

Tomik Subagio: Leading a low-profile lifestyle

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“I will be there in 10 minutes. I am on my way to my office,” a voice says through my mobile phone.

Ten minutes later, a cyclist enters the compound of a two-story

apartment building in the leafy suburb of Unley in southern Adelaide.

“I was interpreting at the federal court,” says Tomik Subagio, referring to the court two kilometers downtown, as he greets my friend and I at his office. He had been interpreting in a case involving an Indonesian-Australian family, he says.

A chilly wind swept his sweatless face as he took off the helmet that concealed his thinning grey hair. His suit and tie seemed out of place to an Indonesian eye, as one seldom sees a cyclist in a suit in Jakarta, something not unusual here.

At 80, this engineer and interpreter looks fit and happy. Known as “Subi” by his Australian friends, Tomik retired as a senior engineer from the South Australian water and engineering department in 1992 after a 24-year career.

“I have been riding a bike for 40 years and it keeps me healthy,” says the Javanese aristocrat, who has lived in Adelaide for 50 years.

“This is my fourth bike that my wife gave me,” he says, referring to his Australian wife, Janet.

The mostly flat city of Adelaide, Australia’s fifth-largest, is a haven for cyclists. Smaller than other Australian cities, it is a bit bigger than the Jakarta metropolitan area.

Tomik says his Indonesian friends used to chide him by saying that it was shameful to ride a bicycle to work.

“What is shameful about riding a bike? If you commit a crime, such as corruption, then it is shameful,” says the grandson of the former prime minister to the 10th sultan of Surakarta. Tomik is entitled to the aristocratic title Raden, which he never uses.

Apart from working in Adelaide, Tomik also does English-Indonesian and Indonesian-English translating work for courts in

other cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

“They call me and I will translate through the phone in my office,” says Tomik, who obtained his name from the American comic strips he admired as a child.

Besides the work at court, he is also a translator for institutions such as hospitals and prisons. Indonesian patients or Australian doctors often need interpreters to communicate and prisons need his services to speak to detained human traffickers or Indonesian fishermen.

This has kept him so busy that it is almost a full-time job.

“Working will keep your brain healthy. I detest doing nothing and I hope to die while I am doing my work,” he says.

Judging from the amount of translation work, he believes the number of Indonesians coming to Australia has increased in the last three years.

“The new arrivals come from the whole section of Indonesian society, from fruit pickers to professionals like mining engineers,” Tomik says.

He attributes the increase to better government-to-government relations.

Tomik first came to Adelaide in 1950 to study mechanical engineering at the University of Adelaide. After graduation, he went back to Jakarta in 1955 and married Janet there before returning to Adelaide in 1968.

The couple has a daughter, Ria, and a son, Bima. Pictures of Ria and Bima are among the large number of pictures and certificates adorning his office wall.

The certificates include an appreciation from the city council for his volunteer work in the community, an acknowledgement for his

contribution to the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) and an award from Indonesian Ambassador Primo Joelianto for Tomik's contribution to Australia-Indonesia relations.

One letter from the South Australian premier's office acknowledges his contributions to local environmental improvements.

On the wall near his office door, dozens of postcards bearing flattering words are on display.

"My wife likes to tease me that I need a longer wall," Tomik says, laughing.

It was after his retirement that he took up translating, while continuing to consult as an engineer.

He may have done a lot of things in Australia, but he often wonders about the challenges facing Indonesia. Foremost in his concerns is the impending water crisis in Jakarta.

"Jakarta will become a ghost city in 10 years. The seawater intrusion has reached Central Jakarta and will reach South Jakarta in 10 to 15 years," Tomik says.

It is a view shared by Indonesian experts, many of whom have alarmed the public.

As a water management expert, Tomik is capable of talking about water scarcity for hours.

"I am happy to give a free consultation to the Jakarta government," he says.

A good part of Jakarta's population of 10 million relies on groundwater. This is a sign of a backward country, Tomik says, especially as most houses also have septic tanks.

As the seawater reaches South Jakarta and the groundwater level declines due to relentless abstraction of deep water, trees will die out and corrosion will eat away at the foundations of high-rise buildings.

“I am terrified to think about it,” Tomik says. “There is no stopping the crisis. It is already too late to do something to avoid it. What can be done is only to slow the pace of the sinking groundwater level and to soften the impact of the crisis.”

In 2007, he met with Jakarta Governor Fauzi Bowo to persuade him to do something.

“The governor seemed to have been on a different wavelength,” he says of the meeting. “He thought I was after money.”

On top of his translating work, Tomik is still a consultant. His latest job was designing a cooling system for a steel-roofing company in Jiangsu, China.

Had riches been on his mind, he says, he would own more than one house.

“I once asked my wife if she wanted to have two houses,” he says. “She didn’t. I agree with her.

“We live in this world only temporarily. And here, we rent the land from the Aboriginal people.”

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