Reflecting on the May 1998 mass rapes and the birth of Komnas Perempuan

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Anti-government protesters face off against police in Jakarta – May 1998 (Arbain Rambey)

Rahel Narda Chaterine, Jakarta – The cases of alleged human rights violations during the May 1998 riots in Jakarta have still not been resolved to this day.

Between May 12 and 15, 1998, a series of riots broke out in various parts of the country, including in Jakarta. The riots were triggered by the shooting of four Trisakti University students.

Thousands of students from various campuses had been protesting to demand reformasi – political reform – and to force then president Suharto to step down.

Elang Mulia Lesmana, Hafidhin Royan, Hery Hartanto and Hendriawan Sie died during the incident which is now remembered as the May 12 Trisakti Tragedy.

A day after the Trisakti Tragedy, racially charged riots exploded with scores of ethnic Indonesian Chinese falling victim. The riots were accompanied with vandalism, the burning of buildings, killings and rapes.

During a press conference with Amnesty International Indonesia on Wednesday May 20, 2020, National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) commissioner for the period 1998-2006, Ita Fatia Nadia gave evidence on the reported cases of sexual violence at the time.

"So there was indeed the Trisakti shootings, but there were incidents of widespread looting, and the incidents of looting were followed by assaults, rapes and killings", said Nadia.

Based on Komnas Perempuan's records, there were at least 92 acts of sexual violence which took place during the May riots in Jakarta, Medan (North Sumatra) and Surabaya (East Java).

As many as 53 cases were rapes accompanied by violence, 10 attacks or cases of sexual assault and 15 cases of sexual harassment.

According to Nadia, many people have forgotten the sexual violence against women that occurred at the time. "These cases are never addressed by activists these days, let alone by the DPR [House of Representatives]", she said.

Nadia said that she and her colleagues received many reports of women being raped following the May riots. At the time, she was active in a foundation for the protection women victims of violence called Kalyanamitra.

Based on the reports they received, she and her colleagues visited the victims. Once such case was a victim in the Glodok area of North Jakarta. She was shocked to see the condition of the victim.

"We often assisted in rape cases, but these rapes were beyond my comprehension as a human being. Because their vagina's were severely damaged, not rapes using a man's sexual organs, but using objects", said Nadia.

The victims were taken directly to the Carolus hospital in Jakarta for intensive care.

TGPF formed

On July 15, 1998, the Society on Violence Against Women met with Suharto's successor, President B.J. Habibie. The meeting was to follow up on the results of the data gathered on women rape victims. Nadia outlined the data to the president.

According to Komnas Perempuan president Habibie acknowledged that there had been widespread rapes of ethnic Chinese women during the riots.

Habibie then instructed the women representatives present to write a statement containing an apology from the state for the tragedy. On the same day, Habibie read the statement out at a press conference.

On July 23, 1998, Habibie formed a Joint Fact Finding Team (TGPF) to investigate the May riots, including the mass rapes that occurred during that time.

In its report, the TGPF concluded that it was true that there were sexual attacks suffered by ethnic Chinese women. Some 92 acts of sexual violence were recorded has having taken place during the May riots in Jakarta and surrounding areas as well as Medan and Surabaya.

In October 1998, Habibie formalised the Society on Violence Against Women through Presidential Decree Number 181/1998 on a National Commission on Violence Against Women, thus transforming it into the Komnas Perempuan.

[Translated by James Balowski. The original title of the article was "Retrospeksi Tragedi Mei 1998: Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan yang Kerap Dilupakan".]

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