

## THE CHAMPION OF THE GRASSROOTS REVISITED: An Episode of Emha Ainun Najib's Stage Performance and Environmental Activism against Cement-Mining Corporations in Northern Kendeng of Pati, Indonesia

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### Abstract

*Emha Ainun Najib (Cak Nun) is a charismatic and controversial Muslim cultural leader who has a wide audience in Indonesia. Along with an ensemble band called Kiai Kanjeng, he has monthly performances in various parts of Indonesia. Adding to that, they are occasionally invited by institutions, individuals, or businesses. In the New Order era, on behalf of the disadvantaged, Cak Nun's criticisms against a highly controversial dam project in 1980–1991 showed his rebellious tendencies in the face of state and elite despotism. As a result, he has referred to as “the champion of the grassroots.” However, since his involvement in the corporation-induced mudflow of Lapindo in Sidoarjo in 2006, his stand on the grassroots has actually been doubted.*



*However, based on his recent stage performances in several regions hit by industrially-induced environmental crises, particularly in Pati's northern Kendeng, some groups have begun to question whether the assumption that Cak Nun is "the champion of the grassroots" is still relevant. By elaborating on the ways in which various onstage and backstage stories were formed in northern Kendeng, this paper argues that Cak Nun is perceived to deliver confusing messages, resulting in the affected communities becoming more divided and fragmented.*

*[Emha Ainun Najib (Cak Nun) adalah tokoh budayawan Muslim karismatik dan kontroversial yang memiliki pengaruh luas di Indonesia. Bersama dengan grup musik bernama Kiai Kanjeng, setiap bulan ia tampil di berbagai pelosok Indonesia. Selain itu, mereka sesekali juga diundang oleh lembaga, individu, atau pengusaha. Pada masa Orde Baru—atas nama kelompok yang terzalimi—Cak Nun bersuara lantang mengkritik proyek bendungan yang sangat kontroversial pada 1980–1991. Ia menunjukkan keberpihakannya dan memberontak kepada negara dan despotisme elite. Akibatnya, ia disebut sebagai "juara akar rumput". Namun, sejak keterlibatannya dalam insiden lumpur Lapindo di Sidoarjo yang dipicu korporasi pada tahun 2006, pendiriannya di akar rumput justru diragukan. Bahkan berdasarkan penampilan panggungnya baru-baru ini di beberapa daerah yang dilanda krisis lingkungan akibat industri, khususnya di Kendeng Pati bagian utara, beberapa kalangan mulai mempertanyakan apakah anggapan bahwa Cak Nun adalah "juara akar rumput" masih relevan. Dengan mengelaborasi berbagai cerita dari atas panggung dan di belakang panggung yang terbentuk di Kendeng utara, artikel ini berargumen bahwa Cak Nun dianggap menyampaikan pesan yang membingungkan, sehingga masyarakat yang terkena dampak menjadi semakin terpecah dan terfragmentasi.]*

**Keywords:** *Emha Ainun Nadjib (Cak Nun), Lumpur Lapindo, Cement Corporations, Grassroots*

## **Introduction**

Emha Ainun Najib, or widely-called as Cak Nun, is a charismatic Muslim intellectual and leader in Indonesia. Owing to his multi-talented skills, he has gained many titles, ranging from a poet, playwright, singer,

cultural leader, social activist, political critic, to a ‘rebellious’ “*kiai mbeling*” (Muslim leader).<sup>1</sup> His appearance concurrently looks like a mystical figure<sup>2</sup> as well as a wild critic.<sup>3</sup> Thereby, notwithstanding that Betts<sup>4</sup> claims that Cak Nun has taken his “*jalan sunyi*” “(silent pilgrimage),” his pilgrimage was actually full of uproar.<sup>5</sup>

Cak Nun has metamorphosed from merely as an individual to an institution that has very large and loyal audiences.<sup>6</sup> As a renowned-poet, his audience usually cries out at him to read his poems in his performance.<sup>7</sup> Along with his ensemble band called as *Kiai Kanjeng*, Cak Nun has produced a ‘miniature’ of social space in the form of stage-based monthly cultural performances. And, his performances look “as spiritual as they are political.”<sup>8</sup> In such a stage, Cak Nun’s performance is “an effective means of spreading news and opinions to a large audience...to influence public opinion.”<sup>9</sup> Through such performances, Nugraha admits that Cak Nun is capable of “*membesarkan yang kecil dan mengecilkan yang besar*” (enlarging the small and shrinking the large).<sup>10</sup>

Earlier, Cak Nun is known as a charismatic poet due to his fiery poems in propagating Islam and social justice.<sup>11</sup> His popularity

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<sup>1</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 198–9; M. C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to Present* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, ...*, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> Latief S. Nugraha, “Strategi, Agen, dan Posisi Emha Ainun Nadjib di Arena Sastra dan Arena Sosial,” *Poetika* Vol. 3, No. 2, 2015), pp. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Ian L. Betts, *Jalan Sunyi Emha* (Jakarta: Buku Kompas, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Latief S. Nugraha, “Strategi, Agen...,” pp. 112.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105 & 109.

<sup>7</sup> Jody Diamond, “Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival 1997,” *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 7, 1997, pp. 94.

<sup>8</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an...*, p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> Max M. Richter, *Musical Worlds in Yogyakarta* (Singapore: Leiden: KITLV Press, 2013), p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> Latief S. Nugraha, “Strategi, Agen...,” pp. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Perlman, “The Traditional Javanese Performing Arts in the Twilight of the New Order: Two Letters from Solo,” *Indonesia*, No. 68, 1999, pp. 3.

skyrocketed when he began collaborating with *Kiai Kanjeng*. Cak Nun sometimes appears with *Kiai Kanjeng* as an Islamic poet, singer, culturalist,<sup>12</sup> or political critic. Meanwhile, as a religious leader, he sometimes brings up with qur'anic exegesis, religious sermon, chanting *wirid* and *zikir* as well as prayer.<sup>13</sup> Rickleff called the performance of Cak Nun with *Kiai Kanjeng* as a "Sufi style movement."<sup>14</sup> Their performances usually draw a sizable crowd from all over Indonesia. Most of their audiences are Muslim as indicated by many females wearing headscarves and males putting 'colourful and ornate fez caps' on their heads.<sup>15</sup> They have a monthly routine of shows in various parts of Indonesia using these three names: *Maiyah*, *Kenduri Cinta*, and *Padang Bulan*.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, they are occasionally invited by institutions, individuals, or businesses.<sup>17</sup>

Cak Nun's criticisms and conducts often create controversies. For example, during the New Order era, he was known for his strong support for thousands of *Kedung Ombo* farmers in Central Java who were displaced and given very little compensation as a result of the New Order government's highly controversial dam project in 1980-1991.<sup>18</sup> As the director of the "Cultural Discussion" bureau within *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI<sup>19</sup>-The Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) at the time, Cak Nun agreed to sponsor a small conference with the displaced farmers of *Kedung Ombo*, but he eventually received a

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<sup>12</sup> Max M. Richter, *Musical Worlds...*, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an...*, p. 198–9.

<sup>14</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java...*, p. 297.

<sup>15</sup> Max M. Richter, *Musical Worlds...*, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an...*, p. 199.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class," *Indonesia*, No. 56, 1993, pp. 29.

<sup>19</sup> ICMI was originally an Islamic organization founded by non-government Islamic figures. However, because Habibie as the chairman of ICMI sought support from Suharto, it eventually became an exclusive organization designed to promote the re-election of Suharto through the politicization of Islam. See *Ibid.*, pp. 21–1.

warning notice from ICMI's boards to withdraw it.<sup>20</sup> He then resigned from ICMI to send his fierce criticism that ICMI should "do more than just bolster the images of Soeharto and Habibie."<sup>21</sup> Due to his strong alignment with the people, Rasmussen (2010) calls him the "champion of the grassroots"<sup>22</sup>, suggesting that Cak Nun would always stand for the benefit of the disadvantaged, not vice versa.

Nevertheless, at least since Cak Nun's appearance and involvement in response to the corporation-induced mudflow of Lapindo in 2006, his stand for the grassroots has been doubted. In the Lapindo mudflow, Cak Nun's involvement is seen as benefiting the corporation (*Lapindo Brantas Inc.*) rather than the victims<sup>23</sup> although Cak Nun and his wife clarified and denied such a blatant accusation.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the controversial involvement of Cak Nun in similar cases does not stop there. For example, similar hesitation arises over Cak Nun's performance and involvement in the

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<sup>20</sup> Robert W. Hefner, (ed.), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an...*, p. 203.

<sup>23</sup> What was done by Cak Nun, who serves as a mediator between the victims and the government as well as the Lapindo Brantas Inc., was deemed to have benefited the Lapindo and incurred losses for the victims. Cak Nun is accused of having led the mudflow victims to accept a compensation scheme benefiting the Lapindo. However, there was a group of victims who finally disagreed, so that the victim coalition split and triggered horizontal fragmentation (and frictions) among victims. Such victims' accusations against Cak Nun were widely circulated on the internet. See Anton Novenanto, "Manusia dan Tanah: Kehilangan dan Kompensasi dalam Kasus Lapindo," *BHUMI: Jurnal Agraria dan Pertanahan*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2015, pp. 7; Paring Waluyo Utomo, "Bangkit di Tengah Keterpurukan: Perjalanan GEPPRES Menuntut Hak," in Heru Prasetya (ed.) *Bencana Industri: Kekalaban Negara dan Masyarakat Sipil dalam Penanganan Lumpur Lapindo* (Depok: Yayasan Desantara, 2012), p. 188–198; Win, "[Forum Pembaca KOMPAS] RE: Lapindo, Emha Ainun Nadjib dan DPR," last modified July 28, 2008, accessed June 17, 2022, and "'Jancuk...!' – Tentang Cak Nun dan Bang Ro'is," *Arsip nJowo*, January 8, 2008, accessed June 17, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> See *Penjelasan Ganti Rugi LUMPUR PANAS LAPINDO Versi Cak Nun & Aburizal Bakrie*, 2021, accessed June 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>; and antaranews.com, "Cak Nun Difitnah, Novia Temui Korban Lumpur," *Antara News*, last modified August 11, 2008, accessed June 17, 2022.

planned building of two cement-mining companies in the northern Kendeng of Pati (central Java) since 2008. Interestingly, in the first opposition against *PT Semen Gresik*, Cak Nun showed strong support for the affected villagers, but in the later opposition against *PT Indocement*, Cak Nun demonstrated the opposite position.

Based on the foregoing, this study seeks to determine whether Cak Nun is consistently perceived as standing on the grassroots by two distinct groups of people, particularly those involved in the Pati cement factory debate. We interviewed mainly two Pati informants who were involved in the controversies that occurred onstage and backstage during Cak Nun performances there. By analyzing the political rhythms of the stage performance navigated by Cak Nun, we would like to particularly elaborate on the controversy surrounding Cak Nun's second stage performance in the face of the planned construction of *PT Indocement* in Pati. As a result of such elaboration, we would show that in the past, Cak Nun was well-known for his staunch defense of the grassroots, whereas in Pati, he delivered confusing messages, resulting in further fragmentation of the anti-mining group.

### **The Stage Performance as Miniature of Social Space**

In this paper, the stage performance is seen as a miniature of the "social space" in which it is socially produced.<sup>25</sup> However, it is worth noting that social space is not free from the dominating tendencies of the bourgeoisie, who always have the initiative in the production of space.<sup>26</sup> Lefebvre therefore offers an analysis of rhythm to unpack dominance in the social space. The rhythm analysis seeks to unpack how formants that appear to be performed harmoniously actually have one dominant element over the other. By doing this, one can ultimately read

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<sup>25</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52–6.

how the production was created and where it is going.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, it is crucial to analyze, among other things, the onstage narrative-making, the contained meaning or political messages, and their contextual significance. Thus, it is essential to recreate the complete portrayal of what is happening onstage and backstage in order to comprehend the dominating tendencies in a set of rhythms. Furthermore, in what is called by Lefebvre “psychoanalysis of space,” what is performed onstage is a façade, and it contains obscenity backstage. And, the obscenity tends to be hidden. To reveal the dominance in them, the façade (onstage) and obscenity (backstage) must be completely opened.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, we should not be deceived by the “natural simplicity” that appears onstage since it appears to be transparent in the social space of stage performances.<sup>29</sup> However, despite appearing transparent, the naturalness is only a façade. It is viewed as having taken place in a social setting voluntarily, freely, and without traps because it is witnessed by a large number of individuals (audience). This is referred to as the “illusion of transparency.”<sup>30</sup> However, because it takes place under duress behind the scenes, what takes place on stage ends up being insufficient. Even while coercion seeks to hide itself (or is hidden from the social space), it eventually refuses to be hidden and comes to light. The “illusion of opacity” is what is referred to as in this. As a result, the miniature of social space shown on the stage looks bright and dim at the same time (the double illusion).<sup>31</sup>

Thus, this research is specifically aimed at portraying the double illusion (i.e., the onstage “façade” and the backstage “obscenity”) to readers. More than that, based in particular on Cak Nun’s stage performances in northern Kendeng, we will briefly verify the ways in

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369–370.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



which various onstage and backstage stories were produced, resulting in different and conflicting views among the audiences about the true meaning of the event.

### ***PT Semen Gresik and PT Indocement in Pati: An Overview of the Contradictions and Local Oppositions***

Northern Kendeng is known for its karst-based mountainous areas. It is precisely located in Central Java and East Java, which stretches from the north of Grobogan, south of Pati, Rembang, Blora, north of Bojonegoro, Tuban, and west of Lamongan. Karst is a distinct landform formed in a carbonate platform by “the interaction of limestone and aggressive water penetrating into its primary fissures and voids.”<sup>32</sup> Northern Kendeng karst’s inherent carbonate elements (such as limestone, dolomite, and gypsum)<sup>33</sup> have attracted cement-mining corporations (such as *PT Semen Indonesia* and *PT Holcim* in Tuban, *PT Semen Grobogan* in Grobogan, and *PT Semen Indonesia* in Rembang) because they are mining raw materials that cannot yet be replaced by others for cement manufacturing.<sup>34</sup>

Since 2006, the Karst of Pati has attracted *PT Semen Gresik* and *PT Indocement* to establish their mining companies. *PT Semen Gresik* (PT SG) failed to accomplish its goal and officially left Pati in 2011.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, *PT Indocement* (through its subsidiary company, *PT Sababat Mulya Sakti*, or PT SMS), conducted research on the potential and possible location in 2008 and has officially planned to build a cement-mining company

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<sup>32</sup> Wolfgang Dreybrodt, *Processes in Karst Systems: Physics, Chemistry, and Geology* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Spencer Fleury, *Land Use Policy and Practice on Karst Terrains: Living on Limestone*, 1st edition (New York: Springer, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Mawa Kresna, “Serbuan Pabrik Semen di Pegunungan Kendeng Utara,” *tirto.id*, last modified March 22, 2017, accessed March 28, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Ganies Oktaviana, “Analisis Konflik Sumber Daya Alam di Pegunungan Kendeng Utara, Kabupaten Pati, Provinsi Jawa Tengah: Studi Kasus: Rencana pembangunan pabrik semen oleh PT. SMS di Kecamatan Tambakromo dan Kayen,” *thesis*, Institut Pertanian Bogor, 2015, p. 3.



since 2010.<sup>36</sup> The mining locations of PT SG and PT SMS are different, with PT SG attempting to operate in the Sukolilo sub-district while PT SMS will carry out its mining activities in the sub-districts of Kayen and Tambakromo.

The failure of PT SG in Sukolilo is due to the local opposition, one of which was pursued through legal advocacy. Sukolilo's anti-cement villagers had filed a lawsuit, which had progressed from various state administrative courts to the Supreme Court (MA-*Mahkamah Agung*). The mining permit for PT SG is supported by the 2001–2011 spatial planning of Pati, which divides the Sukolilo's karst into (a) protected areas and (b) economic areas, in which PT SG was legally planned to conduct mining activities. Yet, it is indeed considered to contradict the Decree of the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources of the Republic of Indonesia, Number 0398K/40/MEM/2005, which designates all areas included in the Sukolilo karst (including the Pati's sub-district of Sukolilo, Kayen, and Tambakromo, the Grobogan's sub-district of Brati, Grobogan, Tawangharjo, Wirosari, and Ngaringan, and the Blora's sub-district of Todanan) as geologically protected areas. As a result, the Supreme Court finally revoked PT SG's mining permit.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, *PT Indocement*, through its subsidiary, *PT SMS*, was legalized to establish a cement-mining factory in 2011 through a decree of the Head of the Integrated Licensing Service Office of Pati Regency No. 591/021/2011, which was valid until 2014. Due to local opposing tendencies, PT SMS is unable yet to realize its mining plan, and, therefore, the permit was extended to 2017. Yet, after the Supreme Court won PT SMS's appeal against local villagers in 2017, PT SMS is still having difficulties realizing its plan in Pati's sub-districts of Tambakromo and Kayen.

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<sup>36</sup> Maksum Syam, "Jaringan Penolakan terhadap Industri Tambang di Pegunungan Kendeng Utara," *thesis*, Universitas Indonesia, 2016, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> Citra Dewi, "Analisis Gerakan Sosial di Kecamatan Sukolilo, Kabupaten Pati, Jawa Tengah," *thesis*, Institut Pertanian Bogor, 2015, p. 61–2.

PT SMS's victory in the Supreme Court was made possible by changes in the previous regulations. Having learned from the failings of PT SG, the constraining regulations were adjusted. Prior to the issuance of the environmental permit for PT SMS by Pati's regent in 2014 (Decree of the Regent of Pati No. 660.1/4767/2014), Pati's spatial planning for 2010–2030 (Decree of Pati No. 5/2011) converted a number of protected Sukolilo Karst Areas into mining areas. Following that, the revision of the Decree of the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources No. 0398 K/40/MEM/2005 concerning the Sukolilo Karst Landscape Area (KBAK/*Kawasan Bentang Alam Karst Sukolilo*) was made through the formulation of the new Decree of the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources No. 2641 K/40/MEM/2014. This new decree is allegedly issued to provide mining space for PT SMS. The Sukolilo Karst area has shrunk from 118,02 square kilometers to 71,80 square kilometers as a result of the new decree. There is a difference of 46,222 square kilometers. Coincidentally, the areas excluded from the previous decree have now become mining sites for PT SMS, and, yet again, they have the same karst rock formation as the Sukolilo Karst.<sup>38</sup>

The local opposition and resistance against the construction of the Cement Company in Pati is mainly based on the fear that it would jeopardize the livelihood of villagers living around the targeted mining location. Indeed, many local villagers work in the agricultural sector, which is heavily reliant on the availability of land and water for crop cultivation. For example, in one of PT SMS's mining areas in Mojomulyo village, Tambakromo sub-district of Pati, the majority of the local livelihoods are peasants and agricultural laborers. Of the total population of 2,453 people, 410 were peasants and 400 were agricultural laborers in 2009.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Tommy Apriando, "Warga Pati Tolak Pendirian Pabrik Semen. Kenapa?," *Mongabay Environmental News*, last modified September 4, 2014, accessed April 10, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Mujiati, "Pengaruh Mengikuti Pengajian di Pondok Pesantren Darul Muqoddas terhadap Peningkatan Pengamalan Ibadah Masyarakat Mojomulyo Tambakromo Pati," *thesis*, Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, 2009, p. 29.

Meanwhile, of the total population of 2,313 people in Purwokerto's Kayen sub-district, which is also a mining area for PT SMS, 225 worked as peasants and 515 as peasant laborers in 2010.<sup>40</sup> Given the fact that many villagers are working as peasants, resistance against the construction of cement corporations is arising because they believe that the cement-mining corporations will bring about water shortages for agricultural irrigation.<sup>41</sup> Overall, the majority of the Pati population works in the agricultural sector, and thereby, the availability of land and water for agricultural activities is very basic. For example, in 2019, of the total labor force participation rate (TPAK/*Tingkat Partisipasi Angkatan Kerja*) of 650,573 people, 26.36% worked in agriculture, which was followed by 20.30% in industry, 24.95% in trade, 12.51% in service, and 15.88% in others.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, 90% of the population in the cement mining target villages rely on springs that come from northern Kendeng for their water needs. For example, in Sukolilo, almost every village has springs, such as in Sukolilo village (19 springs), Gadudero village (3 springs), Tompe Gunung village (21 springs), Kayen village (4 springs), Kedumulyo village (1 spring), Mlawat village (1 spring), Baleadi village (3 springs), and Summersoko village (24 springs).<sup>43</sup> Thus, due to the fact that they rely heavily on the springs for their daily water needs, they do not want them to collapse due to mining activities.

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<sup>40</sup> "Sekilas Tentang Desa Purwokerto," *Desapurnwokerto*, January 21, 2012, accessed September 23, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Erwin Dwi Kristianto, *Menyelamatkan Lingkungan Berakbir di Penjara: Kriminalisasi 9 Warga Penolak Pabrik Semen di Kabupaten Pati* (Semarang: YLBHI, Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Semarang, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> BPS Kabupaten Pati, "Keadaan Ketenagakerjaan Kabupaten Pati Agustus 2019," <https://patikab.bps.go.id/>, last modified Agustus 2019, accessed September 23, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Kristianto, *Menyelamatkan Lingkungan Berakbir di Penjara...*

## **“The Champion of the Grassroots”: The Moment of Hesitation from Northern Kendeng**

In the polemic vortex of the cement corporations in Pati, Cak Nun appeared at least twice. In her first appearance, Cak Nun shows a solid resistance against *PT. Semen Gresik*. Meanwhile, in his second performance, Cak Nun is perceived as showing an opposite stand by providing supporting narratives for *PT Indocement*. Yet, the narratives of Cak Nun for *PT Indocement* are viewed in varied ways by the two anti-cement figures of Pati. Based mainly on the accounts of the two figures, we would delineate what happened backstage (obscurity) as well as onstage (façade) that night. Yet, we concealed the real name of the informants for reasons of confidentiality, and we merely used some alphabets of it.

Cak Nun's first appeared in the anti-cement ceremony entitled “*Selamatkan Pegunungan Kendeng: Tolak Pabrik Semen*” “(Save Kendeng Mountains: Refuse the Cement Factory)” held on March 19, 2008, at *Omah Sonokeling* by *Jaringan Masyarakat Peduli Pegunungan Kendeng* (JMPPK - the Network of Community for Kendeng Preservation).<sup>44</sup> In his speech, Cak Nun openly resists the planned building of a cement factory (*PT. Semen Gresik*) by referring to the Islamic doctrine instructing Muslims to protect nature, which is regarded as producing wider benefits than cement mining.<sup>45</sup> At this ceremony, Cak Nun was accompanied on stage by Gunretno and Habib Sholeh Anis Ba'asyin (Bib Anis).<sup>46</sup> Gunretno is

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<sup>44</sup> JMPPK is an alliance for anti-cement resistances founded in 2006 and containing more than 450 members in 2022, consisting of individuals, communities, NGOs, or university affiliates. Ivan Wagner Bakara, *Kronik Kendeng Lestari: Perjuangan Rakyat Kendeng atas Tanah Airnya* (Pati - Jakarta Pusat - Semarang - Depok: JMPPK, YLBHI, LBH Semarang & Desantara, 2018); SO, “Conversation,” April 30, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Agust Eko Yuwono, “Resistensi Masyarakat terhadap Rencana Pembangunan Pabrik Semen di Kedumulyo Kecamatan Sukolilo Kabupaten Pati,” *thesis*, Universitas Negeri Semarang, 2010, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> They were joined by Arif Zayyin from *Wabana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia* (WALHI—the Indonesian Forum for Environment Indonesia) and Lilo Sunaryo (a Muria anti-nuclear power plant activist). See *Ibid.*, p. 74, 77 & 79.

a central symbolic figure of anti-cement resistance in northern Kendeng and the main leader of the JMPPK. Bib Anis is a well-known Pati religious leader who has become an anti-cement activist and has a large audience through a monthly religious gathering in which he performs with *Sampak Gusuran*, a local music band that musicalizes poetry. Cak Nun and Gunretno sat together this time to refuse *PT Semen Gresik* in Pati, but at the second appearance, they would confront each other in an argumentative battle on stage for and against *PT Indocement*.

Cak Nun's second appearance was on the stage of solidarity for the flood victims of Sukolilo-Pati. Along with *Kiai Kanjeng*, Cak Nun made a performance in Pati's town square based on the invitation from the regional government of Pati Regency on December 14, 2011, to raise funds for the flood victims.<sup>47</sup> The 2011's flood of Pati was allegedly caused by illegal limestone-mining in the northern Kendeng.<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that Pati has recently suffered from annual (flash) floods in various sub-districts.<sup>49</sup>

In 2011, instead of local government officials, public figures, and religious leaders, several local and national businessmen, including Franky Welirang (the vice president of *PT Indocement*), were invited to Cak Nun's performance for flood solidarity.<sup>50</sup> Aprianto claimed that Gunretno voluntarily attended the event because he received an invitation from the local government.<sup>51</sup> However, based on the information from FA (a local anti-cement activist from northern Pati), Gunretno attended the event by way of coercion exercised by Cak Nun. Prior to Gunretno's appearance

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<sup>47</sup> *Pewarta Jatim*, "Pengajian Kyai Kanjeng Galang Bantuan Banjir Pati," *ANTARA News Jawa Timur*, accessed April 3, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Winarto Herusansono, "Banjir Bandang Pati Diduga Akibat Penambangan Liar," *KOMPAS.com*, last modified December 5, 2011, accessed November 14, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> In 2022, the flash flood hit the sub-district of Kayen. See Dian Utoro Aji, "Banjir Bandang Melanda Pati, 2 SD di Kayen Sempat Terendam," *detikjateng*, accessed November 14, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Tri Chandra Aprianto, "Perampasan Tanah dan Konflik: Kisah Perlawanan Sedulur Sikep," *BHUMI: Jurnal Agraria dan Pertanian*, No. 37, 2013, pp. 164.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164.

on stage, FA admitted that there was a tug of war between Cak Nun and FA, where Cak Nun pulled Gunretno's right hand and FA pulled his left after a meeting with Cak Nun in a local hotel. To calm down the situation, Gunretno eventually chose to accept Cak Nun's invitation to accompany him to a dinner conducted by the local government prior to the stage performance. After the dinner, Cak Nun tightly and continuously embraced Gunretno, so that another tug of war happened between Cak Nun and FA. Once again, Gunretno chose to go along with Cak Nun to the show stage.<sup>52</sup> "*Piye iki Cak kok Kang Gun arep mbok ajak pengajian? Kang Gun iku Wong Samin [dengan nada keras] kok mbok ajak pengajian? Ra usah. Dia tetap memaksa. Tarik-tarikan lagi di depan kantor Bupati itu. Wis ben aku tak melu.*"<sup>53</sup> "(How is this Cak, why would you invite Kang Gun to join the Muslim preaching? Kang Gun is *Wong Samin* (Saminist) [with loud tone] would you invite to come to Muslim preaching? No need. He kept insisting. Another tug of war in front of the Regent's office occurred. Oke, I'll just go along, Gunretno said.)"

It clearly seems that Cak Nun did want Gunretno to attend the *Maiyah*-like performance that night, even though Gunretno was unwilling to join because he is not a Muslim. On the stage, Aprianto depicted that there was "an attempt to subdue one another." "*(Upaya untuk menundukkan satu sama lain)*" between Cak Nun and Gunretno.<sup>54</sup> However, from the rhythm of the show, as we will portray it below, we think that Gunretno only responded to the offensive arguments of Cak Nun. To be precise, we think that Cak Nun started an attempt to tarnish the image of Gunretno as a central symbolic figure of anti-cement movements in northern Kendeng, but Gunretno fought back. That is, Gunretno did not intend to argue with Cak Nun, but he was forced to. As a result, an argumentative battle between Cak Nun and Gunretno was inevitable on the stage that night. Due to Gunretno's symbolic centrality, his defeat in

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<sup>52</sup> FA, "Interview," September 26, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Tri Chandra Aprianto, "Perampasan Tanah dan Konflik...", pp. 164.

an argumentative battle on a public stage witnessed by a large audience would jeopardize or weaken the anti-cement movements in northern Kendeng. However, if Gunretno had won the argumentative battle, it could have had the opposite result.

In the opening speech from the representative of the local government on stage, it was acknowledged that development projects are prerequisites for enhancing the well-being of the local population. Therefore, the advent of investors is needed and welcomed for the development process of Pati.<sup>55</sup> In line with that, Cak Nun opened the show stage by presenting a popular Javanese song called “*Dayohe Teko*” “(The Guests are Coming),” accompanied by the modern gamelan music of *Kiai Kanjeng*. The fragment of the song’s lyric exemplifies the ways in which the host should welcome guests, such as “*e dayohe teko, e beberno koso, e koso bedah, e tambalen jadab...*” “(the guest comes, open the mat, the mat is perforated, patch it with *jadab*—sticky rice cake).” After singing “*Dayohe Teko*,” Cak Nun provided a short interpretation of the song, saying that the lyrics illustrates the ethics of the Javanese predecessors; if there are guests, they should be welcomed and served by whatever we have. If there are guests, they should not be rejected, but they must be carefully asked. After that, Cak Nun asked for clarification from the audience as to whether his understanding was correct or not, and the audience responded by agreeing (*setuju*) with Cak Nun in unison.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, Cak Nun continued his performance by sticking to the purpose of the show, i.e., raising funds for Pati’s flood victims. As there were already some local businessmen in Pati such as the director of *PT Garuda Food*, the representatives from *PT Dua Kelinci* and *PG Trangkil* (Trangkil’s Sugar Factory), Cak Nun started asking the audience, and particularly the businessmen on the stage, one by one about how much they would donate for the recovery of Pati’s flood victims. When

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> FA, “Interview.”



it was someone's turn, he had to answer the amount of money they would donate, and someone was asked to collect and write it down.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, the turn came to the director of *PT Garuda Food*, and he only donated one million rupiah, and which made Cak Nun furious, so Cak Nun reached into his own pocket and fulfilled it into ten million on behalf of *PT Garuda Food*.<sup>58</sup>

Among the local businessmen, there were only two non-businessmen, i.e., Cak Nun and Gunretno. After all of the businessmen had been questioned, it was Gunretno's turn. Cak Nun asked Gunretno, "*Kang Gun mau menyumbang tidak?*" "(Does Kang Gun want to donate or not?)" Gunretno answered, "*Kalau uang saya tidak punya, tapi kemarin itu saya sudah membantu membangun rumah saudara-saudara saya yang jumlahnya sudah puluhan.*" "(I do not have money, but yesterday I helped build the houses of my brothers, whose number are already in dozens.)" Cak Nun suddenly pointed to someone off stage, he is Franky Welirang, whom he was then asked to go on stage. Subsequently, to answer Cak Nun's question, Franky said that if in the form of money, he probably would not contribute much, but he would provide as much as whatever the victims needed to recover from the flood; "*Ya kalau diperlukan saya mau menyumbang. Mau menyumbang berapa? Kalau uang mungkin tidak banyak, pertanyaannya sekarang kebutuhannya apa, sebisa saya, saya cukupi.*" "(Yes, if needed, I want to donate. How much do you want to donate? If money may not be a lot, the question now is what is the need, as much as I could, I would seek to provide it all.)"<sup>59</sup> The above choice of traditional Javanese song and order of question-answer navigation by Cak Nun put Gunretno in a cornered and despicable position. On the one hand, the big name of Gunretno was tarnished, but the image of Franky Welirang was raised on the other. As if Gunretno was portrayed like this: "*Kamu koar-koar soal lingkungan dan segala macam, dan ketika ada musibah ini, apa*

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> AN, "Interview," August 14, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> FA, "Interview."

*yang bisa kamu lakukan. Intinya seperti itu kira-kira.*” “(You talk about the environment and all kinds of things, and when this calamity occurs, what you can do. The main point is like that.)”<sup>60</sup>

After the stage fragment of fund raising, Cak Nun continued his performance by discussing the cement-mining polemic in Pati. For example, Cak Nun analogized karst to having a beard that can re-grow naturally although it is regularly cut, suggesting that preserving karst is like having a beard that can be cut (mined).<sup>61</sup> In short, the whole set of plays in the stage performance that night was arranged in a certain rhythm to corner Gunretno, “*Kang Gun waktu itu dibantai habis-habisan oleh Cak Nun... Saya sudah stres, modar Kang Gun nanti bilang apa ini. Gimana jawabannya. Habis pokoknya.*” “(Kang Gun was completely slaughtered by Cak Nun... I was already stressed. He was dead of fleas, what Kang Gun would tell later. How the answers would be. He was finished.)”<sup>62</sup>

Surprisingly, in such a cornered and despicable position, Gunretno attempted to find and grab the microphone, despite attempts to obstruct his efforts. After holding the microphone, Gunretno launched a counterattack against the previous Cak Nun’s set of arguments and dialogical performance. Gunretno began by confirming Cak Nun’s interpretation of the song by saying, “*Mbah-mbah saya juga begitu. Dulu itu kalau menyuruh itu juga kalau ada tamu ya dipinarakno dan disuguhi sak apik-apik e. Aku tidak lupa yang begituan itu.*” “(My grandparents were like that too. In the past, they ordered that too, if there were guests, they were welcomed to sit down and be served as descent as possible. I did not forget that one.)”<sup>63</sup> Gunretno later added, “*Bener semua tapi ya tamunya jangan mengatur yang punya rumah. Lha kalau tamunya mengatur yang punya rumah berarti tamunya kurang ajar*” “(That is all correct, but the guests should not dictate the owner of the house. If the guest dictates who owns the

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> SO, “Conversation,” August 14, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> FA, “Interview.”

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

house, it means that the guest is rude).”<sup>64</sup>

Gunretno continued his rebuttal to Cak Nun’s argument and performance by claiming that the flash flood in Sukolilo was caused by the damaged ecosystem of northern Kendeng. As a matter of fact, the damaged ecosystem has resulted from the illegal logging and limestone mining that have been going on for years in northern Kendeng. Then, Gunretno argued that if the cement factory mines for cement, the northern Kendeng will be increasingly damaged because the raw material for cement will be taken from the Kendeng karst. As a result, the surrounding communities of northern Kendeng will be increasingly and continuously threatened by floods. By imitating Cak Nun’s previous style, Gunretno asked for clarification from the audience by saying, “*Seperti itu bagus apa tidak?*” “(Is that good or not?).” Simultaneously, the audience answered, “*tidak?*” “(no)” in unison. He also continued asking, “*Kalan gunungnya dibabisi, setuju atau tidak? Tidak?*” “(If the mountain is finished, do you agree or not? No).”<sup>65</sup>

Overtly, Gunretno pointed out that Franky Welirang, who was sitting on stage is one of *PT Indocement’s* bosses and has the desire to conduct karst-mining in northern Kendeng. “*Iya begitu atau tidak Cak Nun?*” “(Is that so or not Cak Nun?)” Gunretno confirmed to Cak Nun. Gunretno was finally able to reverse the situation at that time, “*...yang hadir itu malah mendukung Kang Gun. Forum itu akhirnya malah dikuasai Kang Gun. Diwalik grambyang?*” “(... those present were actually supporting Kang Gun. The forum ended up being taken over by Kang Gun. It was instantly reversed).” Then, to lock up the reversed situation, Gunretno walked out the stage by first asking permission from the audience by saying, “*Saya itu bukan orang Muslim, jadi kalau saya pamit dulu tidak apa-apa ya? Ya tidak apa-apa?*” “(I am not a Muslim, so if I go home earlier than others, is it okay? Yes, it is okay).”

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Actually, the audience's voice in response to Gunretno's confirmation sounded louder than Cak Nun's confirmation. As the coercive rhythm of Cak Nun against Gunretno was felt earlier in the tug of war, FA had taken the initiative to anticipate the unwanted situation by calling the anti-cement groups of Sukolilo to mobilize anti-cement supporters to attend there. In a very limited time, there were four trucks and one bus carrying the anti-cement people to the show. They then spread and mixed with other audiences, and this strategy was able to entice many others to follow the anti-cement's responses in confirming Gunretno's questions, resulting in a very loud atmosphere that night. Particularly, before Gunretno walked off the stage, he shouted the anti-cement slogan or yelled: "*Salam Kendeng*" "(Long Live Kendeng)" even after he left the stage many times, to which the audience responded with the word "*Lestari*" "(Sustainable)."

Deliberately, all the groups from Sukolilo (followed by many audiences who were swept away by the atmosphere and euphoria) walked around the town square by shouting "*Salam Kendeng. Lestari*" (Long Live Kendeng. Sustainable) again and again. Such reversed situation made Cak Nun very furious, seen from his face which turned to be fiery red: "*Cak Nun wajahnya merah padam*" (Cak Nun's face was fiery red).<sup>66</sup>

Apart from that, as he came late and missed the full show, AN did not believe that Cak Nun delivered supporting statements for the cement factory of *PT Indocement* and attempted to humiliate Gunretno at the stage. His disbelief stemmed from the fact that Cak Nun had previously been involved in resisting *PT Semen Gresik* several times, suggesting that Cak Nun's commitment against the cement factory in Pati was evident. AN admitted that Cak Nun once promised that he would personally negotiate with Franky Welirang because he personally knows him very well. Prior to the show, all he knows that the show was dedicated to raise funds for Sukolilo's flood victims. AN personally heard Cak Nun's statement

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

that the show was purely for the flood victims, and later he promised to meet Franky to talk about the cement factory, “*Kita enggak usah ngomong semen atau apa, pokoknya ini murni kemanusiaan. Sudah ada kesepakatan, nanti di lain tempat, ngomong ke Franky, ini benar-bener murni mengumpulkan dana untuk banjir*” “(We would not discuss cement or anything, just as pure humanity. This means, there was an agreement, later in another place, talking to Franky, this is really purely raising funds for the flood victims).”<sup>67</sup>

Thus, AN believes that there was nothing abnormal with Cak Nun that night. Cak Nun’s eccentric questions have been widely known in other stages. Actually, Cak Nun asked miscellaneous questions based on Gunretno’s statements at the stage. What was strange was Gunretno’s sudden behavior, as if it were pro-cement propaganda, so that he left the stage earlier. AN admitted that, in the previous meeting with Cak Nun in the local hotel of Pati, there was an agreement that they would not talk about cement on stage. “*Dua teman yang di hotel bilang tidak ada apa-apa. Memang sudah perjanjian, tidak akan ngomong semen, dsb. Dan, tidak ada omongan bagaimana prospek semen, tidak ada. Wong gembira-gembira aja. Udah.*” “(Two friends at the hotel said there was nothing. There had been an agreement; we would not talk about cement, etc. Nothing was said about the possibility of cement. We were all just happy. That’s all).” For this reason, AN decided to create his own anti-cement movement apart from Gunretno because he alleged that the sudden change in Gunretno’s attitude on the stage that night was due to someone controlling him.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the disparity in understanding the Cak Nun’s performance that night caused the previously united ally (AN and Gunretno) against *PT Semen Gresik* to split and forge their own path of resistance against *PT Indocement*.

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<sup>67</sup> AN, “Interview.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Controversies Continued

Cak Nun's controversial involvement in the *Lapindo* mudflow in Sidoarjo called into question his track record of defending the underprivileged. For example, the presence of Cak Nun at a protest against the nuclear power plant (NPP) in Jepara in July 2007<sup>69</sup> was taken cautiously by a local anti-NPP activist. A former affiliate of *Marem-Masyarakat Rekso Bumi* or the Earth Nurturing Society (a very influential local organization advocating environmental preservation and against nuclear power plants that was established in 2006)<sup>70</sup> called CMT said that he was surprised by the sudden presence of Cak Nun in the anti-NPP protest, although he assumed that Cak Nun was probably invited by other local activists. CMT admitted that he tried to keep Cak Nun from becoming more involved in the local anti-NPP movements so that they did not become as splintered as the victims of the *Lapindo* mudflow.<sup>71</sup> Also, soon after the controversy on the show stage over the flood's solidarity in Pati, FA met with the survivors of the *Lapindo* mudflow to find out what Cak Nun was doing there. He then came to the conclusion that, to some extent, the involvement of Cak Nun in Pati was similarly directed to bring about local fragmentation, as happened in the *Lapindo*.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, in 2017, Cak Nun and *Kiai Kanjeng* were invited by *PT Angkasa Pura* to hold religious preaching and prayers with a theme entitled "*Hijrah: Angon Kahanan Anyar (Peradaban Baru Pasca Operasional Bandara Internasional Yogyakarta)*" ("*Hijrah: Shepherding in a New Space New Civilization of Post Operational Yogyakarta International*

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<sup>69</sup> "Warga Jepara Tolak PLTN Muria," *Tempo*, last modified June 6, 2007, accessed February 11, 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Sulfikar Amir, "Challenging Nuclear: Antinuclear Movements in Postauthoritarian Indonesia," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2–3, 2020, pp. 283.

<sup>71</sup> CMT, "Interview," February 22, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> FA, "Interview."

Airport).”<sup>73</sup> His use of the Islamic concept of “*hijrah*” (the migration of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD) in his preaching received criticism. Al-Fayyadl argued that the word “*hijrah*” invited a polemic of meaning because it was intended by Cak Nun to legitimize the forced eviction carried out by *PT Angkasa Pura* against the villagers of Kulon Progo who refused to move. In other words, Cak Nun was accused of using Islamic concepts for the benefit of *PT Angkasa Pura*, so that the villagers would voluntarily be evicted.<sup>74</sup> Yet, Suratman responded back to Al-Fayyadl’s criticism by justifying that Cak Nun’s concept of *hijrah* is correct because the project was unstoppable and, therefore, Cak Nun provided a contextual understanding of *hijrah* for the greater benefit of the villagers and *umma* (Muslim population).<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

Cak Nun is a figure who has complete talents in various fields, from poetry, music, and culture to Islam, coupled with the ability to stage art. Cak Nun is also able to package certain “implicit messages” to navigate public opinion in a unique cultural staging work by romanticizing and mystifying them. His abilities can consistently draw a large audience for years, and a network of loyal audiences in various corners of Indonesia to strengthen his opinions’ reverberation. His various abilities plus his stage skills and large audience made him a charismatic figure, which later became an attraction to help form a certain political legitimacy, not only to defend the grassroots but also to defend the elites.

Cak Nun’s multiple talents and popularity have attracted various actors, from civil society, civil service and business sectors alike, to promote their respective causes for public support. Whether or not

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<sup>73</sup> “Angkasa Pura Airports Gelar Pengajian Dan Doa Bersama Masyarakat Kulon Progo,” *PT Angkasa Pura I*, last modified March 24, 2017, accessed April 3, 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Muhammad Al-Fayyadl, “Mistifikasi Kesadaran Rakyat yang Menderita oleh Cak Nun,” *Medium*, See, last modified June 22, 2018, accessed April 3, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Maman Suratman, “Konsep Hijrah Cak Nun dan Mistifikasi ala Fayyadl,” *Geotimes.co.id*, See, last modified January 3, 2018, accessed April 3, 2020.



he took his relationships with various and (sometimes) contesting actors as an opportunity for public reconciliation, the messages he conveyed in his performances are not always understood in a uniformed meaning. Instead, following his recent public appearance/performances amidst environmental crises in Sidoarjo, Pati, and Kulon Progo, he delivered confusing messages which resulted in the division and further fragmentation of those affected by the mining and environmental crises. Thus, the epithet that Cak Nun is “the champion of the grassroots” deserves further scrutiny and review now.

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