

Power, Religion and Terror in Indonesia

Research >
Southeast Asia

Why has there been so much conflict and violence in Indonesia over the past few years? A deceptively simple answer is that Indonesia has been experiencing intense power struggles since the demise of former President Suharto. Conflict in Indonesia is often related to power. Just as conflict is extremely diverse, power, too, has many meanings and many manifestations in Indonesian society. Conflict over power does not necessarily result in violence, let alone in an epidemic of bloodshed. Moreover, power conflicts are not the cause of all violence. However, this study explores the hypothesis that particular conceptions, symbols, institutionalizations, and concrete practices of power, play a major role in the generation and suppression of violence in Indonesia.

By Bernard Adeney-Risakotta

Since the Bali terrorist bombs of 12 October 2002, a great deal of attention has been focused on the connection between religion and violence. Religion is a powerful force in Indonesia and has played a part in much of the violence, as well as in attempts to stop it. Over the past four years, terror has become ubiquitous in Indonesian society and frequently linked to religious communities. However, religion is never an autonomous force that acts independently from other factors. Religion is integral to power in Indonesia, both in its positive and negative manifestations. Violent conflict in Indonesia is usually precipitated by political, economic, and social changes that are influenced by volatile tensions between traditional power structures, religious world views, and modern institutions. Since virtually all Indonesians are religious, violence often appeals to religion for justification. However, violence also includes profound cultural elements that are embedded in the traditions, stories, rituals, and *adat* (traditional law) institutions that are part of the identity of the people.

In so far as violence is connected with power (as opposed to psychosis, rage, frustration, hatred, ideology, misunderstanding, principles, or more generalized social pathologies) this study is motivated by the desire to understand how power is generated and utilized in Indonesia. My theory suggests that a fundamental form of power lies within the people, as distinct from the elite. Recent events demonstrate that great creative and destructive potential is located within the people, whereas their leaders are generally impotent. Violence destroys power. 'Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power' (Arendt 1970:53). State use of violence in certain areas of Indonesia is always both an indication and cause of the weakness of the government in those same areas. The more the state uses violence, the weaker the government.

State violence may also destroy the power that lies in the people, especially if they respond with violence, as in Aceh, and for many years in East Timor. Yet, state violence can also galvanize the people's power, especially if the people are unified in non-violent resistance, as finally occurred in many parts of Indonesia, including East Timor. Governmental power is dependent on the power that lies within the people. This approach distinguishes power from domination. I understand power as the ability of the people to achieve their own goals (for better or worse). Government is a powerful modern institution through which the people hope to achieve their goals. However, power in Indonesian society is also generated and channelled by other modern, religious, and cultural practices and institutions.

My research explores the thesis that we need a new theoretical framework for understanding power and violence in Indonesia that moves beyond simple categories of antagonistic groups. Different patterns of meaning, practice, and discourse provide a more useful analytic tool for understanding power and violence than the now classic tradition of dividing Indonesia (or Java) into religious, social, or political groupings. Power and violence in Indonesia cannot be understood within a Weberian framework of social evolution from traditional to modern, nor through an ideal-type dichotomy between Java and the West.

There are three major sets of symbol systems, institutions, and practices in Indonesia that interpenetrate each other and form the conscious and unconscious identity of all Indonesians. All three are so powerful and all-pervasive that none of them can overthrow the other two or claim the exclusive allegiance of any particular group. These three networks of meaning are not necessarily incompatible with each other, but they contain many elements of incommensurability such as to generate distinctive and competing worlds of discourse. Virtually all Indonesians live, think, feel, and participate in three different conceptual worlds, which are often synthesized or integrated with each other, but just as often separated and dichotomized. Each of these frameworks of meaning has generated their own institutions, practices, and structures of power. These three Indonesian worlds can be

defined as: modernity, religion, and the culture of the ancestors. Through my work I investigate how each of these symbol systems generates or controls power, and how they become enmeshed in violence.

Indonesians cannot be divided into three groups: those who are modern, religious, or traditional. All Indonesians are modern in the sense that they are shaped by modern institutions, ideas, and practices. The remotest farmer knows the exchange rate of the dollar and depends on globally determined prices, modern transportation, and modern ideals of progress, education, and rights. Similarly, all Indonesians are religious. Religious institutions, ideas, and practices shape the identities and practices of all, not least of which includes those who resist the dominant trends in religion. Equally, all Indonesians are shaped by the culture of their ancestors. Culture is not a static, ancient set of ideas, practices, and institutions, but rather an evolving, dynamic power that determines the life style and perspective of all Indonesians. For example, of the three main institutions of law in Indonesia, secular, religious, and *adat*, the most powerful of the three is *adat*. I explore the thesis that the relationship between these three distinct webs of meaning is a useful key for understanding how power operates in the society and how violence is generated out of the tensions between all three. Violence is not primarily caused by evil people, but rather by conflict within and between three different kinds of structures of power.

During my past eleven years of teaching and research in Indonesia, I have also been formed by these three worlds of discourse. Most social scientific studies of Indonesian society assume a fundamentally modern, Western epistemology in which the cultures, religions, politics, and history of Indonesia are viewed as objects to be studied that are fundamentally different, or even alien from the researcher. Anthropologists try to see the world 'from the native's point of view', but that world remains eternally distant (Geertz 1976). Social science assumes a modern understanding of scientific knowledge, which takes culture and religion as objects of research. Even Indonesians are taught to radically separate their culture and religion from modern modes of scientific investigation.

In contrast, this research project is written from within the epistemological assumptions and perspectives of all three of these different worlds of discourse. It is a modern analysis of Indonesian identity, power, and violence, which adopts many Indonesian, religious, and cultural assumptions about the nature of reality. I argue for a new theory of power, which operates within these three different worlds of Indonesian discourse. Perhaps as many as 100,000 people have died during the past four years through violence related to ethnic, religious, economic, and political conflicts in Indonesia. In a country known for its gentle culture, high level of tolerance, and warm hospitality, what triggered such an orgy of death? <

References

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Note >

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