

GLOBAL VIEW

Hips Don't Lie

A pop singer and a potentially violent culture war in the world's biggest Muslim state.

by BRET STEPHENS

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JAKARTA, Indonesia--In 1992, a 13-year-old provincial Javanese girl shook her hips to the tune of the 1980s Western chart-topper "The Final Countdown." Onlookers noticed. The rest, as they say, is history-- and a potentially violent culture war in the world's most populous Muslim state.

Today, that girl, known here by her stage name Inul Daratista, is Indonesia's version of pop sensation Shakira, particularly when it comes to her astonishing dance routines. She specializes in a wildly popular folk-music genre called *dangdut*, which sounds roughly like a mix between Arabic folk songs and Bollywood show tunes and is the cultural equivalent of country music. For more than 30 years the genre has been associated with Islamic teachings thanks to the efforts of a singer named Rhoma Irama, aka "the Rajah of Dangdut." Ms. Daratista, however, has other ideas for what the music ought to be about.

"People are always craving something new and I offer it," she says in an interview in one of the eight karaoke clubs she owns with her husband. "Dangdut can appeal to everyone. You can have jazz dangdut and rock dangdut and salsa dangdut all combined with the traditional elements. It's all part of the globalization process." She sings songs of romance and self-fulfillment: "I want your love only for me," goes a lyric that, in polygamous Indonesia, means rather more than it does in the United States.



Inul Daratista

As Ms. Daratista sees it, her message aims to inspire listeners, particularly young women, to be true to themselves. "If you live according to the rules of other people you won't accomplish a thing," she says. Others see it differently. In 2003, she produced a music video that, according to reports, shows her moving suggestively over a prone man who is playing a flute. A council of 57 Muslim groups labeled the video *pornoaksi*, or "porno-action," and called a million of their followers into the street to demand that she be banned from television. Legislation was also introduced in parliament to forbid all forms of pornoaksi.

Among those leading the charge was Mr. Irama, himself one of dangdut's great innovators. In the early 1970s, inspired by hard rockers Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, he introduced electric guitars to what had previously been an all-acoustic ensemble. He later underwent what he describes as a religious conversion. "Before, I identified music with drugs, sex and defying God," he says in his sitting room, which is dominated by a framed picture of calligraphic Quranic verses. "But I was drawn to the thought that music could serve as a corridor to Islam." In contrast to Ms. Daratista, Mr. Irama's lyrics often consist of such pieties as "gambling poisons your life."

To no small extent, Mr. Irama's artistic career both tracks and explains the gradual Islamization of what was once a firmly secular country. He recalls the first time he greeted his audience with the religious *assalamualaikum* (peace be upon you) rather than the secular *selamat malam* (good evening). He was met with a hail of boos and tossed objects. But his Quranically inspired lyrics and restrained stage presence eventually won a new and worshipful audience. Dangdut, previously popular among nominally Muslim *abagan* Indonesians, also became the music of *santri*, practicing Muslims.

Today, Mr. Irama is as much a political figure as he is a cultural one. He serves as secretary general of the Forum of the Islamic Umma and helped draft the pornoaksi legislation by elucidating the distinction between what he considers appropriate styles of dance and dress and the impermissible eroticism of Ms. Daratista. His description of the latter is itself nothing if not explicit: "grinding her hips, going up and down, showing her rear to the audience in a manner that simulates sexual intercourse" and so on. As for dress, he believes that performers who expose their navels, cleavage or the upper half of their thighs are all engaged in "porno-action."

Not everyone draws the line in the same place. Azrul Tanjung, an ally of Mr. Irama and the principal organizer of the pornoaksi legislative effort, speaks of a "scale of arousal" to judge whether any given behavior crosses the line. (A woman with her back exposed, he believes, is acting pornographically.) Another man, a teacher at a religious boarding school, says he has no problems with Ms. Daratista performing her songs in public--provided she keeps bodily motions to a minimum and dresses herself from head to toe in loose fitting clothes.

At the same time, Ms. Daratista also has some notable defenders. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, spiritual head of the 40 million-strong Islamic organization Nadhlatul Ulama, has suggested that people offended by Ms. Daratista's televised gyrations would do better to change the channel than enact legislation. Another prominent theologian with Sufi inclinations, Mostafa Bisri, went so far as to paint a dancing Ms. Daratista surrounded by religious sheikhs. In the painting, the sheikhs appear undisturbed by the sight before them, as if to say that truly devout Muslims needn't resort to censorship to rise above earthly temptation.

These objections have succeeded in stalling the pornoaksi legislation, at least for now. It helps that at least some Indonesians are aware that it is Ms. Daratista who, in fact, has helped return dangdut to its secular (and sensual) roots, while it is Mr. Irama who is applying notions of Islam previously foreign to the genre. It also helps that Indonesians remain sufficiently proud of their traditions of cultural, political and religious pluralism to resist efforts to impose monolithic modesty codes that have little to do with actual pornography. Whether that will be true a generation from now is another question.

For her part, Ms. Daratista says she feels "heartbroken" by the accusations leveled against her and by the controversy she's stirred, not that she intends to retreat in the face of it. "To express myself as a human being is courageous, not pornographic." She proceeds to demonstrate the point with a display of singing and dancing this columnist isn't likely to witness again in his lifetime. As Shakira would say, hips don't lie.

Mr. Stephens is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board. His column appears Tuesdays.