

# Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999

Jemma Purdey



ANTI-CHINESE VIOLENCE IN INDONESIA

1996–1999

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Cover photo: Looters burning a portrait of Indonesian tycoon Liem Swie Liong and his wife in front of Liem's house in central Jakarta. Photo by Oscar Motuloh.

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*For Tom*



# Preface

In mid-May 1998 brutal violence raged through Jakarta, Solo, Medan and other cities of Indonesia. Most victims of the massive property destruction were Indonesians of Chinese descent, who comprise little more than two per cent of the country's population but account for a high proportion of private business capital. During the mass violence one thousand indigenous (*pribumi*) urban poor were killed in fires inside shopping centres that they had been encouraged to loot and Indonesian women of Chinese descent were targeted for gang rapes on the streets and in their homes. Years later urban poor victims and Chinese Indonesians are still fighting for justice and compensation and for a greater sense of security in the nation they call home.

When I began researching anti-Chinese violence during the early part of 1998, no-one predicted the brutality and systematic nature of violence that would follow a few months later. As the effects of the Asian economic crisis began to push up the prices of basic goods across Indonesia, violent incidents against Chinese-Indonesian shops and other property in Java became more frequent and appeared to be condoned by the government. When the May violence exploded in Medan, Solo and Jakarta — the most concentrated and vicious of its type against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia's recent history — many Chinese Indonesians fled the country and others sent their money abroad out of well-founded fears, further weakening the nation's failing economy. Suharto's resignation one week later did little to ease their fears.

This is a study of anti-Chinese violence within a period of social, political and economic transition and chaos in Indonesia. Beginning in mid-1996, Indonesia underwent a slow but steady revolution. Its people were beginning to demand a greater role in the politics of the state. Everywhere in society — in the media, politics, non-government organisations, student groups and labour groups — people acquired the courage to move against Suharto's New Order government and became more outspoken. Indeed it was this increased confidence and self-assurance among Indonesians that eventually forced Suharto's resignation on 21 May 1998. Despite this regime change, anti-Chinese violence

continued in late 1998 and early 1999. This period is an important focus of this study for what it reveals about the nature of 'anti-Chinese violence' as a social construction in a weak state. This violence did not occur alone. Besides the ongoing secessionist conflicts in Aceh, West Papua and East Timor, other types of ethnic and religious violence broke out around the country in West Kalimantan, Maluku and East Java.

It is surprising that the story of anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia has not yet been written with ethnicity as its master narrative. Explanations seem to skirt around ethnicity as a causal factor in its own right. Master narratives highlighting economic competition and racialised state terrorism have dominated existing interpretations of this violence. Although ethnicity and prejudice are recognised as a factor, these studies do not position it as central to the violence, but as a basic sentiment (or tool) to be manipulated. Given that any explanation must begin with the fact that the victims of the violence are ethnically different from the majority population, before then acknowledging the decidedly complex range of other factors involved, ethnicity is fundamental to any complete understanding of this violence.

The subject of this study is *large-scale* anti-Chinese violence during this period. This includes incidents involving attacks on more than one target, often in more than one place, thereby denoting a more general and non-specific motive. In order to clearly separate violence that is localised and has discrete motives the study does not include single attacks on churches, shops or houses owned by Chinese Indonesians. Where possible, I have attempted a narrative of a selection of events of violence. The choice of incidents was based on a variety of factors including the level of destruction, the public and political responses to these cases, and the continuities or discontinuities between incidents. This preference was also influenced by my access to materials about certain events (documents, witnesses, reports) and by the decision to present incidents of violence against Chinese Indonesians, which had a range of different motives.

In each case I identify the origins of the violence and provide a consistent narrative of how it unfolded as recounted and reported by news agencies, community groups, religious organisations, witnesses, victims and the state. From these different information streams and in accordance with Paul Brass's advice: 'We might listen to all the interpretations of violence, especially those on site, who have seen it, participated in it, or somehow been close to it',<sup>1</sup> I have shaped what I perceive resembles 'what happened' during and also after each incident. In itself this process required making judgements, as all researchers

must do, about different representations of these events, to produce my own authored narrative with all the shortcomings of this form. I have sought to expose the operations, interests and politics behind these interpretations by way of interrogating the authenticity of the narratives presented. The 'story' of each incident is placed within the context of analysis of the organisational forms and structures of the violence; the systems and networks that allow it to occur; including the state, the 'institutional riot systems' of *preman* (gangsters, thugs) and criminals and the 'repertoire' of the crowds. Through presenting analysis of the events occurring in Indonesia's political economy, alongside investigation of the violence, the way in which state and public discourse impacted on these events is borne out. I am also conscious that the emotion and suffering of these experiences should not be overlooked. The outcome is one provisional truth of these violent events, which seeks to add to the range of 'potential realities'.

The book is divided into three chronological parts separated by the May 1998 events: July 1996–April 1998; May 1998; and June 1998–October 1999. The intensity and brutality of the violence in May 1998, together with evidence of their systematic and simultaneous enactment, marks this period as a 'climax' in the violence against Chinese Indonesians from 1996–99. The mass violence in May 1998 also presents the greatest challenge for someone endeavouring to write a narrative of these events. Whilst violence occurred in several Indonesian cities more or less simultaneously, public discourse and official representations of the violence have focused on events in Jakarta. A significant mass of documentation and analysis of this violence already exists, including reports assembled by a government-appointed body the Joint Fact-Finding Team (*Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta*, henceforth referred to as Joint Team) and civil society organisations. In this case, because of the scale and political and social significance of the violence the researcher is crowded with myriad contested versions. Thus, rather than attempting to create a 'new' narrative of the Jakarta violence, I offer a critique of the 'official' version of the violence as presented in the Joint Team report commissioned by President Habibie in July 1998.

As an alternative to the Jakarta-centrism of existing narratives, this study approaches the 'May violence' through presenting analysis of the cases in Medan and Solo. The study of the Solo violence in May 1998 (in particular, representations of that violence produced by its residents and others afterwards) demonstrates the power of alternative interpretations as Veena Das wrote, 'to constitute the meaning of the violence for people in different social positions'.<sup>2</sup> The Medan case provides a



highly localised context for analysing the violence in May, yet at the same time reveals its national reach.

My proximity to the 'history' I was researching and writing meant that the study was challenged by complications of emotion and immediacy. At the same time, it meant that the actors in the stories and their memories were accessible to me in a way that they would not have been if I had undertaken this research even a few years later. The most obvious impact on this book is the emphasis given to the victims of the violence and recognition of the need to look for alternative version of violent events. Some of my most important sources became the victims' support organisations and womens' NGOs, which emerged at this time as the frontline for human rights in a post-New Order Indonesia. From this contact I grew to understand the responsibility to its victims of such writing on violence. Furthermore, I was very interested in the interactions between these groups and Chinese-Indonesian community organisations. In Jakarta these groups worked together closely on actions calling for justice and came together for healing.

Sixty years after Indonesia's independence, Indonesians of Chinese descent still find it difficult to define their position in the nation. They continue to struggle to find a way to identify themselves as both ethnically Chinese, and Indonesian. Under Indonesian nationalism they are regarded as being an homogenous ethnic group and also as different from the indigenous or *pribumi* population. The decision about what to name them is itself one of the difficulties facing this group of Indonesians and also this study. What do we call a group that is, after several generations as Indonesians, increasingly assimilated into the majority 'Indonesian' culture and which has been virtually forced to do so by those in power since the mid-1960s? How should we name a group that does not consider itself to be homogenous? This study recognises these distinctions, but it uses the inclusive term 'Chinese Indonesians' for all Indonesians who under the law are recognised as set apart from indigenous Indonesians on the basis of separate legal requirements regarding identification and proof of citizenship.

I have made the decision to avoid labelling these violent incidents as 'riots'. Although Donald Horowitz asserts that 'ethnic riot' is synonymous with 'ethnic violence' or with 'racial', or 'tribal disturbances',<sup>3</sup> classifying these acts of violence as 'riots' is too prescriptive of the agency of those involved. Regardless of academic subtleties, in more general usage the term 'riot' assumes that these are incidents of crowd or 'mob' violence in which the participants are similarly motivated. It is an emotive term that, in many ways, dismisses the reality of these violent

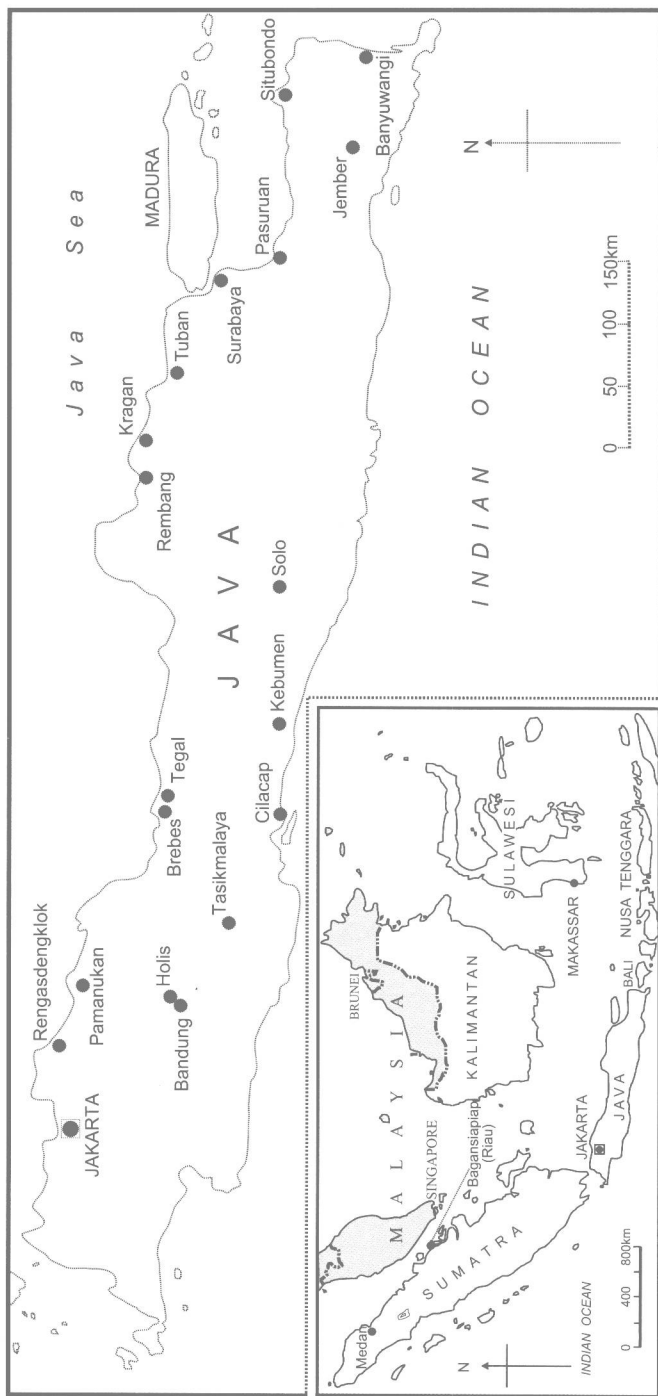
acts. The term *rusuh* (riot) in Indonesian has the same effect as *amok* (amuk), as a term of reference presented in an almost automatic manner to describe these acts. Using *kekerasan* (violence) instead of *kerusuhan* (riot) calls for a deeper investigation of the sources of agency and responsibility. With respect to violence against Chinese Indonesians in particular, avoidance of this term makes it possible to position these incidents alongside other types of violence in Indonesia, without discrimination.

My thanks go to my friends and family who have always encouraged and supported my interest in Indonesia. In Indonesia there are a large number of people I need to thank who assisted me with my research when I visited in 1999 and 2001. In particular I thank the Leksono-Supelli family for showing me the most extraordinary kindness and generosity and for allowing me to become part of their family. I especially thank the brave and inspiring Karlina who not only acted as my host, but also guided me through the networks and politics of NGOs in Indonesia. In the same way thanks to Amir Sidharta, who gave me an insight into the perspectives of Chinese Indonesians in Jakarta. For their assistance with information in Indonesia thanks to Esther Yusuf and everyone at Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa, Albertus Sugeng at GANDI, the members of SIMPATIK, Thung Julian, Mély Tan, Imelda from FRONT in Bandung and Widi, Bowo and friends from SEMADI also in Bandung, Pak Bingky, Pak Oei and Pak Hendi from INSPIRASI in Surabaya, and most of all everyone at TRuK, especially Citu and Rinto for their friendships. I am greatly appreciative to all the people I was privileged to meet in Indonesia. Some of their names appear here but they are too numerous to mention. I am indebted to the Department of History at Melbourne University for providing facilities, funds and collegial support. Thanks also to the Arts Faculty and the School of Graduate Studies for travel and other grants, which allowed me to visit Indonesia and attend conferences. Thank you to a team of readers including Arief Budiman, Charles Coppel, Tom Dobson, Brigid Delaney, Ariel Heryanto, Celia Purdey, Jon Booth, Kristen Hilton and Tim Lindsey for their wisdom, time and patience. Thanks to Donna Williams for her editorial assistance and to The Kian Wie and Claudia Prestel for their comments on the final manuscript. Special thanks to Connor Bailey for being generous with his knowledge of the fishing industry in Bagansiapi-api, and to Helen Pausacker for sharing with me her vast collection of materials from Solo. Also to Kate McGregor and Nicki Tarulevicz for their friendship and encouragement and to Derek McDougall who has been a great support from the beginning. Immense thanks go to Howard Dick for his support

and guidance in bringing this book to publication. My final thanks are reserved for Charles Coppel for his great inspiration, intellect, patience and friendship over the years. Charles introduced me to an area of study I had never envisaged and with his guidance I returned to some of my early passions for human rights and justice. Finally, to Tom; this would not have been possible without you.

## **A Note on Translation**

All translations from Indonesian to English are my own unless otherwise indicated. In some cases I have quoted from the English language version of an Indonesian newspaper published on the Internet, and in these cases the title is given in English in the citation. The same is true of the reports from Volunteer Team for Humanity (TRuK) and the Joint Fact Finding Team (TGPF), which are available in both English and Indonesian versions. I have used modern Indonesian spelling for Indonesian words, names and place names included in the book, except in cases where individuals have retained the older style of spelling.



Map of Indonesia and Java.

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# 1

## Chinese Indonesians: A Minority in the Middle

*On 14 May 1998, in the north Jakarta suburb Tanjung Priok, shouting and banging disturbed the owners of a local basic goods store. The shop was located on a leafy residential street off a main road. It was owned by a Chinese-Indonesian family who had lived in the area for many years and whose children, including a daughter Lia in her twenties, had grown up playing in the street and attending school with their neighbours and regular customers. The family had been alarmed by the violence elsewhere in Tanjung Priok itself and in the greater Jakarta area over the past 24 hours and had closed their shop and locked the house, although they had not felt the need to flee. However on 14 May a crowd attacked their shop and the house behind it, and unable to break the windows and doors, they gained access through the roof. As the looters descended, the children and their grandmother sought refuge in the home of a pribumi (indigenous) neighbour whilst their parents tried to defend their home. As Lia struggled to help her elderly grandmother across the street to the safety of their neighbour's house, the old woman slipped and fell, injuring her hip. Among the looters were people known to the family, including the local meatball seller, who made off with a television set. Others stole the photocopier from the store and then later tried to sell it back to the family for a high price. A year after the attack the family were operating their store again, supplying basic goods to the neighbourhood. Lia, however, could not continue to live in the area. She was simply too afraid of confronting those who had terrorised her family.<sup>1</sup>*

Lia's story is timeless. Ethnic Chinese across generations and localities in Indonesia can recount similar tales. As members of a small ethnically distinct minority, Chinese Indonesians have periodically experienced

violence across various regimes, rulers and political models.<sup>2</sup> This violence has often coincided with social, political and economic change at the national level, but it is also driven by local concerns and conflicts. Like Lia's family, ethnic Chinese in Indonesia are predominantly engaged in trade and commerce and, though only two per cent of the population, are estimated to control a large proportion of Indonesia's private business capital. They are also more likely to be Christian, Buddhist or Confucian than to follow the majority religion, Islam. Symbols of this wealth and other markers of their difference as 'foreigners' including religious ones are targets of this violence. The thread of violence against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia runs through the history of the settlement of Chinese traders and merchants in the archipelago over hundreds of years, giving rise to a constant pattern of prejudice and discrimination.

## INDONESIA'S ETHNIC CHINESE MINORITY

In Indonesia state racism has a history longer than the history of the Republic. Maybe even older than the entity known as the 'state' (Goenawan Mohamad).<sup>3</sup>

Indonesia's national slogan *Bhinneka Ika Tunggal*, Unity in Diversity, celebrates difference. Adopted at independence in 1945, this principle allows Indonesians to also have a regional and ethnic identity, a *suku bangsa*; to speak the languages of their region as well as the national language. They are *pribumi* or indigenous Indonesians. This diversity is, however, limited to ethnic groups with claims to a territory of origin in the archipelago. Being migrants, Chinese Indonesians have no claims to any specific territory, although they are concentrated in some particular locales. For example, ethnic Chinese make up 30 per cent of the population in Pontianak, West Kalimantan; 10 per cent in Jakarta and 13 per cent in Medan, North Sumatra.<sup>4</sup> They are spread across the islands and speak many local languages, yet are still seen by many Indonesians as a group whose claims for belonging in Indonesian nationalism are partial.

Nation-ness, and hence the distinction between Indonesian and non-Indonesian, are only a step away from the ethnic dichotomy of *pribumi* and non-*pribumi*. Nothing illustrates this better than the New Order's grandiose national park, the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, 'Beautiful Mini Indonesia Park' ... we find nothing representing the lives of fellow nationals of Arab, Indian, Chinese or European ethnicity.<sup>5</sup>



Figures on the numbers of ethnic Chinese as a percentage of Indonesia's population were made possible for the first time since 1930 by the inclusion of a question related to self-identification of ethnicity and race in the 2000 census. Using these results and their own analysis, Leo Suryadinata and his fellow authors of *Indonesia's Population*, calculate that ethnic Chinese make up a mere 1.5 per cent of the Indonesian population.<sup>6</sup> This is based on various assumptions, but most importantly that Chinese Indonesians are under-represented in the census data. The authors maintain that up to 25 per cent of people of Chinese descent would not identify themselves as such when completing the census. Therefore they estimate the proportion of ethnic Chinese to be as high as 2 per cent of the total population, although it is a figure Jamie Mackie still considers to be too low.<sup>7</sup> Why might Chinese Indonesians not declare their Chinese ethnicity? The authors speculated that the memories of the 1998 violence were still fresh for many and frightened them off. But we also must consider that many Indonesians of Chinese descent whose families have lived for generations in Indonesia may indeed no longer regard themselves to be anything but Javanese or Sundanese and so on. A young Indonesian friend once told me about a simple survey in her geography class, during which the teacher asked people to raise their hands according to their *suku bangsa* or ethnic group. She was surprised when 90 per cent of her classmates whom she perceived as ethnic Chinese nominated another group, even though Chinese (*Tionghoa*) was an option to be taken.

Indonesian nationalism embraces plurality of religion through the *Pancasila* (Five Principles) contained within the preamble to the 1945 Constitution, which was intended by Sukarno to lay down the basic values of Indonesian political culture, whilst allowing freedoms of religion and ethnic expression. According to this doctrine, Indonesians must believe in God Almighty and adhere to one of the five officially recognised religions — Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism and Protestantism. Islam is overwhelmingly the dominant religion in Indonesia with 88 per cent of the population, followed by Christianity (9 per cent), Hinduism (2 per cent), Buddhism (0.8 per cent) and Other (0.2 per cent). However, the omission from the 2000 census of alternatives including Confucianism, or the option to nominate as agnostic or atheist, means that some individuals are obliged to provide false data.<sup>8</sup> For example, a Chinese Indonesian who is Confucianist may identify herself as Christian for the purposes of the census. Although the census data do not provide explicit figures on the nominated religion of Chinese Indonesians, the results do