

Narrative Pluralism in History and Its Implications for History Learning: A Case Study of PRRI History in West Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

The pluralism of historical narratives in Indonesian historiography presents its own challenges for teachers, whether to convey the official or competing versions. This article aims to discuss PRRI as a case of historical narrative pluralism in Indonesia. The three main questions to be answered are: 1) what is the history of PRRI according to the official narrative; 2) what is the rival narrative version of PRRI's history; and 3) what are the implications for history learning in schools. From the research carried out, it is explained that in the official narrative, PPRI is referred to as a form of disobedience, resistance and betrayal of the region (especially West Sumatra) to the central government. On the other hand, in several counter narratives, PRRI is said to be a form of correction from the regions to the central government which is considered unfair in carrying out development so that there is no intention to break away from the Republic of Indonesia. The existence of this kind of pluralism of historical narratives has implications for history learning in schools, where teachers must strictly adhere to the principles of neutrality and objectivity. Teachers must convey information in a balanced and data-based manner. Apart from that, to raise students' historical awareness, teachers can also ask emancipatory questions.

1. INTRODUCTION

History is an essential element in building the national consciousness of a nation, especially among students (Kartodirdjo, 2014; Hasan, 2013). In the context of fostering this awareness, history education in schools plays a crucial role because it is through this teaching that history becomes popular and widely known by the public (Syaputra, 2019). Therefore, history learning is considered a subject that plays an important role in shaping the character and identity of the nation. As stated by Hasan (2013), the purpose of history education in high schools is to develop students' personalities as citizens, historical awareness, collective memory as a nation, nationalism, unity in diversity, national strength, and historical thinking skills.

However, a common issue is that history taught in schools often consists only of selected highlights of Indonesian history. As a result, only events deemed important and meaningful are taught. The determination of what is considered important or meaningful is largely influenced by those in power (Darmawan, 2010).

Another emerging issue concerns historical narratives. In the case of Indonesian national history, the narratives about certain events often differ, particularly between the grand narrative or official version and alternative narratives, which are frequently referred to in the literature as controversial topics or issues. In some cases, the differences between the official narrative and alternative narratives are stark (Nordholt, Purwanto, & Saptari, 2013). With the existence of narrative pluralism or controversial topics, the challenge lies in how these narratives should be taught in schools. This creates a dilemma for educators regarding whether to present the official version or the alternative version of events.

One example of this narrative pluralism is the history of PRRI in Sumatra. In the official narrative, particularly during the New Order era, PRRI is described as a rebellion, a separatist movement seeking to break away from Indonesia. On the other hand, from the perspective of the people of West Sumatra, the movement was a form of correction against the central government, which was perceived to have violated the constitution, rather than an attempt to secede from Indonesia.



In the teaching of Indonesian history, the PRRI topic is part of contemporary history presented to students, specifically under the theme of regional uprisings after the war of independence, alongside other events such as DI/TII, RMS, and the Andi Aziz Rebellion. As a controversial theme, teaching PRRI presents a challenge for teachers, as a wrong approach could lead to negative consequences. On the other hand, it also provides an opportunity to equip students with critical and analytical thinking skills. As noted by Logtenberg et al. (2023), teaching controversial topics can help students understand differences in perspectives from the past. Therefore, what is truly needed is an understanding of effective methods or strategies for teaching such topics in schools.

Building on this issue, this article will discuss narrative pluralism by focusing on the history of PRRI in West Sumatra. Accordingly, the topics that will be explored are: (1) PRRI in the official or grand narrative, (2) PRRI history in alternative narratives, and (3) its implications for history teaching in schools.

2. METHOD

This research is a library study with a descriptive analysis approach, which involves a series of activities related to collecting library data, reading, taking notes, and processing research data (Zed, 2008). Therefore, in this study, the researcher limits the data sources to library collections only (without observation or interviews), primarily consisting of books, journal articles, scientific magazines, mass media, research reports, and papers. Among the book sources, *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia Jilid VI* and high school history textbooks will serve as key references to examine the official narrative.

The steps undertaken in this research include: (1) preparing tools and materials, (2) compiling a working bibliography, (3) organizing the research schedule, (4) reading and taking research notes, and (5) drawing conclusions and analyzing the research findings (Zed, 2008).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PRRI in the Official Narrative

According to the official narrative, PRRI in West Sumatra began with regional dissatisfaction regarding the development budget allocated by the central government. Over time, this dissatisfaction turned into a lack of trust in the government. Since efforts to bring change through parliamentary means were unsuccessful, they resorted to extraparlimentary measures. These movements gained support from several military commanders, which eventually led to the formation of regional councils. In West Sumatra, the council established was named Dewan Banteng, formed on December 20, 1956, under the leadership of Colonel Ahmad Husein (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 1993:272).

After the formation of this council, through a Regional Government Assembly, they submitted several proposals, including granting the region the broadest possible autonomy, reviewing the placement of regional officials, establishing a Regional Defense Command, and turning the former Banteng Division into a corps within the Army. The results of this meeting were reported to Jakarta by a delegation consisting of Colonel Dahlan Djambek, A. Halim, Dahlan Ibrahim, Sidi Bakarudin, and Ali Lubis (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 1993:273).

In Jakarta, this delegation met with Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo, Moh. Hatta, and Mr. A.G. Pringgodigdo but failed to meet President Soekarno. While attempts to meet the president were unsuccessful, Colonel Ahmad Husein in Sumatra decided to take over the Central Sumatra regional government from Governor Ruslan Muljohardjo. The central government considered Husein's action illegal. Tensions arose between the leadership of Dewan Banteng and the central government. It is further noted that the central government sent envoys to negotiate with Dewan Banteng, but these efforts failed because Husein only wanted to speak with a delegation officially representing the Head of State (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 1993).

The situation escalated further following the attempted assassination of President Soekarno on November 30, 1957. Amid the growing unrest, regional efforts to separate from the Republic of Indonesia became increasingly evident. On February 10, 1958, the head of Dewan Banteng, Ahmad Husein, issued an ultimatum to the central government, demanding that the Djuanda Cabinet resign within 120 hours. In response, the government took decisive action by dishonorably dismissing Ahmad Husein and other involved commanders (Djamhari, 2012:313).

On February 12, 1958, Army Chief of Staff A.H. Nasution issued an order to freeze the Central Sumatra Military Command and placed it directly under his authority.

Three days later, on February 15, 1958, Ahmad Husein proclaimed the “Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia” with Mr. Sjafruddin Prawiranegara as Prime Minister. Since diplomatic efforts were deemed unsuccessful, the government and the Army Command decided to launch a military operation. The joint Army-Navy-Air Force operation, later called Operation August 17, successfully crushed PRRI with overwhelming force.

From the above account, it can be concluded that the widely accepted narrative and collective memory portray PRRI as a rebellion, a separatist movement aiming to break away from the Republic of Indonesia, similar to other separatist movements like DI/TII, APRA, RMS, and the Andi Aziz Rebellion. Because of its separatist nature, the central government considered PRRI a serious threat that had to be suppressed with military force. Furthermore, the official narrative of PRRI omits many aspects, particularly those concerning the preconditions leading to the movement. Other perspectives, such as the suffering experienced by the people of West Sumatra due to the war, the number of casualties, and other details, were overlooked or perhaps deliberately excluded by writers and researchers.

The History of PRRI in the Alternative Narrative

As previously explained, beyond the official narrative, alternative narratives often emerge from marginalized groups. In the case of PRRI's history, particularly in West Sumatra, many alternative narratives can be found. Unlike the official narrative, which views PRRI as a separatist movement without clear reasons, these alternative narratives present a contrasting view—considering PRRI as something logical and even as an expression of love for the Republic of Indonesia (Zed, 2001:152). Moreover, the alternative narratives offer a broader perspective, highlighting multiple aspects rather than focusing on a single viewpoint.

According to this version, PRRI did not arise suddenly but had deep historical roots. In the military sphere, the movement began when the central government implemented a policy known as RERA (Reconstruction and Rationalization) in 1949, which simplified military structures and reduced the number of troops (Asnan, 2007). As a result of this policy, thousands of soldiers were returned to civilian life, leading to widespread disappointment among former soldiers, who felt abandoned by the central government. Similar resentment was felt by officers who were demoted in rank. In the political sphere, the movement was triggered by the rejection of four gubernatorial candidates for Central Sumatra proposed by DPRST in 1950, which eventually led to the dissolution of DPRST by the government (Zed, 2014:166). In the economic sphere, the movement was caused by unequal development policies, where the government was highly centralized, despite 60% of the nation's foreign exchange earnings coming from the regions (Hastuti, 2014:185).

These issues culminated in a reunion of 612 former Banteng Division members from November 21–24, 1956. The reunion's main goal was to fight for the rights of veterans and the people. To achieve this goal, Dewan Banteng was formed with Ahmad Husein as its leader (Djamhari, 2012:307). Besides Husein as chairman, other members were also appointed. As a follow-up to the reunion, Dewan Banteng—through Husein—took over the regional government from Governor Roeslan Muljohardjo on December 20, 1956 (Kahin, 2008:281).

Afterward, Dewan Banteng submitted several demands to the central government. These demands included granting full autonomy and development for Central Sumatra, establishing a Regional Defense Command in Central Sumatra, and forming the dissolved Banteng Division into a corps within the Army. The central government and army leadership considered these demands unreasonable and rejected them. The delegation from Dewan Banteng sent to Jakarta to present these demands also failed to meet President Soekarno. They only managed to meet Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo, former Vice President Moh. Hatta, and State Secretary Mr. A.G. Pringgodigdo (Asnan, 2007:184).

In the following developments, the central government sent several envoys to West Sumatra for negotiations. Unfortunately, these efforts failed to reach an agreement. The central government subsequently ignored the region's demands, while Dewan Banteng continued its efforts to gain public support through various activities, such as the Sumatra-wide Traditional Congress and the Ulama Congress. Since their initial demands were ignored, on February 10, 1958, the head of Dewan Banteng, Ahmad Husein, issued an ultimatum demanding that the Djuanda Cabinet resign within 120 hours. In response, the government took firm action by dishonorably dismissing Ahmad Husein and other involved commanders.

The situation peaked on February 15, 1958, when Ahmad Husein, feeling disregarded by Jakarta, proclaimed the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (PRRI) with Bukittinggi as its capital. This marked the end of any possibility of compromise between the two sides.

In response, the central government mobilized all armed forces (Army, Air Force, and Navy) to crush PRRI (Zed, 2009). With overwhelming military strength, the central government eventually defeated PRRI's resistance. The casualties from this civil conflict were devastating. According to Zed (2009:8), 983 government troops were killed, 1,695 were injured, and 154 went missing, while PRRI suffered 6,373 deaths, 1,201 wounded or captured, and 6,057 others surrendered.

As stated by Mestika Zed, the PRRI resistance was not a separatist movement as it has often been generalized along with other regional uprisings during the 1950s. According to him, PRRI was a strong corrective measure against the central government, which was seen as violating the constitution (Zed, 2001:1). Furthermore, Zed pointed out evidence such as PRRI's demands to form a new cabinet led by Moh. Hatta and Javanese leader Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX. PRRI also never replaced national symbols like the flag, the national anthem, or others. According to Zed (2009), PRRI was born out of a spirit of nationalism and patriotism.

Implications for History Learning

As explained above, the history of PRRI is one example of the plurality of historical narratives in Indonesia. Most people, especially those who grew up between the 1960s and 1990s, tend to view PRRI as a rebellion. However, recent studies, particularly those conducted after the reform era, show that PRRI was essentially a movement opposing the central government, a movement that sought reform, even though it cannot be denied that the movement, to some extent, also displayed irregular practices. Nevertheless, for the people of Sumatra, particularly West Sumatra, the PRRI period represents a dark chapter, a past trauma. Most importantly, it has become a collective memory, which has influenced their mindset and worldview.

So, what about the teaching of history in schools? Should history education remain trapped in a cycle of blame and resentment? Shouldn't we be encouraged to learn from history and see it as a teacher of life?

The diversity of narratives is not necessarily a problem; rather, it can be utilized to enhance students' problem-solving skills and critical thinking abilities. However, specific teaching strategies are required.

First, teachers must remain neutral, avoiding any form of provocation or planting hatred toward certain parties. In addition, teachers should present information objectively, without exaggerating one version over another. Students should then be allowed to make their own interpretations. This aligns with Wiriaatmadja (2022), who states that the principle of neutrality requires teachers to suppress their own views on these issues to avoid indoctrinating students with their opinions. Furthermore, Sjamsudin (2012) explains that, regarding the principle of neutrality, teachers should remain as neutral as possible toward differing opinions that arise during discussions, as well as biases brought by students from outside the classroom, even though teachers naturally have their own standpoints.

Second, closely related to the first point, it is important to adopt teaching strategies that engage students actively. Students should be encouraged to seek out information independently and then discuss it with their classmates. The key goal of these discussions is not to determine who was right or wrong but to relate historical events to contemporary issues and seek solutions. In this context, using emancipatory questions and concepts from Habermas' critical theory appears to be appropriate.

For example, after students research and discuss PRRI, teachers can ask questions such as: *If you had been in Colonel Ahmad Husein's position at the time, what would you have done?* Or, *If you had been in Soekarno's or A.H. Nasution's position, what would you have done about PRRI?* It is also important to connect these discussions to current issues, for instance by asking: *If one day you became a President or Governor, what lessons could you learn from the PRRI case?* Many other similar questions can also be raised. With such questions, history education is expected to serve as a bridge between the past and the present, allowing students to directly experience the relevance and benefits of learning history in their contemporary lives.

4. CONCLUSION

PRRI represents a significant example of how historical events can be interpreted through multiple lenses, reflecting the complexity and diversity of Indonesian historiography. While the official narrative portrays PRRI

as an act of rebellion and betrayal by regional leaders, particularly from West Sumatra, alternative perspectives emphasize that it was more of a regional response to perceived injustices and imbalances in national development policies. These differing interpretations highlight the political, economic, and social tensions of the time, as well as the challenges faced by a young nation in maintaining unity amidst regional grievances. Understanding this plurality of narratives is essential to gaining a comprehensive view of Indonesia's historical dynamics.

The presence of such narrative pluralism provides valuable opportunities for improving history education in schools. Rather than presenting a single, rigid version of events, teachers are encouraged to adopt a neutral stance, presenting multiple perspectives with equal weight and objectivity. This approach allows students to critically analyze historical accounts, identify bias, and appreciate the complexity of historical truth. By avoiding indoctrination and encouraging open discussions, teachers can create an inclusive learning environment where students learn to evaluate evidence, compare narratives, and construct their own informed interpretations.

Furthermore, controversial topics like the PRRI movement can be powerful tools for fostering critical thinking, empathy, and civic awareness among students. By engaging with conflicting viewpoints, students not only gain historical knowledge but also develop essential skills for democratic participation, such as tolerance for diverse opinions and the ability to resolve conflicts constructively. Teachers can guide students to connect past events with contemporary issues, encouraging them to reflect on questions of governance, justice, and national unity. This pedagogical approach not only enriches students' understanding of history but also helps them recognize its relevance in shaping their present and future.

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