

The Roots of Violence in Indonesian Political History*

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It is not easy for me to discuss contemporary Indonesian political history. As I am a government official, I could easily be considered by other scholars as either a former Soeharto agent or a product of the New Order. In fact, I have never been in a class of indoctrination although this was compulsory during the period of my recruitment into government service.

First, I would like to quote Robert Elson. In his paper "In Fear of the People: Soeharto and the Justification of State-sponsored Violence Under the New Order," Elson argues that "His (Soeharto) fear and mistrust of the Indonesian people characterized his thinking about politics."

It is my understanding that this statement is the representation of something called *budaya darurat* or "emergency culture" which strongly influenced the conduct of Indonesian politics since independence. The state as well as society have always been considered in a state of emergency. This means that historically, Indonesian politics has operated under the concepts of "emergency" or "temporary."

This condition is also related to the socio-political discourse of *keseragaman* (uniformity) and *keamanan* (security) which are deemed essential to stability. These terms have been an important driving force behind the actions of the state and society.

Politically there is no distinction between the Soekarno and Soeharto regimes in terms of state sponsored violence, except perhaps in the manner in which the military performed its role and the number of people victimized in the performance of the role. The number of politically related deaths, detentions and tortures in connection with the same provincial

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and regional movements against the government in the 1950s and the political rivalries of the 1960s are comparable to the political violence committed during the New Order. Both Soekarno and Soeharto contributed to the bloody affairs in Indonesian history. It is said "that the state had to be violent with its people, periodically and systematically because there was no other way of preventing the people acting against their own best interest."

The question is how could such violence happen?

Since the beginning, the new independent Indonesia in fact lived in a state of emergency. The 1946 general election that was to end the transitional constitution and government never took place. Between late September 1945 and mid 1950 the basis for the state of emergency was created. Indonesian history would definitely be different if the British and the Dutch did not enforce their military superiority in order to reinstall Dutch colonial power in the archipelago after Indonesian independence was declared in August 17, 1945. Without this episode, the Indonesian armed forces could not justify its important contribution in retaining Indonesian independence, and the society would be less militaristic.

The Indonesian state changed from unitary state to federal state in 1949, and then returned to unitary state in 1950. However, Soekarno retained his presidency for another period of emergency under the provisional constitution of 1950. The first general election of 1955 was not able to turn off the emergency nature of Indonesian politics. Despite the creation of a new parliament, *Konstituante*, and government, Soekarno remained head of state with a clear legal status. Certainly, the parliament or *Konstituante* never had any session to elect a new president or vice-president, whoever they could have been. There is a simple reason for these events: the new constitution was still being drafted by the *Konstituante*. Therefore, there was no obligation on their part to elect a new head of state under the provisional constitution. This meant that after 10 years since independence, Indonesia was still being governed under an emergency situation.

Soekarno, together with the Indonesian armed forces (read the Army and General Nasution), the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and several Islamic and nationalist parties, ruled under the slogan *revolusi belum selesai* (revolution is not yet finished). They crushed the opposition in the name of the continuing revolution for a just and prosperous Indonesia. The return to the 1945 constitution and the introduction of Guided Democracy in 1959, the declaration of a state of emergency and the anti-Western bloc or anti-new colonialism campaign further

strengthened the state of emergency within state and society as well as the militaristic nature of Indonesian rule.

The Indonesian people were forced to believe that emergency is the nature of society. Soekarno no longer needed elections to legitimize changes in the government. Any section of society and those who considered themselves opposition groups could not challenge the social and political system, structure and policy as a whole because these were protected by the principles of emergency and uniformity. Pancasila and Nasakom (nationalism, religion and communism) were the only national ideologies. Any individual or group with a conflicting interpretation will be crushed under the wheel of the revolution.

Soeharto and his followers inherited the structure and system created by the regime they had overthrown, except for certain aspects concerning Marxism and communism. They ruled the New Order Indonesia also under the state of emergency. Soeharto upheld Pancasila as the national ideology and all levels of society were to share one common view. The regime believed that the majority is not ready for alternative views and used violence to prevent people from expressing a different opinion. Violence soon became part of the Indonesian culture. Unlike Soekarno's, Soeharto's regime enjoyed strong support from the military. The government included technocrats who provided a more sophisticated interpretation and application of the culture of emergency. Since 1971, Indonesia regularly held general election, followed by the general meeting of the people's Representative Assembly to elect a new president, every five years in order to impress on the people that there is democracy in the country. However, there was no real possibility of choosing a new president during the people's Representative Assembly meeting. The Assembly did not elect a new president but simply re-installed the old president.

Why, because Indonesia was experiencing economic development and there was no single human being out of one hundred million Indonesians able to lead Indonesia and continue the development except Soeharto. A similar way of thinking could be used to explain the dominant role of the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI). The Indonesian armed forces "should function as an agency for national security, nation building, national growth and national prosperity." Both Soeharto and the ABRI were considered stabilizers of a disunited country.

The Soeharto regime denied the existence of pluralism. As with the previous regime, Soeharto decided that Pancasila is also the only national ideology. The ideology of Pancasila provides no room for an

alternative way of thinking. In practice, every citizen must go through official interpretations of Pancasila provided by the government. Any differences are considered a threat to national development as well as to the government and Soeharto personally, and they could easily be accused of as the enemy of the people, resulting in isolation, going to prison, or for the unfortunate, being killed. The regime would do any action at whatever cost to prevent people from having a different way of thinking. The regime tended to say that the need to be different is understandable, but it is only the need of a few people. Meanwhile, the majority is not yet ready. This statement is supported by the fact that there is a great gap between certain levels of society in terms of social and economic status as well as political consciousness. As a consequence, any violence carried out by the regime could easily be justified for protecting national development or interest. People then danced the same tune, which then created mutual distrust in all sections of society. Thus, violence became a part of the social and cultural identity of Indonesian society.

The dominant role of Soeharto and military men was still considered temporary although it was already in place for three decades. They always promised that there would be a change when the national goal was achieved but the question is when? Change came only in May 1998 when the opposition and an economic crisis forced Soeharto to step down. However, the culture of emergency in Indonesian politics was reaffirmed when Habibie was sworn in as president. The former vice-president was sworn in as the new president at the Presidential Palace without a meeting with People's Representative Assembly taking place, and creating thereby another constitutional crisis.

In conclusion, many scholars do not understand the reality of violence in Indonesia. They point to some individual or group or to the political structure of the New Order as the *dalang* (mastermind) for the state-sponsored violence of the Soeharto and the previous Soekarno regimes. The fact is, it is no longer a structural problem but a socio-cultural one. It is not only Soeharto but also Soekarno and Nasution who are responsible for the tradition of killing people to end all movements against the government. The origin of violence should be found long before the New Order or the Soeharto presidency. It is in the whole process of Indonesian history since its independence, where the militaristic nature and overwhelming distrust within the state and society were created. At this stage, clearly I have some differences compared to well-known Indonesianists in understanding the present riots or social violence in Indonesia. ❁