

# The Role of Violence During Indonesia's Political Transition

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/07/did-the-mass-outbreak-of-violence-during-indonesias-political-transition-play-a-role-in-consolidating-democracy/>

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### **Did the Mass Outbreak of Violence During Indonesia's Political Transition Play a Role in Consolidating Democracy?**

The beginning of the 1990's marked the start of a transition in the realm of Indonesian politics. The population had put up with enough and began to show their frustration towards Suharto's New Order authoritarian regime that had governed the country for over three decades. Under the New Order minorities were disadvantaged while certain ethnic groups were privileged and social engineering projects were taken that displaced thousands. The New Orders repressive policies also prevented the open articulation of 'regional' political agenda. (Aspinall and Berge, 2001; 1008)

Violent outbreaks began to take place just before Suharto's resignation in 1998. Despite its violent democratic transition, Indonesia today stands as one of the most democratic countries in South East Asia. (Freedom House, 2012) My argument is that violence played a significant role in the process of democratisation in Indonesia as it is a product of what Bertrand calls a 'critical juncture'. The resignation of Suharto and the transition thereafter symbolises a massive rupture in Indonesian political development and began the process of building an entirely different kind of regime. (Kimura, 2010; 248) This period signifies the critical juncture in Indonesian politics whereby the population questioned the national project as a whole, renegotiated their rights and chose to push for democracy. Bertrand explains that during a 'critical juncture' the institutionalizations of ethnic relations are modified along with a reaffirmation, contestation or renegotiation of the principles upon which these relations are based. (Bertrand, 2004; 10) Critical junctures create space for competing groups to negotiate their rights and terms of inclusion within the emerging political institution. This process is often violent, as members of society are insecure of the outcome of the new political establishment. Van Klinken explains that the devolution of authority to lower levels of the state, combined with democratising changes in the way key-holders are appointed, unleash intense competitive dynamics. (Van Klinken, 2007; 37)

This essay will first identify violence on a national level which involved violent acts against the Chinese-Indonesian population, and communal violence in North Maluku and West Kalimantan. It will then explain how these violent outbursts led to the renegotiation and reaffirmation between groups in society. During this critical juncture, the existing institutions began to weaken, which brought a threat of exclusion but also a hope for inclusion and change amongst different groups. (Bertrand, 2004) Members of society that were marginalised during the regime competed for their rights and a piece of the new institution and those that had been advantaged throughout the New Order fought to maintain their permanency. Comparatively, Malaysia did not experience a clear democratic transition in its history. Instead, it experienced a negotiated political transition without a significant 'critical juncture'. This essay will finally attempt to show how the process of democratic transition has varied between the two countries and how a 'critical juncture' has allowed the opening of channels for clearer democratic consolidation in Indonesia.

### **National and Localised Violence in Indonesia**

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Indonesia was strongly affected by the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997 as its oppressive means of old political control contradicted the country's integration into the global markets. This accelerated the resignation of Suharto as the only thing that kept the middle-class from taking action against the government was economic stability, but once that began to deteriorate there was nothing to hold protestors back. By May 1998, political protests took over the streets of Jakarta and spread across the whole country. University students and the middle class led the 'reformasi' movement to topple Suharto's regime and strive for democracy. Four Trisakti University students were shot during one of the protests days before Suharto's resignation on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May. This violence was expected as the authoritarian regime had not been challenged as expressively in the past. What followed suit was the proliferation of violence throughout the country including localised cases of violence and national incidences of violence, in particular violence against Chinese-Indonesians. From 1998 to 2002, violent conflicts also escalated in several parts of the country, most significantly in Kalimantan, Aceh, East Timor, Papua, Maluku and Sulawesi. (Bertrand, 2004)

Under Suharto's New Order regime, the minority Chinese businessmen were given favourable contracts and were nurtured to strengthen Indonesia's economy. At the same time however the Chinese were still politically and socially excluded. During the weakening of Suharto's regime, grievances regarding socio-economic inequalities surfaced and mass anti-Chinese sentiments proliferated as these networks and favourable contracts came under close scrutiny. Resentment grew not only against large conglomerates but also, by extension, against all Chinese Indonesians, especially small retailers in towns across the county. (Bertrand, 2004 ; 66) The Asian financial crisis in 1997 heightened these grievances and during the riots of mid-May in 1999 hundreds of Chinese Indonesian's were killed and their properties destroyed. This outbreak of violence showed the accumulated frustrations people had towards the New Order policies that were institutionalised since the 1960's. This violence was experienced nationwide; grievances towards the Chinese population were seen in Jakarta and in the most remote areas of Indonesia.

Localised violence also occurred during this period of transition in rural areas of Indonesia including North Maluku and West Kalimantan. The fighting in North Maluku was one of the most savage examples of localised violence Indonesia experienced during the New Order transition. It has been reported that the death toll was the worst of all post New Order communal violence; almost 2800. (Varshney, Panggabean and Tadjoeidin, 2004; 23) During the Suharto's New Order regime, North Maluku experienced an uninterrupted series of military district chiefs. The sultanate custom was wiped out and religion was also ruled out as a political principle. Additionally, the dominant government elite, *Golkar*, intimidated and manipulated local elections. The sudden opening of democratic space in May 1998 created both opportunities and threats to the North Maluku population. (Van Klinken, 2007; 107) The violent outbursts that occurred were intrinsically political, manipulated by the dominant elites who feared that their positions were beginning to weaken after May 1998. The initial religious conflicts involving Christians and Muslims soon turned into Muslim-Muslim violence, thus showing that religion although played a significant role, was not the main agenda behind the violence but a means of mobilization. The revival of the 1960's struggle for a North Maluku province fired the imagination of all and triggered a wave of nationalism and unity. (Van Klinken, 2007;112) On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1999, a board run by President Habibie to make legal reforms decided Maluku would be divided into two provinces after the June 1999 elections. What were at stake were the political positions and interests of the new formed province. Violent forms of renegotiation and reaffirmation during this period led to the Milano Peace Pact in February 2002. (Bertrand, 2004; 133)

In West Kalimantan, large-scale conflicts took place between two major ethnic groups; the Dayaks and the Madurese. Under the New Order regime, the majority Dayak population were side-lined economically and politically while the Madurese represented a group that had progressed under New Order policies. (Bertrand, 2004;133) Violence between the Dayaks and Madurese broke out in December 1996. The Dayaks attacked the Madurese as opposed to the government and did so when the New Order's institutions were weakening between the end of 1996 and 1997. These violent outbreaks occurred in several waves. The first was calmed by 6 January 1997 while the second was more extensive and deadly. In one attack, 131 people were killed when a group of Dayaks stormed Salatiga and burned down all the existing Madurese houses. (Bertrand, 2004) The marginalization of the Dayak by the New Order regime was a particularly important factor in explaining the institutional environment that created the tensions. Dayak discontent grew during the New Order in response to the state's alteration of the rules of access to resources; the Dayaks exclusion from political and economic development. (Peluso and Harwell, 2001) Competition for local jobs and land was high in West Kalimantan, as a result of high rates of migration and transformation of the

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area. Under these conditions the Dayaks competed with the Madurese and other migrants for scarce resources that were largely controlled by wealthy entrepreneurs from outside the region. (Bertrand, 2004) This economic disparity further exacerbated the violence in the region. During the period of violence, the Dayaks were aware that an institutional change could give them a chance of economic and political advantages. The Dayaks fought for their rights and political representation and expressed embedded grievances towards the Madurese as a result of the insecurity of the new structure of the political institutions.

## **Critical Junctures as an Explanation for the Violence**

During regime change there is an opportunity for political mobilization and negotiations of group claims. Regime change is a period of important institutional change that opens up discussions and negotiations about resource allocations, representation and the status of ethnic groups. Violence emerges out of tensions embedded in past institutional reforms and compromises that are no longer sustainable or acceptable. (Snyder, 2002) Tensions that had accumulated over the last 30 years led to violent outbreaks and ethnic conflicts during the 'critical juncture' as agents have a new found flexibility in choice. (Kimura, 2010) Critical junctures open channels to define the criteria of inclusion and exclusion. (Bertrand, 2004; 20) Terms of inclusion involves the basis on which groups are recognised and whether they constitute as members of the nation, and the terms of exclusion is the threat of losing the sense of stability certain groups were provided during the regime. Violent mobilisation occurs when these terms of inclusion and exclusion are open to renegotiation during the reconfiguration of the regime. When the "critical junctures" process comes to end and institutions are established, the relations between ethnic groups and the state are redefined by the new terms of inclusion. (Bertrand, 2004) A democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote and when this government de-facto has the authority to generate new policies. (Linz and Stepan, 2001; 18) Once a state regains institutional strength and stability, the uncertainty of outcomes is reduced and with that, the violence also begins to subside.

During the transition to democracy and reform after Suharto's resignation, the extent of the violence began to decline significantly. Strong resentments were replaced by a tone of sympathy due to the horrifying number of deaths. After sanctioning the inclusive values of the Indonesian nation, Chinese Indonesian's were reaffirmed as citizens and as equal members. Institutional reforms, leadership change and violent results of the New Order policies presented an opening to renew rules, laws and customary practices. (Bertrand, 2004; 69) The period of violence allowed the two ethnic groups to readdress their position in society and come to a peaceful compromise. Chinese Indonesian's began to be more involved in politics and openly requested an end to discriminatory practices. Suharto's resignation led to a space cleaning, which suddenly provided opportunities for Chinese Indonesians to openly discuss their experiences as an oppressed minority. (Allen P.M., 2005; 3)

What occurred in Maluku can be explained the process of 'polarization' found in the Dynamics of Contention. (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001; 322) It is defined as a widening of the political space between claimants in a contentious episode and the gravitation of previously uncommitted or moderates to one or both extremes. Polarization occurs when elites sense an opportunity or a threat, when a new province is created local elites struggle for regional autonomy. All this occurred during Indonesia's 'critical juncture'. In 1999, when North Maluku was provincialized, competition rose for the positions of district heads and provincial governors which lead to a series of violent conflicts. Similarly, in West Kalimantan, Dayak Political elites who had been frustrated in their loss of representation and control over resources had a strong interest in winning many of these posts. During the weakening of Suharto's regime, the institutional structure of Indonesia's political and administrative institutions was open to renegotiation. This 'critical juncture' allowed Dayak elites to seize an opportunity to reassert the control they once had in the province.

## **Democracy in Indonesia**

The essential question is whether the violent 'critical juncture' in Indonesia has consolidated democracy today? In 1999, Indonesia experienced significant reforms in order to deal with the communal tensions. Variant forms of proportional representation were used. Members of Parliament from multi-member districts that were to run in

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election parties had to show that they had a broad national presence with functioning branches in a large proportion in the country's districts. This form of electoral system prevented Indonesia's national institutions from becoming a battleground for organized regional and ethnic interests. It also created a highly fragmented party system which no single party was able to dominate. (Aspinall, 2010) This succeeded in preserving pluralism and preventing the escalation of communal tensions.

Reforms also involved a significant policy of decentralization of political and financial power. Considerable political powers were devolved to the country's districts and were given control over a good part of the state budget. Although this mass decentralization risked increasing the rate of corruption, it promoted local governments to make many of the key decisions about how best to use local resources. (Aspinall, 2010) Therefore, regional ethnic conflicts and grievances could be dealt with in an effective political manner.

Term of inclusion has allowed the ethnic Chinese community to remain active since the 1999 elections. It has been enjoying its new freedom and the ability to express its ethnic feelings in public. There has been a revival of interest in ethnic feelings in public. (Suryadinata, 2001) Since Suharto's regime, there has been a growth in civil society movements. There are many ethnic Chinese pressure groups that are active in promoting ethnic Chinese culture and interests. They lobby the government on the ethnic Chinese community's behalf, as they see it, to get discriminatory laws and practices removed. (Leo Suryadinata) Additionally, after the waves of violence against the Chinese-Indonesians subsided, several non-government organisations (NGO) were created to prevent future outbreaks of violence. Amongst them were the National Solidarity Organisation and the Indonesian anti-discrimination Organisation. (Bertrand, 2004 ; 69)

Despite these positive trajectories, Indonesia still faces significant challenges in consolidating its democracy today. Indonesia still has a problem with law enforcement amongst many others, and there can be no democracy without the supremacy of the law. (Nusa Bhakti) Poor governance however is the midwife of authoritarian reversals. *Reformasi created a stable framework for democracy, and despite its difficulties Indonesia is on the right path towards democracy.*

## Country Comparison: Malaysia

Due to the historically marginal role of the military in Malaysia, there is no evidence of significant military-civilian tension or, importantly, the kinds of opportunities such internal regime pressures may offer for would be oppositions. (Hedman, 2001; 935) Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia has not experienced a clear 'critical juncture' in its history that redefined existing terms of inclusion and exclusion. In Malaysia, UMNO (United Malays National Organization) continues to be the dominant party in the ruling coalition. UMNO favours its ethnic Malay constituents over urban Chinese by weighting rural districts heavily. (Case, 2002)

Malaysia has been labelled as a 'semi-democratic' regime since its independence in 1957 as it limits the practice of civil and political liberties through restriction on communication, assembly and the strategic use of detention orders and other legal and emergency powers. (Welsh, 1996) Thus, the Malaysian regime remains relatively insulated against certain pressures associated to possibilities of mobilization as civil society elsewhere. Civil society in Malaysia does not fit the theoretical ideal of democratic, grassroot-oriented, politically transformative organisations for building social capital and keeping the government in line. Too few of them are truly independent, self-financing and racially and linguistically inclusive. (Weiss and Salihan, 2003, 43) Furthermore, opposition groups are prevented from reaching wider audiences by the government owning most of the media outlets, they are restricted in circulating their own party publications and they are barred from organizing mass rallies, even during campaign periods. (Case, 2002) Malaysia therefore has not had a clear opportunity to redefine its regime and adopt democratic consolidation the way that Indonesia has.

## Conclusion

Along the way to democratisation, struggles often become more violent for a while as the stakes rise with regard to who will win or lose from democratic institutions. (Tilly, 2003 ; 44) During Indonesia's political transition Indonesian's

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started expressing its discontent more openly. A new generation of advocacy groups, mainly pro-democracy and human rights groups, were formed and became increasingly active in anti-government protests. These groups were characterised by their attempts to unite all forms of pro-democracy movements and increased pressure against the government. (Uhlin 1997, 114) At the same time, ethnic conflicts proliferated as they had a new found opportunity to renegotiate their rights during this 'critical juncture', due to this violence nationhood emerged at a local level. Despite struggles in consolidating democracy, Indonesia experienced a clear turn over from an authoritarian regime towards a more democratic regime which gave opportunities for the negotiation of competing rights. The chances of future processes of democratic consolidation are stable as the internal tensions of the Suharto regime facilitated eventual democratization and diverse forms of mobilization. ( Hedman, 951)

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