

# Western Dominance in Indonesia's Discipline of International Relations

Written by Ahmad Rizky M. Umar

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The discipline of International Relations (IR) is a Western social scientific enterprise. In 1977, Stanley Hoffmann declared that International Relations is essentially an *American Social Science*, because it was dominated by scholars based in the United States during the Cold War. Early historiographical works also show that IR discipline was born out of the Anglo-American geopolitical projects before and after the Second World War. The foundation of IR is inseparable with the construction of the post-1945 international order, which is dominated by Western countries.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, scholars have begun to criticise the Eurocentric nature of IR. Siba N. Grovogui criticised the negative image of 'Africa' in International Relations and International Law, which has always been contrasted with *civilised* Europe. Sankaran Krishna and Branwen Gruffyd Jones, similarly, also point out that IR is always entangled with colonialism and imperialism, whose legacies are still largely present in contemporary world politics. John Hobson, similarly, questions not only the 'Eurocentric' nature of IR, but also its close relationship with racism.

The Eurocentric and colonial nature of IR leads scholars to go widen IR canons and engage with non-Western scholarship. Robbie Shilliam argues that incorporating non-Western thoughts necessarily implies a critique of the imperialist legacies of the discipline. Amitav Acharya echoes this criticism in his famous ISA Presidential Speech by calling for a 'global' International Relations, which incorporates non-Western civilisational thinking outside the West. Drawing on these interventions, recent scholarship goes further by looking at the discipline of International Relations in the global south, such as Turkey or India and Brazil.

Nevertheless, there is still a question of whether calling for a 'global' IR by incorporating non-Western scholarship is sufficient to dismantle the Eurocentric foundations of the discipline. In a new article, I argue that 'global IR' is not sufficient to tackle the Western dominance. Drawing on an autoethnographic reflection from my experience as an IR student in Indonesia, I argue that Western dominance has been deeply entrenched in the country's IR discipline. More specifically, Western dominance shapes the foundation of IR discipline in Indonesia, *reproduced* in everyday academic discourse and *naturalised* through institutional practices of power in Indonesia.

It is important to first understand how Indonesian scholars developed IR as a discipline. The origins of the discipline itself was actually varied. Indonesian scholars established IR in the 1950s as a wider part of the government's quest for decolonisation and statebuilding after colonialism. It was no surprise that early Indonesian IR was originally developed to support the push for global decolonisation, particularly after the 1955 Bandung Conference.

Nevertheless, the direction of the discipline changed in the 1960s as General Soeharto toppled the nationalist Soekarno government, thus re-orienting IR –and social science in general— to support the government's developmentalist project. It was in this context that IR as a discipline was shaped by IR disciplinary development in the United States, particularly as new generations of Indonesian IR scholars returned from the United States after their PhDs and re-institutionalised IR according to the Anglo-American tradition. This changing development shaped the Western dominance in Indonesian IR's academic tradition.

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I encountered the Western dominance in Indonesian IR discipline since the first time I was introduced to the discipline. As a first-year IR student, our primary reading was Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, which was compulsory in the *Introduction to International Relations*. As I learned IR further, I encountered other canons in the discipline, which are dominated by three 'big' perspectives: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. This dominant view is reflected by the textbook that was then used in the *International Relations Theory* course.

The Western dominance is not only visible through the textbook, but also in the construction of disciplinary boundary. As an IR student, I had to write an Undergraduate Thesis that deals with a particular issue in international politics, and this should be defended in front of examiners. There is one question that is usually asked of an IR student during the examination: "which part of your research is IR?" This question demands students to justify their research in accordance with an accepted theoretical framework within the discipline, which shows an effort from IR academics to gatekeep IR from what is considered as 'non-IR' project.

My experience thus shows two implications of Western dominance in the academic IR discipline. First, Western dominance leads to the prioritisation of English-language scholarship or a scholarship written by Western scholars over Indonesian academic works, which inadvertently creates an 'inferiority complex' among Indonesian scholars. Indonesian IR students, ironically, are more familiar with the writings of John Mearsheimer or Stephen Walt than Indonesian scholars like Dewi Fortuna Anwar or Hadi Soesastro. Moreover, the gatekeeping and differentiation between 'IR' and 'non-IR' also discourages students from elaborating on the Indonesian case (except on Indonesia's foreign policy) for their research, which leads to lack of engagement with Indonesian scholarship.

Second, the Western dominance leads to the exclusion of academic traditions that are considered as 'subversive' in the country, such as Marxism and critical IR theory. The exclusion has been historically embedded with the massive persecutions and killings of communists between 1965-1966, whose legacies are still largely felt today. As a result, scholars within this tradition have to use non-academic space to spread their words and thoughts. Indeed, many Indonesian IR scholars have used non-academic publications like magazines, online websites, or podcasts to showcase their works, primarily due to fear of backlash or persecution, in addition to lack of space for this kind of work in formal academic traditions.

This Western dominance has several implications for academic IR tradition in general. First, there is a lack of engagement of the Indonesian IR discipline with the rich history of Indonesia's international thoughts. The Western dominance leads Indonesian strategic and political thinkers unfits within IR disciplinary space. These problems also resonate with the larger concerns of Western dominance and missing non-Western scholarship in IR discipline. As proponents of Global IR have rightly noted, the Western dominance leads to the non-acknowledgement of non-Western scholars in IR discipline, even in their own country.

Nevertheless, while the call for 'global IR' is important and timely, it is not sufficient to dismantle Western dominance in IR's academic tradition. The Western dominance in academic IR discipline outside the West is still strong, and it constrains IR scholars from fully engaging with non-Western scholars. In order to fully embrace a 'global IR', we need to unsettle the Western dominance in the foundation of IR discipline outside the West, and fully acknowledge the dynamics of everyday knowledge production across the World. In other words, it is important to question the Eurocentric foundation of the discipline that originates either from colonialism, or from US imperialism during and after the Cold War.

Indonesian scholars also play a role in challenging this Western dominance and thus contribute to further decolonise IR scholarship. In the past three years, I have to mention that Indonesian scholars now increasingly embrace the call for 'global IR' and engage with 'the Global South' perspective to redefine IR. This is a positive development, and it is important to widen this trend in the future by engaging younger scholars to continue to enrich knowledge production within the Indonesian IR discipline.

But 'globalising' IR scholarship also necessitates reflexivity and self-criticism. It is equally important to be self-reflective with our own discipline in teaching and research, as well as with the 'power' dimension in local knowledge production. There should be criticism of the role of the Indonesian intellectual in strengthening authoritarianism and

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legitimising mass killings in the past, as well as complicity in imperialism. Thus, a critical reflection of the discipline will be essential to embrace a truly 'global' IR scholarship, and furthermore 'globalising' genuine Indonesian IR scholarship in the future.

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## About the author:

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