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# **Frames of Power: The Evolution of Indonesian Cinema from Censorship to Conservatism**

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## **Abstract:**

Indonesian cinema has undergone significant transformations, shaped by the nation's shifting political and social landscapes. This article explores the evolution of Indonesian film across three key eras: the Suharto-led New Order (1967–1998), the Reformasi period (post-1998), and the contemporary conservative resurgence. During Suharto's authoritarian rule, cinema was strictly censored and used as a tool for state propaganda, with filmmakers navigating rigid restrictions on political and social content. The Reformasi era ushered in newfound artistic freedom, enabling filmmakers to explore themes of political resistance, human rights, and LGBTQ+ representation. However, in recent years, rising conservatism and religious influences have led to renewed restrictions on creative expression, particularly on films addressing gender, sexuality, and historical revisionism. This study examines how Indonesian cinema reflects and influences societal norms, analyzing its role in shaping national identity, public discourse, and the struggle for artistic freedom.

## **Keywords:**

Indonesian cinema, Suharto, censorship, Reformasi, conservatism, LGBTQ+ representation, film and politics, artistic freedom, national identity, religious influence

## **Introduction**

Indonesian cinema, like many national film industries, is deeply intertwined with the country's political and social landscape. The evolution of Indonesian cinema can be broadly categorized into three significant phases: the New Order era under Suharto (1967–1998), the Reformasi period (post-1998), and the current era, which sees a resurgence of conservative influences. Each of these phases has shaped not only the content of films but also their impact on societal norms and structures in Indonesia. This article explores the transitions within Indonesian cinema, focusing on how these shifts reflect and influence Indonesian society.

### **Suharto's Censorship Era: The New Order and Its Control Over Cinema (1967–1998)**

Under Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime, cinema was heavily regulated. The government viewed film as a tool for national propaganda and imposed strict censorship laws to suppress dissent and promote state ideology.

- **Censorship and Propaganda**

The Suharto regime exercised tight control over the film industry through the Film Censorship Board (Lembaga Sensor Film, LSF), which ensured that only films aligning with state ideology were produced and screened. Themes promoting nationalism, economic development, and military achievements were favored, while films that critiqued the government, explored communist ideology, or depicted politically sensitive issues were banned.

One of the most infamous films from this period was *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (1984), a propaganda film commissioned by the government to reinforce the official narrative of the 1965 coup and demonize the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The film was made mandatory viewing for schoolchildren and military personnel, reflecting the extent of state intervention in shaping historical memory through cinema.

- **Cultural and Social Restrictions**

Filmmakers faced immense restrictions regarding content, especially concerning religion, politics, and sexuality. Films that depicted corruption, social inequalities, or alternative viewpoints were often censored or prohibited. However, despite these challenges, some filmmakers managed to subtly critique the regime through allegorical storytelling and metaphorical representations. Directors like Teguh Karya and Arifin C. Noer used nuanced storytelling techniques to navigate state-imposed censorship while still addressing pressing social issues.

### **The Reformasi Era: Freedom and New Narratives (1998–2010s)**

The fall of Suharto in 1998 marked the start of the Reform Era, a period characterized by democratization, freedom of expression and a revival of the film industry. Filmmakers were no longer subject to rigorous government censorship, allowing them to explore diverse and previously repressed themes.

- **Emergence of Independent Cinema**

With the decline of state control, independent filmmakers gained prominence, producing films that tackled subjects such as political corruption, human rights violations, and gender identity. The rise of independent studios and digital filmmaking also allowed more diverse voices to emerge, particularly from marginalized communities.

Films such as *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) by Rudi Soedjarwo and *Pasir Berbisik* (2001) by Nan Achnas reflected a newfound willingness to engage with contemporary social issues, albeit in a commercial format. Meanwhile, *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) by Riri Riza explored themes of educational inequality and resilience, resonating deeply with Indonesian audiences.

- **Revisiting Historical Narratives**

Filmmakers also revisited historical events that had been manipulated or censored during Suharto's regime. Riri Riza's *Gie* (2005) portrayed the life of activist Soe Hok Gie, shedding light on dissent and resistance against authoritarian rule. Similarly, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, confronted the 1965 anti-communist purges, sparking intense debates about historical justice and collective memory. The Reformasi period thus witnessed a significant transformation in Indonesian cinema, where filmmakers were able to challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives on history and society.

### **Rise and Decline of LGBTQ+ Representation**

During the Reformasi era, LGBTQ+ themes began to emerge in Indonesian cinema. Films such as *Arisan!* (2003) and *Lovely Man* (2011) explored LGBTQ+ identities with a level of openness previously unseen in Indonesian cinema. These films received critical acclaim and gained a strong following, marking a progressive shift in the country's cinematic landscape.

However, this newfound representation faced significant backlash from conservative groups and religious authorities. By the late 2010s, the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters became increasingly controversial, with many films facing bans or social condemnation. The growing influence of religious conservatism curtailed creative freedoms, as seen in the strong opposition to *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* (2018), which faced provincial bans despite winning international awards. The decline of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream cinema illustrates how freedom of expression is being restricted under the guise of preserving religious and moral values.

### **The Contemporary Conservative Era: A New Wave of Restrictions? (2010s–Present)**

Despite the liberalization seen in the Reformasi era, recent years have witnessed a growing conservative influence in Indonesian cinema, largely driven by religious movements, political pressures, and social media discourse.

- **Rise of Religious and Moralistic Films**

With the increasing prominence of conservative Islamic values in the public sphere, religious-themed films have gained popularity. Movies such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008) and *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* (2013) reflect a shift towards Islamic-oriented narratives, catering to a growing demand for morally and religiously grounded storytelling.

While these films promote Islamic values, they have also led to debates about the portrayal of women, gender roles, and religious pluralism in Indonesian society. Some critics argue that these films reinforce conservative ideologies that restrict women's agency and suppress alternative interpretations of Islamic teachings.

- **Resurgence of Censorship and Political Influence**

Although Indonesia remains more open than it was during Suharto's regime, concerns about censorship have resurfaced. In recent years, films and documentaries tackling LGBTQ+ issues, government corruption, and religious intolerance have faced bans or restrictions.

The curtailment of artistic freedom is often justified in the name of religious and moral values. Hardline Islamic groups and conservative politicians have increasingly called for stricter regulations on films that they perceive as threatening traditional Indonesian culture. This trend signals a growing influence of religious fundamentalism on public discourse and media policies, posing a significant challenge to Indonesia's democratic and pluralistic ideals.

## **Conclusion**

The evolution of Indonesian cinema from Suharto's censorship era to the Reformasi period and the current conservative wave highlights the dynamic interplay between film, politics, and society. While the fall of Suharto enabled greater creative freedom and a diversity of narratives, recent years have seen a complex negotiation between liberal and conservative forces. Indonesian cinema continues to be a powerful medium for shaping and reflecting societal values, but its future trajectory remains uncertain as filmmakers navigate the ever-changing political and cultural landscape. Whether Indonesia moves towards greater openness or deeper conservatism will significantly impact the stories told on its silver screens—and the broader narratives that define Indonesian identity in the 21st century.

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