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Non-western theorizing: the challenge of International Relations curriculum in Indonesia

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1 Introduction

What is the issue encountered in the International Relations (IR) curriculum shared across divergent Indonesian higher education institutions? Since the first IR program was formed in 1957 at Gadjah Mada University (Fakih, 2020), a lingering issue persists in the teaching curriculum. That is a dominant, positivist-inspired inquiry in the study of IR. This focuses on constructing empirically verifiable predictions as a methodology, leading to the endorsement of specific epistemological, theoretical, and methodological perspectives to be taught and grasped by students. Consequently, despite the growing number of post-positivist scholarship taught in universities, this still remains a marginalized topic.

In this opinion piece, I argue that only by reflexivity and self-reflection can higher education lecturers in Indonesia be aware of this. Eun (2020) raised this issue in several of his works in 2020 by arguing that academics can realize the severe lack of theoretical diversity in IR teaching if one reflects on what is being taught to students. Recently, Umar (2023) argued that Western IR dominance in Indonesia is due to the naturalized and reproduced institutional practices of power, which causes dominant schools of thought to be the main topics in IR teaching. I build up those opinions and echo the importance of further galvanizing IR studies in Indonesia's higher education institutions by focusing on broadening its curriculum. In doing so, I argue for theoretical diversity in teaching IR programs at Indonesian universities and a more robust adoption of "non-western" IR theorizing. In doing so, it allows consideration of divergent histories, philosophies, and knowledge, which spans across different ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological thoughts that Acharya claimed to "...not impose any particular idea or approach on other but respects diversity" (Acharya, 2016, p. 4).

The existing marginalization of post-positivist scholarship is concerning. Indonesian IR curriculum is geared toward establishing future diplomats for the state. However, a curriculum comprising dominant Western-based IR theories impedes creative thinking and theoretical building outside the existing schools of thought. As future diplomats, it is pivotal for those taught in Indonesian universities that it is possible to theorize outside of the dominant Western theories. This allows students to be equipped with the knowledge to adapt to different geopolitical changes without succumbing to great powers' preferences.

2 The problem with the Indonesian International Relations curriculum: outmoded substantives

Higher education institutions teaching IR in Indonesia greatly emphasize Western-centric IR traditions. As Umar explained, this instance can be traced to institutionalizing IR

studies during Suharto's presidency in the late 1960s. Not only were "sensitive" topics such as Marxism disregarded in the Indonesian curriculum, but an intentionally constructed curriculum focused on patterns of economic development in the West (Heryanto and Nancy, 1988; Umar, 2023). Indonesian IR curriculum geared to support the New Order era of Suharto was also highly relevant to the geopolitical crisis, which inquired into Indonesia's position vis-à-vis the Cold War (Hadiwinata, 2017).

Critical perspectives in Indonesian IR studies have been left out over the years. There was an increasing marginalization of critical perspectives within Indonesia's IR studies. This initially started during the New Order Era, when the Indonesian government left out the knowledge contributions of leftists, which then continued during Indonesia's democratic era through the imposition of development-based curriculum and the presence of government-determined curriculum approvals (Nugroho, 2005; Wahid, 2018). Consequently, this hierarchical structure in constructing Indonesian higher education curricula has left out many insightful studies on global south IR theories. Within IR scholarship, these are known to be non-Western IR theories, a critical stance in understanding the world outside the dominant Western-centric IR traditions.

A number of IR scholars have echoed this in the past. Buzan and Acharya have been among the most vocal on this topic, criticizing that "Western theories, the criticism goes, misrepresent and therefore misunderstand much of the rest of the world" (Acharya, 2014, p. 647). Before this opinion, the non-convergence of the Western-centric IR traditions in Asia is described by David Kang as doing "...a poor job as they are applied to Asia" (Kang, 2003, p. 58). Inspired by this thought, Acharya and Buzan (2010) asked, "Why is there no non-western international theory"? Such scholars have argued for diversifying the IR theories, pointing to how non-Western societies' cultures, philosophies, and historical contexts can contribute to theorizing IR. As a result, we are now witnessing more IR schools of thought assessing the unique contexts within Asian societies, with the rise of China being a dominant discourse in contemporary IR studies (Qin, 2011, 2016; Yan et al., 2011). Consequently, contemporary IR theorizing has allowed for divergent views and points of analysis, transcending the ontological, epistemological, and methodological starting points under Western-inspired IR. However, Indonesian higher education institutions have not effectively adapted to this trend.

The development of the IR curriculum has been somewhat stagnant since Indonesia's democratization era. Transcending the Western-centered IR school of thought, there is a growing number of developments within Indonesia's IR curriculum to assess the role of non-state actors, non-traditional security threats, evolutions of human rights, and other empirically rich studies. However, when it comes to the core departure of analysis, what dominates is Western-inspired inquiries: the role of the state, power, political economics, and international system. Based on data from the Indonesian International Relations Association (AIHII), 73 IR programs in Indonesia are spread across different islands (AIHII, 2023). However, despite the country's growing number of IR programs, they all share a curriculum that sidelines the importance of alternative IR thoughts. Looking deeper into prominent IR programs in the country, such as Universitas

Hasanuddin, Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Sriwijaya, Universitas Pertamina, Universitas Katolik Parahyangan, and Universitas Diponegoro, alternative schools of thoughts only occupy one or two classes within a course (Introduction to International Relations, Theories of International Relations, Foreign Policy, or International Politics). A heavier emphasis is placed on divergent empirical investigations of interest to the study program, such as regional issue areas, traditional security, and gender in IR, rather than exploring alternative ways of interpreting the empirical points of investigation.

As a result, theorizing in this field of study is exceptionally confined to those theoretical commitments. Although there have been notable attempts to discuss non-Western IR theories, this agenda is still lacking within Indonesia's higher education institutions. When Indonesian IR studies are anchored to place the importance of great power politics in the early years of one's studies, it affirms the importance of a Eurocentric Westphalian system and Western history, marginalizing other analysis points within the study.

It is, however, fair to state that other universities outside of Indonesia also face this issue. In a study conducted by Haggmann and Biersteker (2014), they concluded that 23 American and European universities lacked any non-western scholarship introduced throughout their courses of studies. As Eun (2020) states, "...IR is too Western-centric", and the Indonesian IR curriculum has adopted this for decades.

3 Discussion: reflexivity, self-reflection, and theoretical pluralism

I echo the importance of reflexivity and self-reflection, as argued by Eun (2020). Doing so makes us academics realize that IR structure is the making of us (academics) as critical agents in IR knowledge dissemination (Eun, 2020). By embracing this role, we can recognize that the Western-centric IR theories within Indonesia's IR curriculum are concerning and may impede our students' creative non-Western IR theorizing. As a lecturer myself, given the responsibility to develop the critical minds of young Indonesian students, developing a curriculum that teaches the diverse range of available theories is vital. Through self-reflection, we will realize that this existing structure is not fixed and can face changes once we realize the issue. As Umar recently wrote, this may not be easy to recognize due to the naturalized Western IR dominance through Indonesian institutions (Umar, 2023). However, we can tackle this issue by constantly questioning what it is and why we teach our students a particular paradigm. In terms of ontological, epistemological, and methodological stance, is it justifiable not to introduce other emerging Asian and non-Western schools of thought?

After reflexivity and self-reflection, we will realize that other parts of the world have attempted to develop this non-Western-centric IR thinking. This considers the vast historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts underpinning foreign policies and how non-Western states think of the world.

An example is Chinese IR. Vis-à-vis the rise of China, western academics have adopted a somewhat stagnant view of this phenomenon. However, Chinese scholars have argued the importance of indigenous theories and concepts related to Chinese cultures, which allows for a better understanding of how China views the world (Qin, 2011, 2016; Yan et al., 2011). For these scholars, it is pivotal to develop IR studies that consider “Chinese characteristics,” which leads to a unique construction of a ‘Chinese School’ that studies Confucianism, Marxism, *Tianxia*, and other concepts highly related to China. Take, for example, Qin Yaqing’s relational theory, which perceives state foreign policies in the context of relationality. He argued state interactions can be comprehended by understanding the existing relationship among states and considering aspects of hierarchy and equality (Qin, 2016). In contrast with the dominant realism school of thought in IR, Qin’s relational theory abandons notions of state dominance and power and starts by inquiring about the relations between two different states.

Although Chinese IR is starting to be introduced within Indonesian IR programs, this has not been a consistent path taken across the nation. As in the case of the prominent IR programs mentioned in Indonesia, most have only adopted the curriculum of understanding IR theorizing in the Global South rather than a specified inquiry into interpreting Chinese IR. This is concerning, as Indonesian students are currently confined to power transition theories in comprehending Indonesia’s relations with China and a rather binary view of the state’s relations with other secondary states of Southeast Asia. Part of this problem is that different cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts are left out in IR curriculums, which severely impedes how Indonesian students can creatively theorize IR.

However, the most concerning development has been how Indonesian students understand Indonesia within the IR context. Due to the dominance of power transition theories, there is a stagnant view of Indonesia as a middle power in the international system. Some have discussed Indonesia’s soft and niche diplomacy, but perceptions tend to start from a realist, liberalist, or constructivist theoretical foundation. Another consequence is the lack of efforts in considering a separate ‘Indonesian IR’ school of thought, which would consider the theoretical richness that Indonesia’s history, culture, and philosophies can contribute to IR theorizing. This is problematic. Indonesian academics such as

Wicaksana have criticized this, arguing that Indonesia thus remains a ‘silent subject’ within the study of IR (Wicaksana and Santoso, 2022).

I close this opinion piece by echoing the importance of embracing theoretical pluralism in Indonesia’s higher education IR curriculums. Students must be exposed to the various theories available within IR scholarship. The divergent ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches are essential for students to develop the critical thinking necessary to be successful IR graduates. Being confined to the theoretical commitments of Western-centric theories severely limits this creative thinking process and students’ ability to explore different topics contrary to the dominant schools of thought within the IR discipline. Non-western theorizing allows for diversity, which is currently dominated by the importance of ‘generality’ compared to theoretical pluralism.

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