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A Wall Is Just a Wall, It Can Be Destroyed

Jungkir Maruta

25th August 2023

Serikat Tahanan, is an anti-authoritarian prisoners association, organising both inside and outside of eleven different prisons across Indonesia. They have worked to reach out to fellow convicted anti-authoritarian activists to advocate and educate the public about prison conditions in Indonesia. *"By organizing in Serikat Tahanan, we are constantly reminded why we started our fight. Our long term agenda is to abolish prison."* The comrades have decided to collect their writings in a publication and have launched a firefund campaign to cover expenses. In solidarity and support, we share one piece from the coming publication.

Untill All Are Free.

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We know that throughout history, various prisons around the world have experienced riots and uprisings. But this is an almost rare occurrence. Prisoners had to live for years in the

same gloomy room and were thus considered passive subjects. How do we define a resistance where we can almost only rely on ourselves, in a space that is almost isolated and full of pressure, which offers almost no opportunity to organize, such as a prison?

Walls are just walls, and humans are only humans. Even prisons and their guards have weaknesses, and prisoners do their best to exploit those weaknesses whenever the opportunity arises. In Indonesia, smuggling and bribery of corrupt wardens is common. The existence of prohibited objects in prisons in Indonesia has been well documented in many mass media reports. These range from drugs, cell phones, sharp weapons, and even firearms! I've also heard of prisoners paying to take women in or even out of jail for a while.

But all the examples above are privileges (usually corruption prisoners consist of politicians and government officials) that most other convicts do not have. To overcome various limitations and powerlessness, rule violations and sabotage also often occur. Failing to control the spread of cellphones, jammers were occasionally installed, but prisoners continued to destroy them secretly. This also includes destroying CCTV, stealing cooking utensils and office equipment, shoplifting food from the kitchen and then reselling it, to manipulating daily inspection.

Clichés like, “rules are made only to be broken,” hold true here. Article 4 of Permenkumham 6/2013 describes 22 prohibitions for each convict or detainee. Such as: having financial relationships with other prisoners or wardens; commit immoral and homosexual acts; make an escape attempt; keeping money illegally; equip residential rooms with electronic equipment; installing electrical installations; have means of communication; storing weapons and tools that can cause fire; etc. Throughout my experience, none (except the spread of heretical teachings) of the 22 points of the prohibition that has never been violated.

Defiance persists all the time and compromises are often maintained by wardens based on their own interests.

Resistance also occurs in a form that is not at all confrontational, or in a very passive way. This is for example by pretending not to hear calls or orders, or pretending not to see officers present. Prison life is, in places, like a cat and mouse hide and seek. There are those who gamble, get tattoos, take drugs, use cellphones, all of these need protection so there are always inmates assigned as spies to raise an alarm if a guard approaches. In the police cell where we were locked up the whole time, we used a mirror to see through the bars. We took turns monitoring using mirrors, and the prisoners on duty we called "spies".

At regular inspections, we several times presented rhymes (in Indonesia we call it "pantun") as a more creative and fun way to criticize, convey aspirations and complaints, or simply as a statement so that detainees must be in solidarity with one another. One of the rhymes that I wrote criticized extortion. One time, the food provided by the family was not delivered to the detainee in question. The food (something of value!), was only handed over if we paid the police. Therefore, in front of the police at the assembly, I read a short rhyme:

Tulang iga tulang rusuk / Kiriman kita dilarang masuk [Rib ribs / Our shipment is prohibited from entering]

Or, there has also been a rhyme to honor prisoners assistant (tamping):

Makan emping di empang / Tanpa tamping kami timpang [Eating emping in a pond / Without tamping we are lame]

Sometimes, the rhyme that I convey is just an outpouring of the heart:

Batuk-batuk, makan gorengan / Aku berdoa untuk, dia yang kurindukan [Coughing, eating fried food / I pray for him, the one I miss]

The prisoners (including the police) loved to listen to me. They often ask if I have prepared rhymes beforehand. And

sometimes the police also reply to our rhymes, because I'm not the only one who composes rhymes.

From police custody, I was transferred to a detention center. There, we had to spend 12 days in quarantine in very dirty cells, full of garbage, clogged toilets, full of worms, centipedes, cockroaches and other insects, without lights and water. One night, it rained. I woke up and realized that our cell had become a pool, my body soaked in the flood. To be able to move to a bigger and cleaner room, we have to pay around IDR 500 thousand. If on the last day we don't pay, then we will be moved to the solitary confinement which is meant for punishment. This is blackmail!

Therefore, I invited dozens of inmates in five other quarantine cells to join the pay strike. I wrote a letter for a senior inmate to read. I wrote:

Please read this letter in each cell and take turns until quarantine cell number 6. Make sure all detainees know the contents of this letter. We propose that we all go on strike to pay the relocation fee. It's not our obligation, but illegal fees from employees. We received news that the relocation money was IDR 500,000. If we don't pay, we will be moved to the solitary confinement next door. We have a friend next door, who has been in a solitary confinement for a month because he can't afford to pay the bills. If we all went on strike, the wardens would be confused, whether we were immediately kicked out without paying or whether we were moved to a solitary confinement. It's possible we're all being held in quarantine cells. We have to endure three more days here, until new prisoners are transferred here. Because the transfer of prisoners takes place every two weeks. This will make the warden confused to decide whether we are all put in the cell straps or stacked with new prisoners. If we are united, we will all be expelled without having to pay. Remember, our families outside are working hard to make money. Later in the room, we also have to pay the head of the room, the down payment, not to mention his living expenses. If we still don't get kicked out without paying, at

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least, we demand that the relocation fee be reduced. Remember, ants don't bite ants. Ant just bite anyone who steps on them. Ants bite rollicking. Arrive at cell 6, please burn this letter. Don't let any prisoner be accused of being a provocateur. For those who agree, let's discuss it tonight.

The senior prisoner agreed, though he said he'd rather be here than be moved to the big room. I don't know why. But the letter was not read and he told me to keep the letter. He himself loudly incited prisoners from other cells to strike. Many agreed, but on the twelfth day, it turned out that many prisoners had already paid because they could not stand the suffering in the quarantine cells. Unbeknownst to me, my lawyer had paid the warden money to get us out of the quarantine cell. I am so ashamed. Imagine, I was the one calling the strike but instead I was get out. My name was called, and I could only watch as the other hapless prisoners, including the senior inmate who couldn't afford to pay, had to stay in that damned cell a little longer. Later, I can understand why he prefers to stay in quarantine: residential rooms are no less terrible and corrupt. Although the quarantine cells are terrible, at least there is no need to pay!

When I was transferred to prison, I opened a food stall. I sell coffee, cigarettes, bread, instant noodles, and many other staples in the room. One day, all the inmates who were selling were gathered by the warden. They asked that all stalls be closed, except for those who were willing to pay a deposit of IDR 5 million to the "prison cooperative". Even so, the inmates are asked to pay an upfront fee of IDR 500 thousand, not to mention a monthly fee of IDR 250 thousand.

In the past, before there were cooperatives, inmates could receive large quantities of staple goods (eg instant noodles). As a result, the prison in my place is said to be like a bustling market, because many prisoners resell their family's goods. Currently, the number of family goods is limited, so prisoner must buy from the cooperative at a higher price. One day, the war-

den intercepted a prisoner who was caught selling repackaged side dishes sent by the family, because the wardens are involved in the business of selling food and trying to maintain a monopoly by the cooperative.

I resisted such extortion and kept selling secretly. I camouflaged the stall by scattering items into different lockers. If during a raid these items are found, then the locker owners just have to admit the items as their own. This is a black market strategy to oppose monopoly by cooperatives and wardens. A few weeks after the we were called, the wardens also diligently raided the rooms and confiscated several of the shop's items, such as bread. At that time I swore an oath in front of the other inmates, that I would fight back if my shop's goods were confiscated (Luckily, that didn't happen).

If this sounds trivial, I need to remind you that instant noodles can be a luxury item in prison. Especially if the side dishes we receive are half-cooked rice, sandy and rocky, fish with a pungent fishy smell, and vegetables accompanied by caterpillars. Trust me, I've eaten all of that before and I'm not exaggerating. But from that experience, there is a lesson that I can learn, or rather, contemplation about our condition today. If instant noodles traded by a confiscated convict provoked outrage, I can't imagine what would happen if I became a farmer and my land was confiscated. In fact, that is what is happening today in all corners of Indonesia. I was even in the same cell with a farmer who was criminalized in a conflict against a plantation company. He was deeply moved when I handed him the memoirs of *Nirbaya* prison by Indonesian journalist Mochtar Lubis, because when he read it, he felt the same sentiments as the author who was being imprisoned by Indonesia's authoritarian New Order regime.

Our imagination of resistance invariably leads to spectacular and dramatic forms of popular confrontation, often on a massive scale, whether spontaneous or organized. I suggest that we also see resistance from the very bottom of our being.

In a place where isolation and communication restrictions are enforced, staying connected to the outside world is a struggle. Facing institutions of discipline, obedience and supposedly the creators of this deterrent effect, just being yourself is resistance. In a gloomy situation that drags you into a slump, maintaining vitality and being an example is resistance. In the end, I realized that if the prison was basically trying to negate my existence, asserting that I "existed" was simply resistance. If everything is forbidden, then everything becomes resistance.

I know what I'm telling you sounds heroic. Of course. But I also don't care and don't try to act big. I want to share my story and hope this will inspire more people to realize his capacity for resistance in the context of their own struggles. Don't mistake me for a staunch and fiery rebel either. Actually I'm not brave. It would be more accurate to call me reckless. Reckless means knowing he is weak, afraid and will not win, but decides to keep going. I mustered up the courage with difficulty. Apart from that, I also tend to be introverted, quiet, and limit my relationships with other inmates. Most of the time, I was obedient and smiled broadly at the wardens. I never put on a defiant face.

If at any time I have to act, it must be an important and urgent situation. In something worth fighting for, I'm ready to rebel against the warden. Don't worry, I've set limits. I'm also not going to go too far, taking unnecessary risks. I've repeatedly made fatal mistakes, so I'm more careful. I always keep Alexander Brener's message in mind:

I promise to be sober and cunning, agile and dangerous. I promise to act in such a way that you can neither drown me nor surround me with silence. I promise to fight you intelligently and vigilantly, carefully and calmly, so as to strike you gently and forcefully, wherever I can, as long as I have enough strength, even if there is no future in it.

Written with all my heart