

## Against State Straightism: Five Principles for Including LGBT Indonesians

[Tom Boellstorff](#), Mar 21 2016, 797 views



Image by Matt Buck

### **Indonesia and the Threat of Intolerance**

Indonesia is under threat—the threat of intolerance and oppression with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity. Whether we are Indonesian or not, it is imperative to denounce this intolerance, stand with Indonesians who challenge it, and envision a world where who you love, or the gender with which you identify, does not affect your status as a full member of civil society. It is no hyperbole to say that Indonesia’s future as a democracy is at stake, not least because around the world, anti-LGBT oppression often builds on (and links to) other forms of discrimination. In the case of Indonesia, this includes continuing forms of marginalization, intolerance, and violence against many regions of the archipelago (for instance, Papua), as well as against many groups—including workers, peasants, women, and the urban poor—which themselves have LGBT persons among them.

This article responds to an unprecedented series of “anti-LGBT” statements and actions by some Indonesian government officials, politicians, and social organizations. I will also use this acronym “LGBT,” with the understanding that it refers to a range of identities including *gay*, *lesbi* (or *lesbian*), *tomboi* (or *priawan*, or *laki-laki trans*; very roughly, female to male transgendered persons), and *waria* (very roughly, male to female transgendered persons). The analysis is based on my experience as an anthropologist who first visited Indonesia in 1992 and who has conducted extensive research on the lives of LGBT Indonesians; I also draw on

the work of my colleagues (see, for instance, Bennett and Davies 2014; Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005a, 2007, 2014; Davies 2007, 2016; Murtagh 2013; Oetomo 2001; Suryakusuma 2004; Wieringa 2002; Yulius 2015).

Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation (after China, India, and the United States) and home to more Muslims than any other country, has a geopolitical significance that cannot be overstated. No future vision of our international order can ignore this massive archipelago, which includes a dizzying array of local cultures, a vibrant national culture, and multiple links to global cultures and movements.

It is striking that as the anti-LGBT incidents discussed below were taking place, far more media coverage around the world was directed to the boxer (and Senate candidate) Manny Pacquiao in the Philippines. But while Pacquiao's comparison of LGBT people to animals was terrible, it was an individual statement that did not change policies or laws. Furthermore, he [lost a lucrative sponsorship from Nike](#) due to his comments, and later [apologized](#) for what he had said. In comparison, in Indonesia we find not just anti-LGBT comments but polices, threats, and actions; furthermore, there has been little in the way of apology, and little condemnation outside [LGBT](#) and [human rights circles](#). This reflects the lack of attention paid to Indonesia by the world community, and the urgent need to speak out against this blatant discrimination.

Below, I review some key anti-LGBT incidents in Indonesia which occurred in early 2016, and then discuss what is different about these incidents compared to other events in the past. After that, in service of a framework for addressing these incidents, I introduce my concept of "State Straightism." Finally, I set forth five principles that respond to these incidents and their broader implications.

### **The Real "LGBT Crisis"**

As noted by international media including [Foreign Policy](#) and the [New York Times](#), from late January 2016 through to March 2016, a series of anti-LGBT incidents took place, the scope of which has no precedent in Indonesian history. The very existence of LGBT Indonesians has been termed a "#DaruratLGBT" ("LGBT Crisis") on Indonesian social media, but these anti-LGBT incidents are the real "LGBT crisis" facing the archipelago. They have taken place so quickly and in such great number that I make no claim to providing a comprehensive summary, but the basic outline seems clear.

It apparently began with something small: on January 24, 2016, Muhammad Nasir, the Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education, responded to the [dissemination of a brochure](#) for a "LGBT Peer Support Network" at the University of Indonesia by stating that LGBT individuals should be [barred from university campuses](#). For a high-ranking government official to challenge a student brochure was unusual, but even stranger was that this same day the head of the People's Consultative Assembly, the highest legislative body in the nation, claimed in support of Nasir that "LGBT [must be banned](#) because it does not fit with Indonesian culture." Nearly at the same time, the newspaper *Republika* published a story "[LGBT is a Serious Threat](#)" that included interviews with political figures. This newspaper (and others) followed with many more anti-LGBT stories, often linked to the shocking series of events that followed the "brochure incident":

On February 7, an HIV/AIDS prevention awareness event to take place in the city of Surabaya, organized by the nonprofit group *Gue Berani* (I'm Brave) [was cancelled](#) after being condemned by Soekarwo, the governor of East Java province.

On February 11, the Information and Communication Ministry [demanded](#) that social media and instant messaging apps for smartphones [remove any emoji](#) that [showed same-sex](#) couples. Some companies complied—notably the messaging app LINE, which [deleted](#) such emojis from their Indonesian service. Public figures, including the well-known cleric Abdullah Gymnastiar, [supported](#) this action.

On February 15, Vice President Jusuf Kalla [requested](#) the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) not fund LGBT community programs. Even though the UNDP is [not currently supporting](#) any such programs, this demand is frightening because LGBT organizations have a difficult time securing support from within Indonesia.

On February 17, the Indonesian Ulema Council, a major Muslim clerical organization, [called for legislation](#) that would [criminalize “LGBT activities and campaigns.”](#) Other Islamic [organizations](#) made public [pronouncements](#) sharing these anti-LGBT sentiments.

On February 23, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission [banned](#) male effeminacy from all television shows. The terms used in the official document were that men (*pria*) cannot appear with *gaya berpakaian kewanitaan* (feminine dress), *riasan kewanitaan* (makeup), effeminate gestures or movements (*bahasa tubuh kewanitaan*), or an effeminate way of speaking (*gaya bicara kewanitaan*). The prohibition also extended to using “terms often used among effeminate men” (*itilah dan ungkapan khas yang sering dipergunakan kalangan pria kewanitaan*); this is an indirect reference to gay slang (*bahasa gay*). The edict was supported by [psychologists](#) who claimed it would lead to children engaging in “sexual deviancy,” often using the derogatory phrase *kebanci-bancian* (roughly, “sissy-ness,” but even more negative). Many [legislators](#), [state bureaucracies](#), [nongovernmental](#) organizations (including at least one [ostensibly feminist organization](#)), and [even celebrities publicly](#) supported the edict. On March 4, the Communications and Information Ministry announced it would [draft a bill](#) to ban websites that “promote LGBT propaganda,” in effect extending the anti-LGBT communication policies from television [to the internet](#) and threatening the online presence of Indonesian LGBT organizations, many of whom have no physical office space of their own. Also on February 23, Indonesia’s Defense Minister referred to the LGBT movement as [worse than nuclear warfare](#), adding that one danger was “we can’t see who our foes are.” On February 27, he repeated this statement, emphasizing that LGBT Indonesians “do not fit the national character.”

On February 24, after several days of increasing anti-LGBT agitation in Yogyakarta, a meeting was held between members of the FPI (the *Front Pembela Islam* or “Islamic Defenders Front,” a right-wing Islamic group that has often resorted to violence), local figures including the chief of police, and leadership of Al-Fatah, an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) for *warias*, about 40 of whom were enrolled at the time. Al-Fatah, which had been open since 2008, [received international attention](#) as one of the only institutions of Islamic education for homosexual or transgender Muslims worldwide. The local leaders supported the FPI’s contention that the boarding school was a “disturbance,” and the next day [Al-Fatah was shut down](#).

Also on February 24, the Indonesian Psychiatrists Association (*Perhimpunan Dokter Spesialis Kedokteran Jiwa Indonesia*) announced it would [classify](#) homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism as treatable mental disorders. By 1993, the Indonesian Ministry of Health's Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Classification of Mental Disorders "made no mention of homosexuality except in a brief note stating that it is part of the diversity of human sexuality" (UNDP 2014:24), though "gender identity disorder" did appear. The decision to classify homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism as treatable mental disorders was justified in terms of a 2014 law on mental health, but that law only referred in general terms of "people with psychiatric problems" and "mental disorders." Placing LGBT Indonesians in these categories based merely on their sexual orientation and gender identity could have implications far beyond the medical domain. Despite psychiatric bodies around the world [protesting](#) this decision, as of the time I write this article there has been no retreat from the reclassification; in fact, there has already been talk of encouraging "conversion therapy." On February 26, a general in the Indonesian army [stated](#) that LGBT Indonesians could not become soldiers.

On February 27, Hidayat Nur Wahid, Vice Chairman of the Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia, [called for legislation](#) criminalizing LGBT Indonesians, echoing a proposal made by the PKS party a few days earlier. At least three [other](#) political parties supported this proposal, in one case [comparing](#) the banning of LGBT to the banning of communism and drug trafficking. The mayor of Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province, stated [she would form a "special team"](#) to respond to the "LGBT problem."

### What is Different?

I do not claim that this chronology includes every anti-LGBT event in early 2016, and new incidents continue to occur. I obviously hope such incidents subside, but write assuming they will not, at least in the near term.

There have been welcome cases of public figures condemning these events and [calling for tolerance](#). For instance, the [mayor of Bandung ordered](#) the FPI to remove anti-LGBT banners posted around the city. Some journalists and scholars pointed out the [misunderstanding](#) and misrepresentation behind the anti-LGBT incidents, or emphasized the [history](#) of homosexuality and transgenderism in the archipelago. In solidarity with these voices of inclusion, I seek to help explain the current situation—but my real goal is to provide conceptual tools to respond to what might happen in the future.

Why these anti-LGBT incidents—with a breadth and severity unparalleled in Indonesian history? Why now? Answers to these questions are unclear. One of the [best early analyses](#) speculated that a sensitive debate over revising (and weakening) the national Corruption Eradication Commission might play a role (Croft-Cusoworth, 2016) noting that

"Last year, when the [Commission's] integrity was similarly threatened... local media was gripped by another 'crisis' that seemingly escalated from nowhere: the so-called '[drug crisis](#)' which led to the execution of 14 drug convicts... As with the 'drug crisis,' the 'LGBT crisis' has been mainly fanned by incendiary comments made by public figures in the media, rather than caused by actual events".

This sensible explanation leads us to ask what broader context created the conditions enabling LGBT Indonesians to emerge as a legible target. One insufficient answer is hardline Islam. It is true that many of the most strident anti-LGBT pronouncements have come from Islamic organizations and more thuggish groups like the FPI, and the closure of the Al-Fatah Islamic boarding school has been one of the most tragic outcomes of these events. Yet while discussions of sexual diversity with regard to Islam clearly should continue, an explanation solely in terms of Islam is unsustainable. Many Muslims have spoken eloquently against anti-LGBT acts. Nor are these acts limited to any one religion: a precursor to the wave of anti-LGBT discussed in this article was the [prosecution of a sales executive](#) at the Four Seasons in predominantly Hindu Bali, for [allowing a same-sex commitment ceremony](#) to take place at the hotel. Furthermore, even when Islamic groups have participated in anti-LGBT rhetoric, a language of sin has been relatively muted. Some of these participants have reminded us that they see homosexuality as incompatible with their faith, and have even suggested piety (or [immersion in hot water!](#)) as a “cure.” But the sense of panic is overwhelmingly framed not in terms of souls that need of saving, but in terms of sex aggressors threatening the nation.

Sex panics have long been documented worldwide, including the contemporary period (Amar 2013; Lancaster 2011). Indeed, the “LGBT crisis” is taking place in the context of a broader sex panic in Indonesia. This dates back at least to the anti-pornography law (*RUU/UU Pornografi*) debates beginning in 2006 (Bellows 2011) and has more recently included the [razing](#) of entire heterosexual red-light districts. But not only was there no sudden increase in visible LGBT sexuality in 2016; those involved in anti-LGBT incidents seem never to have claimed this was so. Instead, as [others have noted](#), the overwhelming pattern was to claim a threatening LGBT “movement,” one both hidden and openly [“campaigning.”](#) The claim is laughable because despite the heroic work of many dedicated activists, Indonesian LGBT organizations remain small and underfunded; they mostly work in the domains of entertainment and public health rather than advocacy or visibility, much less politics. The claim becomes much less laughable when we recall that the notion of hidden or formless organizations (*organisasi tanpa bentuk*) was used during the “New Order” dictatorship of Soeharto (1965-1998) to justify the marginalization, incarceration, and murder of “communists” real or imagined. The fact that alleged drug dealers were executed during the “crisis” of 2015 is cause for even greater concern.

So if the “crisis” is perceived to be about LGBT organizations and movements, not sexual acts and identities in themselves, what is the ostensible danger? Unsurprisingly, one theme is that LGBT Indonesians threaten children. This tired trope ignores the fact that many children themselves are LGBT, and many LGBT adults are parents. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that if it was so easy to “turn” someone LGBT, the overwhelming heterosexism and gender normativity in Indonesia should safely ensure all children are heterosexual and cisgendered. But bigotry does not require logic: at the same time that claims of a predatory LGBT movement targeting children were circulating, on February 23, 2016 the [mayor](#) of the city of Tangerang claimed that due to their lack of nutrients, powdered milk and [instant noodles](#) were leading to children becoming LGBT. The fact that this spurious biological explanation contradicts an equally spurious sexual predator explanation of the LGBT “threat” indicates that the concern with children is but a symptom of a deeper anti-LGBT sentiment.

As I noted at the beginning of this article, what makes the current “LGBT crisis” so concerning is the role played by state officials and organizations, and the concomitant threat to implement anti-LGBT policies and laws—a threat that in some cases has been carried out



with astonishing speed. Prior anti-LGBT incidents, like the series of attacks on gay and *waria* events in the late 1990s and the attack leading to the cancellation of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's regional Asian conference in 2010 in Surabaya, were linked to the FPI and similar hardline Islamic groups (see Boellstorff 2004, 2014). The police and local governments did little to stop the intimidation and violence, but they did not actively support it and there was no talk of changing policies or laws. Indeed, the only other rough historical precedent I can recall is a sex panic that consumed the Dutch colonial government in 1938, at the twilight of their rule, when the final viceroy of the Netherlands East Indies instigated a crackdown on "pederasts." But the precedent is only partial, not least because European expatriates were the target—including the crackdown's most famous victim, the German painter Walter Spies, on whose behalf Margaret Mead spoke during his trial in Bali (see Boellstorff 2005a:52–54). In addition, to my knowledge the Dutch crackdown involved the enforcement of existing laws, not the passing of new ones.

The key point is that in the current "LGBT crisis," the state is clearly involved, but in a different way than the anti-LGBT incidents of the last two decades or the late-colonial crackdown. What is this emerging relationship between the Indonesian state and normative sexuality and gender?

### State Straightism

I contend that the "LGBT crisis" is only indirectly about children or Islam. It is really about national belonging, about who will have a place at the table in Indonesia's evolving civil society. If we read what are now hundreds of pages of anti-LGBT statements from the first months of 2016, certain key phrases recur: above all, variations of the claim that being LGBT does not fit "our national culture." When children are mentioned, it is usually as part of a claim that the "[young](#) generation" is at risk of sympathizing with (and thus becoming) LGBT. When Islam (and religion more generally) is mentioned, it is usually as part of a claim that piety is so central to national identity that "LGBT goes against our constitution." (Belief in God is the first of the Pancasila, the five national principles I discuss below, not the constitution.) Rani Kurniati, Public Relations representative for the women's organization GRANITA, February 23, 2016, went so far as to reference Garuda, the mystical bird that serves as a national symbol (not unlike the Bald Eagle in the United States), asking us to "imagine an Indonesia symbolized by Garuda and led by an LGBT person. The bird itself wouldn't know which gender was which." Variations of the phrase "campaign to reject LGBT" (*kampanye menolak LGBT*) increasingly appeared as well. This notion of rejection (*tolak*) is noteworthy because during my fieldwork I found that one of the most common hopes of LGBT Indonesians was the opposite: to be accepted (*diterima*) by the nation.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this fact: the stage on which this anti-LGBT drama is playing out is the nation itself. Despite the many dispatches from various provinces, towns, and even villages, the danger LGBT persons supposedly present is never voiced in terms of traditional culture (*adat*), ethnicity (*suku*), or even region (*daerah*). What is threatened is Indonesia itself—the nation (*negara*), the citizenry (*bangsa*), the young generation. The central finding of my research has been that LGBT persons in this archipelago think of themselves as LGBT *Indonesians*—and secondarily LGBT Javanese, Buginese, Balinese, or any other ethnicity. A consequence of such a framework is that this national LGBT archipelago is seen as one island in a global archipelago of LGBT communities, linked across

lines of sameness and difference. It seems that some elements of mainstream Indonesian national culture have finally caught up—with tragic results.

Indeed, while debates over the Corruption Eradication Commission may play some role in the emergence of the “LGBT crisis,” the rhetoric employed strongly suggests that a more important factor is the spread of marriage equality worldwide. This includes the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015, but also new forms of legal recognition for LGBT persons in nations closer to Indonesia itself (for instance, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam). In March 2016 there were cases of invalidating marriages between men and warias, recalling how one of the key events first launching LGBT Indonesians into the public sphere was the unofficial marriage of two women in Jakarta in 1980. More broadly, the ubiquitous use of “LGBT” itself indicates that the crisis is being expressed nationally with an eye to the transnational. This phrase has historically not been used in Indonesia (it does not appear once in my book *The Gay Archipelago*, published in 2005, precisely because I had never encountered the term in Indonesia to that point).

The use of “LGBT” reveals how an awareness of global advances in rights with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity shapes the sense of “crisis,” making thinkable a future Indonesia that recognizes diverse sexualities and genders. (While LGBT organizations in Indonesia have spoken in favor of marriage equality, they do not have sufficient public visibility to explain the “crisis,” and such organizations did not make any increased or differing statements in early 2016.) Of course, the Indonesian nation-state has been heteronormative and gender normative from the start, as expressed in the family principle (*azas kekeluargaan*) that the nation is composed of families. Historically the state never had occasion to specify that these families are heterosexual, so taken for granted has heterosexuality been. In her classic analysis of these assumptions, Julia Suryakusuma developed the notion of “State Ibuism.” *Ibu* is a formal term for “mother,” and what we could also term “state motherism” is an ideology that “defines women as appendages and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as members of Indonesian society—in that order” (Suryakusuma 1996:101). And already at this point—twenty years before the current “LGBT crisis”—Suryakusuma like many other scholars was noting that “sexual behavior, however bad, is tolerated if kept under wraps, but condemned if it becomes public” (Suryakusuma 1996:101; see also Brenner 1998).

Many maps of Indonesia from the New Order period (and to the present) included images of a man and a woman standing together as a couple in “traditional clothing,” a practice that also appears, for instance, in “traditional clothing of the archipelago” postage stamps. The couples are identified with a province (like South Sulawesi, Bali, or North Sumatra), so “tradition” is in these images linked to modern political boundaries that always include multiple cultural groups. This apparent paradox is acceptable because the real purpose of these images is literally to “embody” the national motto of “unity in diversity” (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*), by safely reducing difference to sartorial form. Each clothing style is different, but what remains the same is the containment of that difference within the heterosexual couple. Heterosexuality unifies the nation. The “LGBT crisis” has rendered explicit this national heteronormativity and gender normativity, with unprecedented vehemence and official imprimatur.

Building on Suryakusuma's notion of "State Ibuism," I term this ideology "State Straightism." (We could also call it "State Heteroism" or "State Heteronormativity": I choose "State Straightism" primarily for the fewest syllables.) State Straightism is an ideology that defines Indonesians as heterosexual and normatively gendered, and thereby excludes LGBT Indonesians from national belonging despite their formal citizenship. Of course, forms of State Straightism exist around the world, including in the United States (see, e.g., Canaday 2003). What is distinctive about State Straightism in Indonesia?

To help answer that question I have used the notion of "political homophobia" (Boellstorff 2004). I developed this concept when seeking to understand what seem to be the first precursors of the "LGBT crisis": an attack in September 1999 against an attempted national meeting of the "Indonesian Lesbian and Gay Network" in Surabaya, and the violent breakup of a gay and *waria* show held near Yogyakarta in November 2000. While "homophobia" and "heterosexism" are sometimes used interchangeably, there is value in distinguishing them. Homophobia refers to a gut-level sense of disgust or repulsion to the presence of homosexuality (often conflated with effeminacy in men and masculinity in women). In contrast, heterosexism refers to a belief or ideology that heterosexuality is the only natural or moral sexuality. So an anti-LGBT law is heterosexist but not homophobic, and the same can be said of the bureaucracy that institutes it.

Around the world, heterosexism can feed homophobia and vice versa. The assumption heterosexuality is superior can shape a climate of violence against LGBT persons, and disgust toward those persons can help enshrine heterosexuality as the norm. But not always: there are well-documented cases of a relative lack of heterosexism even where there is homophobia, and a relative lack of homophobia even where there is heterosexism.

One immediate thing we can do with this more precise analytical lens is note that State Straightism is a form of heterosexism, not homophobia. Even in the context of political heterosexism, violence against LGBT Indonesians in the public sphere has been relatively rare. I coined the term "political homophobia" to identify cases where political heterosexism transforms into homophobia directed at attempts by LGBT persons to claim public space, legal recognition, and social inclusion. Political homophobia entails the addition of violence to what had been laws and policies, and the addition of phobic emotion—anger and disgust—to what had been belief and ideology.

The "anti-LGBT" crisis as it appeared in January and February 2016 remained primarily in the domain of heterosexism. It took the form of a set of statements and actions, from a range of sectors in civil society, that made State Straightism explicit and proposed policies and laws to codify and extend it. All this is cause for concern. What magnifies such concern is that as I noted above, while heterosexism and homophobia are distinct, each can strengthen the other. One key element of that link is when government actions move from statements, policies, and laws to arrests and the closing down of places where LGBT persons meet. This is precisely what happened when on February 22, 2016, there were news reports of [threats to make arrests](#) at an outdoor area in a city near Surabaya frequented by gay men and other men who have sex with men, which included calls for more lighting and other "remodeling" so the area would be less hospitable to such socializing. On March 12, 2016, there was an arrest of eight men at a well-known gay socializing area in Surabaya, complete with approving media coverage. While such police raids on gay socializing areas have taken place in the past, they have been infrequent, and this one occurred in the context of increasing threats of violence



leading LGBT groups to [set up safe houses](#) and avoid going to their modest offices. Harking back to the event that was the ostensible trigger for this “crisis,” scholarly events regarding LGBT issues have been cancelled at several campuses, contributing to a shrinking space discussing these issues.

The “LGBT crisis” is contributing to a suffocating expansion of State Straightism that threatens the position of LGBT Indonesians in that nation’s civil society, and could lead to new forms of pervasive, sanctioned homophobia. This is a betrayal of the dignity and rights of LGBT Indonesians, and a betrayal of the principles of diversity and tolerance on which Indonesia was founded.

### **Conclusion: Five Principles against State Straightism**

While in this article I have not hesitated to emphasize my solidarity with LGBT Indonesians, I am sensitive to the fact that I am not Indonesian myself. Forms of international advocacy are important, but a solution to the “LGBT crisis” is one that Indonesians must find, with the important proviso that LGBT Indonesians are themselves part of the nation and part of the solution. All I can do here is set forth—as tools for discussion—five principles against State Straightism. As I noted earlier, the Pancasila or “Five Principles,” first set out by Sukarno (Indonesia’s first President) in 1945, are important elements of state ideology. I provide five principles in recognition of that ideology, but my “principles” are but tentative points to ponder, in no way authoritative or settled. Given that two of the Pancasila are “a just and civilized humanity” and “social justice for all Indonesians,” these points do, I hope, reflect the best of Indonesia’s rich and inclusive political history.

#### ***First Principle: Homosexuality and Transgenderism Have Been Part of Many Traditions in the Indonesian Archipelago***

As many people have pointed out (including [quite recently](#) in response to anti-LGBT incidents) homosexuality and transgenderism did not suddenly wash up on Indonesia’s shores. They have been part of many local cultures throughout the archipelago, as far back as historical records permit us to see. Much of this was not public—unrecognized romance, love, and desire lost to history—but sometimes homosexuality and transgenderism were formally acknowledged in some fashion. Two well-known examples of this are the *warok-gemblak* relationship from the Ponorogo region in eastern Java, where male actors would sometimes have sexual relations with their male understudies (because sex with women would weaken their mystical power). Another example are *bissus*. In the Bugis culture of southern Sulawesi, *bissus* date to the pre-Islamic era. They guarded the royal regalia and had other mystical powers; most were born as men but dressed as women. So the claim that LGBT is “not part of Indonesian culture” is false.

#### ***Second Principle: LGBT Indonesians Deserve Inclusion Regardless of History***

While important to mention, there is a danger in the first principle. The histories of homosexuality and transgenderism in Indonesia are varied and map poorly onto contemporary LGBT lives. *Warok* and *bissu*, for instance, are professions not sexual identities. They were (and are) only for a select few. They are linked to particular ethnicities and many regions of Indonesia have no analogues. Indeed, in the way of the “LGBT crisis” there have already been cases of using “local tradition” to justify an anti-LGBT stance (for

instance, [in the Riau Islands](#)). Furthermore, many hardline religious movements see superseding “impure” traditional practices as a valued goal. We do not want equality and inclusion in only some parts of Indonesia, or for only a limited few. Your human rights does not depend on your historical pedigree. Even if they have no established past, modern LGBT identities are no less real than any other identity in the archipelago, and persons with those identities are no less Indonesian.

### ***Third Principle: Religion Does Not Justify Oppression***

National culture has been the primary justification for the “LGBT crisis,” but this crisis has been partially voiced in the language of religion as well. Many Indonesians are deeply religious and more than 85% of the population is Muslim. There is, of course, great diversity in religious experience between those who are more secular and those who are more pious, and between different forms of secularism and piety. This diversity includes the presence of Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Protestantism (all recognized by the state alongside Islam), as well as other faiths lacking official recognition. Religion is part of public life in Indonesia as it is around the world, but in the “LGBT crisis” it is often being used to silence debate and limit diversity. However, all religions include forms of diversity and debate, and many LGBT Indonesians are religious. Their experiences, including the complicated experiences of LGBT Muslims, deserve to be acknowledged (Boellstorff 2005b). Many religious Indonesians have advocated for accepting LGBT Indonesians. The “LGBT crisis” is clearly caught up in an important debate regarding the place of religion in Indonesian civil society. LGBT Indonesians do not deserve to be casualties of this broader debate.

### ***Fourth Principle: LGBT Indonesians Do Not Threaten Children***

As noted earlier, alongside religion the other primary issue mixed into the “LGBT crisis” has been the appeal to protect children. For over a century and around the world, the claim that LGBT persons threaten children has been used to justify opposition to LGBT rights (Rubin 1984). In the “LGBT crisis,” there have been some claims that LGBT persons sexually abuse or recruit children, as in the February 18, 2016 arrest of the pop singer Syaiful Jamil, even though the person he was accused of sex with (termed a “boy” (*anak laki-laki*) in some [news coverage](#) of the arrest) was 17 years old. However, the claims have primarily been phrased in terms of a general threat to the “young generation” (the phrase often used, *generasi muda*, recalls the phrase *kaum muda*—roughly, the “young group”—which referred to youth nationalist activists in the late colonial period). Perhaps one reason for the general nature of the “threat” is that no actual crimes are claimed to have taken place: the claim is that the mere existence of LGBT Indonesians, and particularly their public visibility, is threatening to young people. Challenging this falsehood is vital to opening a real dialogue about LGBT Indonesians as valid members of civil society.

### ***Fifth Principle: Indonesia’s Diversity Should Include LGBT***

In December 2015, the ashes of the great political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson were lowered in an urn into the Java Sea. Anderson’s best-known book, *Imagined Communities*, drew on evidence from around the world to explain the origins of modern nationalism (Anderson 1983). But despite his global erudition, Anderson was first and foremost a scholar of Indonesia. His love for the country was beyond dispute, as was his

willingness to challenge intolerance and oppression in the archipelago. Can we imagine Indonesia's national community truly including its LGBT citizens? Anderson's work helps us understand how national cultures share certain features worldwide, despite having distinctive aspects. Indonesia's motto of "Unity in Diversity" certainly reflects global influences; it is nearly identical to the U.S.A.'s own motto *E Pluribus Unum* and similar mottos elsewhere. It fits this incredible archipelago, with its thousands of inhabited islands and hundreds of distinctive local cultures, all linked to a national culture and to a range of transnational influences. Indonesia's diversity has always included LGBT persons. The question is if they can live their lives in the freedom that has been the cry of Indonesian nationalism from its beginnings.

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