

# The Manipulation of Indonesia's Ethnic Chinese

## THE TWSC INTERVIEW WITH ARIEL HERYANTO

The fall of Suharto has been viewed as the Southeast Asian region's most astonishing event of late. The tension and destruction in Jakarta and other Indonesian cities and the former dictator's startling ouster sent the country of 200 million into a wave of shock and relief. The events certainly compounded the economic crisis that had plunged about 40 percent of the population into poverty. The dramatic process reduced to a sideshow the systematic gang raping of 162 women and girls, mostly ethnic Chinese, that accompanied the 1,200 deaths that occurred during the May 13-14 riots. Having designated blame on spontaneous eruptions of racism unleashed upon the Chinese minority, the rest of the country is only now grappling with the horror even as it braces for hardship in the days to come. It has become clear, however, that the so-called anti-Chinese riots were anything but spontaneous. They were in fact premeditated and organized acts of terrorism of a regime that was in its death throes. Last May 25, the Third World Studies Center asked Dr. Ariel Heryanto to shed light on these tumultuous events. Dr. Heryanto, a lecturer at the Southeast Asian Studies Programme of the National University of Singapore, has done several researches on student movement and middle class politics in Indonesia.

THIRD WORLD STUDIES CENTER: Our interview will be outlined into three topics. The first part will be about the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, especially now that they are the targets of riots in your country. The second will be on the analysis of the events that led to the resignation of President Suharto. The third will be your analysis about the future or prospects of political events in Indonesia.

At least from what we have read from the press, the series of events that led to the resignation included the element of the anti-Chinese riots. At the same time you have the student demonstrations that were clearly anti-Suharto. How would you explain these dual events?

ARIEL HERYANTO: I am glad you asked me that question because there is a need for clarification to be made because the reality is a great deal more complicated than it has been portrayed in the media.

I was listening to a radio program in BBC (British Broadcasting Company), there was a news-talk program where the anchor invited the listeners to give their comments on the events that are happening in Indonesia. Callers were from all over the world. Many of them expressed

their views specifically on the anti-Chinese riots. Most of them followed the simplified version of the news that these are simply racist riots against the Chinese. I think that is a little too simplistic.

To begin, I need to stress something from the outset. I will not deny that there is an element of anti-Chinese in the riots. To deny this might give you the wrong and unnecessary impression. I do not want to do that. So I want to repeat, yes there is an element of anti-ethnic Chinese but what happened is more complicated than that.

Now several qualifications are called for. One, no anti-ethnic Chinese riot that took place periodically throughout this century that I know or heard of is spontaneous. There is now a general perception that because some people suffer from hunger, poverty or humiliation, they get angry, and attack the rich Chinese. Hence, the idea of spontaneity.

But mass spontaneity is almost never there. When you have an anti-ethnic Chinese riot, you have a case where trucks and trucks of people are unloaded and given directions on whom to attack. The attackers come from different towns. These riots were well-organized, well-orchestrated events.

Throughout much of the century we have similar organized anti-Chinese riots in different parts of the country, in different periods of history. Each event had its own dynamics. You cannot generalize them too much and simply say that they are organized. We must ask further questions, such as who organized them. Most of the time, it is the ruling elite. If you ask which segments of the ruling elite, and for what reason, answers differ from time to time, case to case, locale to locale.

For example, anti-Chinese riots in the past often flared up shortly before elections. It was a period when the strong government needed to divert people's anger and opposition and therefore some kind of scapegoating was necessary. This is one reason.

At the same time, the tensions were instigated by the ruling elite not only to divert people's misgivings and anger away from government but also to help them produce some kind of pretext to detain a number of opposition leaders, usually the Muslim leaders, who are blamed as masterminds of the riots. These Muslim leaders usually had nothing to do

with the riots. The riots would also make the Chinese turn to government for protection. This was in the past. Now, this time it is very different. This is the case where the government is crumbling. Elements of the losing party panicked.

So throughout the century, we have repeatedly witnessed anti-Chinese riots but then there are nuances, different gains to be attempted. This time, there are a number of possible reasons. We never know for sure what happened in each case. We have speculations based on bits and pieces of information. But these speculations are not fantasies made of thin air.

In the recent incident, many believe, it was once again orchestrated. A number of observations came to prominence. Firstly, these incidents were seen as an attempt to create a state of emergency that would allow the president, if necessary, to declare martial law and then give his son-in-law the power to restore order. Secondly, some people have insinuated that these were attempts to discredit General Wiranto who is the chief commander of the armed forces and a main rival of the son-in-law. Thirdly, the incidents were meant to discredit the establishment. Fourthly, they were attempts to redirect the citizens' anger. So there are a number of possibilities which were not considered in the past.

I don't think these incidents are necessarily anti-Chinese in general. I know there was some element of racism but racism does not necessarily explode into riots. When such racist riots take place, they do not follow uniform pattern and mode. It takes special organization, history, memory, vocabulary, vernacular habits, discourses and power. Here localism and globalism meet and mix. What happened in Indonesia recently, as many times before, was primarily racialized terrorism. It was not people's power turning into refractory violence nor mass racism.

TWSC: Don't the Chinese see through that?

HERYANTO: I am sorry to believe that may not be the case. Most Chinese as much as their fellow nationals would succumb to the constructed notion of essentialized ethnicity. They view their ethnicity as a given, just like many of the non-Chinese population. According to the dominant myth, the "irrational and jealous" local Javanese and other natives are angry with the "greedy and exploitative" Chinese. This myth leaves the state agents

and the rest of the social forces, like patriarchy and classes, free from examination.

TWSC: The myth is being perpetuated.

HERYANTO: Yes. A lot of Chinese and non-Chinese believe it. It is hard for them to do otherwise, because they are not equipped with alternative ways of seeing what is going on around them. It is very unfortunate. I have been trying to work with friends in Indonesia to challenge such a dominant myth. Admittedly there is a limit as to how far we can go.

No racism is natural. It is a particular cultural disposition that takes many decades to construct. It requires reinforcement in practice. An instigator of racial riots is able to mobilize those cultural resources under certain circumstances that he or she cannot solely create. But it takes more than the instigator, the poverty, or the economic crisis to create the situation. As I mentioned earlier, collective memory, myths, history, shared morality all feed the construction.

TWSC: How does it then converge with the part of the dynamics that is anti-Suharto? It does not really converge, is that what you are saying?

HERYANTO: No. I think the riot was meant to divert people's attention and anger away from the Suharto government. It did not evolve from the pro-democracy movement.

It is very unfortunate that it took massive victimization, the scale of which remains unknown. It is also unfortunate that the pro-democracy activists have not yet come out with strong condemnation against these racialized riots. You have a lot of condemnation from countries all over the world including the U.S. A lot of pro-democracy groups reacted to it, and expressed concerns, but I don't think that was enough.

I suspect Indonesians do not have yet the legitimate discourse of defending the Chinese. The Chinese, for some reason, have been made into some sort of pariah, at least in political discourse. Even the term "Cina" for "Chinese" has been made derogatory.

Privately, I know a lot of non-Chinese groups who have protected and sided with the Chinese. They extended accommodation and protection to

the Chinese during the riots. But these were very private and very individualized acts. We never know who or how many they are or why they defended the Chinese. These sympathetic individuals remain anonymous in history. We have yet to see an official statement from institutionalized bodies, condemning such violation of human rights. So, to repeat, the riots did not originate from the pro-democracy movement that went astray. In fact, the riots were meant to disrupt and undermine the movement.

TWSC: The Chinese issue, therefore, was controlled or manipulated by the state.

HERYANTO: I would say some segment within the military, the most important state apparatus that specialize in repressive and violent measures, plus paramilitary forces that often work in tandem with the military forces. Prabowo has often been accused as the one responsible for the ugly mess in Jakarta. I don't have evidence to prove or disprove such allegation, but I have reasons to believe it.

Definitely the riots required some organization with professional and unlimited resources to organize such a massive and systematic activity. There have been testimonies from eyewitnesses that heavily built men with mobile radio were giving directions during the riots. There are inconclusive indications that some segments within the military organized them. It is not yet quite clear which one. But it may not be from the chief commander of the armed forces, Wiranto. In fact, it was probably meant to embarrass or discredit him, to show that he failed to control the situation.

TWSC: In your article that was recently published by the Singapore-based Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,<sup>1</sup> you said that the 1990s manifested a softening of the racial/cultural tension involving the Indonesian Chinese. You highlighted the new interest in Chineseness by the Indonesian public and the relative lack of racism and anti-Chinese violence in some key incidents like the strike staged by industrial workers in Medan in April 1994. Do the recent developments in any way disrupt this trend?

HERYANTO: Not really. I would say there are two distinguishable, although related, movements to be recognized here. The recent racialized terrorism was a residue of the past ethnically-based policy of the colonial power. It proved to be extremely convenient and profitable for the successive ruling elite to reproduce it. It has been difficult for the population to resist or

erase it. It still exists and continues to be re-used by the New Order, but it is quite independent from the emerging trend of cross-ethnic class formation which is very recent and still developing at this stage. So we have contradictory trends at work.

Before 1978, there was a strong anti-Chinese sentiment even among pro-democracy groups. Demonstrations were occasionally tainted with anti-Chinese yelling and chants. In 1978, there was a major nationwide crackdown of the pro-democracy movement. Truncheons and tanks entered the capital. There were shootings, detentions, trials and prosecution of political activists. Ten years afterwards, there were no student demonstrations at all until the new generation of student movement began in 1989.

Since 1989 students have taken to the streets almost on a regular basis. Not in a single case have I seen any banner, any yelling, or any poster with anti-Chinese sentiment. I am not saying that there was no longer any anti-Chinese sentiment. There still is. But not in public, not officially. What you have were some anonymous anti-Chinese pamphlets. The fact that they are anonymous means that people who are anti-Chinese are not comfortable being publicly identified as such. I think this is a significant historical change although not a total one. But I would say it is still significant. When there was an outburst of racialized violence, as it did recently, it came top down.

The idea of racism in Indonesia requires qualifications, as I suggested in my article. It was during the New Order that the Chinese found themselves in a "very bad" situation culturally, politically, or socially. At the same time they prospered economically. Never before have the Chinese been so rich in the whole history of Indonesia. So you need to recognize these contradictory phenomena, and not just focus on one and forget the other.

TWSC: If the anti-Chinese riots were part of military operations, don't you think that they sort of backfired on the presidency of Suharto?

HERYANTO: Yes and no. One the one hand, I cannot see the riot perpetrators gained anything significant from the destruction they have caused. But I wouldn't say it backfired in the specific sense here. I think Suharto's resignation had to happen regardless of whether the Chinese

were stoned, looted and so on. It is quite inevitable, and independent from all these anti-Chinese violence. I suggested that the riots were meant to prevent Suharto's resignation but I cannot say that the riots have precipitated or pushed the President's resignation. I don't think that is the case. The riots achieved almost nothing, politically, symbolically, economically or otherwise.

TWSC: It actually threw a bad light on how the Indonesians went through their people's power revolution.

HERYANTO: Yes. It was so ugly and messy. It indicates the magnitude of the New Order's legacy even after Suharto resigned. It suggests how little the student-led movements have managed to clear the mess, and that we still have a long way to go to complete the job.

The riots were an expression of desperation among some members of the military and its allies who did not know what to do with their final days. These people, who were heavily dependent on Suharto's presidency do not represent all officers, bureaucrats, or institutions. Others learn to survive without Suharto, without necessarily abandoning Suharto-style militaristic dictatorship.

TWSC: Will Prabowo take the new power arrangement sitting down?

HERYANTO: I can't imagine what he can still do. He had no power except the one Suharto gave him. With Suharto leaving the office, what else does he have? Very little, if at all.

TWSC: Could you explain to us the factors that converged to bring about the fall of Suharto?

HERYANTO: I think the media in the last few months have put so much emphasis on the contribution of the economic crisis. It is hard to deny that. But the international community may not be aware of the larger picture, the painful struggle of Indonesians to bring Suharto down over the past several years. These activities did not gain attention from the international media. So the economic crisis was seen as a major tragedy that suddenly triggered the situation. Major magazines like *Time* discovered the Indonesian student demonstrations with surprise and described them as something that took place overnight. It was ridiculous.

Another important thing that should be taken into consideration and has not been discussed adequately is the international dimension or rather international intervention. For many years, the Suharto government enjoyed so much protection economically, diplomatically and so on from the United States, maybe more than the domestic support it enjoyed. In the past one or two years, the U.S. government lost its interest in courting Suharto. So, I already sensed that Suharto's final days were coming very quickly for a lot of reasons.

A major factor was the end of the Cold War which provided the stage for the birth of the Suharto regime. Suharto was perceived as capable of terminating all the communists and leftist politics, like many of his counterparts in the original ASEAN countries. With the end of the Cold War, his government lost some of its original reasons to exist. It was just a matter of time unless a new major factor came to rescue it. When the Cold War ended, the U.S. and other Western blocs were very much interested in talking about human rights, labor rights. This put the Suharto government in a very difficult position because now it has become one of the regular targets of the American post-Cold War propaganda assaults.

For more than five years since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. exercised a double standard. They knew Suharto's records of human rights abuses but they protected Suharto from criticisms for similar reasons the US has been trying to improve relations with China. But there is limit to that. A day before Suharto resigned, the U.S. made the following pronouncements about Suharto. They said he had made a lot of contributions to the country and he had a wonderful opportunity to make his final contribution by leading a peaceful transition for the next generations. This is their way of saying good-bye.

So the American factor should not be overlooked. Oftentimes analysts take the standard procedure of looking at the country as an isolated island in the ocean. Under the spell of nation-states boundary imagination, they look at the military, the ruling party Golkar, the Suharto family and the students. Or when there is reference to the U.S. the explanation is usually superficial. I believe the U.S. government had so little direct intervention in what happened, not simply because they are morally bound to restrain. It could have saved Suharto if it wanted to. But I think the U.S. facilitated the fall of Suharto by not in any way helping him.



I think the persistence of the domestic opposition has gone up and down. So, one would speculate on what could have happened to the student demonstrators had Suharto not resigned immediately but in, let us say, two months. Will the students have the stamina to stay in the streets? I doubt it. It was so fortunate that right at the point when the students began to feel exhausted something else happened I am almost sure that they would have given up with the kind of pressure they were experiencing. Students deserve credit but I am sure the story is more complicated than that.

TWSC: Why did the army put pressure on Suharto to resign?

HERYANTO: They have been very clever. They believed and were aware that this could be the most peaceful, the best solution to the problems not only for those who run the country now but also for Suharto and his family and allies. It was in their best interest that Suharto resigned in that particular moment. Imagine a scenario in which Wiranto gives Suharto an ultimatum: If you want us to protect you, then resign now. If you do not resign now, things can get out of control, and we cannot protect you. Don't turn to us.

TWSC: Can you describe to us the composition of the opposition or the strands that make up the pro-democracy movement?

HERYANTO: I don't know of anybody who can answer your question. Members of the opposition are so fragmented. Well, we can mention some of the major ones. You have for example the more conservative Islam, the more progressive Islam, and the more moderate Islamic movement. Among the business community and technocrats, you have those who supported Habibie. You have those who supported the radical activist leader Sri Bintang Pamungkas who is supposed to be released from prison tomorrow (May 26). So you have all kinds. You have people more nationalistic than the Islamic, for instance followers of Megawati Sukarnoputri. You have the more leftist activists who belong to Partai Rakyat Demokrasi. You have quite a strong group of people whose main bases are the labor unions. They are very diverse. It is very difficult to portray the situation in a single brush.

TWSC: When you say they are very diverse, do you mean they are not united?

HERYANTO: They are not united. The question is whether you expect them to be united. I mean, isn't democracy about learning how to live with differences? It is not so much to eliminate differences but how to live with differences, how to manage differences. It is going to be painful I know, it is going to be difficult and the cost is quite considerable.

For many years, I was sick of hearing analysts, mostly scholars who worked outside Indonesia, dismissing the student movements and urban-based middle-class opposition in general. I discovered later that distant observers in the U.S., Europe, and Australia hold similar attitudes towards activist friends from Thailand and the Philippines. They believe no opposition is significant in these authoritarian regimes of Southeast Asia. They reason that these critical minded activists are too small in number, alienated from the population that support the repressive regime, and short on unity. As a result, observers devote their study on Suharto, and other members of the ruling elite, and consequently overestimate the power of these people they admired. One wonders what they will say these days about Indonesia, about their own ideologically-laden scholarship thus far.

TWSC: If the pro-democracy groups are not consolidated, then don't you think the military will still have the upper hand in charting the course of political events in Indonesia?

HERYANTO: Yes. But the question is this. If one institution declares itself as the ruler the country, will it survive? How long can it last? The situation now is very fluid that I don't think any single social force can make that claim. It is such a decentered and decentering situation. It is impossible for a single social force to claim a position of stable leadership for more than a few months.

TWSC: On the other hand, can this kind of situation make the military amenable to play some kind of background rather than a leading role?

HERYANTO: Exactly. No matter who it is, anybody who wants to provide that in the country at the moment, the military will have to be both accommodated and accommodating. Anybody who wants to take a leading role must learn to build intermediary and provisional alliances. So everybody is now trying to woo friendship with others. Everyone. And yet, they suspect one another, including the foreign forces.

In a way, this particular moment is full of color, it is like rainbow I think. It is both conducive to creativity and innovation, but also prone to tremendous crises for an extended period. But I don't think it will hold and be enough to restore economic stability. It is a moment of big relief but pretty soon we have to get back to the ugly truth of reality.

I believe it is not likely that the armed forces will take over and we will have martial law following the Burmese or half-Burmese style of leadership. I don't think that this will happen. The military has ruled too long in Indonesia with lots of coercion. People simply get sick of it. What is going to happen, I speculate, will be more towards Filipino style with all its disorder and room for resistance.

TWSC: Is that because the Indonesian military is in transition too?

HERYANTO: Yes and also because they have become quite aware that the time has passed when military rule was necessary if not legitimate. For that reason, the Burmese military is still 50 years behind in history.

I think we should be more realistic about what to expect. Maybe prices of basic commodities will still be soaring. The economy is still staggering, but politically and culturally we can be more optimistic.

Of course, there will be limits. I don't think that those who run the country now are going to, for example, lift the ban against the communists. I don't think the military will be prepared to welcome a strong Islamic party. So there is still some kind of hesitation despite all these openness. Maybe later, women and environmental groups, some leftists with very isolated leftist politics, different Muslim groups, moderate or less moderate, are going to flourish, but short of being dominant.

TWSC: What about the Chinese, will they still be isolated or not?

HERYANTO: That is more difficult to answer. I have some hope that things will get better. Meaning, it is possible that the Chinese will regain the political freedom and space like they had before Suharto came to power. That was not ideal. This new change may not be in the form of Chinese political party, but perhaps a soccer team or something like dance group. Remember even these were not allowed to exist in the past 30 years. But things could develop more dramatically than that.

We are also going to expect some changes in our relationship with countries like Malaysia and Singapore. We may now be talking about not only economic growth, regional security, or Asian values, but also democracy. This is a good time because we have dreamt for such for so long.

TWSC: That is a good dream for the ASEAN. You will have more countries talking about democracy and human rights to counter the dominant discourse about Asian style of leadership. But do you really see Indonesia taking that kind of initiative?

HERYANTO: Not with this present cabinet. The hope is in the emerging forces within civil society. This cabinet is so weak that it may not last very long. Anything can happen from now, although there is no guarantee everything will be for the better and everyone will be happy ever after. ❁

### Endnote

- 1 "Ethnic Identities and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture," in Joel S. Kahn (ed.), *Southeast Asian Identities, Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1998).