Remembering May 1998

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Almost sixteen years on, Jakarta's first ethnic Chinese governor joins in efforts to keep the memory of the events of May 1998 from fading

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In an outer suburb of East Jakarta, hidden at the far end of the cemetery, lie 113 unnamed graves. Depending on the time of year and how diligent the local government has been in carrying out their duties, these graves are in various states of disrepair. They are difficult to find, overgrown with lawn and the inscriptions fade with each passing year.

Those buried in these graves are in danger of being forgotten. There are no names written on their headstones, their remains at the time of their death impossible to identify. Even the date of their deaths is unclear with the inscription on the graves simply 'Korban Mei 13-14 1998' (Victims of 13-14 May 1998). These are the victims of the riotous violence in Jakarta in mid-May 1998 that preceded Suharto's resignation on 21 May. The graves mostly go unnoticed, but every year, in time for the commemoration ceremony supported by the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan) and victims' families, an effort is made to clean up the graves.

Standing up for the vulnerable and the voiceless

In May 1998 mass demonstrations by university students broke out across Indonesia leading to the fall of Suharto and the deaths of over 1000 people. This is a fact that most Indonesians can tell you. What they might not tell you and might not know, is that dozens of women, mostly of Chinese ethnicity, were sexually assaulted and raped in an outbreak of mass rioting targeting ethnic Chinese and also urban poor.

This public amnesia stems from the denial that these crimes ever occurred, despite the fact that many of them were confirmed by the government-appointed fact-finding team that was set up to investigate the riots. Activists involved in human rights and the women's movement at the time reacted with outrage to this series of events, demanding a response from President Habibie. The result was the formation of Komnas Perempuan.

As the first institution formed in the reformation period, Komnas Perempuan is known as the anak sulung (first born) of the reform era institutions in Indonesia. Sixteen years on, with limited government funding it continues to carry out its mandate to monitor and document violence

against women and push for policy change. This is a formidable task in a country where the statistics on violence against women are high and rising each year.

Educating about past tragedies

According to Yuniyanti Chuzaifah, head of Komnas Perempuan from 2010 to 2014, an important part of Komnas Perempuan's role remains connected to its originating mandate: to educate and remind the public about the events of May 1998 and seek resolution for the victims and for society as a whole. 'Violence in Indonesian history has been repeated again and again – from the events of 1965, violence in Poso and Papua, and then May 1998. If we let it go on, our children will learn that Indonesia approves of and allows such violence to occur'. said Yuniyanti.

Remembering May 1998 is a personal matter for Andy Yentriyani, a Komnas Perempuan commissioner from 2010 to 2014 and one of the longest serving staff members. She was a university student at the time of the riots and the memory of what happened is still fresh in her mind. Andy is afraid that with the passing of time and changes in leadership within the institution the passion to maintain public awareness will fade, the memory becoming more distant with each year. As one of the victim's family puts it, 'It's not that people are forgetting now, it's that they don't even know'.

Commemorating May 1998

Since 1999, Komnas Perempuan has been working together with victims' families and local governments to make sure that the tragic events of May 1998 are not forgotten. A small monument known as Jarum Mei was constructed at Klender, East Jakarta and serves as an important marker at one of the sites of the tragedy. 'They (the victims' families) miss their children. Their children have no graves of their own. We built this monument as a sign of respect to those who have passed away', said Yuniyanti. However, Komnas Perempuan also understands that a marker in itself cannot raise public awareness or interest. What is actually needed is public involvement in the memorialisation process.

First held in 2011, the Napak Reformasi is a means of commemorating the events of May 1998 in the form of a memorial tour. The sites visited include Klender Mall where a fire killed many hundreds of urban poor, and Trisakti University where the army opened fire on an unarmed student protest killing four people and wounding many others. The tour also visits sites related to the Chinese involvement in the establishment of Jakarta.

Organising the commemorative tour is no simple task and in 2014 it was perhaps even more challenging than in the past. Andy Yentriyani's fear of dwindling enthusiasm for the memorialisation process grew. The group organising the event was small and one of its most dedicated members had passed away just a few weeks before. Morale was low and there were budgets to discuss, details to arrange and problems to work out, not least of which was trying to secure the attention of Ahok, who was busy in the lead up to the 2014 presidential elections and his pending ascension to the role of governor.

In a perverse twist just a few days before the anniversary a horror film, *Mall Klender*, began screening in Jakarta. The film includes scenes of tormented, half-burned victims haunting the mall. A mother of one of the victims who died at Klender Mall was teary as she spoke at a meeting. She expressed her disbelief that a film company could base a horror story on events involving the death of her child and others. ‘I waited for days for my child to come home from the mall.’ In a meeting with the filmmakers, Komnas Perempuan raised questions including ‘What is the point? What is the benefit for the community?’ They were told it was ‘a coincidence, merely a coincidence’. However, such a response was wholly inadequate for the victims’ families.

The tour

In 2014 Napak Reformasi took place on 18 May, with three buses taking different routes through Jakarta's heavy traffic and culminating at Pondok Ranggon cemetery. Representatives from the Jakarta provincial government, having promised to work together with Komnas Perempuan, were asked to attend a ceremony at Pondok Ranggon cemetery. It was decided that the then vice governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or Ahok, (now governor) would be invited to place the first stone in the building of a new memorial.

One of the sites visited by the 2014 Napak Reformasi was Trisakti University, where shootings occurred on 12 May 1998. On the way, the commentator, a history lecturer, gave participants a brief background on the events leading up to the student demonstrations and riots. She spoke of how in the past she had to be very careful about what she taught her students, never straying far from what was set out in the textbook.

The guide pointed out circular plaques in front of the university marking the places where the four victims fell. Wreaths are still regularly left there, although their location, in the car park, means that sometimes they are nearly obscured by cars. Towering in front of the university is a six-metre high monument and, inside, a small museum. In addition to giving a detailed description of events leading up to the shooting, the museum has displays of photos and personal effects of the young victims, named as heroes of the reformation who died struggling for a better Indonesia. A hole made by a stray bullet is still visible in a nearby window.

The bus then made its way to Pondok Ranggon cemetery. Participants from the three different tours joined together to share their experiences and watch the ceremonial placement of the first stone.

At the cemetery, Yuniyanti greeted the participants. ‘Today we should be grateful … with the support of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama we can lay the first stone in the building of the Jarum Mei '98 monument.’ The meaning of this symbol, she went on to say, was one of hope.

The monument itself is a statue of a needle that represents stitching together the fragmented past. ‘We all experienced a collective trauma and this can easily happen again if it is not stopped. They were the victims in the past, but if nothing is done, we could all be potential victims’, warned Yuniyanti.

Ahok's speech was moving. ‘Their deaths will not be in vain, the innocent victims of May 1998.’ This process of memorialisation, he emphasised, was not about seeking revenge but about ensuring such ‘a terrible crime’ never occurs again. Ahok expressed his gratitude to the university students who were present. They were, according to him, an important link to the future. ‘My father always taught me, the smell of corpses can never be covered up, one day the smell will leak out! We just have to wait and pray’, he said. Ahok told the crowd he felt personally indebted to those who died, as without the lessons learned from May 1998 he might not have been elected as deputy

governor (and later governor) of Jakarta. Standing without an umbrella, Ahok's face was red as he squinted at the audience through the blinding midday sun.

The question of human rights in democratic Indonesia

At the time of the Napak Reformasi in 2014, Indonesia was already caught up in the pesta demokrasi (festival of democracy) in the lead up to the July presidential elections. The issue of past human rights violations had been raised a number of times in the campaign but without guarantees. As Ahok commented that evening, 'I don't know when we will have a president who is really brave in upholding justice for all Indonesians…But I believe that one day, if we live for long enough, Indonesia will see that. We will have a brave president.'

The Jakarta government has agreed to maintain the graves, put up signs and erect a monument to the victims of the May Tragedy in Pondok Ranggon cemetery. They will also arrange for monuments to be placed at other sites and ensure that information about Napak Reformasi is incorporated into history tours of Jakarta and school textbooks.

After Ahok's speech the mother of one of the victims collapsed into the arms of someone standing nearby. She was moved to tears by the thought that finally the death of her child had been recognised, the government was prepared to acknowledge the tragedy and make efforts towards memorialisation. The signed agreement with Governor Ahok hangs proudly in the Komnas Perempuan offices. There has been progress. But what will happen in the future? Will Jokowi be the brave president that the country has been waiting for? It remains to be seen.

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