

Violence in Paradise

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The rising violence in Indonesia in recent months has to be seen in the context of several developments. For one, not only have the working and middle classes grown, but youth groups have become politically more mobile. The general discontent with the despotic political system has accentuated with the drought and the current economic crisis. The risk is great that Indonesia is headed for a period of wider political violence.

ORDER reigned in Indonesia, for decades. Individual protests, strikes and East Timorese resistance did not disturb the stability, a stability as remarkable as the oppression was potent and the growth rate high. Now the picture is a different one. The economy is in crisis and political change inescapable; the risk is that it will be violent. Indonesia has had just two democratic elections at the national level in 1955 and at the local level in 1957. In the second, reformist communists were on their way to becoming the largest party, so 'guided democracy' was introduced instead; election campaigns thereafter have been tightly controlled affairs. In the face of the parliamentary election last year, however, as well as the indirect presidential election due in March, the regime has been forced to crack down on the opposition leader, Megawati, and on the democracy movement. Hundreds lost their lives during the election campaign last year. Riots were reported every week. The problems continue. Millions have now been struck by the economic crisis, and the harvest has failed besides. Recently Suharto has acquired wider powers to curb unrest and crack down on dissidents. What does all of this mean? And above all: how can we explain the political violence?

Today's protests and riots have taken ethnic and religious expressions in the main. This confirms the established explanations, many claim. These are based on the studies done of Java at the end of the 1950s by Clifford Geertz, the world-famous anthropologist. According to Geertz, Indonesian politics was stamped by four socio-cultural streams ('alirans'): on the one hand, 'devoted' Muslims ('santri') some of them 'traditionalists', others 'modernists'; on the other, the Javanese common people ('abangan') and their lords ('priajaji'). To this were added minorities like the Chinese. Politics and conflict rested on so-called primordial ethnic and religious bases. The communists of the time, for example, were tied to the abangan. Violence and conflict could only be avoided, went the claim, if the state checked and integrated these alirans. Sukarno failed, but Suharto succeeded. Now this argument has returned. Political violence and threats to stability, it is argued, reflect the fact that conflicts rooted in ethnicity and religion have come to the surface again. And

now, adds everyone from post-modern anthropologists to paternal gentlemen, such identities may assume even greater importance than under Sukarno (when, after all, a series of groups united in the struggle for national independence, freedom and modernisation). Renewed and vigorous efforts are therefore needed to handle the 'multicultural' problem, and to prevent the masses from running amok.

Explanations of this sort have been tossed back and forth for as long as good alternative analyses have been lacking of the fundamental political dynamic behind the elite game in Jakarta. Now, however, an unusually sharp, exciting and well-written study is available, a study which not only is of general interest but which should also be mandatory reading for every enlightened traveller to Bali – Geoffrey Robinson's *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1995).

Bali is usually depicted as an harmonious exception in Indonesia. The culture is different. Geertz's socio-cultural streams are absent. The commonly presumed bases for explosive political conflict found elsewhere in the country simply do not exist in Bali. Yet the mass murder of leftists in 1965-66 was the worst right here in the middle of paradise beneath the palms on the beach; among the rice terraces, temples and studies in the mountains. How could this be?

Robinson goes far back in time, searches in the archives, examines research reports, interviews those who were there, makes the story come alive, all the way up to today. The result is amazingly effective and clear. Cultural traits in themselves do not matter very much. Both harmony and political violence in Bali vary sooner with the exercise of authority by external and central-state actors as well as with how such intervention relates to the island's own social and economic conditions. Strong external dominance as at times under the Dutch, the Japanese and Suharto seems to correspond to relative harmony (notwithstanding the various methods used to divide and rule), while a weaker and more divided central power as during periods of resistance and under Sukarno leaves greater space for the organisation and manipulation of latent conflicts centring on land and other vital resources.

We may therefore conclude, together with John Sidell (in the *Journal Indonesia*, No 63), that Robinson's results both refute Geertz's cultural explanation and undermine the argument that continued control over ethnic and religious groups is necessary. Dominating such groups may suppress the surface manifestations, but it does not solve the real social and economic conflicts Robinson has identified. Against Geertz's established perspective, then, stands an historical interpretation, one stressing the importance of socio-economic conflict in combination with political repression.

How then can one explain, with such an approach, the rising violence in Indonesia today, and at the same time predict what will happen? The most important thing, as far as I understand it, is that the working and middle classes have grown, at the same time that large youth groups have become politically more mobile and general discontent has increased both with the despotic political system and with the unjust distribution of incomes and wealth. During the first half of the 1990s this led, in combination with conflicts within the elite, to certain limited opportunities for political association and expression. The regime, however, could not handle the clearer conflicts that emerged. By means of repression in the summer of 1996, the lid was jammed on again. There was not, consequently, even a weakly organised democracy movement capable of channelling frustrations. Protests have tended therefore to take violent and primordial expressions. For one thing, ethnic and religious loyalties and organisations are among the few permitted to exist. For another, the regime itself stimulates and even pays many instigators both to escape an open display of state violence against dissidents and to justify a policy of national harmony enforced by autocratic means.

Now all this is being accentuated by both the drought and the economic crisis. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund aim to save the economy with austerity measures and with greater freedom for foreign capital. The effect is that, among other things, more than two million workers and white-collar employees have been laid off. Interest rates and prices are rising. Wages are being hollowed out. Soon at the end of the Muslim month of fasting, the customary bonus may be cancelled. Many are likely to protest. But the opposition still lacks powerful organisations of its own and the regime has no representative opposite parties with whom to negotiate solutions. An old and sick president is likely to be re-elected in March. How he shall be succeeded no one knows, but the effectiveness of central control will likely diminish.

The risk is great, then, that we are headed for a period of wider political violence. There is special cause, therefore, to study Robinson's historical examples and explanations and to adopt a critical attitude not only towards Suharto but also towards the Bank and the Fund.