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# Toward a “pluriversal” international relations studies in Indonesia

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## 1 Introduction

What are the grounds of International Relations (IR) studies? Scholars have pointed out the strong connection between IR and Western knowledge, philosophies, and histories (Barasuol and da Silva, 2016; Blaney, 2002; Blaney and Tickner, 2017a,b; Liu, 2016). Highlighting a Western-centered discipline, recent scholarship in IR has concluded the lack of plurality in IR theorizing, with the call to adopt more diverse means of understanding how the world works in a political sense (Acharya, 2014, 2016). The consequence of a Western-centered discipline has been that the voices from the Global South are underrepresented and excluded from IR knowledge formation. In addition, the recent exploration of critical theories in IR (Critical Theory, Feminism, Marxism, etc.) has not been perceived as sufficient to eliminate biases in the field, as many have argued about the “epistemic violence” encountered by scholars in the Global South (Ala et al., 2021; Odoom and Andrews, 2017). With the presence of biases in IR knowledge, this opinion article calls for re-evaluating the pedagogy of IR studies, especially in parts of the globe that do not share a common perspective with the Global North.

The historical, cultural, and political contexts of the Global North (Western states) differ from the Global South (Small and Middle powers, primarily located in Africa, Latin America, and Asia). In Latin American, African, and Asian countries, perceptions of how the world works and what matters in global politics contrast with the common literature produced in IR. However, a general belief, predominantly adopted in the Global North, is that IR theories are “... universally applicable, irrespective of the local context, culture, and society” (Ala et al., 2021, p. 38). The universal applicability of IR studies impacts the teaching and learning processes in the Global South, as there is a lack of convergence between what is taught and the socio-political realities in their countries. The problem associated with the tendency to universalize this Western-based knowledge is multiplied when higher education curriculums are geared to adopt Western-based perspectives, epistemologies, and ontologies in IR without exploring more diverse perspectives in the field. The core of Western-based knowledge includes IR grand theories, including realism, liberalism, constructivism, and the assessment of empirical investigations from the West to support the claims of those theories.

In brief, this opinion article extends the applicability of the “global pluriversal IR” echoed in [Ala et al.’s \(2021\)](#) study. It argues that Indonesia, as a country of the Global South, has similarities to Brazil and South Africa regarding the prospects and challenges of diversifying the IR curriculum in the country. Eventually, this article echoes the importance of revealing the potential of Indonesian philosophies as an alternative means to understanding IR theories, transcending the dominant western-centrist IR studies currently adopted in Indonesia. It is further argued that knowledge and ontologies can benefit from plurality through Indonesia’s IR worldviews, leading to a higher connection to the social realities in the Global South. The focus is on five prominent undergraduate IR programs, including those under Universitas Hasanuddin, Universitas Padjajaran, Binus University, Universitas Airlangga, and Universitas Indonesia. The study programs are hosted by universities consistently ranked in the top 15 among Indonesian Universities according to the world university rankings of Quacquarelli Symonds and Times Higher Education ([QS, 2024](#); [THE, 2024](#)).

The argument put forward is as follows. First, the dominance of Western-centered IR theories and sub-areas of IR and the seclusion of Global South perspectives. Second, this article provides some suggestions on measures that can be taken by Indonesian higher education institutions to achieve a “pluriversal” IR in Indonesia. This includes bridging local Indonesian values to interpret regional Southeast Asian affairs, and as the basis to establish alternative interpretations to world affairs.

## 2 The state of international relations curriculum across Indonesian universities

IR students have been exposed to this Western-centered IR since the early years of their undergraduate studies. Students are expected to be introduced to the Great Debate among IR scholars in the 20th century, connected to European and US history, Western Powers, and how the Global North perceives the other parts of the globe. Following this, sub-areas of IR are primarily dominated by the American academy, focused on foreign policy, political economy, and international security ([Acharya and Buzan, 2010](#); [Baylis et al., 2019](#); [Griffiths, 2020](#); [Putra, 2023a](#)). Consequently, if not left out, local knowledge, such as the norms and contexts that influence Indonesia’s foreign policies, has become a minor theme in the IR curriculum. In addition, this article also identifies the problem that IR theories introduced in the early years of an IR student are focused on those Western IR theories, thus shaping the foundations of an IR student’s understanding of IR studies.

The problem is highly evident in the context of Indonesian IR undergraduate programs. Investigating five prominent IR programs in Indonesia revealed that the curriculum structure does not differ significantly. Courses such as Introduction to International Relations, International Politics, and Theories of International Relations tend to be presented in the first 2 years of the undergraduate program ([BINUS, 2024](#); [UI, 2024](#); [UNAIR, 2024](#); [UNHAS, 2024](#); [UNPAD, 2024](#)). These courses form the foundation of how Indonesian IR students think about the study, including

the types of theories that would be utilized as analytical tools in assessing cases in the following years.

However, the substantive would predominantly be Western-centered, leading to the perception that what matters in the study are the variables highlighted by realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Paradigms of the Global South, for example, decolonization materials or how non-Western states perceive IR, tend to occupy a minor aspect in the foundational stages of IR teaching. Indonesian IR study programs are members of the Association of International Relations Indonesia (AIHII), which facilitates benchmarking curriculums from leading IR programs in the state. It is thus viable to conclude that the curriculum structure adopted in those five IR programs is also similarly adopted in other IR undergraduate programs in Indonesia (though programs might slightly diverge). This is problematic, as the first years of higher education are the foundation of a student’s worldview ([Powel, 2020](#)). Some have argued that introducing new narratives will not be possible if alternative perspectives are not introduced in the teaching process ([Querejazu, 2016](#); [Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al., 2020](#)).

Why does the starting point matter in IR studies? As past studies have suggested, the initial focus on IR of the West limits IR awareness beyond the Global North’s epistemological boundaries ([Blaney, 2002](#); [Karen and Tickner, 2020](#); [Putra, 2024](#)). The problem is not that scholarly work and non-Western theories do not exist, as the pressing challenge is how such theories can be circulated wider ([Acharya and Buzan, 2010](#)) in order to allow a more diverse understanding of the critical concepts of IR. To address the lack of diversity of IR theories introduced in Indonesian classrooms, the following section will discuss the applicability of the “pluriversal” IR in Indonesia’s IR curriculum structures, highlighting the advantages of a more diverse theoretical foundation to the study.

## 3 “Pluriversal” international relations curriculum: urgency and ideas for implementation in Indonesia

This section argues for adopting a pluriversal IR curriculum in Indonesia’s IR programs. Pluriversal IR curriculum introduces other epistemologies, ontologies, and worldviews aimed at “...de-centering conventional narratives and making many worlds visible” ([Ala et al., 2021](#), p. 44). Regarding IR programs in Indonesia, an exhaustive list of changes could be adopted. This opinion article will explore specifically knowledge systems from Indonesian values that could be utilized to diversify IR theorizing. An Indonesian IR, grounded by Indonesian philosophies, allows for a more nuanced understanding of Indonesia’s foreign policy, Southeast Regional dynamics, and alternative means of how the world can be perceived.

What would a transition to a pluriversal IR curriculum consist of? First, the substantive taught would comprise diverse theories and concepts from the Global South. Finding the appropriate narratives depends on the ontologies and epistemologies an Indonesian study program wishes to achieve in its IR curriculum. Some examples include Anwar’s argument of the shaping of an ASEAN-led regional order pioneered by the norms of free and

active foreign policy (Anwar, 1994) and Wicaksana's "family estate" that provides an alternative understanding of the construction of values that Indonesian elites held to in the past (Wicaksana, 2019). As past studies have argued, a pluriversal IR curriculum would attempt to embrace different realities to understand IR in a different way (one that converges to the socio-political realities of where a student is situated) (Blaney and Tickner, 2017b). This is not to say that the grand theories of IR are no longer relevant in classrooms. It is recommended that students be trained to be more critical of the introduced Western narratives, not positioning the histories and theories as the only cornerstones of IR theorizing.

A pluriversal IR program in Indonesia would focus on resonating classroom studies to the encountered local realities. A wide range of values, knowledge systems, and histories allow a more nuanced understanding of Southeast Asian studies. Specifically, talking about Indonesian values increases the urgency to look closer at the philosophies of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (different but one), *gotong royong* (doing something together), and the importance of non-alignment and self-determination for secondary states having faced colonization in the past. It is worth noting that issues faced by the Global South are mainly introduced in the courses discussing dependency theory, decolonization, and regionalism. As an alternative, the following will discuss several practical strategies to achieve a pluriversal IR program in Indonesian higher education institutions.

First, existing IR programs in Indonesia discuss European-led approaches to aspects of regionalism. This is due to the linear teaching fashion, focusing on the Great Debates in IR, World Wars, Cold War, and significant events deriving from American or European-centered events. An understanding of how Indonesia and Southeast Asian states perceive regionalism, for example, would benefit from a neutral interpretation of how regionalism and regional institutions should perform. Adopting alternative approaches to interpret events in the region would allow for a non-linear perspective and eliminate the monopoly of Western-dominated concepts. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a priority of Indonesia's foreign policy, has been perceived to be a failure due to a comparison of its performance with that of the European Union (EU). This is due to the glorified perception of supranational authority under IR scholarship. This is problematic for ASEAN, as the regional organization's construction was never to replace the state sovereignty of Southeast Asian states.

Second, Indonesia's philosophies of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *gotong royong* most certainly provide an alternative interpretation of events involving Indonesia in its foreign policies and at the regional level. There is a strong belief within Indonesian policymakers that the philosophies of working together and being one despite differences guide its foreign policy conduct (besides non-alignment and self-determination) (Fitriani, 2018, 2021; Laksmiana, 2016; Syailendra, 2017; Yeremia, 2020). Both philosophies were detrimental in the formulation of ASEAN, as in 1976, Indonesia as one of the founding members of the regional organization, instilled the vision of being united despite differing political systems among the five founding members (mimicking the philosophy of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) and the need to work together in resolving tensions arising due to the Cold War in Southeast Asia (similar to Indonesia's *gotong*

*royong*). The following years after ASEAN's formation, the two philosophies remain relevant in explaining how the 10 states with different political systems responded to pressing regional challenges such as claims in the South China Sea, transnational crimes, and environmental degradation (Putra, 2023b). Such Indonesian philosophies can guide IR theorizing and analysis that transcends existing schools of thought in IR due to their explanatory potential in IR.

Thus, when this article calls upon a pluriversal IR curriculum, it is not simply limited to adding more cases and examples from the Global South but re-conceptualizing what IR knowledge consists of and how students can make sense of IR phenomena. This advances students' creative, innovative, and critical thinking skills. An example is how the Indonesian IR curriculum should perceive the South China Sea conflict. The focus of analysis on Western-centered concepts is great power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific and the lack of decisive policies taken by secondary states in Southeast Asia. However, putting forward the philosophies of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *gotong royong* re-orientates the discussion to respecting the collective actions taken despite differences in foreign policies of ASEAN member states, the constant reference for cooperation, and the risk-based perceptions held.

This opinion article is aware of the possible challenges to adopting a pluriversal IR curriculum in Indonesia. Changing Indonesian study programs' curriculum is a lengthy process, usually taken only in preparation for accreditations and International certifications. To overcome this technical challenge in IR pedagogy, lecturers can incorporate more possible alternative concepts within the existing curriculum and slowly take steps to diversify courses when feasible.

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