

***A Joint USINDO Scholars Open Forum Series
with AIFIS and @america***

**New Trends in Indonesian Studies in the United States:
Opportunities and Challenges**



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Introduction

On May 20, USINDO in cooperation with AIFIS and @america conducted an Open Forum discussion with Prof. Thomas B. Pepinsky, an Associate Professor at Cornell University and the President of AIFIS. He spoke about the state of Indonesian studies in the US.

The video of this event can be watched [here](#), and Prof. Thomas Pepinsky's slide presentation can be viewed [here](#).

Summary of Prof. Thomas Pepinsky's Key Remarks

Indonesian studies arrived late to the U.S., according to Prof. Pepinsky. Only after World War II did American policymakers fund scholarships and research centers, so Americans could learn more about other nations, including Indonesia.

The history of Indonesian studies in the U.S. can be divided into five periods. During the first period, which was before WW II, scholars focused on "*Classic Indologie*"—or Indonesia's pre-independence history. The second period followed World War II when the U.S. government created national research centers to study Southeast Asian countries. The third period was the "New Order Stasis," during which U.S. Indonesian scholars broadened and deepened their knowledge of Indonesia. The fourth period, referred to as the "Generational Change," occurred when most Indonesian scholars in the U.S. either retired or passed away. The last period—otherwise known as the "Contemporary Transition"—involved younger scholars competing with established Indonesian scholars over scarce resources and opportunities.

During most of those periods, scholars conducted basic research, related to the U.S.-Indonesia relationship. Most scholars' research focused on Indonesian history. They would ask: What was the Suharto-led revolution about? Why did constitutional democracy decline? How did the New Order emerge? History could provide the answers, they thought.

However, a "new paradigm" for Indonesian studies has emerged, according to Prof. Pepinsky. The "new paradigm" emphasizes applied, quantitative research—which can later be used for implementing policies. But many of the researchers are not Indonesia experts. Rather, they are focused on certain disciplines. Political scientists focus on Indonesian politics. Marine biologists study Indonesian coral reefs. While such a piecemeal approach to Indonesian studies may seem wasted, it is not. It can lead to broader questions about Indonesia's culture, history, and economy.

Indonesian studies face major challenges, Prof. Pepinsky noted. With the government cutting its budget, scholarships and grants are scarcer. The National Science Foundation (NSF) recently stopped funding political science research. Today, only political research that benefits U.S. economic and national security interests gets funding. Unfortunately, many think that those interests do not involve Indonesia, so Indonesian research does not get much money.

Another challenge comes from the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. He prioritizes early-childhood education. Not many resources, during his tenure, will be devoted to Indonesian studies.

Also, U.S. higher education is very expensive. Students want a return on their investment, and with Indonesian studies, that return is uncertain. Not many companies are looking for Indonesian experts. But those who study Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) do get a return on their investment. More and more universities, therefore, are investing in STEM. Indonesian studies are not a priority.

Another challenge is the uncertainty of the U.S.-Indonesia relationship. During the past few years, the U.S. and Indonesia have strengthened their partnership. But will that trend continue? Prof. Pepinsky asked. It is impossible to know

Lastly, few Indonesians can study in the U.S. To increase the number, the U.S. can help Indonesian schools develop their English-language curriculums. Also, with improved English skills, more Indonesian researchers can publish articles in international journals, thereby bringing increased attention to Indonesia.

Despite the challenges, there are opportunities for Indonesian studies in the U.S. President Obama grew up in Indonesia. He will be more willing to develop close and long-lasting ties with the country, so Indonesian experts will be more in demand.

The “pivot” to Asia has led to a renewed interest in the Asia Pacific region, including in Indonesia. The U.S. and Indonesian governments are conducting high-level discussions to strengthen the relationship between the two countries. The U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership is just the latest example.

The American Institute for Indonesian Studies also raises awareness about Indonesian studies in the U.S. The Institute, Prof. Pepinsky explained, helps Indonesian scholars conduct research in the U.S. Likewise, the Institute encourages American academics—whether they are Indonesian specialists or not—to study Indonesia, thereby increasing interest in Indonesian studies.

During the golden era of Indonesian studies, famous scholars, such as Benedict Anderson, came up with creative and insightful theories—applicable not only to Indonesia but to other nations as well. For their work, Anderson and his colleagues received a lot of funding. Today, Indonesian scholars should follow their predecessors’ example. Today’s academics must conduct on-the-ground research, hopefully resulting in novel and thought-provoking conclusions, so Indonesian studies continues to attract funding and attention.

Question and Answer Session

Q: When President Obama visited Indonesia in 2010, he stated that U.S.-Indonesia educational exchanges would increase. However, I don't think much has changed. What do you think? Also, how can Indonesians publish in international journals?

I believe that Obama meant what he said. However, educational partnerships and cooperation take time. In the meantime, several exchange programs and scholarships help Indonesians study in the U.S.

Publishing in an international journal is challenging, especially for Indonesians who do not speak English as their first language. If you want to publish in an international journal, you should work with experienced academics, so you can learn about research techniques.

Q: How can we raise awareness about Indonesian culture? Will that increase the number of people who want to study Indonesia?

At Cornell, we have a course simply called "Indonesia." Students can study anything about Indonesia: music, dance, art, politics, etc. They love the class, and it increases interest about Indonesia among the student body. However, most students still focus on the STEM disciplines.

Q: Do you think Indonesian scholars can develop "Indonesian schools of thought" in political science and cultural studies?

Getting to that academic level will be difficult. More Indonesians must study at PhD programs in the U.S. Afterwards, they need to return to Indonesia, so they can conduct research and develop their theories.

Also, Indonesia's educational system needs to focus on research. But right now, there is not enough funding. Establishing Indonesian "schools of thought" certainly will be difficult.

Q: How does Cornell maintain its Indonesian studies program, particularly when the U.S. government is slashing funding for research?

Cornell's Indonesian studies program remains strong. Because of Cornell's investment in the program, we have the best library on Indonesian affairs in the U.S. However, as a result of tight budgets, increasing our collection will be difficult. I hope a new generation of Indonesian scholars will preserve and expand Indonesian studies at Cornell.

Q: How does Indonesia's academic and scientific cultures impact the Indonesian military?

I do not have a deep understanding of Indonesia's academic culture. Regarding the armed forces, I know that many of their training models come from the Dutch and Japanese. The U.S. also works with the Indonesian military academy.