



The leap of one generation

INDONESIA RISING:

The nation has witnessed the rise of a new, organic native middle class almost overnight

EVEN while on holiday, I cannot get rid of the academic-researcher in me. During a recent break in Kalimantan, I found myself not only living it rough in the countryside and along river settlements of the province, but was interested to speak with and understand the communities I met there. Living with local families in several villages and towns in south and central Kalimantan, I was fascinated by the social mobility that I

witnessed, thanks to my hosts.

One example stood out in particular, which was the story of a family of three brothers, now in their late 40s, who made it good for themselves. Their life story might seem like the stuff of soap operas or urban legends, but the most amazing thing about it was that it happened to be real and true.

The three of them began from the humblest of beginnings: all had barely managed to finish their mid-level education and none had reached college. In their early 20s, they travelled to Singapore to work as labourers and factory workers, saving as much money as they could as they learned new skills at their workplace. After several years there, they moved to

Johor, where they continued to work as labourers in estates and tried to save money to remit to their families back home.

It was in Malaysia that one of the brothers got his big break: after saving enough, he began working for a dental surgeon who taught him how to make tooth replacements and dentures. Bit by bit, he learned this new skill while saving as much money as he could and, in the process, persuaded his brothers to learn with him. After a decade abroad, they saved enough to return to Indonesia taking home

with them their newly acquired expertise in dental surgery.

Back in south Kalimantan, all three invested their earnings in property and capital for business



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start-ups. All set up their own businesses in the same trade: false teeth and dental repairs. With their capital, expertise and a hefty dose of pluck and bravado, they transformed themselves into newly minted entrepreneurs and successful ones at that. In a space of a decade, all three of them now own two-storey houses, cars, TVs, computers and have sent their children to pursue a higher education. All have also invested in land and moved into the oil palm business.

Amazingly, this transition from labourers to professional businessmen is not a story of generational change from father to son. All three brothers witnessed and experienced these changes in their own lifetimes, a testimony, perhaps, to the speed of social mobility in Indonesia today and of how the country has witnessed the rise of a new, organic native middle class almost overnight. Their stories were not unique, for the same spirit of enterprise and hard work is to be seen all over Kalimantan and the rest of Indonesia, for that matter.

For analysts and political observers of contemporary Indonesia, it has to be remembered that the rising tide of economic nationalism and collective confidence stems from factors like these, multiplied by a factor of several hundred million. The old cliché of Indonesia as a moribund nation stuck in an outdated mode of economic production and with a satisfied and complacent society, is

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now redundant. For Indonesia-watchers like myself, who have been following developments there for the past two decades, no country in the region is as dynamic as that archipelago nation that seems to be poised on the verge of take-off.

Appreciating such local personal stories and understanding how they fit into the wider picture of a rising Indonesia is crucial for us if we are going to comprehend what we are likely to see in our neighbour in the decade to come.