

# Betting on a Defender of the Faith

## *A tepid bid to fire up Indonesia's film industry*

By Yenni Kwok in Jakarta

Anti-colonialism and jihad are potent rallying cries. Perhaps Indonesian film-makers had that in mind when they set out to make *Fatahillah*, an epic about a 16th-century Muslim cleric who mobilized the faithful to oust Portuguese invaders from the port city of Sunda Kelapa. The historic themes can be expected to strike a chord in a country where 90% of the population is Muslim and which ultimately won its independence.

A pair of high-powered producers -- Johan Tjasmadi, chairman of the National Film Advisory Board, and Surjadi Soedirdja, the governor of Jakarta -- ensured plenty of official support. Surjadi allocated US\$1.2 million from city coffers for the production, making it the most costly Indonesian film ever. After all, *Fatahillah* was to be the "locomotive" that would revive Indonesia's ailing movie industry. It opened amid a blaze of publicity in June, with the government urging civil servants and students to attend.

If success were determined by moral authority, *Fatahillah* would be a hit. The cast and crew seemed to be chosen as much for their Islamic credentials as their cinematic skills. Scriptwriter Misbach Yusa Biran is known for his religious devotion. Of the two directors, Imam Tantowi and Chaerul Umam, the latter is a veteran of movies with Islamic themes. Even lead actor Igo Ilham appeared to be selected on moral grounds. The 27-year-old accounting student is also an ustadz, or religious teacher, who instructs neighborhood youngsters in his spare time.

At least with an ustadz, the backers felt assured of a clean-living performer in the title role. "It would not be funny if we chose somebody who might go on to act in some porn movie after *Fatahillah*," says Imam. Most of the 20 to 30 local movies produced annually bear titles like *Forbidden Lust*. Indeed, the producers see their 138-minute work almost as a religious crusade. Says Johan: "Fatahillah is about the Islamic way of fighting evil."

A weighty message, but one that the film-makers may not have been up to delivering. Many reviewers have panned the plot as poorly developed, the acting as wooden and the climax as badly shot. "It does not show Islam as being smart," says critic Seno Gumira Ajidarma. Some even found the film disturbingly hostile toward non-Muslims.

The movie has performed modestly so far, selling about 350,000 tickets across the country through mid-July. In Jakarta and surrounding towns, the epic grossed about \$120,000 – far from breaking even. But then money is not the priority.

"This film is not to earn profits," says Johan. Besides, its religious theme goes down well in some quarters. Parmin, a tailor, found it lively. A student wrote to the Muslim-oriented Republika newspaper to give her thumbs-up.

Audiences around the region will have a chance to find out for themselves. *Fatahillah* is to be released in Malaysia in November, and possibly Thailand and Brunei at a later date. Against critics' advice, it has also been chosen to represent Indonesia at this year's Asia-Pacific Film Festival in South Korea. For fans, there will be more of the same: the directors have made a 13-part series of the story for television, with Ilham reprising his title role. The film-makers clearly have faith in their work.

The story was published in Asiaweek ([www.asiaweek.com](http://www.asiaweek.com)), August 15, 1998

*An afterthought note: The making of Fatahillah was interesting because it depicted the Portuguese as the villains during the time when Indonesia was very touchy with the independence support Portugal gave to its former colony, East Timor.*