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**Wisnu ADIHARTONO**  
**PhD Candidate in Sociology**  
**in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS)**  
**– Marseille, France**

**Migration and Family Relationships:  
The Case of “Gay Indonesia” in Paris**

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**Southeast Asia Research Centre**

The City University of Hong Kong

83 Tat Chee Avenue

Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR

Tel: (852) 3442 6330

Fax: (852) 3442 0103

<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>

# **Migration and Family Relationships: The Case of “Gay Indonesia” in Paris**

**Wisnu Adihartono**

## **Abstract**

State and national identity are formed on the basis of mutual unification of thoughts and ideas through the process of representation and social imagination. Through these two processes, people determine what is good and not good, including the issue of homosexuality. There is a “sexual script” in which sexuality is produced, shared, and enforced as a social norm and made a blueprint for correct behaviour. Many Indonesians consider homosexuality abnormal and against religion. Homosexuals in Indonesia have little or no power and limited legal access to fight for their rights. In the end, in order to survive, they are forced to hide their sexual orientation, or in extreme cases, they move to other countries. As long as these push factors do not change, migration will become the “natural way” for them to avoid being mistreated. Because the Indonesian state has been unwilling or unable to ensure and protect the basic human rights of its citizens, I consider the migration of Indonesian gays to be a state failure. Drawing on face-to-face interviews with Indonesian gays who live in Paris, this paper examines why they decided to migrate to there.. It also looks into whether they maintain relationships with their family back in Indonesia and the main features of such relationships. Using qualitative methodology, this paper will introduce some of their narratives.

### ***Short Bio***

Wisnu Adihartono is a PhD Candidate in sociology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) – Marseille, France. His research interests include the sociology of gender (in particular the sociology of gays and gay/lesbian studies), the sociology of migration, and the sociology of the family. His publications include articles on homosexuality in Indonesia in the *Huffington Post* (French edition, in French), *La Gazette de Bali* (in French), and *The Jakarta Post*, the website of Amsterdam Social Science as well as Indonesian online media. He obtained a Diploma in Chinese Language and Political Science and a M.A. in European Studies at the University of Indonesia. He has received scholarships from the French and the Indonesian governments, and research funds from the Ford Foundation Indonesia. He expects to complete his PhD by early 2015.

*Keywords:* Migration, Family Relationships, Gay, Indonesia, Gay Bar

## **I. Introduction: The Reality**

According to Takács, Mocsonaki, and Tóth (2008: 6) from the Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Science, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people can be seen as members of minority groups, i.e., social groups characterized by a relative powerlessness regarding their interest-representing abilities. They cited Fraser (1997: 18) that gays and lesbians suffer from “heterosexism”: the authoritative construction of norms that privilege heterosexuality. Along with these goes homophobia: the cultural devaluation of homosexuality. Their sexuality thus disparaged, homosexuals are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence, while being denied legal rights and equal protection – all fundamentally denials of recognition. To be sure, gays and lesbians also suffer serious economic injustices; they can be summarily dismissed from paid work and are denied family-based social-welfare benefits. But far from being rooted directly in the economic structure, these derive instead from an unjust cultural-valuation structure.

Even though Indonesia has a secularist constitution and homosexuality is legal, a recent poll shows that 93 percent of Indonesians do not accept homosexual couples.<sup>1</sup> The authoritarian New Order (*Orde Baru*) regime of Soeharto had the resources to impose its agenda to a greater degree than the old regime of Sukarno (Boellstorff, 2005: 187). Indonesia has also been a society under enormous stress and change after the Suharto dictatorship era from 1998 onwards. The country’s fledgling democratic governments have faced increasingly Islamicized pressure in terms of governance and law. In the post-11 September 2001 climate, the rise of militant Islamic groups and certain extreme forms of atavistic behaviour across Indonesia have led to endemic and pervasive violence. This was targeted at ethnic minorities and homosexuals, who were often perceived to be Western-corrupted individuals or deviants. Hard-line Islamic groups explicitly targeting homosexuals include the Indonesian Council of Ulemas, Indonesia’s top Muslim clerical body, the Islamic Defender Front, an extremist group that is known for violent tactics, and the Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (Offord, 2011: 144).

Homosexuality in Indonesian society is considered against the norms of society because the “creeping” Islamization of Indonesia has had a widespread impact on the perception of what

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Demetrianova, “The Invisible LGBT in ASEAN: Part 2” *SimplySyx*, 5 July 2014, <http://simplysxy.com/articles/2014/07/05/the-invisible-lgbt-people-in-asean-part-2/>.

is considered normal and appropriate moral behaviour (Offord, 2011: 144).<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 1980s, homosexuality became closely connected to the spread of the AIDS virus in the minds of many Indonesians. As a consequence, it is common in Indonesian society to call gay people “the sick” (*orang sakit*) and thus they are the target of social exclusion, violence, and other forms of physical, psychological and emotional persecution (Offord, 2011: 145). Arus Pelangi founder, King Oey noted: “Discrimination occurs everywhere. If someone is known to be homosexual, taunts and gossip will follow, as well as harassment and loss of employment”,<sup>3</sup> so the idea that homosexuality is a disease is widely shared in Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

However in the past, Indonesia was also home to a number of “sacred” or “traditional” homosexualities, the most well-known of which are the *bissu* of South Sulawesi and the *warok* of the Ponorogo region of East Java (Murtagh, 2013: 6). Davies (2010: 11-12) described *bissu* as androgynous shamans who symbolically embody male and female elements. The Bugis of South Sulawesi acknowledge four genders plus a fifth “para-gender” identity. In addition to male-men (*oroane*), and female-women (*makunrai*) (categories that are similar to those in Australia), there are *calalai*, biological females who take on many of the roles expected of men; *calabai*, biological males who in many respects adhere to the roles expected of women, and *bissu* (Graham, 2002: 27). The *warok* is a leader of the dance of *Reyog*. The basis of the *warok*’s homoerotic relations with his *gemblak* lies in the polluting nature of heterosexual intercourse with women (Wilson, 1999). The *gemblak* is normally chosen for his poise and physical appearance characterized typically as androgynous and a light complexion which is sometimes enhanced with face powder (Wilson, 1999). During performances, the *gemblak* is sometimes known to dress in feminine attire, such as the *kebaya* blouse, a wrap-around skirt (*jarik batik*), and a scarf (*sampur* or *selendang*) (Kartomi, 1976: 87).

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<sup>2</sup> Many provinces in Indonesia have adopted traditional Shariah law, which explicitly condemns homosexuality. The adoption of Anti-Pornography Bill by the Indonesian parliament on 30 October 2008 defines pornography in such a broad manner that even effeminate gestures may be regarded as pornographic (See Offord, 2011: 144).

<sup>3</sup> “Paradox in Heterosexist Indonesia”, *The Jakarta Post*, [www.thejakartapost/node/177241](http://www.thejakartapost/node/177241).

<sup>4</sup> Wisnu Adihartono, “Searching for Security: The Migration of Indonesian Gays”, *Amsterdam Social Science* 23 September 2015, <http://socialscience.nl/2013/09/25/searching-security-migration-indonesian-gays/>.

Currently, homosexuality can be informally welcomed. This means that a person who exhibits homosexual behaviour will be accepted as long as he or she does not cause any trouble in society (Johan, 2011: 203). However, discrimination against LGBT people is also still very common. Therefore, to avoid being discriminated by society, many Indonesian LGBTs play a form of “hide and seek”. Gay Indonesians tend to see themselves as being open (*terbuka*) in certain spaces – for example, in cruising spaces and in the homes of friends – and closed (*tertutup*) in others, such as the workplace or the family home (Boellstorff, 2005: 170-175).

## II. Word Choice: Choosing the Word “Gay” Instead of “Homosexual”

Before I move on to the main topic, I would like to explain why I insist on using the word “gay” instead of “homosexual”. As Whitaker (2011: 15) has noted, some people believe the word “homosexual” has negative overtones. Most homosexual men and women prefer the words “gay” and “lesbian”.

The word “homosexual” could be seen as a pathological term as French philosopher Michel Foucault noted that homosexuality appeared as a form of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration. The homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1980). Meanwhile the word “gay” is commonly used as a declaration of identity to represent selfhood, as in the sentence “I am gay”, “It’s who I am”, and “It’s what I label myself” (Savin-Williams, 2005: 7). Thus, this word is become a kind of pride that exists in a self of every gay man, whether gay masculine or gay feminine. In James M. Donovan’s PhD research, “Homosexual, Gay, and Lesbian: Defining the Words and Sampling the Populations” (Donovan, 1992: 40), he found from one of his respondents the point of distinction between the word “homosexual” and “gay”. The word “homosexual” defines behaviour, while “gay” on the other hand defines an acceptance of the behaviour, a mind-set, by an individual. “Gay” describes a way of life. Being homosexual may have nothing to do with being gay. For example, many non-gay men (and women) do homosexual things, i.e., participate in homosexual acts.

This working paper is based on my on-going PhD research at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) Marseille – France. I interviewed 20 Indonesian gays (masculine

or feminine) in Paris where I carried out my research. The interviews took around one-to-three hours depending on availability and mood. The most difficult element of my research was finding informants, therefore I asked a known “gatekeeper” of the community to introduce me to my respondents. The gatekeeper is also gay and has lived in Paris for over ten years. According to him, there is no statistical data that shows the number of Indonesian gays in Paris, but he estimates that they are in the 100s. In order to avoid dissemination, I promised all respondents that I would not publish names or other identifying details. Only their initials and ages have been recorded.

### **III. “Migration Is a Must”**

Discussing the meaning of globalization which is almost never precisely defined, McGrew (1998) stated that globalization is a process which generates and connects, not simply across nation-states and national territorial boundaries, but between regions, continents, and civilizations. This invites a definition of globalization as: “an historical process which engenders a significant shift in the spatial reach of networks and system of social relations to transcontinental or interregional patterns of human organization, activity and the exercise of power.” On the other hand, Baylis and Smith (1990) identified the character of globalization as the internationalizing of production, with a new international division of labour, new migratory movements from south to north, and the internationalizing of the state. Here, Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan (2011: 27) refer to globalization not only in economic terms, but also in relation to social and political transformations and the emergence of global currents of thought.

Researchers have found that globalization opens connections in most domains and that these connections are not always small in scope but extends to every sphere. Migration, now is generally taken to be movement across a national border, often with the purpose of settling for a period of time and to be managed (Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan, 2011: 16-17), is one of the effects of a process of globalization.

For LGBT people, migration is often a must instead of a choice. The usual “push” and “pull” factors mentioned in studies of migration are no longer the main reason why they choose to leave their country of origin. As voluntary migrants, LGBTs are thought to move voluntary because economic conditions and living standards in their country or region of origin are not

as desirable as in another country or region. In other words, voluntary migrants move to find work and better job opportunities (Hanson and Vicino, 2014: 7). But the actual reasons why people move from their country of origin to another country are varied and complex.

Mai and King (2009) studied the relations between sex and emotion as factors for migration. They added that love, whether it is for a partner, lover or friend, or for a child, parents or other kin, is often a key factor in the desire and the decision to move to a place where one's feelings, ambitions and expectations – emotional, sexual, political, hedonistic, etc. – can be lived more fully and freely (Ibid, 296). Sexuality is another increasingly relevant and recognized axis of self-identification for people, whether they decide to stay put or to migrate. Like love, and sometimes alongside it, sex can play a decisive role in the imagination and enactment of the choice to migrate.

This is the explanation for the movement of Indonesian gays to Paris. They argue that living in Indonesia is not a “rational” choice because society at large still cannot accept homosexuality even though there are some who think that homosexuality is a sexual preference that is not against nature. Thus, sexual identity and feelings for another person can be strong motivators for migration. LGBT individuals migrate in search of places that offer more freedom for them to express their sexual identity or out of fear of persecution (Hanson and Vicino, 2014: 76).

There are three reasons why Indonesian gays migrate to Paris: for study, divorce in the family, or opportunity (holiday, work). The narratives below best illustrate these reasons.

(H, 36)

“I don't know. I am here inadvertently. One day I looked the information that France government offered scholarships to Indonesian students. And at the same time, I think I had to apply it. For me there is nothing to lose. After one month, I got a call that I had to go to the Embassy for an interview. They then informed me that I passed the interview. I am going to Paris without any idea. I just think that I have to study hard and get the diploma. That's all. After I got the diploma, I continue my study to master's degree and then you can see, I am here in Paris.”

(W, 29)

“I don’t know. It all happened inadvertently. After I got my MA here in Paris, my professor asked me to continue to get PhD. And I think it’s an opportunity. I am comfortable in Paris.”

(I, 30)

“I got a scholarship and I am going to Paris, that’s it.”

From these three reasons we can see that H, W, and I did not plan to stay in Paris long-term; it was chance meetings with men who eventually became their boyfriends. For H, he met his boyfriend while eating in a fast food restaurant. At that time, the restaurant was full and H was sitting by himself. Suddenly, JM (the future boyfriend) asked if he could take a seat and H said it was okay. They exchanged phone numbers and started a relationship.

W met his boyfriend when they were working on assignments in the library. W told me that suddenly a young man came to him to borrow the book that W was reading. At that time, W was annoyed with the distraction and continued to read the book. The library closed and W ran to catch the night bus. G (the young man who wanted to borrow the book) follows him secretly. But W feels that G is stalking him. When W got off the bus, W stopped a few minutes and G approached him. W asked him what he wanted. G finally said that he just want to get to know him. They exchanged phone numbers and then began a relationship.

For I, it was love at first sight. One day, I and M (his future boyfriend) were both involved in a project. Working closely together meant that got to know each other very quickly. M loves I because I is smart. At that time, I lacked confidence because he hated his chubby body, but M told him that I’s intelligence was what was attractive to him.

Another short narrative is from A, 34.

“I lived in Paris since 2008. You know that I came to Paris just for a holiday but in the end I fell in love with V (his boyfriend)”.

Like the two cases above, A came to Paris inadvertently. At that time he had only visited Paris as a backpacking tourist. Since he did not have enough money to stay in a hotel, he decided to stay in a youth hostel. Unexpectedly he met his boyfriend, V, on the site.

H, W, and I had similar family backgrounds. Their parents were divorced and they felt that they needed parental affection. They said to me that if their parents were not divorced at that time, they would have gone back to Indonesia and confessed their sexual preference to them. For them, it was better to tell the truth in advance rather than having to lie. But conditions changed. They preferred to stay in France because they hated their parents' divorce.

#### **IV. "Should I Maintain My Relationship with My Family?"**

According to Strommen (1989) there are two common reactions that parents feel when they find out that their children are gay. The first is that most parents are unfamiliar with homosexuality so that they have negative perceptions about it. The second is the feelings that they have failed to educate their children. Therefore parents often find that having gay or lesbian children is quite embarrassing (Rothberg and Weinstein, 1996). Rothman and Weinstein (1996: 81) also said that: when a family member "comes out of the closet" there are a multitude of responses. Take for example, the announcement a heterosexual person makes to his or her family about their decision to marry. This is usually met with a joyous response, a ritual part and many gifts. Lesbians and gay men do not receive this response. Instead, the "coming out" announcement is often met with negative responses which can range from mild disapproval to complete non-acceptance and disassociation. These responses cause considerable stress and pain for the lesbian and gay person seeking parental approval.

Rejection seems greater when it occurs in a family with strong religious convictions. Blumenfeld and Raymond (1988) argue that families with strong religious convictions often focus more on their religion over that of the concerns of a family member. Gays with religious families would normally not confess their sexuality to them because they know of the negative reaction that they would receive.

So what are actually the greatest pressures of being gay in Indonesia? According to Dede Oetomo (2004), there are two major pressures, the first is marriage. They are afraid that they will be forced by their family to marry a woman. The second is the anxiety of being revealed

as gay by society, so they feel insecure. The consequence is that they go to gay bars in order to create an identity because, according to Holt and Griffin (2003), gay bars and clubs are commonly the only public places in which lesbians and gay men can openly express their sexuality. Their findings suggest that gay bars and dance clubs are perceived as places of acceptance and are used as an escape from the hetero-normative dominant culture (Holt and Griffin, 2003).

Gay bars do not develop by accident; they are the result of careful and systematic planning (Achilles, 1998: 179). As places of acceptance and escape, gay bars are usually the main places for LGBT leisure activities (Achilles, 1998: 175). Thus, it can be said that the existence of gay bars and clubs may be indicated as a “private” realm of subjects’ personal sexual identity and the performance of that identity (Matejskova, 2007: 138). According to Barbara Weightman (1980), this place can also be considered as private places as well as what McDowell (1995) and Brickell (2000) say are spaces of privacy where their sexual identities can be enacted and performed.

The other consequence is moving to other big cities in Indonesia or moving abroad. These reasons are understandable because, as Oetomo (2004: 283) has noted, the real threat for gays comes from their family, friends, society, and religion. It is the family in particular since rejection by kin greatly influences their behaviour and psychological state (Oetomo, 2004: 202).

For this research, I only focused on the nuclear family which is defined as a married man and woman with typically two children. However according to Rapoport and Rapoport (1982) there is a myth that the nuclear family is disappearing, but it this has not happened in the Indonesian family. The nuclear family still remains a powerful normative ideal (Saggers and Sims, 2005: 68).

The family as an institution has been criticized by Tanti Noor Said.<sup>5</sup> She said that the family should be a safest place for children to receive love. But she began to suspect that statement because for Indonesian gays, the family is an institution that became quite frightening. Said

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<sup>5</sup> Tanti Noor Said, “Keluarga: Pengadilan, Penjara dan Sumber Pendidikan Kekerasan”, *Suara Kita*, 17 July 2014, [www.suarakita.org/2014/07/keluarga-pengadilan-penjara-dan-sumber-pendidikan-kekerasan/](http://www.suarakita.org/2014/07/keluarga-pengadilan-penjara-dan-sumber-pendidikan-kekerasan/).

cited the statement of Dutch sociologist, Professor Peter Geschiere, who said that the family is the most repressive institution in perpetuating cultural values, so therefore the family may not be a safest place for children. Some Indonesian gays are occasionally beaten or verbally abused simply because they are gay. Generally speaking, perception of Indonesian family regarding homosexuality is still low because of the traditional gender belief system.

The gender belief systems that Soeharto imposed led to a set of beliefs and opinions about males and females and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity (Kite and Deaux, 1987: 97). This belief system includes such factors as stereotypes about men and women, attitudes toward appropriate roles for women and men, and perceptions of those who presumably violate the traditional pattern of gender roles, including lesbians and gay men (Whitley, Jr. and Ægisdóttir, 2000: 948). Thus, it is clear that the gender belief system therefore holds that heterosexuals dislike lesbians and gay men because they are perceived as having cross-gender traits, roles, and physical characteristics (Whitley, Jr. and Ægisdóttir, 2000: 949).

Some of my respondents confessed that the main reason for going to Paris is caused by society's stereotypical beliefs about the roles of men and women. Being called a "sick person" can be another trigger to run away from home in order to find a safe place in addition to their parents' divorce.

### *"My Family is Everything"*

However, despite the above, the family still provides some social support for LGBT children. Many respondents that I interviewed in Paris had already confessed to their parents that they are gay and were in a relationship with another gay person.

According to Wan, et al. (1996), social support is distinguished between four types: emotional, informational, companionship, and tangible. Emotional support is associated with sharing life experiences and is the expression of esteem, affect, trust, concern, and listening which functions to enhance the individual's self-esteem. The second is informational support which concerns the provision of knowledge that might help an individual to increase their efficiency in responding or generating solutions to a problem (Cross, 2000). Companionship is the next support which includes spending time with others in leisure and recreational

activities. This kind of support helps distract the individual away from their problems. Wellman and Wortley (1989) show that companionship is support between close friends or colleagues. The last is tangible support which refers to the provision of financial aid, material resources, and needed services.

Below, I give three narratives. The first two narratives are quite positive because their families do not reject their children because they are gay.

(H, 40)

“Yes, indeed. My parents always think about my life. For Indonesian family, a child is always treated like gold. It’s very different in European society. Even when we are married, parents always hope that we stay with them. In Indonesian culture, we can’t forget that there is a very strong relation between parents and their children....

While I’m here I can still contact them. Come on ... the technology bring us Facebook, Instagram, Path, Twitter, Skype, and Yahoo Messenger. Just click them all, and I know what my parents are doing, and they know what I’m doing in Paris.”

H is a gay and a Muslim and his family knows he is gay. He has lived in Paris for eight years with his partner. He said that his parents strongly support him. He underlined that his parents, even though they are embarrassed that he is gay, still care deeply for him because believes that love between parents and children cannot be easily removed. Therefore H keeps constant contact with them with the help of the Internet.

(Y, 38)

...they never send me some euros, but I send them my euros. We connect each other with Internet, indeed, in particular with Skype. But normally, I chat with my sister ... and later my parents appear on screen and just want to say “hello” to with me. I am very happy to have a family like them...“Alhamdoulillah”. That’s why I try to find a halal job because I send them some euros. Is it a sin if I just want to make them happy?”

Y, Muslim, has strong emotional ties with his family even though he lives in Paris. For him, distance is not a problem as he can use Skype to talk to them. In this case, Y gives tangible support to his family in Indonesia. One day, his younger sister tried to send him money, but as a brother, Y feels it his responsibility to provide for his family. He takes a job in Paris even

though the job is not in an office. He thinks that any job is good as long it does not make him lose his dignity as a human. He wants his family always to be happy and proud to have a child like him even though he is gay.

From the two narratives above, it can be said that close family relationships can be a great source of strength in a time of crisis because the child needs signals that their family will still love them, no matter what.<sup>6</sup>

The last narrative is not so positive. I's parents reject him because they are embarrassed and felt that they failed by having a child like him. The interview was a little dramatic because I cried when discussing his relationship with his parents. He missed them very much and constantly tried to contact them but without success.

(I, 40)

“... (Crying in front of me)...My parents didn't want to have a gay child so they stopped contact with me. But I still have contact with my two sisters. I love them...love very much...I send them some euros and ask them about the condition of my parents....they don't want to speak with me...One day, one of my sister wanted to send me money, but I said 'no', I'm her brother, so I have to take responsibility. I have four sisters ... One is like a parent to me. She is fanatical about Islam ... I want to contact her, but it's impossible... (crying)... I miss them ...”

I also told me that his parents passed away seven years ago, not knowing that their son was gay. A few days after his parents passed away, he confessed to his three little sisters that he was gay. His youngest sister then did not want anything to do with him. However, I is still in contact with his two younger sisters. I's family has a strong religious background. His father worked at an Islamic institution while his mother was a typical Indonesian housewife. They had been on pilgrimages many times and had sent their children to Islamic school. His three little sisters wear the hijab. Even though I studied in an Islamic school, he had quite liberal ideas. I told me that being gay is not anyone's fault.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in *A Guide for Parents who have Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual Children*, [www.gylni.org.uk](http://www.gylni.org.uk).

## **V. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that migration seems inevitable for many LGBT people. This because being open about their sexuality makes them particularly vulnerable to be discriminated by society, religious leaders, and even by the state. As long as these push factors do not change, migration will become the “natural way” for them to avoid being mistreated. Because the Indonesian state is unwilling or unable to ensure and protect the basic human rights of all its citizens, I consider the migration of Indonesian gays to be a state failure. In my opinion, the state should have prevented Indonesian gays from moving to other countries by ensuring their safety and by providing them the opportunity to make a contribution to their own country. After all, whether gay, lesbian or heterosexual, we are all human beings, and therefore have the undeniable right to express ourselves.

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