

**'Contemplating Violence in Indonesia'**  
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**Herb Feith Lecture**

In the 1980s and for much of the 1990s, observers of Indonesian affairs were particularly drawn to the emergence of a new 'middle class' in Indonesia's major cities: its lifestyle, its connection to globalization, its implications for the development of a civil society that could mitigate the authoritarianism of Suharto's New Order. Thus, in spite of the regime's oppressiveness, they looked at what seemed to be a ray of hope. In contrast, studies of the democratic Indonesia which followed Suharto's fall in 1998 have preferred the darker side, concentrating on violence: ethnic and religious conflict, fights over land and the right to resources, the violence of the state and rejection of the state.

One reason for this change of mood has less to do with the state of Indonesia than the state of the world. The end of the Cold War had an unnerving effect on policy-makers and political analysts because, while on the one hand it meant there remained only a single hegemonic state power and political-economic system, it also meant the loss of a familiar framework of super-power rivalry through which one could understand and act globally. One way of responding to this was to construct a new form of manichean Cold War struggle by substituting Islam for the Communist enemy: Samuel Huntington's civilizational clash between capitalism/Christianity/democracy versus Islam/anticapitalism/authoritarianism. This was an approach that appealed particularly to the American political leadership after September 2001. But the new Enemy, Islamic terrorism, was too amorphous and too widespread to be challenged easily; its very lack of organization made it particularly hard to combat and hard to separate from Islam as a whole. At the same time, the rise of religious fundamentalism, born of unease with a world of capitalist materialism, responded enthusiastically to a politics framed in terms of the struggle of Truth against Falsehood; most notably in Muslim societies but also in Christian ones, in particular the United States.

This global ideological environment has placed a particular emphasis on social violence, and in particular on the instigation and manipulation of public disorder. Specialists on Indonesia (and on other areas seen to be particularly prone to disorder) have usually responded by stressing that while social violence may well be fed by outside interests and ideas (have usually responded may well be sponsored by the state), its eruption is the result of the building up of pressures in a local context. At the same time, analysts have almost always seen these violent confrontations as pathological. In Indonesia, Aceh and Papua are partial exceptions to this, for there violence may be described positively, as reflecting a national liberation struggle. But the idea that violence might have a 'creative' aspect, for example in promoting the consciousness of subaltern group- - a not uncommon approach a few decades ago--is nowadays an unthinkable notion. Violence, to present-day observers, is a sickness; the analyst's task is to consider its various manifestations in order to help return society to stability. Religion, ethnicity, class, and history become explanatory elements, but the central concern of most analysts is how these illuminate the outbreak of violence, rather than how the occurrence of violence illuminates the society.

That such centrality has been assigned to violence by Indonesia-watchers may not seem surprising, given the number and variety of internal conflicts that the country has experienced in the last decade. But has the level of violence actually been so extraordinary for Indonesia? Certainly it stands in contrast to the bland authoritarian façade presented by the New Order in its heyday, when violence was usually denied or deployed by the state. But if we look at Indonesia in the 1950s, the subject of Herb Feith's masterpiece The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia, we see a hardly more tranquil place. Rebellion in Aceh, the Darul Islam in West Java and Sulawesi, the Republic of the South Moluccas, the PRRI-Permesta, not to mention simmering class and cultural tensions in Java: this was not a quiet decade.

Yet violence was not really a focus of attention for Herb or for most students of Indonesia of that generation. It was not that they were unaware of it: The Decline of Constitutional Democracy starts out by reminding the reader of

the extreme violence and social disruption of Indonesia's birth in the revolution. But having made this point, Herb did not dwell on it. He assumed continuing instability, as a sort of background chaos, but what was important was the effort made to shape something, a nation, out of this incoherence. Indeed, at least initially the violence was seen as having a positive aspect: not only was it a means of liberating Indonesia from the Dutch but it also created an extraordinary openness, in which a new leadership based on nationalism could impose itself on the inertia and fissiparous tendencies of older forms of solidarity. What mattered, for observers of Indonesia in the 1950s, was how this leadership evolved, what institutions it built up and what policies it pursued. Events in the capital were thus far more important than those elsewhere, and the opinion of the populace was seen as emerging from the national-level leadership of parties and their mass organizations. Nation-building was a high and arduous endeavour, and the critical site for this was at the top. Violence lay around and below, but the important thing was to see the efforts to construct a viable basis for order.

To some extent the sense of openness described by Herb at the revolution's beginning, of infinite possibilities to be seized by an idealistic younger generation, was repeated in the Reformasi (Reform) movement just before and after Suharto's fall in 1998. But very quickly this second awakening gave way to disillusion, for not all that much changed. In spite of the return to representative democracy, far-reaching decentralization measures, and the emergence of a plethora of protest movements, very few interests of the New Order elite were touched. Not even Suharto went to jail. Perhaps even more tellingly, Golkar, the New Order's political vehicle, which had long been considered a product of the bureaucracy and military with no independent source of popular support, survived quite handily in a competitive political environment, making a good showing at local and regional as well national levels. The 'revolutionary' openness of the Reformasi period turned out to be something of an illusion: the ranks of those who ruled changed somewhat, and opened up to new participants, but the ruling elite did not lose power.

I think we can better understand this apparent inertia if we consider the long course of the modern Indonesian elite's emergence, from a small group of intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century through the experience of war and revolution into the present. Having achieved power with the outbreak of the 1945-49 revolution, Indonesia's young political leadership needed to choose between seeking support from social revolutionary elements or from Indonesian members of the bureaucracy which had administered the colony under the Dutch. They chose for the latter, in the rejection of Tan Malaka's leftism in 1946 and the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) in 1948. The leaders who made this choice did not necessarily do so out of conservative conviction, but also because in the context of international and domestic power relations at that time it seemed the only realistic strategy.

The 1950s saw a continuation of this debate, in the form of the contest between populist 'solidarity makers' and bureaucratically-allied 'administrators', as Herb Feith termed them. By now, the bureaucratic and political elements of the elite were well entwined, and the military had emerged as both as a specialized branch of the elite and as a political factor in its own right. The struggle to determine Indonesia's course led first to the eclipse of westernized administrators and then, as the social-revolutionary implications of a populist approach which relied heavily on PKI support became apparent, a general shift of elite support to the military, the destruction of the Communists, and an end to the mobilization of the masses. The New Order period saw the extension of the political-bureaucratic elite's embrace to domestic and global capitalism and a close entwining of business and political interests. In addition, rapidly growing urbanization, education, and participation in the capitalist economy, led to a great expansion of the number of Indonesians who were part of a modern, urbanized world, and to whom the national elite's views and interests seemed relevant.

Seen from this line of argument, the fall of the New Order took place because that system's military-bureaucratic rule was too restrictive a carapace for an expanding, enriched elite. The embrace of representative democracy and

decentralization after Suharto's fall represented not so much the loss of power by a demoralized ruling elite as the acknowledgment of that elite's broadening base, especially in its relationship to business and its extension into the provinces. The New Order's fall was thus the culmination of a vast process of change that had taken place during its lifetime. This is not to say that the disorder which followed its collapse was merely peripheral. On the contrary, the state was shaken to its core, the more so because of economic crisis. More mismanagement and bad luck could easily have resulted in a profound disruption, and the process of working out a new 'new order' is by no means ended. At the moment, however, all but the most long-standing centrifugal impulses appear to have been contained.

One means by which this is being accomplished (and remaining conflicts are being negotiated) is through financial influence. The idealist intellectuals that formed the beginnings of Indonesia's modern elite have little place in ruling groups today. While the bureaucracy and military remain key components of rule, political power is increasingly related not to control over office nor even control over the means of violence, but to control over money. Indeed, money can buy the means of violence: it funds militias and mobs, useful political implements in recent times. In areas where there is not yet an agreed elite pecking order, where the rewards for control over resources are temptingly high, or where there are significant local social tensions (say between a local population and immigrant groups), leaders may effectively pursue their ambitions by buying violence. The populace, for them, is a 'disposable mass,' to be discarded once leaders have achieved their desired share of power.

Politics now often tends to be spoken of as 'money politics,' akin to what has appeared earlier in Thailand and the Philippines. Politicians are closely allied with businessmen, and not too much attention is paid to whether the business is legitimate, for crime is an excellent source of capital and criminal entrepreneurs too need to have political protection. Politics itself is not about the organization of public opinion but about the division of spoils. Consequently, in

spite of the fact that parties are now free to organize, there has not been much attention to mass participation. Electoral support is rather ensured by a network of patronage, whereby votes are bought, either for cash or through favours, and the real fights are between political bosses over turf to exploit.

Money politics only exceptionally makes use of violence, although force may well feature in the early stages of its institutionalization, when strong men and criminal entrepreneurs are carving out a sphere in public affairs. Over time, the achievement of respectability and involvement in a web of patronage networks should smooth off these rough edges, leaving a system which formally acknowledges popular sovereignty but is largely immune to public opinion. Money politics is, of course, a new, modern form of politics, expanding from the capital and the cities. Its spread may well meet violent resistance from time to time as older claimants to leadership defend themselves. More important ultimately, it may inspire those it deprives of an effective voice to seek other forms of belief and association, which may themselves seek power through violence. But this is a danger for the long run, and the run of money politics in post-Suharto Indonesia may be long indeed.

There is another feature of the recent violence in Indonesia which I think is also best explained by looking at development over a long period of time. In this case, it is not the occurrence of violence but its absence. Before the 1970s the great threat, aside from that of civil war between Java and the Outer Islands, was seen as the outbreak of conflict in Java itself between pious Muslims, or *santri*, and those adhering to more Javanist versions of Islam, usually labelled *abangan*. This division had been a major source of mass violence at the time of conflict between the government forces and the Communists in the Madiun Affair of 1948, and its destructive potential had been made use of by the army in the anti-Leftist purges following Suharto's seizure of power in 1965. Politics in both the parliamentary and Guided Democracy period had been based to a considerable extent on *aliran* --political/cultural communities --which were assumed to represent deep and more or less permanent cleavages in popular

orientations. Most of the studies which were done of Javanese society in the 1950s and 1960s assumed the santri-abangan contrast as a fundamental element, at least as important and potentially explosive as class. But though Java has not been free of violence in the past decade, it has not been a major site of conflict, and what there was did not follow the lines of santri-abangan opposition. No one talks any more in terms of the construction of aliran-based political followings; in fact the whole idea of aliran seems to have been forgotten. But at the time it was real enough, as we know from the death tolls, so we ought to ask: why?

One way of explaining the rise and fall of aliran is by looking at the santri-abangan contrast as a phase in the long process of Indonesia's Islamization. The religion penetrated the archipelago unevenly and over many centuries, and conversion is still going on. During their colonial rule the Dutch encouraged Javanese officials in their service to reject 'orthodox' Islam in favour of local culture, and this led by the time of Indonesia's independence to the contrast between what Herb Feith called 'Javanese-aristocratic' and 'Islamic-entrepreneurial' cultural-political cleavages. The bureaucratic abangan leaned towards the nationalist PNI, the peasant abangan to the Communist PKI; both were more firmly opposed to the santri Nahdatul Ulama and Masjumi parties than to each other. Suharto destroyed the PKI and subsequently crippled the Islamic parties, insisting on an organizational and ideological *Gleichschaltung* that precluded aliran alignments. But this was only on the level of formal political activity: given the violence of the 1965-66 upheaval and the embeddedness of santri-abangan identification, Javanese might well have continued to think of themselves in terms of the religious-cultural dichotomy, and the aliran phenomenon might well have reappeared with the restoration of democracy. That it did not was, I think, a result of two features of the New Order period: 1, a rapid acceleration of Indonesia's Islamization, and, 2, a transformation of the role of Islam in relation to the state.

The opening up of Indonesia economically and culturally to global influences, particularly from the 1970s, led not only to increased materialism and

'western' influences but also to greater contact with the wider Islamic world. With increasing wealth, more people could make the *hajj*; Indonesia now provides annually a number of Mecca pilgrims second only to Saudi Arabia itself. Suharto's suppression of parties with an Islamist programme had the beneficial effect of causing socially concerned Muslims to think about channelling ideas and activities in ways that were not identified with party politics. Moreover, towards the end of the 1980s Suharto began increasingly to appeal to pious Muslim opinion. Most notably, he promoted an association of Muslim intellectuals—the ICMI—which rapidly became known as an arena where up-and-coming members of the middle class could advance their prospects for political favour. The result was that the demonstration of religious observance became fashionable among the upper and middle levels of bureaucratic Indonesia in a way it had not been from colonial times, at least for the Javanese.

Islam also began to be seen in this period as the source of a modernity alternative to that of the West. In this sense, it appealed both to members of the modern middle and upper classes who felt uncomfortable with consumerism and with being imitators of an alien model. For the younger and more radical, the Iranian revolution provided a considerable inspiration in its enthusiasm, social radicalism, and anti-Western profession. For the older and more cautious, a flood of Muslim intellectual discussion, inspired both by Indonesian and foreign religious thinkers, made for a serious debate on the nature of society and the ends of political action. Finally, the fact that during the New Order religious association and expression, though restricted, was still possible, meant that social protest could be voiced through Islam when it could not through secular means. As a result, many who might otherwise have looked to an equivalent of the PKI or radical PNI now began to formulate their grievances in terms of religious concerns.

All this, together with the decline of the rural and 'feudal' bases of *abangan* tradition meant that this cultural orientation lost relevance. There is now, certainly, a religious dichotomy, but it is between two kinds of observant Islam: those who hew to a 'Salafist' fundamentalism and those who take a more

flexible approach to the contemporary world. There is, of course, currently a violent strain of thought in Indonesian Islam, fed by global jihadi experience and ideas. So far it has concentrated on attacking those identified with Western materialism or Christianity, and is very much a fringe matter which embarrasses rather than threatens the general social order. Indeed, more often than not those who engage in jihadi violence turn out to have been employed as a 'disposable mass' in the service of political players who are by no means driven by religious concerns .

If, aside perhaps from the long-running political sores of Aceh and Papua, the violence of Indonesia's past decade turns out to have been primarily the mark of regime transition, to be followed by less disruptive means of contesting power, is it of more than historical interest? Indeed it is, but I think its real relevance needs to be seen by looking at it in a different way. We should ask not what the violent episodes that have been studied tell us about the nature of violence, or about why people resort to violence, or why societies disintegrate, but rather what violent incidents can tell us about how society works, how power is constructed and exercised at the local level. We actually know very little about this for Indonesia: In the 1950s and 1960s few non-anthropologists looked at politics below the national level, and most of what analysis was done was based on Java and heavily influenced by stereotypes concerning santri-abangan contrasts in a relatively unchanging rural society. The New Order period saw great changes in spite of its authoritarianism and its determination to keep the populace as a nonpolitical 'floating mass.' The countryside was thoroughly penetrated by capitalist relations, transmigration and the expansion of logging and plantation industries affected even the most isolated communities, urbanization and cultural modernization proceeded apace. But politically relevant studies of provincial and local societies were not welcome under the New Order, by either foreign or domestic investigators, who in any case tended to have their eyes on the rise of the new capitalist elite.

Why is it so important that we look at the workings of power between the local and national levels? Simply because the core assumption of bureaucratic-military hierarchy extending from the capital to control a fundamentally passive peasantry is no longer viable; nor can we assume that parties are simply an alternative means of top-down influence. Had studies of provincial politicking been done under the New Order, they would very likely have revealed networks of unofficial power, whereby men of prowess and financial resource effectively ruled their bailiwick in collaboration with or simply bypassing official administrators. The social disruptions and financial opportunities brought by New Order capitalist expansion greatly increased the chances for such leadership. Since Suharto, democracy and decentralization make it unlikely that such sources of power will continue to remain behind the scenes. Just how their interests link to the structures of formal representation and administration is a matter vital to Indonesia's prospects for stability and progress. So too is the linkage between provincial men of power and the ordinary people: are the latter simply ignored in the course of competing for spoils? And if so are there other sources of inspiration and organization, religious or otherwise, that promise redress?

As things stand, our knowledge of power in Indonesian society bears a certain unfortunate resemblance to that of colonial times. In the Netherlands Indies, the authorities might sponsor socio-economic surveys of the countryside, or investigate local traditions with an eye to shoring up or displacing existing sources of leadership, but they basically assumed a passive, unchanging population, and investigations which disputed this were not encouraged. The only times a real effort was made to learn about what was going on among the populace was when there were outbreaks of violence—local uprisings, sugar-cane burnings, 'messianic' movements, and so on. The studies that were undertaken to explain such events have continued to provide historians with precious glimpses of popular opinion, movement, and organization that contradict the 'official' portrayal of Indonesian society.

The recent studies of violence, too, can serve to reveal workings of local power politics, sources of strain, and and conjunctures/disjunctures in relations between different levels of society. This is the more so in that violence has taken place in diverse parts of the archipelago, which gives us a chance to compare the effect of economic and cultural modernization on society and politics in a way we could not before. Indeed, some scholars are now moving to use the material gathered in the study of post-Suharto violence to explain some of the workings of power in a diverse and rapidly changing society. If Indonesia's future is a relatively open one, we can hope this will be the beginning of a broad investigation of politics and society that will give new understanding and depth to the study of Indonesian democracy which Herb Feith pioneered half a century ago. If not, the studies of violence that have been produced in the wake of Suharto's fall may serve, like the investigations of 'disorders' in colonial days, as precious indications of a reality which political censorship has denied but very likely not eliminated.

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