

Jakarta



Communal Violence in Indonesia: Implications for Democracy and the Role of the State

by Dominic Berger

Since 1998 Indonesia has undergone extensive political and social reforms, in many ways becoming a more open and democratic society. Although this has undoubtedly been a positive development for Indonesia, this article will discuss some recent developments that have led some to question whether the country has indeed become a mature democracy. Inter-communal violence in several urban areas around Jakarta has sparked controversy over how the government is responding to the criminal actions of hardliner groups, such as the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI). As pressure is mounting on the President, the police and the local authorities to take firm action against perpetrators of any violence, mistrust and mob-justice are threatening Indonesia's emerging democracy.

Pluralism in Indonesia is officially embraced in its national slogan: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or "Unity in Diversity". While diversity and identity were highly state-managed affairs during the New Order regime, members of ethnic and religious minority groups saw the beginning of *reformasi* as a new era in which their identity and way of life would be protected and valued within Indonesia's new democracy. This article will look at a certain aspect of the resurgence of minority identity, namely the emergence of radical Islamic groups in several urban settings and their impact on Indonesia's democratic development.

As a country with both a democratic political system as well as a plural society, Indonesia holds a special place for those who hope that these two can function together. The political reforms that began in 1998, known as *reformasi*, led to a more open and democratic government, in turn unleashing social forces that for years had been repressed under Suharto's New Order regime. Amongst these social forces are pro-democracy groups, students, human rights groups, journalist associations and independent trade unions. While *reformasi* is usually associated with these pro-democracy groups, there is another side to a more open

political system: the emergence of radical religious and ethnic empowerment groups, sometimes referred to as 'uncivil society'.¹ Increasingly, these groups are seen as an unintended, and undesirable, consequence of the end of Suharto's authoritarian rule. Firstly, this article seeks to place religious violence in Indonesia into its current political context and secondly, it attempts to assess the risk of its possible impact on democracy in Indonesia.

Historical Background

Suharto's authoritarian regime left little space for radical Islamic groups for actions that were not sanctioned by the regime. Any actions by non-state actors were considered a *de facto* challenge to the regime's absolute claim on power, and were thus not allowed. As the New Order created the appearance of calm and stability in Indonesia's plural society, the regime limited research and discussion of religious and ethnic issues. Today there is still a reluctance to properly examine the legacy of the past. As a result, there is a lack of detailed knowledge about the incidence of violence during the New Order pe-

¹ Zachary Abuza, 'Political Islam and violence in Indonesia', Routledge, New York, 2007, pp. 1-2.

riod, especially violence related to religion and ethnicity. Today, this association of the authoritarian period of Indonesia's history with 'calm and peace' is becoming a danger to democracy.

Analysis' of communal violence have often come to conclusions involving religious or ethnic differences. In other words, the problem is some abstract notion of conflicting "identities".² In contrast to such analysis', John Sidel's *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*, instead focused on the changing sociological and structural factors.³ Sidel argues that a rapidly changing system creates uncertainties and anxieties about the place of Islam and other non-Muslim centers of power.⁴ This anxiety leads to unpredictable outbreaks of violence. Likewise, a comprehensive UN report points to the transition from authoritarianism to a more open democratic system in Indonesia as a factor that changed the dynamic of religious violence.⁵ It found that with the fall of the New Order the direction of the violence changed, concluding that;

the most striking difference between the New Order and the post-Suharto period appears to be that the New Order often used state-perpetrated violence to bring order, whereas clashes between social groups have been much more common since 1998.⁶

Violence in the *reformasi* era has thus become much more asymmetrical, occurring *within* the community, rather than *against* the community. Or, as Wilson argues, the reformasi era has seen the 'privatization of vi-

olence' with paramilitary and vigilante groups often appealing to religion or ethnicity to legitimize their violence.⁷

Radical Groups

Although the main group discussed in this article is the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), there exist dozens of similar organizations. As such, this article is not intended as a case study of the FPI, but rather an analysis of how the actions conducted by such groups impact upon democracy in Indonesia.

The formation of FPI was a direct result of the political turmoil of 1998-1999. Once the New Order regime collapsed following Soharto's resignation, the resulting power vacuum and the social upheaval led the state to rely on proxy-militias to keep various social forces at bay.⁸ During the early years of Indonesia's political transition the FPI was used by several senior generals as well as the police to intimidate the pro-democracy movement, for example by raiding the National Commission of Human Rights in June 2000.⁹ The FPI thrives by operating on the margins between legality and extremism. Rather than operating subversively, the groups effectiveness relies on its 'symbolic radicalism' as a means to influence and pressure the government.¹⁰ To many analysts the FPI are thus a paradox. On the one hand they are described as a radical fringe group who are out of place in a tolerant, moderate and democratic Indonesia, yet at the same time they appear to enjoy close relations with political and security establishments. For example, in August 2010 Jakarta Governor Fauzi Bowo as well as Police Chief Timur Pradopo attended the 12th Anniversary of the FPI sparking outrage amongst

² 'Thuggery all about 'a sense of identity', *Jakarta Post*, 18 August 2010. For detailed studies on violence in Indonesia see Gerry van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small town wars*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007. And Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2008.

³ Sidel, J., 'Riots, pogroms, jihad: religious violence in Indonesia', National University of Singapore Press, Singapore, 2007.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-102.

⁵ 'Patterns of Collective Violence in Indonesia, United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery (UN-SFIR), Jakarta, 2004. Available at <http://www.conflict-recovery.org/bin/Patterns_of_collective_violence_July04.pdf>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ian Wilson, 'Continuity and change: The changing contours of organized violence in post-New Order Indonesia', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, Iss. 2, 2006.

⁸ Wilson, Ian Douglas (2006) 'Continuity and change: The changing contours of organized violence in post-New Order Indonesia', *Critical Asian Studies*, 38: 2, 268-269.

⁹ 'Indonesia: Implications of the Ahmadiyah Decree', *International Crisis Group*, 7 July 2008.

¹⁰ Wilson, I., 'The rise and fall of political gangsters in Indonesian democracy', in Aspinal and Mietzer (eds.) *Problems of Democratization in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2010, p. 210.

large sections of society.¹¹ Despite the outrage the visit indicated that the group enjoys close access to Jakarta's bureaucracy. Since the implementation of decentralization local officials especially have become more vulnerable to pressure by radical groups. In July 2010 Aang Hamid Suganda, the regent of Kuningan, was instrumental in the persecution of the minority Ahmadiyah – an Islamic group diverging from mainstream Islamic doctrines in several key aspects - by enforcing a 2008 National Decree.¹² After heavy lobbying of the government by several radical Islamic groups the decree ordered that the Ahmadiyah "stop spreading interpretations and activities that deviate from the principal teachings of Islam".¹³ The ambiguity of the decree did not outright ban the Ahmadiyah, but it didn't need to. It provided radical groups with the leverage to pressure local officials to act against the group. Eventually, the order by Suganda to close several Ahmadiyah Mosques in his municipality indicated that Indonesia's democratic political system – from its highest lawmakers down to its newly empowered local officials – was open to influence by radical groups.

While religion is certainly an important factor in the FPI's ideology and rhetoric, the actions of these groups go beyond religion. For example, in June 2010 the FPI stormed a meeting between several MPs of the opposition party PDI-P with the accusation that the meeting was a revival of the PKI, Indonesia's banned communist party.¹⁴ The FPI is also renowned for "policing" what it considers morally decadent influences such as gambling, prostitution, transvestites, and alcohol. More broadly, the FPI openly calls for Sharia Law to be implemented throughout Indonesia and claims that *SEPILIS* – Secularists, Pluralists and Liberals – is the biggest threat to Indonesia. Mature democracies require a

rich tradition of constitutionalism, especially for the protection of minority rights. Indonesia's Constitution of 1945 provides a strong platform for values such as secularism, pluralism and religious tolerance, but recent decentralization laws have given substantial power to local governments. As a result, several regions have passed by-laws that, for example, effectively establish sharia law at the district level.¹⁵

Local Issues

Violations of religious freedom and cases of intolerance are found in greatest concentration in West Java and Jakarta, with the police found to be one of the biggest perpetrators, followed by regional government apparatus'.¹⁶ The idea that violence is caused by religion itself is often rejected. Instead, corrupt institutions, politics and even the new democratic system itself is blamed for being behind the increase in violence.

Palti Panjaitan is the Pastor of the HKBP Philadelphia Ciketing Church in Bekasi, an industrial satellite town just outside Jakarta. Bekasi's population is about 98% Muslim. Most Christians in Bekasi are ethnic Batak from Northern Sumatera who came to the municipality to find work. Pastor Palti's congregation has for years been struggling to obtain the correct permits from the local authorities to construct a Church. A decree dating from 2006 requires proposals for the construction of a new place of worship to receive 60 signatures from local households of different faiths.¹⁷ Although allegedly intended as a mechanism to avoid religious conflicts, restricting or preventing groups from practicing their religion has had the

¹¹ 'Condemnations mount against governor's embrace of FPI', *Jakarta Post*, 10 August 2010.

¹² For more background to the decree see 'Implications of the Ahmadiyah Decree', *International Crisis Group*, 7 July 2008.

¹³ Human rights Watch report, 'Indonesia: End Policies Fueling Violence Against Religious Minority', 2 August 2010. <<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/08/02/indonesia-end-policies-fueling-violence-against-religious-minority>>

¹⁴ Arfi Bambani Amri, 'Ribka-PDIP: FPI Tuduh Itu Pertemuan Komunis' (Ribka-PDIP: FPI accuses of Communist Meeting), *Viva News*, 3 September 2010.

¹⁵ G. Adi Kusuma, 'Religion and the constitution' *Jakarta Post*, 9 March 2006.

¹⁶ '2009 Annual Report on Religious Freedom and Religious Life in Indonesia' The Wahid Institute, PDF available at <http://www.wahidinstitute.org/Programs/Detail/?id=442/hl=en/Annual_Report_On_Religious_Freedom_And_Religious_Life_In_Indonesia_The_Wahid_Institute_2009>

¹⁷ As of September 2010, this decree has become subject of heated debate by civil society groups and several lawmakers. See Armando Siahaan, Markus Junianto Sihalo and Ulma Haryanto, 'Indonesian Lawmakers Want Religious Decree Rewrite', *Jakarta Globe*, 19 September 2010,

opposite effect in Bekasi.¹⁸ As a result of not being allowed to construct a Church, the congregation has in the past met in private homes or open fields to conduct Sunday services. This has led radical Islamic groups to demonstrate and sometimes use violence to stop the Christians from “illegally” holding religious gatherings. Pastor Palti says that the local authorities are simply not able to adapt to the arrival of the Christian community.¹⁹ Under the process of decentralization, local officials are now elected through direct elections, but instead of leading to more transparency, Palti claims that local officials act like Raja-Raja Kecil – ‘Little Kings’ who in order to secure votes use religion as a symbol. Likewise, Islamic groups use the specter of “Christianization” as a justification for violence and intimidation against congregations. This behavior is in line with Sidel’s theory that ‘religious violence erupts amidst heightened states of uncertainty and anxiety as to religious identities and their boundaries’.²⁰ Ahmed Suaedy, executive director of The Wahid Institute agrees that the government is largely incapable of managing inter-faith relations. “Under the New Order [Suharto’s regime lasting from 1965-1998] discussion of ethnicity and religion was not allowed, so religious violence was not allowed to happen. Now the system is open but the government hasn’t built the mechanisms for dialogue to resolve these issues”, he says.²¹ Suaedy also believes that decentralization has brought some unintended consequences. “Local democracy is a good thing, but there must be transparency. Local governments now believe they have the power to make laws, even when they contradict the Indonesian Constitution”. The police is coming under increasing pressure from civil society to act against vigilante groups.²² At the same time, periodic claims by the government of acting in the interest of all religions

¹⁸ Hasyim Widhiar, ‘Bekasi sees more religious-based conflicts’, *The Jakarta Post*, 31 August 2010.

¹⁹ Interview conducted on 27 August 2010, Jakarta.

²⁰ Sidel, J., ‘On the ‘anxiety of incompleteness’: a post-structuralist approach to violence in Indonesia’, *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 15, No. 2, p. 133-212.

²¹ Public discussion on 27 August 2010 at Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat (ELSAM)

²² Arnaz, F., ‘Cops asked to take a hard line with FPI’, *Jakarta Globe*, 14 July 2010.

and all minorities in Indonesia are increasingly ridiculed by a pessimistic public.²³

The threat to democracy

The police find themselves in a difficult position, facing pressure from all sides to “uphold the law”. The FPI accuses the police of failing to uphold the law when Christian congregations gather for worship without the proper permits. Likewise minority groups call on the police to uphold the law when groups such as the FPI engage in vigilante justice and mob violence. Allegations that segments of the police and the military are encouraging the FPI to carry out violence is alarming.²⁴ Inconsistent and biased law enforcement quickly leads to a lack of confidence in the state to be a fair and unbiased arbitrator in ethnic and religious affairs. Furthermore, by openly claiming to ‘assist the police’ in upholding the law, the FPI is challenging the already weak authority of the state’s law enforcement agencies. The breakdown of the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence by allowing groups to engage in ‘vigilante justice’ threatens the state in a fundamental way.²⁵ While most studies try to search for some primordial cause such as culture or religion, or on the other hand cite structural causes such as the authoritarianism of the New Order, another explanation is that religious violence is to a large extent caused by ineffective and corrupt state institutions.²⁶ When citizens can not trust the government to uphold the law, the emergence of local gangs or associations, whether built around religion or ethnicity, is likely to increase. With the police already facing a crisis of legitimacy due to corruption scan-

²³ Markus Junianto Sihaloho, ‘Indonesian government urges crackdown on violent groups’, *The Jakarta Globe*, 31 August 2010.

²⁴ Erwida Maulia, Arghea Desafiti Hapsari, ‘FPI merely imagining PKI threat, says expert’, *Jakarta Post*, 3 July 2010.

²⁵ Sara Schonhardt, ‘In defense of Islam, vigilante justice in Indonesia’, *Global Post (Indonesia)*, 24 August 2010. Available at <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/indonesia/100822/fpi-islam-vigilante-justice>>

²⁶ Some examples of the effect of local politics and decentralisation on ethnic relations are discussed in Henk Schulte Nordholt, Geert Arend van Klinken, Gerry Van Klinken, (eds.) ‘Renegotiating boundaries: local politics in post-Suharto Indonesia’, KITLV Press, Leiden, 2007.

dals and accusations of violence against journalists and human rights activists, this is a dangerous situation for Indonesian democracy.

While Indonesia is praised on the world stage for its fusion of moderate Islam with an open democracy, the threat of intolerance and communal violence is increasingly challenging this image.²⁷ After the 2009 election a wide consensus emerged that secularism had become widely accepted in society and that Islam, at least as a political force, was not going to be a threat to Indonesian democracy in the near future.²⁸ During the constitutional reforms after Suharto's fall Islamic parties failed to convince others that *syari'ah* should be included in the constitution.²⁹ As such there is now an opportunity to act firmly against these groups. However, it is precisely a lack of firmness that is fueling growing perceptions that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is not doing enough to protect religious pluralism and that law enforcement agencies are not willing, or not able, to enforce the Rule of Law.

Conclusion

Despite all these alarming cases, the extent of inter-communal violence must be kept in perspective. Firstly, support for groups like the FPI is not widespread. In that sense, the FPI's radicalism is, at least to some extent, kept in check by mainstream opinion which largely condemns religious violence when it occurs. Secondly, it has been pointed out that a large proportion of FPI's members come from low-income neighborhoods, with many having grown up with few economic or educational opportunities.³⁰ Related to the lack of economic opportunities is a lack of dignity experienced as a result of not having

employment. Joining groups such as the FPI offers youths both some material rewards, as well as a sense of belonging to a group, which as Nasir points out, earns them prestige within their group.³¹ From this perspective, it therefore seems that a partial solution to groups like the FPI is found in broader social reforms in education, social security and employment. Eradicating poverty and corruption in local government and within the police might be a good step towards preventing radical groups from recruiting members. Thirdly, the FPI's internal structure is fragmented and subject to regional power struggles, with its Chairman Habib Rizieq now acting as one of the few forces keeping the group united ideologically.³² Considering these points, the specter of a nationwide conflict between different religious groups is therefore not reflected by the reality. Instances of violence are likely to remain sporadic and related to local contexts. At the same time, incidences of communal violence, even when occurring at local levels, should be seen as stemming from broader social and political factors, such as poverty, corruption and the new dynamics of local politics, rather than from within a particular religion itself.

While many Indonesian's are proud of their country's reforms towards a more open democracy, others experience a sense of nostalgia for the order of the past, where a strong authoritarian state kept extremist groups in check. However, a democratic state must not be a weak state. In other words, the excessively strong New Order state needs not be replaced with a weak democratic state. It is possible, and desirable, that a strong state and a strong civil society coexist, but this can only work within a solid framework of constitutional democracy. While democracy compels the state to tolerate diverse views and protect the right of its citizens to protest, a democratic state likewise has a responsibility to maintain its monopoly on the use of violence. A longing for the perceived stability of the New Order needs to be countered with the building of stronger democratic institutions and mechan-

²⁷ Taufik Darusman, 'Taufik Darusman: Failing Democracy', *Jakarta Globe*, 12 September 2010.

²⁸ 'Prospek Islam Politik', Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI), Jakarta, 2006. Available at www.lsi.or.id. Also see Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, 'Muslim Indonesia's Secular Democracy', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 575-590.

²⁹ Nadirsyah Hosen, 'Religion and the Indonesian Constitution: A Recent Debate', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Volume 36, Number 3, 2005.

³⁰ Sudirman Nasir, 'FPI and low-income youths', *Jakarta Post*, 9 August 2010.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Rendi Akhmad Witular, Hans David Tampubolon, 'Islam Defenders mutating into splinter cells for hire', *Jakarta Post*, 16 July 2010.

isms that are capable of managing inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations with confidence and resolve. The government, through the judiciary and the police, needs to appear impartial in the enforcement of the law, especially over matters related to religion. When groups engage in criminal violence and intimidation in the name of religion the state must act firmly against them. When Indonesians see their state bodies as weak, corrupt or biased, they are likely to seek protection and a sense of belonging in local

groups based on religion or ethnicity. This would reinforce mistrust between different groups and in the long-term undermine Indonesian democracy.

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