



## **THE 2001 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR EMERGENT LEADERSHIP**

### **BIOGRAPHY OF DITA INDAH SARI**

**I**n a country where the first of May, International Labor Day, is not a holiday, where independent trade unions are illegal, and where women are expected simply to be good wives and mothers, Dita Indah Sari could be described as a misfit.

Defying the Indonesian establishment and her own family, she left school, organized trade unions, and led public protests. She took her country and its government to task for decades of exploitation and abuse of workers and women. For that crusade she paid a heavy price; she was harassed, beaten, and jailed. Today, as a free woman, she continues to court danger as an outspoken labor leader in a country that, despite new freedoms, remains hostile to those who challenge the entrenched system.

Nothing in Dita's background would suggest that she would one day become an outspoken activist. A New Order baby, she was born in Medan, Sumatra, on December 20, 1972, five years after General Suharto seized power from Indonesia's first president, Sukarno.

Dita was raised by middle-class parents of divergent ethnic and religious backgrounds. Her father, Adjidar Ascha, was a Muslim from Padang Panjang in West Sumatra. Her late mother, Magdalena Willy Frederika Ferdinandus was an English- and Dutch-speaking Christian from Medan, East Sumatra.

Born in 1936, Adjidar was a modernist Muslim and a member of the large national organization Muhammadiyah. Like other reform-minded Muslims, he believed that modern societies need modern schools and that people should strive to be well educated. He attended the Gadjah Mada University but failed to finish his degree due to the pressures from his job.

Adjidar mingled with intellectuals, novelists, and poets, such as Rendra, Taufik Ismail, and Taufik Abdullah. He was active in the workers' organization Sentral Organisasi Karyawan Swadiri Indonesia (SOKSI), which he helped form in 1959 to counter a more radical left-wing workers' movement. Under Suharto's New Order, he was a member of Parliament from Suharto's ruling party, Golkar.

His wife, Willy, was also a member of SOKSI. Six years younger than Adjidar, she belonged to an ethnic group that looked kindly on Indonesia's former colonizers, the Dutch, and that thought of itself as being a cut above the rest because many of its members could speak English and Dutch. Willy studied law at the University of North Sumatra in Medan but, like her husband, dropped out when she started working as an interpreter-secretary at Bata, a Czechoslovakian shoe company.

Dita's parents met in Medan at a party hosted by the shipping company Adjidar worked for. Over the objections of her family, Willy converted to Islam when she married Adjidar. Their union produced two children; the firstborn, Dian, a son, is three years older than Dita.

Adjidar had four other children from a previous marriage. Both his families lived in Medan even though his job required him to remain in Jakarta for extended periods. Dita grew up knowing her four other siblings. They are not close, she says, "but we are friends."

Dita spent the first ten years of her life in Medan. Since her parents were not devout Muslims, she and her brother were not raised as such. They spoke Indonesian at home, but Dita learned a few Dutch words from her mother.

At the age of six, Dita entered Harapan (Hope), a private Muslim school and one of the best in Medan. She excelled there, always ending the school year as the first or second in her class. Seeing Dita's outstanding academic performance, Willy began to have great expectations for her daughter. She not only prodded Dita to study, she also enrolled her in other courses such as piano, English, and French, when Dita was barely eight or nine years old.

"There are a lot of things you can do," Willy constantly told Dita. To the child's disappointment, however, Willy put her foot down when Dita said she wanted to learn only ballet. Willy did not think a career in dance would be promising or profitable.

Dita made many friends in Harapan. "Everything seemed so easy at the time. Life was simple then and the school was fine," she recalls.

But things were not so fine at home. Dita missed the guidance of a father during most of her growing-up years. Adjidar had moved to Jakarta in the late 1970s because of his work. Willy, who now worked for Mobil Oil, refused to follow him there and decided instead to stay in Medan with her children. To make ends meet, she sold the family house and rented a smaller place. Also, for two years or so, Willy and her children lived with Willy's aging mother in the northern part of Medan. Dita became close to her Christian maternal cousins, with whom she had frequent reunions at birthday parties and Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Because Dita rarely saw her father, she grew up knowing only one person she could look up to as a model, her mother. She admired Willy for her ability to juggle family concerns and a successful career—a rarity in conservative Indonesia. Dita remembers that her mother was a modern career woman whose job took her to Singapore and Malaysia. She wore Western clothes and enjoyed dancing and dinner parties.

When Dita was eleven, her parents divorced. This event neither surprised nor devastated her, for she had grown accustomed to living apart, but it hurt her nevertheless because she saw her mother's frustration and Dian's sadness. "That was what affected me," she says, "not the breakup itself, but seeing how my mother lived in misery after that." She remembers her mother saying, "What should I do? I already left my family and my religion and now I have to face the reality that everything didn't work out. All of my sacrifices didn't work out." Willy returned to Christianity and, unable to face her own family and her husband's family, moved to Jakarta with the children in 1988. In the big city, she thought, no one knew her and she could start a new life. Dita was sixteen and in junior high school. She did not want to relocate to Jakarta, but her mother was adamant.

Willy herself made a great sacrifice in leaving Medan. Her job as executive secretary of the Mobil Oil director not only paid well but also allowed her to enjoy benefits such as health insurance and a car. Because she earned more than her husband did, she did not need his financial support. She was forty-six years old when she moved to Jakarta and had difficulty finding a job as lucrative as her former one. The human resources office of Sempoerna, a large Indonesian cigarette firm with offices in Jakarta, hired her, but the pay was not high and there were no benefits. The family had to adjust to living in a smaller house and taking public transportation.

Dita quickly learned to cope with her new environment. Among other things, there was her new school: Perkumpulan Sekolah Kristen Jakarta (PSKD, or Jakarta Christian Union School), a coeducational Protestant high school. (Willy had wanted a Catholic school for her but Dita was late for enrollment.)

She had been happy in Harapan, but no particular teacher there had inspired her. In fact, she did not like the teachers there because, she says, they taught an intolerant kind of Islam. They told the students to "be careful of the non-Muslims. You are different. You are higher than they are. You are going to heaven."

“What I learned from my school,” she says, “was that religion only offers promises and warnings or threats: when you don’t obey Allah, you will go to hell. If you don’t pray five times a day, you will go to hell. [My teachers at Harapan] did not teach me that we should love each other and be generous even to the non-Muslims. This is the most common way of teaching Islam to children. That’s how children grow up [to be] intolerant.” She distinctly remembers the argument she had with her religion teachers over her mother’s return to Christianity. The teachers told Dita that although Willy was still her mother, “she’s now different from you. If you pray for her, God won’t deliver the blessings of the prayer because she is not a Muslim. It’s only Muslims who are blessed.”

Dita and her brother remained Muslims. But Dita could not believe that God “is so bad that He would [assist] only Muslims and ignore people of different religions.” Willy and her Christian relatives helped open Dita’s eyes to the importance of tolerance. And so did her new life in Jakarta.

Dita breezed through the transition from a Muslim to a Protestant style of education. Unlike the very conservative environment to which she had been accustomed, at PSKD boys and girls related freely to one another. The new prayers and services with their Christian songs interested her, and she found the teachings from the Bible exciting. She was happy to learn that there were some Muslims and many Catholics at the school and that their religious affiliations were not a problem. She became the only Muslim member of the church choir and attended the choir’s spiritual retreat. On Muslim holidays her Christian friends visited her at her home; she returned the favor at Christmas. She learned, she says, “that tolerance is a beautiful thing.”

As a teenager, Dita developed a love for reading. Her mother gave her a book on the life of Sukarno. This led her to search for other published materials about Indonesia’s first president, including the biography of his daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Sukarno became one of Dita’s idols.

Her mother also lent her the book *Child of All Nations* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Willy had borrowed the book, considered subversive in Indonesia under Suharto’s New Order, from an officemate of hers who was a daughter-in-law of the author. Although Dita was only sixteen at the time and could not understand the historical period in which the book was set, reading it encouraged her to learn more. She also liked Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* and *Broken Wings*, as well as the teachings of India’s Mahatma Gandhi. She kept abreast of world events by reading newspapers and magazines. This is also how she first learned about the ministry among the dying in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) of Mother Teresa, whom she admired.

Socially, Dita led a normal teenage life. She went out on dates but, being shy, was more comfortable being with her girlfriends. She loved to play the piano and sing. She was a fan of Western teen icons such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, and the Police. She knew many of their songs and kept cassette tapes of them. She also liked to watch films. Her favorite was *The Godfather*.

In 1991, having finished high school, Dita enrolled in the law program at the prestigious University of Indonesia, as her mother had done before her. It was a source of pride to Dita that she passed the entrance examination at the university, since many of her high school friends had failed it. She herself had flunked the entrance tests at the Bandung Institute of Technology and telecommunications school. Science, she says, was not her strong suit; language and writing were. Willy dreamed that her daughter would become a lawyer since she herself had dropped out of law school. She wanted Dita to apply for a fellowship at Harvard University afterwards. Dita’s own interest in the legal profession sprang, she says, from her weekly exposure to the American television series *L.A. Law*.

To attend her university classes, Dita had to live in a student dormitory; her home was quite far from the school. When she and her classmates ran out of money, they subsisted on noodles or resorted to an eat-now-pay-later arrangement with the food stall owners.

In 1992, Dita had her first brush with activism. At a university teach-in, she joined other students in a discussion forum about subjects such as the structure of the Indonesian state and economy, politics, and religion. The teach-in was supplemented by readings, among them some writings by Karl Marx. Although she immediately felt that something was “wrong with the book of Marx,” she was curious to know more. She became a regular member of a study group and one of its few women. From the beginning, she felt a strong sense of belonging. She was exhilarated by the freedom to speak her mind, by the feedback she received from the group’s facilitators, and by the questions they asked to help her reach her own conclusions. These dialogues turned out to be an eye-opener for Dita. She was shocked to learn, for example, that the military could not be expected to side with workers because, historically, it had been the duty of armies to protect states against rebellious slaves.

The group met in secret, but Dita was not aware that the discussions were considered subversive (or illegal) until she was given a book titled *Indonesia: Law, Propaganda, and Terror*. The book, which explained the 1965 failed coup in which several military officers were murdered and more than three hundred thousand alleged communists were massacred in subsequent army-initiated attacks, gave her a new perspective on that period of her country’s history. It also made her realize that there were many things she did not know about Indonesia. As Dita grew dissatisfied with her other university activities such as the choir and mountain climbing and spelunking, the study group provided her with what she was looking for: substance and engagement.

Although Roman Catholics are a small minority in Indonesia (some 5 percent), Catholic students comprised a majority of the study group. From her interactions with them, Dita came to appreciate the Catholic teaching of loving others as one would love oneself. She wondered why Islam, her own religion, did not teach the same thing.

During the Suharto era, the police and military routinely harassed university campuses, arresting politicized students, charging them with subversion and sometimes imprisoning them. Dita and her friends were courting danger with their clandestine meetings. But the threat of arrest did not stop them. They held their meetings at night and on weekends when there were no classes. They planned each meeting carefully, including the security requirements. They posted lookouts and knew what to do in case of a surprise visit by the police: pretend to be doing something else. The ruse was complete with make-believe props like materials for extracurricular activities. This cat-and-mouse game was more than just an adventure for the young activists. It was, Dita says, a “process of learning.”

The study-group discussions quickly spread to other campuses in Jakarta. Through them Dita met other student activists. At the end of 1992, some of them joined to form a national movement called Jakarta Students’ Solidarity, which became the nucleus of Solidaritas Mahasiswa Indonesia untuk Demokrasi (SMID, or Student Solidarity for Democracy in Indonesia). SMID’s goals were to topple the Suharto dictatorship, dismantle the dual military-civilian functions of the military, and expand their movement to include workers, peasants, and the urban poor. To help them strengthen their ties to the workers, the study group institutionalized in 1994 an immersion program that required members to live for two months with the poor. This experience changed Dita’s life.

Dita now moved into a small room with four young women workers employed in garment factories in Pluit, an industrial area in North Jakarta. Their neighborhood was a

typical slum. It was crowded and dirty and had no running water or private toilets. People had to pay for every pail of filthy water and, if they wanted to use the toilet in the middle of the night, they had to walk very far to reach the twenty-four-hour public one. The area was often flooded; the canal running through it was like a giant garbage bin. Food was not clean. The children had worms and were often sick with typhoid.

During her first week in Pluit, Dita herself developed a severe case of diarrhea. In time, however, she became inured to the neighborhood's deplorable living conditions and settled down to work. In the mornings, when her roommates went off to work, she stayed behind to watch their things and to write her reports. Later in the day, she interviewed other workers who were assigned to afternoon or night shifts. From her interviews, Dita learned that workers were paid only 3,800 rupiahs a day, or U.S.\$1.20. This amount was not even enough to buy decent food, much less pay for rent, transportation, and other basic expenses. Some of the workers were expected to send money to their families in the villages.

Although she spent most of her time in North Jakarta, Dita also conducted interviews and lived with workers in other parts of Java, as well as Palembang and Lampung in Sumatra. Wherever she went, she found the living conditions of the working class the same. Their cement houses were small, stiflingly hot, and poorly ventilated. It was in one of these houses that Dita saw what she describes as the "saddest baby I've ever seen." The child of a woman garment-factory worker and a security guard, the four-month-old baby had puffy hands and cheeks and could not cry out loud. Unable to buy milk for her, the mother breastfed her before going to work in the morning and before sleeping at night; she usually worked overtime. In her absence, the baby's grandmother took care of her, feeding her very sweet tea supplemented by soya and porridge. The child was covered with flour instead of powder to protect her from mosquitoes.

"She didn't smile a lot," remembers Dita. "She just stared at you and she didn't move much. She was not a healthy baby." Dita told her colleagues they had to act soon to ensure there would be no more babies that had to live as she did.

This brief exposure to workers' living conditions pushed Dita to devote more time and energy to educating workers about labor laws and, in time, helping them to form workers' action committees. As the number of such committees grew, Dita linked committees from one local workplace to those in others and, then, to committees in different areas—building a network of action committees. Through the network, workers began to realize that they shared a common problem: they were all being exploited.

Dita organized her first committee in April 1993 for employees of a Pluit-based tin factory, the Chomita Can Corporation. The factory had about three hundred employees, mostly women who had not finished high school. The workers were paid the minimum wage of 3,800 rupiahs a day. Although exposed to many risks at the can factory, they were not covered by accident insurance. By helping them compute the real value of their daily production and comparing this to their daily pay, Dita led the workers to discover that their pay was only 3 to 4 percent of the value of their production. Their computations also showed that the company could afford to pay them 5,000 to 7,000 rupiahs a day. Consequently, the committee demanded a daily wage increase of 1,500 rupiahs and asked the employer to shoulder their medical bills in case of an accident.

The factory management refused to sit down with Dita's committee, insisting that only the government-led union, Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (SPSI, or All-Indonesian Working People's Union), had the right to negotiate for the workers' wages. The Chomita workers refused to allow the SPSI to speak on their behalf and decided to go on strike.

To prepare them for the strike, Dita's group gave the workers three important instructions: (1) choose a day or period when orders from buyers are very high because

that is when a strike will be most effective; (2) ensure that workers in essential production units are well-informed and ready to join; and (3) make sure the company's warehouses are locked so that it cannot make deliveries.

The strike, the company's first, went on for three days. The shocked management promised to grant a daily wage increase of three hundred rupiahs to all workers after only three days of negotiations. The company also promised to pay the doctors' fees and medicines of the workers, in case of illness. The workers, represented by Dita's committee, accepted management's offer.

It was Dita's first taste of success as a labor organizer. She was not so lucky with her next case, however, and henceforth her organizing work produced mixed results. She learned how important it was to educate the workers so that they could discern the difference between trivial concessions by management and critical ones, such as a hike in their minimum wage. But she also learned to remind workers that compromise was important. She advised them to "accept what is possible" during negotiations; labor could not always push its maximum demands. When companies refused to budge at all, however, she encouraged workers to fight rather than lose by default.

Working underground posed special problems. Many companies refused to talk to her and her colleagues because their organization was illegal. To solve the problem, Dita worked behind the scenes, closely monitoring the process of negotiations and coaching workers' representatives on the negotiating panel. She instructed them to speak only with decision-makers so as not to prolong the negotiations and never to enter the venue of the talks if police and military men were in the room. (It was a common practice for Indonesian companies to invite police and military personnel to the negotiations to intimidate workers.)

As Dita plunged ever deeper into labor activism, she encountered the extraordinary advantages that multinational companies derived from operating in Indonesia. Companies such as Nike, for example, could always get one of their other branches to produce their products if one was on strike. She argued that workers for such companies would receive decent living wages only when the government insisted that they do so and when strong unions protected the rights of workers. However, Indonesia's minimum-wage laws favored the powerful employers, not their employees. She cites the case of Levi's jeans, where workers were paid the minimum wage because the company insisted that this was government policy. The same line was taken by the makers of Reebok shoes, who rejected workers' demands for higher wages, saying that paying the minimum wage was not against the law. Some five thousand workers went on strike over the company's intransigence in 1995.

Although Dita did not object to the entry of foreign investors, she believed that the government should be selective in wooing them. It should review the reputation of a company beforehand. Is it, for instance, a human rights violator? Will its operations harm the environment? And so on.

Dita learned that a strong union alone cannot always spell victory for workers. An example was the strike at a Sustagen (Mead Johnson) milk plant in 1993. The union decided on a limited work stoppage, fearing that bacteria would accumulate in the baby's milk if workers in some parts of the production line joined the strike. As it happened, a lot of the milk was spoiled and union members spent a lot of time throwing away the bacteria-laced Sustagen to make sure that it did not end up on the market. As a result, during critical negotiations with management, the attention of the union was divided.

The more Dita learned about the exploitation of workers, the more she realized that the situation had to change. Along with other activists, she organized the Pusat Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia (PPBI, or Center for Indonesian Workers' Struggle) in 1994. The neophyte organization, an umbrella group for labor activists, had ten thousand to fifteen thousand

members. Dita was chosen secretary-general. She believes she was asked to lead the new group because her colleagues saw her as the most active person in organizing workers, forming factory committees, leading labor actions and strikes, and imparting education. In addition, she says, the founding members believed that “if there are two persons, a man and a woman, with the same credibility and the same commitment and capability, then one should pick the woman.”

At first, Dita declined the leadership post, saying she did not want to end up in jail like her hero, the South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela. She gave in only when she was reminded, “You have to be like Mandela, but this time a young female Mandela. You see how great he is as a person, as a political leader, as a leader of the people.” Thinking of the responsibility she was taking on, Dita wept. She and her colleagues were young and inexperienced. The job was difficult and dangerous. “I felt like I was holding a very small baby and I had to be very careful with the baby in my hands.”

The times were volatile. The year PPBI was founded, the number of wildcat labor actions in Indonesia shot up to at least a thousand. It was part of Dita’s work to help consolidate these spontaneous, disparate, and illegal actions into an organized movement.

Dita knew all the risks that underground labor organizing entailed, specifically facing the police and military personnel who were deployed to break picket lines and to arrest the leaders of mass actions. In August 1994, she had her first brush with the military during a demonstration at the Ganda Guna Indonesia factory in Tangerang. She and some students and workers were arrested and beaten by the police. After spending one night at the police station, they were taken to the District Military Command (Indonesian acronym: KODIM). They expected the worst, torture and even execution, but they were merely slapped around. Among the group was a lawyer, thus, they were able to contact a legal aid foundation that worked for their immediate release.

In those days, Dita and her colleagues were always on the run. Many fellow activists were in hiding or were already in custody. Only the Catholic Church, two priests in particular, provided comfort and succor. Father Sandiawan Sumardi hid Dita’s group in his brother’s house, while Father Ismartono, a Jesuit, took them into his convent. The priests and some nuns fed them and offered to help them seek asylum abroad—passports and visas and plane tickets. But Dita and her friends were not interested in going anywhere else. Indeed, their activities were intensifying. In 1994, Dita participated in forming a new political organization called the People’s Democratic Union, forerunner of Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD, or People’s Democratic Party) of 1996 that committed itself to the full democratization of Indonesian society. Dita was acknowledged as a leader from the beginning.

Given Dita’s headlong leap into labor organization and political activism, her legal studies at the University of Indonesia suffered. She missed classes and tests, failed her subjects, and was eventually expelled. By 1995, she had finished three years of the five-year law course. But she has no regrets about leaving school. She says, “You can learn more, you can contribute more, living with workers than [you can] sitting in class. Also, what I was learning about the law [in school] was not what I saw in reality.” Her work had become her life: “I identify my project so much with myself that if I stopped I would have no idea what my life means or who I am.”

Dita became a fixture in the labor movement and at numerous strikes and mass actions. She led the 1995 celebration of International Labor Day and was at the forefront of the Great River strike that same year, in which fifteen thousand workers and students protested. Great River—a factory that produces brassieres for such companies as Triumph, Donna Karan, Amo, Wacoal, and Sritex—was owned by Harmoko, President Suharto’s information minister, and Tutut, his daughter.

Many of the demonstrations in which Dita participated were attacked by the military. She was often picked up and beaten in front of the workers with sticks and the back of an M-16 rifle. At one demonstration, she was also subjected to the “electric stick,” which burned her skin. She says she still has a small burn scar on her stomach.

The strong-arm tactics of the police and the military could not but instill fear among the activists, including Dita herself. But the rising spiral of state violence corresponded to a dramatic rise in labor actions, evidence of the increasing influence of the movement. For Dita, things came to a climax in April 1996, the year in which she was elected chair of PPBI. She had already been arrested several times and, along with beatings, had been briefly detained. This time she was charged with subversion and the consequences were severe.

The charges stemmed from her leadership of a large demonstration involving twenty thousand people and eleven factories in Surabaya. It had taken the organizers two months to plan the action. Protesters were expected to come from sites across Java to demand, among other things, a minimum wage of seven thousand rupiahs a day, freedom of association in every workplace, and an end to military intervention in labor actions. Dita had already been involved in a successful mass action in Surabaya, one reason the organizers invited her to lead this one.

The Indonesian military, however, did not want another successful mass action in Surabaya. The men in uniform were also apparently piqued by the workers’ demand that they stop intervening in labor conflicts. At the height of the demonstration, soldiers arrested Dita and nineteen others and took them to the local police station. Dita refused to answer questions until injured protesters had been given medical attention. Before the day was over, seventeen of those arrested were released. But Dita and two other PRD members were beaten and locked in a cell.

The authorities searched the offices of the movement and the houses of suspected unionists. In Jakarta, they ransacked Dita’s office and found her diary. It contained her thoughts about anti-Indonesia resistance movements in East Timor, Aceh, and Papua New Guinea as well as passages about the workers’ movement, her party, and the Suharto dictatorship. These diary entries were used as evidence in her trial for subversion and criminal agitation against the state. Among other things, she was accused of forming an illegal political party that sought to revolutionize Indonesia’s political structure, by democratizing it.

During her trial at the regional court of Surabaya, Dita was defiant. She passed out flowers to the judge, prosecutors, and spectators and read PRD’s manifesto. She used the trial as a platform from which to speak of the issues raised by the prosecution. She told the court of the need to hold a referendum in East Timor. (This former Portuguese colony had been seized by Indonesia in 1975 and held under military occupation until 1999.) She also called attention to Indonesian military operations in rebellious Aceh Province and human rights violations committed against the Acehnese in the course of counterinsurgency operations.

In July 1997, Dita was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison. The sentence was reduced to five years upon appeal. Life in prison was hell for Dita. She was shuffled from one prison to another, from the police station to Medaeng Detention Center in Surabaya, to a women’s prison in Malang, East Java, and finally to Tangerang, on the outskirts of Jakarta.

Dita quickly learned that prison inmates were required to perform cleaning services. With the others, she now cleaned the floors and toilets and threw out the garbage. But she remained a staunch activist even behind bars. At the detention center in Surabaya, she

stood up for the other detainees and complained to the warden about its abusive guards and poor facilities. She warned that there might be trouble if the center continued to press for money from detainees and their families (so-called informal taxes) while failing to provide adequate facilities. Subsequently, when detainees launched an uprising involving a fire—a fire in which Dita lost her books and clothes—it was blamed on her.

Two months after Dita's incarceration began, Willy passed away. On the very day she died, Dita had woken up early to prepare for Willy's visit to the detention center. When the guard called Dita's name, she was surprised to see not her mother but her lawyer, who told her the news. Willy had suffered a third and fatal stroke as she was about to board the car that would bring her to the prison. (Willy's two previous strokes had corresponded with traumatic events in Dita's life: the Great River strike during which she was beaten and her incarceration for subversion following the Surabaya mass action.)

Through her lawyer, Dita asked to be allowed to pay her final respects to her mother. The request was granted, and Dita was given forty-five minutes to do so, escorted by policemen and guards from the center. Willy's body was then flown to Jakarta for the funeral, but Dita was not allowed to make the trip. Far from feeling bitter over her mother's passing, she drew strength from it for the work ahead.

When Dita and other detainees were transferred to the women's prison in Malang, their movements were strictly controlled and monitored. Dita herself was placed in isolation. She recalls, "There was no music, no radio, no television, no news, no newspapers, no magazines. Women's magazines were allowed, but not if [opposition figure] Megawati was in it. Some people could visit but only once a week, and only for fifteen minutes." In Malang, prison officials launched a smear campaign against her. Both the inmates and the guards were made to believe that she was dangerous. As a result, even when she spoke of harmless subjects, she was haunted by the fear that the other prisoners would misinterpret her and report her to the guards.

This experience, she says, was "mentally and psychologically tiring." Under the Indonesian Constitution, a prisoner's place of detention must be as close as possible to his or her family home. Dita's family petitioned for her to be transferred to the women's prison in Tangerang, near Jakarta; after a year, she was. Also, a protest lodged with the National Commission on Human Rights by Dita's father and her friends over her solitary confinement led to another concession: she and other inmates were permitted access to information. (Even so, Dita's prison guards honored this "privilege" selectively. She was allowed only one newspaper per day, given to her after 8:00 p.m.)

It was during her time in prison that Dita came face-to-face with the harsh realities of life for many Indonesian women. She learned that 70 percent of the cases against women were related to abuses committed by men. Of those imprisoned for murder, some 60 percent had murdered their husbands because they could no longer endure years of physical abuse. Many of the women inmates were single parents who had resorted to crime in order to feed their children. Like many of the other women prisoners, Dita was not spared sexual abuse while in prison. But, she emphasizes, she was not raped.

From the start of her involvement in labor activism, Dita knew that her family did not support her. Both her parents had told her that she could help workers more as a lawyer. With Willy's death, however, the family realized how much Dita was suffering in prison and began to visit her. Her father, a Golkar loyalist and a stalwart of the official workers' union, came to recognize the legitimacy of Dita's cause and became upset when the government labeled her and her colleagues, and their parents, as communists. (This charge was repeatedly made against the PRD by the anticommunist New Order regime.)

Again, it was a Catholic priest who helped Dita cope with life in prison. Generally, neither Muslims nor Christians wanted to have anything to do with prisoners whom the government branded as communists. But this priest gave Dita a book about liberation theology and the writings of outspoken Catholic religious leaders like the slain Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and the Philippines' Jaime Cardinal Sin. The examples of their lives inspired her.

Dita's fellow Muslims, however, made prison life difficult for her. They insisted she was a communist and therefore an atheist. In prison, five days a week, three hours a day, Dita had to undergo "religious education" during which she was required to read the Koran and listen to the questioning and preaching of Muslim teachers about the purpose of her life. These feeble attempts to wean her away from her cause failed utterly. Indeed, life as a prisoner reinforced Dita's determination to change her country's unjust economic and political system. She became convinced that if these systems did not change, Indonesia's jails would have more inmates every year.

Many well-known individuals, among them Madeleine Albright, U.S. secretary of state during the administration of President Bill Clinton, and international organizations like Amnesty International and the International Labor Organization, boosted Dita's morale through letters of solidarity and other expressions of support. The Body Shop cosmetics chain launched a campaign on her behalf in eight countries including Japan, Australia, the Netherlands, and England, and made her its "mascot" in 1996. All Body Shop counters displayed her photograph and a poster that said "Free Dita Sari!" Shop customers were given leaflets that contained her history and were asked to sign or affix their fingerprints on a petition to release her.

In 1998, Dita saw some reason to hope. From the newspapers and the stories of visitors to the Tangerang women's prison, she heard about massive political demonstrations and riots in Jakarta. She was sure it was just a matter of time before the dictator Suharto was ousted. At last, the work that she and others had initiated in 1992 was bearing fruit.

Still, Dita greeted news of Suharto's resignation in May 1998 with mixed emotions. "Is this all? Is this what we've been fighting for? Is this what we get? Is this real?" she recalls having asked herself as she watched the scene on television. Frustration soon followed. Months passed before charges were lodged against the former strongman. The person who replaced him, former Vice President B. J. Habibie, was his ally and close friend. Furthermore, many officials identified with Suharto managed to retain their positions in the bureaucracy, the legislature, and the judiciary; cronies of the deposed leader held on to their ill-gotten wealth; and one-time stalwarts of the old regime deftly reinvented themselves by switching parties. Moreover, although there was more political openness, the plight of the workers did not improve. The Indonesian establishment remained hostile toward labor unions. And the government still used cheap wages to lure foreign investments. In short, Dita feared that the new age of *reformasi* might not be significantly better than life under an outright dictator.

A firsthand experience validated Dita's fears. Upon assuming power, President Habibie immediately granted amnesty to a number of political prisoners. Dita, however, was denied amnesty and offered a conditional release instead. The minister of justice insisted that she retire from activist work. She refused to be released in this manner, saying, "I'm not a criminal."

The following February, the minister of justice offered Dita *graci*, or forgiveness, in exchange for an admission of guilt. Again she rejected the offer. Outraged, the minister threatened to keep her in prison until 2002. She said she was willing to suffer that. She had

already received thousands of letters of support from Amnesty International, trade unions around the world, and foreign diplomats. President Habibie finally granted her amnesty and she was freed on July 5, 1999. Before leaving the penitentiary, accompanied by her father and colleagues from local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), she declared, "My freedom is not [a sign of] the mercy of the government, but a purely political measure." She was convinced that Habibie had decided to release her because of heavy pressure from the international community, the approval of which he was courting to gain credibility and secure support.

As soon as she stepped out of prison, Dita proceeded to the Menteng Pulo cemetery to visit her mother's grave. Then, wasting no time, she founded the Front Nasional Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia (FNPBI, or National Front for Indonesian Labor Struggle), a coalition of progressive trade unions, and was elected as its first president.

When she tried to register the FNPBI, the labor department insisted that it base its principles on the state ideology, Pancasila, rather than on the social democratic principles that the coalition had spelled out. The department later questioned a provision in the FNPBI constitution that stated that the struggle of the workers was not only economic but also political. The union was told that no political term should be included in the constitution. Only when Habibie was ousted did the FNPBI's registration woes end. The new labor minister under President Abdurrahman Wahid automatically approved the union's application.

The FNPBI, an umbrella organization of federations from different industrial sectors, has twenty-two thousand members in fourteen provinces across Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Bali. Jakarta is its home base. As a trade union, it advocates workers' rights to employment, just compensation, and free association, among other principles. Part of its agenda is the abolition of the labor-only contracting scheme, a common practice in Third World countries in which certain labor tasks (such as custodial services) are subcontracted to a nonunionized third party.

Dita sees the contract system as a threat to the existence of unions. She explains, "Only the workers personally have to take the risk of that contract, not the union taking care of them. So they want to get rid of the big role of the union to make capital operate smoothly."

What sets the FNPBI apart from other trade unions is its main principle, that political struggle is as important as economic struggle. The organization believes that the two are inextricably intertwined, thus challenging the traditional concept that politics is the concern only of the state and the political parties.

Dita concedes that changing the mindset of Indonesian workers about political participation is a tall order because they are fighting simply for economic survival; often, politics is the least of their concerns. Moreover, she says, Indonesians have internalized meekness as a national virtue and have not achieved a sufficient level of political awareness. Some of them, she points out, have joined political parties that do not consider labor a primary concern. Worse, old forces in the government still use intimidation and other strong-arm methods at the grass roots "because they do not want the workers to be politicized or organized into a powerful union."

The FNPBI wants to bring workers into the political mainstream so that they can have a strong bargaining position with the regime and other political forces. Dita's dream is for the coalition to become a political party "because the majority of the Indonesian population—eighty million people—are workers. . . . I want to make sure that they are accommodated politically and economically. A workers' party is the kind of political instrument needed if you want to achieve that goal." She hopes a "labor wing" will emerge

at the grass roots in ten to fifteen years. Someday, she would like to see the workers take power in her country.

When she speaks to workers, Dita likes to tell them that politics is part of day-to-day life. She cites the example of South Korea and its strong labor movement. Videos and photographs showing the unity and strength of South Korean unions are part of the FNPBI's education and training seminars.

Dita claims to have no political ambitions for herself but draws inspiration from Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, a former metalworker and well-known labor leader in Brazil who ran for president three times before succeeding in 2002. Despite the dismal showing of the National Labor Party in Indonesia's 1999 election, Dita is not discouraged. She notes that the party was formed only a few months before the election, was unable to consolidate its forces, and was strapped for cash.

Even as student activists, Dita and her colleagues had aspired to create a labor party. They felt that the three Indonesian political parties of the New Order era, all government-approved and regulated—Golkar (Suharto's base of "functional groups"); Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), composed of religion-based parties; and Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI), known as nationalists—were useless. There was a need for an alternative political party composed of labor, student, and peasant unions. They took the first step in 1994, when Dita and her associates (Budiman Sudjatmiko of the peasant union and Yakobus of the student union) held an underground congress and formed the multisectoral Persatuan Rakyat Demokratik (People's Democratic Union). The umbrella organization, however, was stumped on the issue of referendum in East Timor. There was no unanimity on the issue. The matter was resolved only after two years, during another congress at a Catholic retreat house in Kaliurang with the founding of the left-leaning PRD, with Budiman as its president.

One of Dita's causes even as a student activist was independence for East Timor, which was invaded by Suharto's troops in 1975. She raised this issue during her trip to the Philippines and to Australia in 1994, her first outside Indonesia. At the Asia-Pacific labor conference in Australia, she recommended the inclusion of the East Timor issue in the meeting's resolution. Her recommendation was rejected. Paul Keating, Australia's prime minister at the time, enjoyed good rapport with Suharto and was very much against granting independence to East Timor.

The tie that binds Dita and her colleagues with the Revolutionary Front for Independent East Timor, or Fretilin, can be traced back to 1995, when some forty young members of Fretilin who were being tortured in East Timor sought asylum in Jakarta. They stayed at the office of Dita's organization for ten days and together planned a daring maneuver at the Dutch and Russian embassies. On one hand, the Dutch embassy was singled out because the Netherlands was Indonesia's former colonizer and attentive to the country's policies. Russia, on the other hand, was chosen because the group wanted to see how countries belonging to the Eastern bloc would react to issues of independence following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The asylum seekers were divided into two groups. One would enter the Dutch embassy, the other, the Russian embassy. They were to make their surreptitious entry simultaneously. At 5:00 in the morning, the group to which Dita belonged climbed the gate of the Dutch embassy. Since asylum seekers from East Timor were not uncommon, embassy officials asked if they wanted asylum. Dita's group said, "No, we're not looking for asylum. There is no one who wants to leave this country." Instead, they said, they wanted people to know that the East Timorese were not alone, that members of the Indonesian democratic movement were supporting them because they were all victims of military repression.

The penetration of the embassies came as a shock, particularly since it was timed with the arrival in Jakarta of a minister from the United Nations. For three days, the two groups occupied the Dutch and Russian embassies before the police moved in and attacked them. Both embassy buildings were damaged and the Dutch ambassador was injured. The incident made it to the international press but was ignored by the local newspapers.

This episode forged a strong bond between Dita and her colleagues and East Timorese resistance leader Alexander “Xanana” Gusmao. Dita felt a strong kinship with Gusmao. When she was in prison, Dita sent poetry and greeting cards to Gusmao. She became a champion of the “Free Gusmao” movement. He, in turn, congratulated her when she turned down the justice minister’s offer of a conditional release. Her high-profile campaign for East Timor’s right to exercise self-determination led NGOs to question her own sense of nationalism several times.

In 1999, when 78.5 percent of East Timorese voted for independence in a Habibie-approved referendum, many Indonesians became angry because they found unacceptable the East Timorese people’s desire to leave the republic. Habibie was blamed for having allowed the referendum to take place.

Dita and her group, however, supported the results of the polls. They went to the United Nations office in Jakarta to deliver a three-point statement reiterating their support for the results of the referendum. They called for the withdrawal of Indonesian troops from East Timor and appealed for intervention by an international peacekeeping force. Their position was in stark contrast to that of the political opposition, which was then led by Megawati Sukarnoputri. Dita does not hide her dismay over the presidency of Megawati, her childhood hero’s daughter.

She observes, “Until the last minute of his life, Sukarno struggled against colonialism and imperialism, but Megawati opened the widest opportunity for the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the agent of new colonialism, to enter and colonize our country.”

The tasks that confronted Dita and the FNPBI were daunting. The organization lacked funds. At times, it could not even afford to fax materials overseas. Funding came from its members, who paid one thousand rupiahs every month. The amount collected was distributed among the different layers of the coalition—60 percent went to the workplace level; 20 percent to the regional level; 10 percent to the province; and 5 to 10 percent to the national center. The FNPBI received aid from international organizations but such assistance was reserved for training and other special programs.

Money, however, was the least of the labor movement’s problems. The bigger challenge for Dita was the diverse and fractured landscape of trade unions in Indonesia. Although Suharto’s downfall breathed life into the labor movement (suddenly there were fifty-two registered unions in Indonesia), it was “terribly splintered,” according to the International Labor Organization based in Jakarta. Dita confirms the observation. At a celebration of International Labor Day, Dita and her colleagues staged a demonstration in Jakarta. Thousands came, but not the invited representatives of various labor organizations and parties.

In the workplace, the presence of so many unions complicated the work of labor activists who now had to contend not only with companies and the state but also with other unions. Some unions were not convinced about the need for a workers’ alliance because they thought working by themselves was easier than working with others.

At a forum organized in 1999 by Dita and her colleagues and attended by twenty-two trade unions, the discussion group reached a consensus to reject the government’s move to cut the oil subsidy, but nothing else was achieved. The unions were open only to

discussion but not willing to follow it up with action. The holding of demonstrations was proposed to protest the cut in the oil subsidy, but only one or two groups signified a willingness to participate.

Dita blames the lack of commitment among Indonesian unions on more than just the citizenry's ingrained meekness and the ingrained de-politicization of the Suharto years. She believes it is a question of the quality of union leaders.

She is realistic enough to know that genuine democracy in Indonesia is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. She says, "If we want to achieve complete democracy, we have to get out of our past and free ourselves from the influence and strength of old forces. We have to make sure this government can be effective enough to manage political change and manage political improvement for the people."

The labor movement must be vigilant, she adds. "The most important thing is to give the best of ourselves to the union movement instead of trying to badmouth other unions. If another union can do what we cannot do, we must learn from them."

There is no letup in the FNPBI's efforts to lobby for workers' rights in Parliament. Dita is at the helm of the lobby and has already earned the respect of the committees in the legislature.

At the grass roots, the FNPBI continues not only to teach workers how to organize, understand labor laws, and negotiate with their employers, it also briefs them on Indonesian politics. The workers are reminded that their problem is not just about wages but also about the entrenched old forces in government. Dita says the development of the workers' political consciousness is crucial in light of Indonesia's increasing democratization. In this task, she sees the media, which came to her rescue several times in the past, as a potential ally.

Dita feels she owes her life to the media. One month after her last arrest in 1996, the military tried to regain custody of her. The police refused because the chief of police was afraid that the media would crucify him if he turned Dita over to the military. The chief of police was punished for rejecting the military's request and transferred to North Maluku. While they did not openly criticize the military, the media stayed at the police station where Dita was being detained. They wrote about her and her demands, thus placing her in the consciousness of Indonesians and trumpeting her cause while she was in prison.

The pardon granted to Dita by President Habibie was also partly the handiwork of media, which informed the world about her incarceration and helped forge solidarity among many organizations the world over.

Dita is convinced that her country is not a lost cause. All it needs, she says, is a leader who can take on the old forces because he or she was never one of them. "In this period, we need a leader who is able and willing to fight corruption, exactly because he was never corrupt before. A leader who is able to maintain justice, simply because he never acted unjustly before. A leader who is faithful to democracy and guards the freedom of his people to talk and work, exactly because he never slipped democracy under his shoes. Only a leader, coming from a hard, difficult and rational process, will be able to draw a firm line between his and the old conservative forces. This will not be someone chosen merely because of traditional background."

Today, one source of her optimism for her country is Islam. Muslims may have failed her when she was a child, an activist, and then a prisoner, but after her release Dita started to learn about Islam and realized what she had missed in the past. Her discovery has brought her closer to Muhammad, who, to her mind, is a model of a true leader. "He was a kind man . . . a politician as well as a statesman, an organizer, a religious leader, a prophet, and a leader in war. He was successful in different positions at different times," she says.

She now hopes for a democratic reinterpretation of Islam as a religion that does not discriminate against other religions or against nonconforming individuals.

Yes, she admits, she had to go to jail “to experience all these political things before I could come to the conclusion that there is some good in Islam. I began to think that Muhammad is also a fighter and Mandela is also a fighter and we can learn from them. They are persons not only with great policies and great strategies but also with great spirit.”

Great spirit was what Dita had to have in order to survive Suharto. In the years to come, she will need more of it to help her carry on her work in the troubled democracy that has replaced him.

Lorna Kalaw-Tirol

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