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Crisis and change in Indonesia

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Rape, Race, and Reporting

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> Moments of political violence may appear shatteringly similar in their grim outcome and in the sheer physicality of the destruction they inflict. Yet these moments, even those regarded as spontaneous outbursts, are shaped by each society's particular history and myths of collective identity and are energized by sedimented memories of threats to the collectivity.
>
> (Coronil and Skurski, 1991:289)

Political rapes, like other rapes, are notoriously difficult as a subject of reporting and critical analysis for observers, not to speak of their experience for victims. This is especially true when the subject is unfamiliar territory for the analysts, as the case of May 1998 has been to many Java-based or Jakarta-biased Indonesians, myself included. These are all obvious points. One bitter implication I wish to consider here is that the state apparatuses are not able, even if they were willing, to satisfy the public demand to investigate the May 1998 case thoroughly, and hold the culprits responsible, in ways that follow the official procedures and meet the conventional standards of justice and truth.

The May 1998 rapes opened a new chapter in the history of Indonesia's political violence. Although not the first incident of its kind in the centre of the state political space, it appeared to have no resonance in the memory of a large portion of the population, including those actively involved in the case.[1]

[1] Much of the June 1946 edition of the Chinese Indonesian-oriented and Jakarta-based The Star Weekly was devoted to coverage of political violence, including sexual atrocities against both male and female ethnic Chinese in several towns of West Java. The Federation of Chinese Associations in Batavia (Chung Hua Tsung Hui) published a 'Memorandum', detailing various forms of human rights abuses against the Chinese communities in Java from coast to coast before and after the Dutch Police action on 21 July 1947. In the sense of their timing, these incidents took place in war situations that distinguish them from what happened in May 1998. The importance of this difference will be elucidated in the section 'Significance of Form'.
I am thankful to Stanley Y Adi for the information and historical documents pertaining to the incidents in 1946-1947, which have receded in the public memory and debates in Suharto's New Order. One minor exception is the recent mention by Tempo (1998a) of a journalistic account of the killings and rapes against the Chinese population in Tangerang in the first week of June 1946, derived from The Star Weekly 23 June 1946. I cannot say anything substantive about these past incidents in the present discussion, because to do so would require a serious further investigation.

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For that reason, the incident shocked many Indonesians who were neither prepared nor equipped to respond. The magnitude of causes and effects of the event proved to be far greater and more complex than first estimated by most of Jakarta's middle class urbanites, including well-reputed human rights activists who sought to bring some sort of justice to the crime. For separate reasons, the event has also received unprecedented scale of international reaction, often with no recognition of past and present cases elsewhere.[2]

This essay consists of four parts. The first, covering several sections, is a series of novice attempts at coming to grips analytically with the various difficulties of speaking of the subject both in general terms and with specific reference to the case of May 1998 in Indonesia. If the apparent novelty of the crime is responsible for its unfamiliarity and difficulty, it is important then to [illegible] how it could have taken place where, when and in the manner it did. The next section will attempt to answer these questions by elaborating

various analyses and explanation of the causes, significance and consequences of the May 1998 event. As an alternative, this essay will offer a close examination of selected moments of history, memories and sense of collective identity in addressing many of these questions. Additionally, attention will be given to the broader context. For want of a better term, this context is called a condition of vulgar masculinist post-colonial state power. This refers to power relations, marked by (a) the spectacularity of masculine excessive violence; (b) intense pain and widespread fear inflicted upon selected victims and the social groups they were seen to represent; (c) the immunity of the perpetrators from legal prosecution; (d) and the redundancy of such violence for any political or material gain to the perpetrators.[3]

A most disturbing fact about the political rapes in Jakarta, as elsewhere, is the paucity of hope for any meaningful restitution, or legal recourse for the victims. No authoritative and effective discourse is yet available for the

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