

JOHANNES PIETER PRONK  
POLITICIAN, DIPLOMAT, ACADEMIC

# RECONCILIATION KEEPS A NATION TOGETHER

**T**HE heat did not seem to bother Johannes 'Jan' Pronk, 75, even though it has been 13 years since he last visited Indonesia. Perhaps it was a residue from the past, when he frequently travelled to Indonesia in his capacity as the Netherlands' foreign minister and the UN's special envoy, and when he got acclimatized to the tropical, humid heat.

The bespectacled Pronk fits the description of a professor, rather than a politician and a diplomat of his yesteryears, given his current job as visiting professor at the United Nations University of Peace in Costa Rica and a lecturer at Amsterdam University College in the Netherlands.

But until 2013, Pronk was an active member of the Labor Party, serving three terms as minister of foreign economic cooperation and one term as minister of housing and the

environment. From 1973 to 1992, Pronk was chairman of the Intergovernmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI), set up by the United States in 1967 to coordinate multilateral aid to Indonesia.

The IGGI was abruptly disbanded in 1992 because of Indonesia's strained relationship with the Netherlands and Pronk's strong stance against alleged human rights violations committed during the Suharto regime. "President Suharto said (at that time) I was *persona non grata*," he said.

To this day, he remains an ardent supporter of human rights and he was in Jakarta last week to deliver a lecture on precisely that topic at the Yap Thian Hiem Human Rights Lecture Series. Pronk spoke to *Tempo* journalists Cheta Nilawaty, Gustidha Budiartie, Dwi Wiyana and Amanda Siddharta. Excerpts:

## How involved were you in Indonesian politics?

I was very much involved in Indonesian affairs as a Dutch politician from 1971 to 1992. I had many contacts, with political leaders, from presidents to ministers, as well as with journalists and NGOs. This is my first visit to Indonesia since 2002, and before that I hadn't been here since 1992. In 2002, I came back as the special envoy for UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He asked me to go around the world to meet presidents and prime ministers, to invite them for the UN conference on development in Johannesburg. I had a discussion with the president (Megawati Sukarnoputri) at the time, inviting her to come to the conference.

**In 1991, as chairman of the IGGI, you criticized the Indonesian government over its human rights record.**

In November 1991, there was a massacre

in East Timor. At that time, it was occupied by Indonesia. Now it's independent. The Indonesian military killed many people. Nobody knows exactly how many. People in East Timor said more than 400, here (in Indonesia) they said around 40. But anyway, those people were killed. They were just unarmed students, who ran away to the cemetery. This led to an outcry around the world. But Indonesia has given East Timor its independence, which is an important step forward.

## Are you saying Indonesia has improved its human rights record?

Indonesia has made laudable progress. But definitely there are still human rights violation and problems in Papua. I hope in Indonesia itself, there are people who can speak freely about human rights violations so that you can have discussions, among people who consider themselves victims, activists and lawyers. Yap Thian Hiem was

an example of a human rights lawyer and activist who was not only speaking for his own group, the Chinese minority. He was harassed, because in Indonesia at that time if the government didn't like what you were saying, they said you were a communist and that was risky. Nowadays, human rights activists and lawyers don't have to be afraid in this country. They can speak, discuss and raise issues. To that extent, the record is better now than in the past, and Indonesia is in a better situation than some countries in the Middle East, such as Turkey or Syria.

## What kind of reconciliation should there be after the massive human rights violation of 1965?

I think it's not up to me to say how reconciliation should take place. It's necessary in all countries where things like this happened. For example, in Rwanda, where about one million people were killed. They



went for reconciliation under the leadership of a new government, which is based on the Tutsi, who were the massacred people. Then they put 200,000 people in jail. If 200,000 people murdered 2 million people, that means each person killed 10 people. That's unbelievable. How can you heal and reconcile a society? But (the Rwandans) did it, using their own system of traditional African justice.

**How did they do that?**

They didn't go after revenge, although some people were jailed, so they organized a system of village courts. This was because there were no official judges anymore, they had all been massacred. In these village courts, the victims told their story and the perpetrators had to listen. Yet, there was no capital punishment, no death penalty. And then they started to reconcile, they called it the healing of society. Of course, it's traumatic if you had to live together in a village or on a hill with the people who killed your father or your son. But they found their way. I'm telling this story because it was totally non-western and that certainly helped.

**But there are some who oppose the idea of reconciliation. How should we deal with this?**

Your nation consists of different groups. That's the diversity; it's multi-cultural and multi-religious. Every nation is bound to have conflicts between groups. The important thing is that the conflict does not escalate into violence. As soon as it escalates into violence, the situation gets out of control and becomes a threat to the nation's sustainability. So you have to do two things. First, you must prevent new escalation from turning into violence. Secondly, you have to proactively (bring) justice to victims of the past violation, otherwise, it will be a source of revenge. And it's ethical, because they are victims, and it's rational, if you really want sustainability for the country. Then you really must go for reconciliation. I don't think I can say more about it, reconciliation is intended to keep a nation together.

**Speaking of human rights, we still practice capital punishment. What do you think of this?**

Again, you're asking a question to someone who's not an Indonesian. I will not judge Indonesia, I will speak about the death penalty as such. I will speak in Padang about this and the title of my address is a quote from the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon. He said, "there's no place for death penalty in the 21st century." He's not speak-

**JOHANNES PIETER PRONK**

**PLACE & DATE OF BIRTH:**  
Scheveningen, Netherlands-March 16,1940

- CAREER:**
- Lecturer of Economics, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (1957-1971)
  - Member, Dutch Parliament from the Labor Party (1971-1973, 1978-1980, 1986-1989)
  - Minister for Foreign Economic Cooperation (1973-1977, 1989-1998)
  - Professor, Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague (1978-1980)
  - Deputy Secretary-General UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD-1980-1986)
  - Professor, Theory and Practice of Policy Making, University of Amsterdam (1988-1989)
  - Defence Ministry Expert Staff (1992)
  - Minister for the Environment and Housing (1998-2002)
  - Lecturer, Amsterdam University College, Amsterdam, (2013-to date)

- Latest Organizational Affiliations**
- Chairman, Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) (1973-1977 and 1989-1992)
  - Member, Independent Commission on International Commission on Global Governance (Carlson/Ramphal Commission, 1991-1995)
  - Co-Chairman, Global Coalition for Africa (1991-1998)
  - Member, Independent Commission on Population and the Quality of Life (1994-1996)
  - Chairman, 6th Conference of Parties UN Convention on Climate Change (2000-2001)
  - Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2001-2003)
  - Chairman, Board of International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), London (2002-2004)
  - Chairman, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, Geneva (2003-2004)

- Recent Awards**
- Defender of Democracy Award, Parliamentarians for Global Action (1997)
  - Officier Legion d'Honneur, France (2001)
  - Dr Honoris Causa Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands (2002)
  - Officier Orde van Oranje Nassau, The Netherlands (2002)
  - Global Environment Award, International Association for Impact Assessment (2002)



ing about Indonesia alone, he's speaking about the world. I strongly believe in this.

**How many countries have eradicated the death penalty?**

We created a universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. In 1966, on the basis of that declaration, we created two covenants, one on civil and political human rights, and the other on economic-related human rights. That is an optional protocol which has been ratified by 81 countries. We have 193 countries in the world. The secretary-general asked that a report on the use of the death penalty around the world be carried out annually. According to the latest report, there are 160 countries which no longer apply the death penalty. You may say 81 have ratified, and 79 have not but they don't carry out the death penalty. But Indonesia still does, so you're part of the

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33. Now, it's up to you to make your own decision, I hope you will definitely move to the 160.

**And the Dutch have totally abolished it?**

We abolished the death penalty in 1870 in the Netherlands. However, we were the colonizers of Indonesia, and yet we did not abolish it in Indonesia. The politicians at the time said, the Dutch East Indies people were not yet ready. They had a different, a lower (concept of) civilization. It went on until the 1940s and dozens of Indonesians got the death penalty. Many were completely innocent, because the Dutch judges often had no legal background, they were only administrators. So we should be ashamed.

**The paper you wrote also criticized the Dutch government on their stance on human rights violations in Indonesia.**

Every nation has conflicts between groups. The important thing is that the conflict does not escalate into violence, causing the situation to get out of control and a threat to sustainability.

I've made it clear in my (paper) that in my view, the Dutch carried out so many atrocities during colonial times and during the liberation war in Indonesia. The Dutch should be modest. What happened in the 1960s was awful, so many people were killed. But the Dutch should not judge without judging themselves, I made that clear.

**You also said that relations between the Netherlands and Indonesia were strained until the Suharto regime and that it was wrong.**

The Dutch saw the first president, Sukarno, as an enemy because he was the leader of decolonization. Then all of a sudden, we started to embrace the new Indonesia, the New Order, which was based on, let's face it, human rights violations. All of a sudden we started new economic relations. In my view that was wrong relations. Of course, you need relations, but you need to speak out about human rights violation at the same time. And that was what the Dutch government failed to do. We were only able to do something when we changed government in 1973, when I became minister at the time. And then we combined economic cooperation with discussions about human rights and we were able to find a balance.

**But despite our human rights record, you say we have a strong economy.**

(Indonesia) always went with rural development, like food security. You didn't have hunger in Indonesia during the 1998 crisis. You had a good agricultural policy. I had many discussions with people at Bulog (the state logistics bureau) at the time. There was a crisis and you took care of the underclass. It was the best result from the economic policies of economists like Prof. Widjojo, Emil Salim, Ali Wardhana and others. They did a good job. They helped Indonesia to stay together. Many other countries, although they didn't fall apart, had problems because of this.

**But today there's another economic crisis, and inequality is rising.**

Now you have growing inequality because you're becoming a capitalist country. This is never a positive thing for the poor people and you have to be careful that poverty will not be concentrated in specific areas and groups of the country. It becomes a threat to economic stability. You must take care of that, aim to eradicate poverty so you have less inequality. The most important advice that I can give to all developing countries is: invest in your poor people. Don't believe that economic growth trickles down, because growth does not equate welfare. ●