of the *Babinsa*, in other words, security and development are united within the political framework of the patrimonial state.

In the early 1990s, a *Babinsa* arrived in the village of some hundred households where I lived in eastern Indonesia. A man in his forties from a neighbouring ethnic group, the *Babinsa* began ensuring that people showed up to political speeches by the district mayor, that people partook in collective work tasks, and that the village traded-in old superstitions for an enthusiasm for the developmentalist plans, from which he also expected to be earning hidden kickbacks. The Ambonese wife of the *Babinsa* became a leading figure in PKK, the family educational program that arranged lectures for the women of the village on hygiene, nutrition and the national moral philosophy of Pancasila. Intended as an instrument of panoptic surveillance and first line of defence against political subversion from ‘certain quarters’, the *Babinsa* over the last 10 years has become thoroughly socialized into village life. He temporarily divorced his wife, when he impregnated a young local girl half his age, taking up residence briefly with the girl’s parents. The low-point in his efforts to develop the village came one night when the girl, in hysterics over the persistent and eerie calls of a *kokók* (a local evil spirit associated with witchcraft) from a large mango tree in the centre of the village, persuaded him to try to shoot the evil spirit of backward tradition once and for all. He emptied the full magazine of his nine-millimetre service gun into the treetop, but witchcraft did not go any. Eventually it made him sick and killed his newborn child. Today, he has left the village and now lives in the district capital with his first wife from Ambon.

The ideological success of the New Order regime in establishing an ideal of social order enforced by rational guidance (*pembinaan*) and supervision, despite the often limited success of the regime’s street-level bureaucrats, can be explained by the fact that being secure (*aman* or *tentram*) is also a major cultural concern in many Indonesian communities (Sairin 1996). The post-colonial preoccupation with security (*keamanan*) in Indonesia succeeded in becoming a dominant political goal not only because of a colonial legacy that made rational social order an administrative canon; state order also resonated with cultural ideas about the significance of stability, harmony, and safety (Mulder 1998: 121). These cultural concerns with safety were

politically nurtured by the maintenance of a historical memory of the country's violent past during periods of 'disorder' and of an image of the subversive enemy from within society who threatened the 'people-state' with a return to these 'crazy' times of disorder (Anderson 1990) (Heryanto 1999; Mackie and MacIntyre 1994).

The many political changes that followed after the fall of the New Order in May 1998 and the implementation of the decentralisation programme in 2001 also included an attenuation of the socio-political role of the army and its function of policing security and ensuring 'security'. Despite the fact that the territorial structure and the position of the *Babinsa* has remained intact, two factors – the rise of localism and neo-traditionalism on the one hand and the enrolment of Indonesia in the global fight against terrorism on the other – have meant that the monopoly of the military on the 'securitisation' of society has been both challenged and reconfigured. I will describe the effects of the fight against terrorism before turning to the issue of neo-traditionalism.

The transformation of state and security imaginaries after Suharto

The bomb explosions on Bali in October 2002, which killed some 200 people, marked a turning point in Post-Suharto security politics. President Megawati who is a staunch believer in the unitary state, had for some time attempted to introduce a new terrorism act that would bring the country into line with the US war on terrorism, but she had met with strong opposition from student reform groups and Muslim organizations, both of whom feared it was a first step to a return to New Order authoritarianism. The bombs changed this picture, and within a few weeks the new law had been passed in parliament. With the law in hand, the Megawati government—suspected abroad of not doing enough to stem Muslim fundamentalism and accused domestically for abusing its power – took a new hard line against sectarian violence in Sulawesi and Maluku, cracked down on political protest in Papua, and started a military campaign against secessionism in Aceh in May 2003.

The securitization of Indonesia after October 2002 thus revolved around imaginaries of the state and its enemies. During New Order rule, the enemy had been the spectre of communism, supported by US cold war policy following the Vietnam War that Indonesia was the linchpin in the fight against communism in Southeast Asia. Radical Islam had also been the target of political oppression in the first few decades of Suharto's rule, but in the early 1990s

this had shifted dramatically as Suharto, in a bid to renew his divide and rule politics had begun supporting conservative Islamic groups (Hefner 2000a; Liddle 1996). This cultivation of conservative Islam has a clear link to the outbreak of sectarian violence after Suharto fall in May 1998 (Hefner 2000b; Hefner 2002).

The bombs on Bali made Islamic fundamentalism the number one enemy, while calls for the legalization of the communist party – unthinkable five years earlier – began to appear. Again, US global politics, which saw Indonesia as the key to Southeast Asian security, played a major role in this shift (Dibb 2001; Gershman 2002). However, the politisation of Islam had become so engrained in Indonesian society in the previous 20 years that fundamentalist Islam could never obtain the status of communism during New Order rule as an undisputed evil. Too many people suspected that Islam was the victim of a global US-led conspiracy and that the securitisation of politics after October 2002 was a kind of New Order renaissance for Megawati's hegemony to be as effective of that of Suharto. The narrowing of the concept of security as a political tool of the state was clearly more effective during the New Order, and despite the new hegemony of the 'hypermodern state of emergency' that has characterized politics after 9-11 (Armitage 2002), the legitimacy of the state was thoroughly weakened with the collapse of Suharto.

The collapse of the New Order, however, was complex. On the one hand, it was precipitated by an undermining of belief in the legitimacy of the state itself. When Suharto stepped down he left a power vacuum that made some analysts talk about the failure of the state in Indonesia in almost Africanist terms (Klinken 2001; Wanandi 2002). On the other, the New Order patrimonial structures of bureaucratic governance remained in place and were even boosted by the change from the 'New Order' to the 'Reformation Era' (*era reformasi*). The system of bureaucratic rule did not collapse: it merely reorganized itself in terms of the new political landscape of decentralization.

Tradition as an alternative to security: traditionalist bureaucrats

It is from the bureaucratic ranks of New Order patrimonialism that decentralization – a master trope of Post-Suharto Indonesia at least as important as security – that a paradoxical alternative to the hypermodern imaginary of the state, which securitisation entailed, emerged. If a reinvented form of 'security' was the reluctant focus of rationalist state administrators

after Suharto, other bureaucrats seized upon the concept of 'tradition'. Tradition, which had been marginalized as an icon of apolitical society during the New Order, achieved a new kind of political value after 1998 as Indonesian politics became suffused with the discourse of NGOs and MNOs like the IMF and the World Bank (Crawford and Hermawan 2002). For these organisations the democratisation of Indonesia – which aimed at establishing the basis for a new kind of security – had to proceed through decentralization, community participation, and the devolution of power (Ahmad and Mansoor 2002). Ironically, it was New Order bureaucrats who set about implementing this political transformation and it soon came to be seen by many people as the cause not only for an increase in corruption but also for the outbreak of sectarian violence. Instead of one Suharto, decentralization was accused of giving Indonesia 'many small Suhartos', each eager to maintain his own patrimonial dominion. Contending for local power in the district, other low-level bureaucrats who had been recruited into the administration because they held traditional offices in the local communities (such as that of raja or sultan) criticized the legitimacy of the state model as a whole, arguing that only a return to tradition could save the country from corruption and conflict. In the place of an illegitimate state, they wanted to put the traditional community, arguing that this, after all, was the spirit of the decentralization process.

I have followed the four Sultans of North Maluku, in particular the Sultan of Ternate, through the devastating conflict in the region between 1999-2000 and into the various attempts of the Sultan of Ternate to regain the political influence he had as the regional representative of the ruling Golkar Party during the New Order. Accused by his political foes of misusing 'tradition' for his own political purposes, he claims that only the values and democratic structures of North Malukan tradition, which he studied as part of his undergraduate degree at the Indonesian University (UI), can restore peace and stability to the country. Tradition, in a sense, is his answer to the problem of security. In an interview in 2000 he stated:

We still don't know what our national values are. [The state philosophy of] Pancasila is unclear and therefore does not perform a function. Therefore it is my principle to uphold the traditional values of the local region (Karni and Haryadi 2000).

These values which embrace modern principle of openness, democracy, power sharing, and transparency are better suited for North Malukan society because they – unlike state doctrine which has proven itself to be socially divisive – have full local legitimacy. Against the charge that local tradition or *adat* discriminates immigrants (see Acciaioli 2001), the sultan and his staff claim that Ternatan political rule has a history of tolerance that goes back to the

thirteenth century and which always has ensured political participation of outsiders through their inclusion in the political structure of the sultanate. The sultanate has legitimacy because it does not uphold a sharp distinction between society and the state – bringing it in line with much current political thought (on this new role of ‘civil society’, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Klinken 2001). This is contained in the image of the *dada*, the ritual presentation of yellow rice, formed in the shape of the mountain of Gammalama. Perched on the top of the mound of yellow rice is a hard-boiled egg. In a play on the political significance of the colours of yellow and white, it is said that yellow represents the people, white represents sultanate rule. Just as the yellow rice is white on the inside, the whites of the eggs cover the yellow of the yoke. The sultan, so the ritual offering of *dada* proves, is in the heart of the people, just as the people is close to the heart of the sultanate ruler. Divine sanction from Allah and the ancestral spirits on the top of Mount Gammalama ensure that this remains the case: betrayal by the people or by the sultan is immediately punished by volcanic eruption, earthquake, illness and death. Thus by divine sanction the democracy of tradition is ensured. It is the lapse in beliefs in these values that govern traditional politics that, according to sultanate staff, explains the legitimacy crisis of the modern state and the ethno-religious conflict that threaten the break-up of the nation.

An elaborate philosophy supports this simultaneously social, political and cosmological imaginary. It is put forward, not as an out-dated, backward expression of feudal mysticism, but as a truly hypermodern form of governance – the realisation of everything NGO democratisation discourse preaches. For the initiated there is thus a hidden divine form of intervention behind the shift from New Order centralism to decentralisation that has allowed tradition to be recognised as the most fitting form of governmentality for Indonesia today. ‘The time for tradition has come’, as one man said. In Ternatan mysticism – heavily inspired by Islamic Sufism – the world is, as another man told me, divided into two realms, a ‘forty percent world’ and a ‘sixty percent world’. The forty percent world is the one we live in; the remaining sixty percent belongs to the hidden world of Allah, the ancestors and the spirits. Everything comes from, and in the end returns to, the world of the sixty percent. This includes the right to govern.

What is interesting is that these kinds of mystical and traditionalist yet modern arguments and sensibilities are not restricted to the villagers of north Ternate. Its elite consists of many former New Order bureaucrats with seats in the local parliament; men who might be suspected of bad faith in their use of traditional rhetoric, but who appear to be acting and speaking in good faith, completely convinced that they speak the truth. And they are not alone. Throughout Indonesia this kind of neotraditional approach to decentralisation is on the

rise (Bubandt, 2004), containing, as I have argued here, an alternative conception of security, order and the state.

Conclusion

I have sketched a brief political history of the national and regional inflections of the global concept of 'security' in Indonesia, treating it throughout as an informant category that needs explication rather than as an analytical category that needs refined definition and consistent use.

In the process I have ignored a wide variety of interesting areas where analytical aspects of security are at stake. I am thinking in particular of the 'privatization' of crime prevention through the rise of rampant criminal militias, formerly controlled by the military (Barker 2001; Lindsey 2001). I made the choice to treat security as a matter of shifting imaginaries in order to demonstrate how security concerns in Indonesia reflect global changes but also entail their own complex and often contradictory political agendas. The problem of order and concerns to maintain security have loomed large through much of Indonesia's history, a concern that has been impressed internationally on the country's shifting ruler because of its important geopolitical position in the region. The shifting notions of security have, however, all been tied to a changing problematic of state, because order in Indonesia has a postcolonial legacy of being a state concern. Security concerns therefore in Indonesia reflect concerns about the state. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the state has become problematic in a way not seen since the country's brief fling with democracy in the 1950s.

While the New Order emphasis on the 'safety' went hand in hand with Cold War concerns about military security, the Post-Suharto shift away from state-secured development towards community autonomy and security reflects the demise of conventional development thinking and the rise of a neo-liberal global governance in which underdevelopment is itself a source of danger (Duffield 2001). Global discourses of democracy, community participation and the devolution of power thus today set the agenda for the reinvention of the state governance in the world and in Indonesia. This, however, has not led to a political consensus within Indonesia about what decentralisation actually means and how security should be understood and implemented.

'Human security' was coined in global development discourse in an effort to rescue the concept of security from a strictly military optic. This reinvention took place within a new form of

global governance in which ‘civil society’ concerns increasingly revolve around particular ideas of ontological security and order. These global concerns are, I suggested, ‘onto-political’. The new global governance entails the production of an ‘ontology of uncertainty’, a perpetual sense of crisis and unpredictable risk, in response to which a new kind of politics, the ‘politics of security’, is necessary. In Indonesia, the same discourse has met and interacted with a vernacular ‘onto-political’ conception of security. Thus in Indonesia, the military had already for more than three decades – and thus long before the new discourse on ‘human security’ – sought to colonise ‘the soft side of security’, establishing in the process a vernacular form of governance. The simultaneous breakdown of the New Order state and the global emergence of the security paradigm have meant that security in Indonesia today is regarded with a suspicion and ambivalence that incarnate global forms of critique of the new paradigm, but which also in some quarters of Indonesian politics do so within a traditionalist purview. In these political circumstances, alternative conceptualisations of how to ensure ontological security have emerged. I thus described how local entrepreneurs, many of them with a past in New Order administration, have seized upon the discursive obscurity that surrounds the rhetoric and implementation of decentralisation to reinvent a place for tradition in a modern Indonesian-style democracy. Entailed in this invention is an alternative socio-political imaginary that contests the legitimacy of the state and the imaginings of order that official discourses on security in the country still harbour.

While the securitisation of global governance is built on new ontological ideas about what it means to be safe and in the end what it means to be human as well as a redefinition of the legitimate, political means through which security is to be ensured, global governance is not seamless in its global extension. The apparent universalism of the ontology and politics of global governance breaks down into a more complex pattern upon closer inspection. The ‘onto-politics’ of security have global, national and local refractions, the interplay between which might be worth a second look.

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