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Coercive capital, authority and street politics

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The Politics of Protection Rackets in Post-New Order Indonesia

Gangs and militias have been a persistent feature of social and political life in Indonesia. During the authoritarian New Order regime they constituted part of a vast network of sub-contracted coercion and social control on behalf of the state. Indonesia's subsequent democratisation has seen gangs adapt to and take advantage of the changed political context. New types of populist street-based organisations have emerged that combine predatory rent seeking with claims of representing marginalised social and economic groups.

Based on extensive fieldwork in Jakarta, this book provides a comprehensive analysis of the changing relationship between gangs, militias and political power and authority in post-New Order Indonesia. It argues that gangs and militias have manufactured various types of legitimacy in consolidating localised territorial monopolies and protection economies. As mediators between the informal politics of the street and the world of formal politics they have become often influential brokers in Indonesia's decentralised electoral democracy. More than mere criminal extortion, it is argued that the protection racket as a social relation of coercion and domination remains a salient feature of Indonesia's post-authoritarian political landscape.

This ground-breaking study will be of interest to students and scholars of Indonesian and Southeast Asian politics, political violence, gangs and urban politics.

Ian Douglas Wilson is a Lecturer in Politics and Security Studies at the School of Management and Governance, and a Research Fellow at the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Australia.

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Preface

Throughout 1999–2001 I was living in Bandung, the provincial capital of West Java, undertaking PhD research examining the organisational history and politics of the Malay martial art of *pencak silat*. The research corresponded with a period of intense political and social change in Indonesia. The seemingly immovable President Suharto had fallen from power less than 12 months earlier after 32 years of authoritarian rule. His replacement, B.J. Habibie, called multi-party general elections for June 1999, the first to be held in the country since 1955. Overnight, dozens of new political parties sprang into existence and long-defunct ones were revived. In my neighbourhood in the east of the city, party branches and supporter groups sprung up, and flags and banners lined the streets. These were soon followed by numerous ‘command posts’ (*pos komando*, or *posko*) set up on street corners and intersections, the most prevalent in my neighbourhood being those belonging to the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* or PDI-P) the party led by Megawati Sukarno Puteri, the daughter of Indonesia’s first president. Made from bamboo and plywood and colourfully emblazoned with party logos and banners, the posko doubled as a hang out spot and party recruitment centre for local youths, with many soon joining the party’s ‘task forces’ (*satuan tugas*, or *satgas*), its paramilitary-style security wing. Ostensibly the purpose of the satgas was to garner local support, coordinate campaign efforts as well as keeping a more general ‘eye on things’. The space occupied by the posko in the neighbourhood had previously been home to *pos siskamling* (an abbreviation of *sistem keamanan lingkungan*, or ‘environment security system’) – security posts that were part of a complex system of neighbourhood surveillance established during the 1980s by the previous New Order regime. As a resident, I’d been obliged periodically to do a shift on the *ronda malam* ‘night watch’ at the siskamling post, which entailed a night of drinking coffee, playing cards, smoking clove cigarettes and chatting whilst ostensibly keeping an eye out for strangers or ‘suspicious’ behaviour.

I knew many of the men hanging around the posko in my neighbourhood via these ronda malam duties, most of whom were in their early twenties. Many, due to economic circumstances, had only finished primary school and had no steady job. Several had spent stints in jail for assault, theft or gambling. They were a friendly but rough lot, in many respects a product of their environment. To make ends meet some worked as security or parking attendants for a local car dealership and jewellery store, others skimmed ‘protection’ fees from local street

vendors, or operated a *Pak Ogah* ('Mister Do-bugger-all'), informal traffic wardens risking life and limb in a futile attempt to create order from the chaos of Bandung traffic in return for loose change from passing motorists. Many of my neighbours called them *preman*, a colloquial term derived from the Dutch *vrij-man*, literally a 'free man', but in contemporary parlance used to refer to a petty thug, standover man or gangster. Now wearing garish red and black camouflage uniforms, army boots, berets and insignia of rank supplied to them by the party, to the unaccustomed eye they looked exactly like military personnel.

The distinction in Indonesia between 'soldier' and 'thug' has indeed not always been clear cut. Throughout the country's modern history, state authorities have regularly relied upon non-state specialists in violence and local toughs who formed part of a vast subcontracted network of social and political control. As Ryter (1998) has noted, up until the 1980s the word '*preman*' had referred specifically to military officers out of uniform, but over time increasingly took on connotations of criminality, pointing to the perceived convergence of public and private violence, and the ambiguity between legality and illegality that characterised the New Order.

Some of the new satgas told me proudly how they had been given basic military training by former officers who had joined the party. Those with a reputation for being tough and experienced fighters were given a higher 'rank'. Their new sense of identity and authority was evident in their increasingly assertive behaviour. A banner they hung at the entrance to the neighbourhood proclaimed a territorial monopoly seemingly at odds with multi-party democracy: 'you are entering an area *owned* by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle.' Other neighbourhoods had similar banners from other political parties, ethnic or religious organisations or 'youth groups'. The elections were still over two months away, but the satgas acted as if they'd already been given some kind of mandate to rule. Within the space of a month, they had gone from being a tolerated nuisance, who were even occasionally useful when problems arose in the neighbourhood, to what some considered a virtual law unto themselves. Neighbours were intimidated to vote for their preferred candidate, much as an earlier generation of *preman* had done on behalf of Suharto's ruling party, Golkar. Local store owners suffered daily requests for donations to party 'fighting funds'. Those who declined found themselves subject to intimidation and in at least one instance that I witnessed, physical assault, the victim of which subsequently paid satgas from another party for protection. On several occasions brawls broke out between rival satgas over the placement of party flags which quickly escalated when their comrades from other areas came to back them up. These fights had little to do with competing visions for Indonesia's future, and more to do with struggles over who should or should not have access to what. Concerned these conflicts would spill over, men in a nearby neighbourhood joined a religious vigilante group to keep the satgas at bay. It appeared from this perspective that the new democracy had less been 'hijacked' as some commentators were already suggesting, than it was being interpreted and played out as a competition for territory, resources and rents amongst *preman*, the poor and unemployed young men – those who arguably had much to gain from political and economic reform. A scan of the Indonesian

media suggested that similar patterns were playing out in other parts of the country.

For all the genuine enthusiasm towards the new political process in my neighbourhood at that time, and the potential many believed it held for ushering in a new era of popular participation and genuine material improvement for its largely working-class residents, the presence of this new but nonetheless familiar breed of 'preman in uniform' cast a long and at times unsettling shadow. From the perspective of my former ronda malam buddies, however, this *was* democracy, and it offered them via the satgas opportunities for money, authority and prestige. The image of Suharto's authoritarian New Order state seemed, at this level, to have fractured into a complex menagerie of rival groups competing, often through force, to access territory, constituencies and the material benefits that came with it – the reproduction of well-entrenched practices of coercive governance within a multi-party democratic framework.

Now 16 years on, Indonesia has an institutionalised electoral democracy conducted on an impressively vast scale, with direct elections for every position from the president down to village chiefs. The introduction of decentralised forms of electoral-based democratic politics and bureaucratic and administrative reform was, on paper, intended to increase public participation, accountability, transparency and efficiency in the political process, and reduce the conditions giving rise to groups pursuing interests through violence and coercion. In some localities it has had a marked impact in this regard, but in others it has resulted in the proliferation and diversification of such groups. In the case of Jakarta, democratic process has seen violent entrepreneurs, gangs, and militias adjust to and be shaped by the changed socio-political conditions. With a new emphasis upon local as opposed to national politics, those with coercive authority at this level have become at times pivotal players as powerbrokers and mobilisers for a variety of social and political forces, and as contestants for power via the ballot box themselves. It has also seen gangs and street organisations developing into something resembling a kind of representational politics for actors and interests previously excluded from formal politics, in particular the urban poor. As Sassen has noted, 'street level politics makes possible the formation of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system' (Sassen 2003, 13).

A ubiquitous part of the urban environment in Jakarta, it is the world of preman, the organisations and gangs that they form and the kinds of politics they engage with and represent, that are the subject of this book. The politics of preman also draw attention to broader issues regarding the local dynamics and practices of state power in Indonesia's post-authoritarian democratic context, and the ways in which different types of formal and informal political authority is established, exercised and contested at the quotidian level.