

Chinese New Year: Should we politicize heritage?

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Chinese New Year which falls on Monday, Jan. 26, has been a national holiday since 2003. The euphoria that ensued after the important holiday gained official status, particularly among Indonesians of Chinese descent, was well founded.

Public expression of Chinese culture had been denied for more than three decades under Soeharto's rule.

After Soeharto requested in 1967 that expressions of Chinese culture be limited, his subordinates interpreted his appeal as instructions to ban everything Chinese. This amounted to cultural genocide since the generation of Chinese Indonesians born after 1967 have been alienated from their own culture. Even Chinese characters are unrecognizable to many of them.

Chinese schools were closed, Chinese characters were banned. The lion and dragon dances went on a long hiatus.

Young Chinese became equally ignorant of Chinese songs as broadcasting them in the radio became illegal. Only after Soeharto fell from grace in 1998 did things begin to turn around.

Many Chinese Indonesians have spent the last 10 years scaling a steep relearning curve. Others remain indifferent to a culture they have learned to keep at arm's length.

Were Soeharto alive today he might have gnashed his teeth to see the 1,000 Chinese flowers blooming, of a different sort. Language schools have blossomed, songs and programs in Chinese are broadcast on radio and television and Chinese MCs and celebrities have taken center stage.

Had he strolled through Jakarta's posh commercial district in Kuningan, home to the offices of foreign envoys, he would be surprised to see the Chinese embassy there. The older building in Chinatown closed down in 1967.

The young army general came to the fore when the world was embroiled in the Cold War.

Backstopped by Western governments, particularly the United States, Soeharto's policies mirrored the conflict between capitalism and communism.

Chances were, any leader emerging under such circumstances would have leaned on one or the other of the two belligerents.

Seven years after Megawati Soekarnoputri made it a public holiday in 2002 through a presidential decree, it may be timely to ask ourselves if her decision was sensible. It is less an effort to ask for its revocation than to consider carefully whether the decision was made on a solid foundation.

If the basis for the decree was cultural, then Imlek - as it is known locally - had been celebrated in the past by a cross-section of the society. Why single out Chinese culture over Batak, Javanese, Papua or the hundreds of other cultures resident in Indonesia? We may as well include Diwali for Indians, Hannukah or Yom Kippur for Jews, or others.

Does every cultural group have the right to a public holiday in a democracy?

If the national holiday is based on religion, the usual assumption is that Confucianism should determine its day, since a goodly portion of the 10-odd million Chinese Indonesians are Confucianists. However, some consider it merely as a set of teachings, though it is recognized as one of the six government-sanctioned religions.

Based on the lunar calendar, Chinese New Year is used by Chinese farmers to arrange their planting season. So to say that religion is the basis of the decree also misses the mark.

Proponents of the national holiday like to say the official holiday serves as a sort of glue to unite people.

They, too, stand on shaky ground. How could a pluralist and democratic society predate modern Indonesia?

There are lessons to learn from the past as far as unity is concerned. People from different ethnic and faith groups used to live in harmony in a democratic society. Ancient buildings, including mosques, temples and churches across the country are testaments to it.

Megawati's years were marked by the postdictatorship crisis. More urgent matters awaited her.

Megawati could have channeled more energy towards them rather than dwelling on matters such as public holidays. Her laundry list was exhaustive: solving the economic crisis, punishing corrupt business and political leaders, upholding justice and overhauling the legislature.

Megawati's presidential decree came on the heels of her predecessor Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid's term. He had begun to allow the Chinese to celebrate their culture publicly in 2001, thus canceling out Soeharto's presidential instruction 14/1967 in one stroke.

Gus Dur held the holiday should be optional. Those who celebrated it could take the holiday.

Looking back, Gus Dur's decision to make Chinese New Year an optional holiday seems sounder than Megawati's. The latter could have just left it that way. Indonesia should allow every ethnic group to celebrate their cultural traditions, as they have in the past. There is no need to politicize it.