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One Punk's Travel Guide to Indonesia

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November 2013

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This article originally ran in Razorcake #76 (Oct./Nov. 2013).

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November 2013

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In December 2011, police descended upon a punk show in Banda Aceh, Indonesia and arrested sixty-four teenagers for being, well, punks. The concert was a fundraiser for local charities and had the proper legal permissions to be held, according to the organizers. The police claimed the organizers didn't have the right permits, and they also claimed to have found marijuana and sharp objects that could be classified as weapons. The sixty-four youths were taken to the Aceh State Police Camps and held for almost two weeks. Their heads were forcefully shaved, their clothes burned, and they were forced to pray and take communal baths to "cleanse" themselves.

The Aceh authorities told BBC News the punks had not broken any laws and they were being detained for "re-education" (BBC News, "Indonesia's punks shaved for 're-education'" 14 December 2011.) Deputy Mayor Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal proudly claimed she personally supervised the police raid and pointed to previous raids against Aceh's cafés and city parks to detain young punks. This clearly amounted to a focused and sustained harassment of the Aceh punk community. But why? Djamal justified her actions by stating: "Aceh is a Shariah [Muslim law] region. Everyone should obey it and the punk community is clearly against Shariah." As Djamal claimed, "Punk is a new social disease."

I first read about the detentions from the international news, but soon my email inbox filled up with calls from across the global punk community for actions of solidarity (which would be repeated three months later with the arrests of Pussy Riot in Moscow). One of my bands sent a track for a CD compilation to help support those arrested, and I signed various petitions and sent letters via Amnesty International. But I wanted to know more about what had happened, and what was happening in Indonesia in general. I was aware that Indonesia has one of the largest and most active punk scenes in Asia. I was also aware that Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims in the world. And I knew that in Aceh, the northern state on the island of Sumatra, Sharia Law had been de-

clared, which meant that the population needed to abide by the rather strict tenants of Islamic law. I write about punk culture, so it seemed important that I should go and check things out for myself. So I did.

What follows are some observations from my recent trip to Indonesia. It is not an in-depth scene report, like what you might find within the pages of *Maximumrocknroll*. I am not an insider and I don't pretend to be. I was only there for a couple of weeks and spent my time in three cities: Jakarta, Bandung, and Banda Aceh. But this is one of the things I do: travel around the world hanging out with punks, asking questions and writing articles about it. Someone recently called me the "Anthony Bourdain of punk," which works on so many levels. So what follows are some of my impressions and insights.

A Brief History of Punk in Indonesia

Indonesia is a massive country made up of over 130,000 islands. It was colonized by the Dutch, occupied by the Japanese during World War II, declared its independence in 1945, and then fought a war against the Dutch (who refused to recognize their independence) until 1949. A couple of decades later, General Suharto gained power and established the "New Order" regime which, thanks to American support, ruled the country with a repressive hand for almost thirty years. Suharto stepped down in May 1998 as a result of mounting popular pressure. It's important to note that one of the driving social forces involved in bringing down Suharto's New Order was Indonesia's young, growing, and highly politicized punk community.

Punk came to Indonesia in a serious way during the early 1990s. True, tapes of early punk bands like the Sex Pistols and the Dead Kennedys had circulated much earlier than that, but it didn't result in the massive growth of a scene like what happened in the 1990s.

In the 1990s, the Indonesian punk scene was at the forefront of bringing down the Suharto regime. Several decades later, it has grown, evolved, fragmented, and mutated. Now there doesn't seem to be a common enemy, except, perhaps, global capitalism. Corporate interests—from major record labels to major cigarette companies—are pushing their way into the underground. It is a familiar tale told across the globe. But in Indonesia I was heartened by the resistance taking place. Commercial "punk as a lifestyle" is clearly present, but so is a huge DIY community. For many, DIY punk is a means of survival, and that helped remind me just how vital and important a social force DIY punk can be around the world.

crushingly bad. With pop music so horrible, it is no wonder punk is popular in Indonesia.

For many punks, DIY was regarded as a life ethic, but also a necessity given the costs and restrictions encountered in everyday life. A number of punks in all three cities noted that engaging with corporate life was not even an option, but that they wouldn't take it even if it was. This didn't just seem like posing. The DIY underground is strong and lively in all three cities I visited. I came across two excellent Indonesian punk zines while there: *Punk Illegal* (with a layout very similar to *MRR*) and *Hantamstagnansi*, both of which were steeped in DIY mentality. The latter, for example, was loaded with full page proclamations such as "Get Active: Teaching Your Fucking Self," "DIY or Die!" and "Do It Yourself or Do It With Friends." Both zines were full of ads from DIY punk/hc labels from across Indonesia, as well as Asia, Europe, and North America.

It is impossible to make generalizations about the Indonesian punk scene(s). Sitting in front of 7-Eleven sipping beer at 4 am with Esa (damn, how many times have I been in a similar situation during my lifetime?), I asked him what Western readers should know about Indonesia and its punk scene. He responded: "They should visit Indonesia to know what is punk. All the bands, all the people outside Indonesia that come here always say, 'Indonesia is really huge. Indonesia has really, really huge punk scene. It is like the punk capital of the world.' I think because most of the punks here can't communicate in English, it really makes it difficult to communicate with other punks in other parts of the world. If you want to find out what punk really is then you need to go to Indonesia because you can't expect bands from Indonesia going outside because it really, really costs us lots of money, and we need to work like years just to go outside." This was a great, honest answer. Most punks in Indonesia are poor. They don't get welfare from the government. They need to survive and sometimes that means playing songs on street corners and sometimes it means working shitty jobs.

Most people I have spoken with (as well as the academic material on the subject) point to the influx of CDs and tapes by bands like Green Day, Bad Religion, and Nirvana for sparking the punk scenes across Indonesia. In January 1996, the Foo Fighters, Sonic Youth, and the Beastie Boys performed at the Jakarta Pop Alternative Festival. Green Day played in Jakarta the next month. Releases by major label acts were imported into the country thanks to globalization and for many people, those functioned like a gateway drug—an introduction to independent DIY punk bands and culture.

Most people I spoke to who were active at that time talk about how those commercial punk bands were attractive because of the energy and attitude. Even though such bands were still distant rock stars, they provided an introduction to the DIY punk culture that had nurtured them. For example, people wanting to find out more about Green Day discovered the whole Gilman Street scene and the larger DIY community in the Bay Area. For many, it was the discovery of the DIY punk scene that was truly transformative. Indonesia—while not in abject poverty—was (and is) a developing country, so any active youth culture has to be DIY by necessity. So, ironically, global capitalism and its attempts to profit off of passive consumers actually led to the development of a vibrant independent, anti-capitalist DIY punk culture across Indonesia. Western releases by DIY punk, hardcore, and metal bands began to circulate widely, and Indonesians began to form their own bands, release their own tapes, form their own record labels, and write their own zines.

All of this was occurring under the repressive control of Suharto's New Order. Despite their usual attempts to control crowds and clamp down on dissent, the government initially took very little notice of the growing youth culture. They provided organizers with permits to hold shows because they thought punk and independent music was just entertainment—a distraction for the kids. In reality, these shows were instrumental in mobilizing resistance to the Suharto regime. Anti-government songs

were played and circulated, political tracts disseminated, and actions organized. These developments were occurring across the country.

In Bali, one of the most famous bands of the time to emerge was Superman Is Dead (S.I.D.), a name that was a direct reference to Suharto. In Yogyakarta, one of the most popular punk bands performed their hit song "I Want a Fresh President" in front of a banner proclaiming the same sentiment. In Bandung, bands like Turtle Jr. and Puppen released influential anti-government songs, including "Kuya Ngora" and "Sistem," respectively.

Also in Bandung, Riotic Records/Distro began circulating their zine *Submissive Riot* that dealt explicitly with social and political issues. An offshoot of this group formed that Anti-Fascist Front which was highly active in political resistance against Suharto's regime. In Jakarta, numerous punk bands emerged and were active in the anti-Suharto struggle, perhaps none as infamous as Marjinal. As the documentary on the band proclaims, "Living in Jakarta, they took to the streets with thousands of other students demanding the end of authoritarian rule by then President Suharto. Punk gave people, like Mike and Bobby from Marjinal, the impetus to protest and demand change against frightening odds."

In an academic article on the rise of "political punk" in Bandung, Joanna Pickles observed that the New Order regime had effectively forced young people from the political sphere. (Joanna Pickles, "Punk, Pop and Protest: the birth and decline of political punk in Bandung" *Review of Indonesia and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 41, no.2, 2007.) This was largely due to the realization that Indonesian youths had been at the forefront of political resistance during the independence struggle. Seeing youth and college students as a potential threat, Suharto's regime worked hard on forcing them to the margins of society, often by stressing cultural and religious requirements of respect for elders and social submission.

Punk challenged these oppressive social norms. Youth of all stripes and backgrounds began hanging out and seeing common

Java, expressing disdain for these groups, but also concern about where they might be taking the country and the punk community.

Viva D.I.Y.

One morning while in Banda Aceh, my host punks picked me up in a borrowed police van (it was actually a security van for the school where the driver's mom works, but I'm gonna call it a police van anyway). We were headed to the beach. There was about eight of us in the van and we were all singing along to NOFX on the tape deck. We sang "Don't Call Me White" and "Kill All the White Men" and the songs took on special meaning for me as the only white guy in the van. We were going to the beach to meet with some other local punks to talk about strategies in DIY punk. We also exchanged stories and experiences, talked about globalization and capitalism, and reflected upon the phenomenon that is global punk.

In my short time in Indonesia, there were many similarities between their local scenes and others that I have encountered around the world. There was a high degree of fragmentation, due to geography and sub-genre diversity, like many other places. There was sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia countered with heavy doses of pluralism, tolerance, and acceptance. There was pride in local scenes, as well as the ubiquitous bitching about the scene: "It was better back then," "There are no good bands around these days," "There are no good venues in town," "Nobody goes to shows. Everyone is insular and lazy," and so forth. You know the script.

I spent a Saturday night in Banda Aceh with a group of about eight punks in the global ritual of riding around town looking for something to do. Just like in communities around the world, punk is also a response to the crushing boredom that comes with being a young adult. We hit an outdoor coffee house for an open mic performance. The highlight was when two in our group got up and played a couple of songs, but the rest of the music was soul-

ports the transformation of Tom Gabel to Laura Jane Grace. He sees no contradiction whatsoever with being punk and Muslim. He is dismissive of Sharia Law, but believes his relationship with Allah was extremely important. He is an anarchist Muslim punk and he is DIY punk to his core. He wasn't an anomaly. In Bandung, one punk I spoke with talked about how, as a teenager growing up in a conservative Muslim house, he had an identity crisis about being both punk and Muslim. After a few years, he realized that he could be both and didn't need to choose one over the other.

A few people did note that there was a dangerous development in the works: the radicalization of the Indonesian punk movement by conservative elements. The One Finger Underground Movement is small, but on the rise. It is called "One Finger" because you point your finger towards the sky in recognition that there is one God and He is the ruler over everything. It is a group of radical Muslims targeting underground youths and punks for conversion. Though he claims not to be a member of One Finger, former Red Rockers member Ucay has been associated with the rise of radical Islam within the underground scene. While in the band, Ucay was straight-edge but became increasingly frustrated by his failure to influence his fellow bandmates. As he observed, "It made me feel that I failed. I could bring the message to the fans but I couldn't change my own band." He also became increasingly radicalized, causing further divisions within the band. He eventually left the band, ostensibly after vocalizing his support for a radical Islamic group Indonesia Tanpa JIL (Indonesia Without Liberal Islam Network) during a radio performance. When I asked him about the tension between being a punk and Muslim, Ucay stated "Actually some of punk rock/ underground musicians in Indonesia never take the ideology seriously. We just adopted the style and the music only (including me). I never took punk ideology seriously." I think it is fair to say that most punks I met would disagree with the claim that they didn't take punk ideology seriously. A number of punks also noted the rise of radicalism in parts of Indonesia, such as West

cause in their love of loud, angry music. In a brief time, political awareness among punks strengthened, especially as DIY punk became a way through which they became politically empowered. Hikmawan Saefullah, an academic and active member of the Bandung punk scene, observed, "In the early to mid-1990s, Indonesian youths in the big cities such as Bandung, Jakarta, and Bali began to build informal networks of bands, events, fanzines, independent records labels, and small clothing companies dedicated to punk culture and ideals. The reason why the scene-building practices have become significant in the lives of many Indonesian youths is because it offers resources to resist what confines them in their everyday lives: state oppression and corruption, hypocrisy, injustices, discrimination, social and economic inequality, and the feeling of alienation that is prevalent in the modern capitalist society." (Hikmawan Saefullah, "The Silenced Protest: Punk and Democratization in Indonesia," unpublished paper, no date.)

The burgeoning DIY punk (and DIY metal) scenes were very important in empowering youths in their struggle to topple Suharto's New Order regime— which they succeeded in doing in 1998. In the post-authoritarian years, punk has evolved in ways many in the West can easily recognize. It has fragmented as new scenes emerged around specific genres and subgenres of punk; generational shifts have occurred as new kids get turned onto punk, while older punks get even older (and sometimes leave the underground community); and the forces of commodification and commercialization by corporate interests have raided the scene with abandon. Some two decades after punk in Indonesia really gained force, the scenes there remain some of the largest and most active in Asia, if not the world. It is a complicated scene that defies simple characterizations.

Commercialization and Resistance

In 2008, there was a tragedy in Bandung at a local metal/punk show.

The six hundred-person venue was reportedly packed at almost double capacity for the album release of the local band Beside. At the end of the show, aggressive security forces attacked from both outside and inside the venue, leading to a crush of bodies that left eleven people dead. Regardless of the exact circumstances, the Indonesian authorities used the incident to clamp down hard on the underground music scene. Punks were increasingly cast in a negative light and show organizers have had to apply for expensive and oftentimes difficult to obtain police permission since the tragedy. Many of the punks I hung out with also booked DIY shows, so the challenges in doing so were often a topic of conversation. Booking venues have gotten more difficult since the 2008 tragedy in Bandung. Not only was police permission expensive and sometimes difficult to obtain, but it was sometimes hard to find willing venues. In Jakarta, I was told that one of the more popular venues charged around four hundred dollars to rent out the venue, which is extremely expensive for punks there. I was told that since there was an attempt to keep ticket prices cheap (around one or two dollars each), that often meant that bands would have to pay to play, or at the very least, not expect any of the door monies. House parties and garage shows tend to be out of the question since the police often show up quickly and shut them down. This has put a crunch on DIY organizing, and, not surprisingly, the authorities are more willing to give permits to larger commercial venues and corporate sponsors. This is just one of the ways by which corporate interests, especially cigarette companies, have infiltrated the underground. A number of cigarette companies, such as L.A. Lights, now sponsor “underground and independent” music festivals and even CD compilations. Many DIY punks eschew these blatant corporate appropriations of independent DIY culture, but many oth-

ber explicitly saying they were atheists. This was not uncommon with many of the punks I spoke with while in the country. Some punks, such as Esa in Jakarta and CJ in Banda Aceh, said that they became punks as part of a rebellion against conservative Muslim culture.

Yet, a number—possibly even the majority—of punks I talked with stated that they considered themselves practicing Muslims. Of course, it isn't a surprise that there are Muslim punks. One can just check out the documentary on *Taqwacore* to get a sense of that. Nor is it unusual for some punks to also be religious, as I am well aware given the number of Christian punks in the West. I'm just not one of them. I'm an active atheist and I find myself having a hard time understanding how one could be a punk who actively believes in resisting the status quo and all forms of repression, and also be an active participant in organized religion. There seems to be a fundamental disconnect for me. This disconnect came into focus when I was hanging out in the bedroom of a punk in Banda Aceh. On the wall were two posters: one for Bad Religion and the other of Ayatollah Khomeini, the radical cleric who helped create the Islamic state in Iran. What. The. Fuck? Complicating the scene even more was the fact that there were also posters of Travis Barker, Sid Vicious, and photos of Kurt Cobain, Karl Marx, and Antonio Gramsci. How can these things be reconciled? Whenever I brought up the disconnect, this punk merely shrugged it off.

I should also say that this guy was one of my favorite people to hang out with. He took great care of me, picking me up at the airport, and taking me back when I left. His mother cooked several meals for me. He is incredibly kind and gracious. He prays several times a day and considers himself an active Muslim. He is also extremely progressive politically, expressing a level of religious tolerance often lost among other believers regardless of religious stripe. Politically, I would probably label him an anarchist. He is straight-edge, promotes PMA, but also loves Sid Vicious. He adores Bad Religion and Islam. He respects Queercore and sup-

T-shirts, jeans, and cheap black sneakers. They were the only female punks I was able to have a lengthy conversation with on my trip—though women are clearly active in the scene. Boys'R'Toys (Bandung), Virgin Oi! (Bandung), and Punktat (Jakarta) are some of many female punk bands. In addition to the usual American punk bands name checked (Bad Religion, NOFX, Descendents), they said they were also inspired by Bikini Kill, Distillers, and Pussy Riot. Like many punk females around the world, they expressed concern about violence against women in their society, fretted about finding a supportive place for women in the local punk scene, complained that their male punk colleagues didn't always take them seriously, and talked about police harassment. They also talked about how they dealt with the social pressures in a predominantly Muslim society. They discussed at length how it was easier and more acceptable for Indonesian males to be politically and socially liberal and the pressures on females to be more conservative. It just added another layer of teenage angst that they had to deal with, and I felt my white Western male privileges in spades while talking with them.

I had gone to Banda Aceh thinking I'd learn more about the relationship between the punks and the Indonesian state, but it turned out pretty straightforward: The police raided and detained the punks in a crass election tactic by local politicians and it worked. Random people I spoke to across Banda Aceh saw it that way too. Many defended the police for cracking down on "troublemakers," while others were embarrassed by the police's heavy-handedness and the negative international attention it brought. I think I could have guessed how each speaker voted in the past election based on their opinion about local punks.

What I ended up thinking about more and more while in Indonesia (and Banda Aceh in particular) was the relationship individual punks had towards Islam. A number of punks were dismissive of Islam in general. None of the street punks on the steps of the Tsunami Museum expressed any adherence to Islam, with a num-

ers have been willing to play along. Some of have tried to have it both ways—like Ucay, the lead singer of Rocket Rockers who once wore an anti-cigarette T-shirt while performing on stage at a cigarette-sponsored concert.

The corporatization of the Indonesian punk scene has been an ongoing process. It didn't take long for major labels to realize that there was profit to be made from punk in the Indonesian market. Some of the early punk bands signed to major labels, just as they had done in the U.S. and U.K., and were currently doing again in the U.S. in the post-Nirvana signing frenzy. Bands like Superman Is Dead (SID) signed to Sony/BMG, as did Bandung's Rocket Rockers. Not surprisingly, such bands were often labeled "sell outs," while they defended their decision with claims that they could now reach more people with their message. One friend I met who books DIY shows in Banda Aceh, Teuku Fariza, dismissed this logic head-on: "SID and Rocket Rockets are definitely sell-outs. If their main concern is getting a big crowd, please get the fuck out of punk. How did Minor Threat or Fugazi become well-known while keeping DIY? DIY just has proven it for almost over 30 years. Krass Kepala and Kontra Sosial had even toured Europe with DIY ethic. Now, who is the true punk?"

It's a familiar debate within punk and other underground communities: are you being exploited by corporations or are you exploiting them? Superman Is Dead began to wear their "outsider" status as a badge of honor. Rocket Rockers released one album with Sony/BMG and then launched their own independent record label, Reach And Rich Records, which they used for their future releases. Opinions about them varied amongst the Indonesian punks I spoke to, with some calling them hypocrites and sell-outs and others regarding them as the punk equivalents of Robin Hood.

Bandung has a history of being one of Indonesia's cultural centers, so it isn't surprising that there is an active music scene there. As the punk scene matured, a number of participants started their own "distros" which, while including the trade of tapes and

CDs (and occasional vinyl), primarily focused on independently-produced clothing. According to some, at one time there were around three hundred active distros in Bandung alone. Those numbers are decreasing as bigger stores and corporate interests move into the market. But the evolution of these DIY cultural producers into DIY entrepreneurs has been important in sustaining the underground community in Bandung and across Indonesia. They also serve as important role models of DIY sustainability for the large number of struggling unemployed youths across the country. One friend I made in Banda Aceh named Maggot runs his own Mad Goat clothing line, selling mostly T-shirts and hats from out of his house and at punk shows. Likewise, Homeless Dawg is a DIY metal clothing line run by a homeless guy in Bandung.

Gustaff, who helps run the Common Room open house in Bandung, observed that “punk and metal are the unwanted children of modernization in Indonesia.” For him, and many others, there is a strong overlap between the DIY punk and metal scenes. Both scenes emerged around the same time, shared the same social-political agenda, and a common enemy in the state. In fact, I don’t think I have ever seen a greater integration between punks and metal-heads than I did in Indonesia. Of course, I don’t think I have ever seen a metal scene as politicized and steeped in DIY mentality either. Joking about the lack of division between metal and punk, Gustaff said, “We’ve become very postmodern now, where the sign and signifier have lost all original meaning.” Gustaff, probably one of the smartest and most articulate punks I’ve ever met, also explained the popularity of DIY punk in Indonesia by referring to French postmodern philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: “creativity is the product of poverty, not wealth.” Gustaff saw the purpose of DIY punk and metal in Indonesia to evoke political and social change, drawing upon waves of angry youths looking for tools to express their thoughts and feelings.

While one might be dubious about such grand claims when reading those words on paper, they are powerful and pertinent

Most of those I spoke with claimed that the raid and detention was political theater. The Deputy Mayor was running for re-election and campaigned about being “tough on crime.” Punks were an easy target. So the police swooped down on the show—organized as a fundraiser for charity—claiming that they didn’t have the correct permit (a point debated by several of the punks) and that they found marijuana and weapons in the crowd. The Deputy Mayor was re-elected and life returned to normal.

The group of street punks, sitting in the hot sun sipping beer out of a bag in full view of anybody walking by (remember alcohol is prohibited under Sharia Law), complained that they still get harassed, but that it isn’t as bad as it was during the lead up to the election. The other group of punks, I should point out, were rather dismissive of the street punks. In part, they claimed that the street punks weren’t “real punks,” just a bunch of juvenile delinquents wearing a punk uniform but not really understanding the politics and ethics of punk (which they themselves understood as involving independent DIY cultural production and resistance to the status quo). They thought the street punks have understandably gained a reputation as troublemakers for openly drinking alcohol, harassing passers-by, and fighting. While this first group of punks thought it was wrong that the December show had been raided and people detained, many thought the street punks weren’t completely innocent. For their part, the street punks claimed that they were the only “real punks” in Banda Aceh and all others were a bunch of “posers.” It sounded like your usual punk squabble and I couldn’t help but think about the “tru punx” from Mitch Clem’s *Nothing Nice to Say* comic. And if I am going to be honest, there were good reasons I spent most of my time with the first group of punks. I found them more honest, less pretentious, and far more interesting in their multi-dimensionality than the street punks on the steps of the Tsunami Museum.

While sitting on those steps, however, I got into a conversation with two Indonesian riot grrrls. They wore black headscarves, black

3. In the subsequent peace agreement between the government and the Aceh rebels, the region was allowed to impose Sharia Law (a strict code based on a rather conservative interpretation of Islam). One of the reasons I went to Indonesia was to find out more about what happened in Banda Aceh in 2011 with the detention of those sixty-four punks and to try and understand the ways punk exists in a Muslim society. I spent a little less than a week in Banda Aceh and whatever assumptions I had before getting there were quickly thrown out.

Before arriving, a number of punks in Jakarta and Bandung joked about how conservative Aceh was, with strict Sharia Law being imposed across the region. Even though most had never been up to Aceh, stories about Sharia Law abounded—including the one about how women were now barred from driving a motorcycle or riding on one in any other way but side-saddle. Of course, as I rode on a motorcycle into town from the airport, I saw loads of women driving their own motorcycles and straddling them in the back. Yes, women's head scarves were ubiquitous, and their arms and legs were almost entirely covered. But I wouldn't call their clothing conservative. Everywhere I looked women of all ages were walking around in jeans, tights, T-shirts, and tight-as-hell blouses. On the wall of the first café I went to there was graffiti featuring a stylized woman's face with a headscarf with the words "Stop Rape" underneath. And while the BBC runs news reports about riding around town with the "Sharia Police," I never saw a single member of that so-called group once.

While I was in Banda Aceh, I hung out with two different groups of punks. I mostly hung out with a group of about a dozen punks who were in their twenties and taking classes. The other was a group of street punks who hung out on the steps of the Tsunami Museum most afternoons. Two in this group claimed to have been arrested during the infamous December detention. They were held in barracks and while one complained of the harsh treatment he received, the other said that most of the time they were just bored.

when said in the middle of an open house full of like-minded multi-generational punks and metal-heads. One of my favorite examples of this mentality is the long-running Jakarta punk band Marjinal. Marjinal has been instrumental in supporting not only the DIY punk scene but also street youths. One of their most well-known practices is teaching street kids how to play ukulele and guitar so that they can busk for money. In a country with no social safety net, this practice is about survival, self-sufficiency, and personal empowerment.

Diversity and Fragmentation

You think your town's scene is fragmented? Please. Try living in Jakarta, with over ten million people spread out for miles and miles in perpetual gridlock. It takes hours to get from the center of the city to its outskirts with traffic jams infamous across Asia. I was supposed to meet up with Esa of the band Zudas Krust and Doom-bringer Records, and it took him several hours at night to drive his motorcycle from southern Jakarta to where I was staying in the center of the city. We hung out in the early morning hours drinking beer in front of a 7-Eleven talking about the Jakarta punk scenes. He spoke about how the scenes were geographically split between south, north, east, west, and central Jakarta. When I asked him if there was any integration between the scenes, he responded: "We know each other and we support each other, although we are not really connected to each other because of the regions, because of the traffic, and because they have their own activities. Several years ago there was a big, huge gig. It was called Jakarta Unite. It intended to unite all the scenes from Jakarta and it was really, really huge, like hundreds of bands coming, especially from Java and Sumatra and other islands." So while corporate interventions have helped to fragment the Indonesian punk community, it is also fragmented by sheer size.

Not only is it difficult to travel around Jakarta, it is also a challenge to travel across Indonesia—it is, after all, a country made up of thousands of islands. Two of the biggest islands are Sumatra and Java. As Esa pointed out, “If you visit Sumatra you can spend a week just to go to the whole Sumatra because in cities you can spend one or two days. Maybe in Jakarta it’s not really hard to go to other cities, but, compared to other islands, it’s really difficult to go.” Traveling between islands requires taking a ferry or plane, both of which can be expensive for your everyday punk band. So my friends in Banda Aceh hadn’t seen that many punk bands that were not from their island of Sumatra, though tapes and CDs were circulating rather easily. Indonesian punk scenes are more geographically isolated than their American or European counterparts. Reportedly, there has been tension between the Jakarta and Bandung punk scenes related to football-inspired violence, but there have been recent moves to bridge the rift.

The punk scenes are also fragmented by genres. Name your punk flavor and they’ve got it in Indonesia. Pop-punk? Emo? Grindcore? Street/crust/oi? Scandinavian hardcore? Straight-edge? UK82? Yep, yep, yep. You want some Indonesian Celtic punk, go check out Forgotten Generation or Ikat Kepala. All of these genres breed their own mini-scenes. My friend Adith plays bass for Forgotten Generation and talked to me about organizing Celtic punk-only festivals called Celtic Punk Night Out in several cities across Indonesia. Yes, there are enough Celtic punk bands in Indonesia to fill up multiple festivals. But while almost every person I spoke with talked about the genre-diversity within the Indonesian punk community, they also stressed that the community remained pluralistic. Shows tended to include a wide variety of genres on the same bill. No one spoke about exclusion, but rather the reality that the community was so damn huge that diversity was just a fact of life. If any serious division exists, it is between DIY punk and commercial punk (or what a number of people dismissed as “fashion punk.”).

But there are also problems with violence within the scene. There have been some hostilities between the skinhead communities in Bandung and Jakarta. In one incident—reportedly at a show in Jakarta by the British skinhead band Last Resort—a number of Bandung punks were attacked and the vocalist for Bandung’s Bulldog Brigade was attacked with a chain. Adith of Forgotten Generation (and formerly of Bulldog Brigade) also points out that some of the violence is committed by “fashion punks.”

“It is difficult to deal with some people who only expresses punk through their physical appearances,” Adith said. “They have mohawks, they have leather jackets and boots. But they often engage in violent activities and it is my opinion that what these people do is come to underground punk rock shows and they get drunk beforehand and then they just make the events become chaos. They just destroy events. They always make problems. Because of these people, we have difficulties in organizing punk rock shows and getting permits to put on shows. It gives problems to other punk rock communities that have no relations with them. But the police department just generalizes that all the punk communities are just the same.”

A number of other punks also talked to me about how punks still have a reputation of being criminals in much of mainstream society. And that brings me back to the detention of those punks in Banda Aceh.

Punk and Islam

There are a couple of things about the Indonesian region of Aceh that are important to keep in mind:

1. It fought a long war of resistance against the central government in Jakarta from 1970-2005.
2. A tsunami hit on December 26, 2004 which killed over 170,000 and left over half a million homeless.