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The Limits of Recognition:

Visibility, Violence, and the Making of May 1998 in Indonesia

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Bates College

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Introduction

> *Yang paling jelas saya ingat itu lihat cewek-cewek Chindo dikeluarin dari rumah, dipukul kalau nga dengar, terus dipermalukan di jalan. Mereka di suruh lepas baju… habis itu I sudah nggak lihat lagi, langusung lari pulang.*
>
> What I remember most clearly is seeing Chinese girls dragged out of houses, beaten if they did not listen, and humiliated in the street. They were told to take off their clothes… After that, I stopped looking, I just started running home.[1]

As she spoke, my aunt did not move through this memory in a steady manner. She paused, circled back, and hesitated over certain details, while others came out abruptly, almost too quickly. Her testimony and her memory of May 1998 was certainly vivid but at the same time partial. She never found out what happened to the girls she saw and what stood out most to me was the uncertainty surrounding the event. This thesis grows from that uncertainty. In May 1998, violence unfolded across Jakarta and other Indonesian cities in ways that were both highly visible and profoundly uneven in how they could be known. Commonly referred to as the May 1998 Indonesian riots, the worst of the violence lasted from the 12th of May to the 15th. Fires consumed commercial districts, smoke filled the skyline, and images of destruction circulated widely in newspapers and television broadcasts. These scenes quickly came to define the riots.

The violence that unfolded in May 1998 has often been narrated as the chaotic endpoint of the New Order regime (1967-1998).[2] It was a moment of economic collapse,

[1] "Interview with Aunt," Zoom, March 2026.
[2] The New Order refers to the authoritarian regime led by President Suharto from 1966 to 1998. It was characterized by centralized executive power, military influence through the doctrine of *dwifungsi* (dual function), restrictions on political opposition and the press, and an assimilationist approach toward ethnic Chinese Indonesians.

political rupture, and mass unrest that culminated in the resignation of Suharto. In this telling, the riots appear as both culmination and catalyst, a breakdown of order that signaled the exhaustion of authoritarian rule and the arrival of Reformasi; however, to approach May 1998 solely through this frame is to treat the violence as a self-evident event whose meaning lies transparently in what occurred.[3] Such an approach risks obscuring a more difficult problem. More specifically, while the riots were certainly a crisis of governance and public order, the riots were also a crisis of representation. What could be seen, said, and later known about the violence was unevenly structured from the very beginning. This thesis begins from the premise that the meaning of May 1998 was not simply discovered in its aftermath, but actively produced through the practices that sought to document, interpret, and stabilize it.

In the immediate moment of upheaval, journalists, officials, and civil society actors were confronted with rapidly unfolding events that exceeded the categories available to describe them. As fires continued to spread and mobs continued to loot and gather in large numbers, these forms of destruction were photographed, counted, and narrated within familiar vocabularies of *kerusuhan* (riot), *amuk massa* (mob violence), and *kekacauan* (chaos). At the same time, other forms of harm, particularly those directed against Chinese-Indonesian communities and instances of sexual violence, proved far more difficult to capture within these frameworks. Information about these kinds of harm circulated instead through rumor, testimony, and informal networks, often without the forms of verification required to enter the public record with comparable authority. It is within this tension that this thesis advances its central argument. The documentation of May 1998 was structured by what I term an evidentiary partition, a patterned division between forms of violence that were immediately visible and institutionally legible, and those that were not. Here, the significance

[3] Reformasi refers to the period of political reform that followed Suharto's resignation in May 1998. The term encompasses democratization, decentralization, expanded civil liberties, and new demands for accountability regarding violence and corruption inherited from the New Order.

lies in that this partition not only reflects differences in the nature of the violence but that it also reflects and was produced through the interaction of media conventions, political constraints, and institutional practices that together shaped what could count as credible knowledge. As a result, certain narratives of the riots, particularly those emphasizing spontaneous unrest and material destruction, quickly became dominant, while others remained fragmented.

The existing historiography of May 1998 provides essential insight into these dynamics, but it has tended to approach the riots through distinct analytical lenses that are rarely brought into sustained conversation. Different bodies of scholarship approach the riots differently, and have rarely been brought into conversation with one another. As previously mentioned, one influential body of scholarship situates the violence within the broader collapse of the New Order. Works by Harold Crouch and Edward Aspinall have shown how the Asian financial crisis, elite fragmentation, and mounting reformasi mobilization destabilized the regime, while Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz focus on the politics entirely, emphasizing how oligarchic power was reorganized, not dispersed, in the post-Suharto period.[4] Within this literature, the riots appear primarily as a political turning point, evidence of regime breakdown and transition. While indispensable, this perspective tends to treat the violence itself as a transparent symptom of structural crisis, leaving less examined the question of how the events were rendered knowable in the first place.

A second body of scholarship has pushed against depoliticized understandings of the riots as mere "chaos." Work on collective violence in Indonesia has insisted that riots are not self-explanatory eruptions of disorder but historically structured events shaped by

[4] Harold Crouch, *Political Reform in Indonesia after Soeharto* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010); Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Richard Robison and Vedi R. Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets* (London: Routledge, 2004).

institutions, coercive actors, and political opportunity.[5] This literature has transformed the field because it unsettles the very vocabulary through which May 1998 was often publicly described. If the language of *kerusuhan* (riots), *amuk massa* (mob rampage), or urban breakdown suggested spontaneity, the broader violence literature on Indonesia directs attention instead to patterned violence and to the social and political conditions that make some targets vulnerable.[6] For this thesis, this scholarship is important not only because it contests the explanatory adequacy of "chaos," but because it highlights a larger historiographical problem; namely, that the descriptive language that dominated public narration was itself part of how the event became legible. In other words, the issue is not only whether the riots were spontaneous or organized, but how certain framings came to appear more credible than others in the first place.

This idea of moving beyond generalized accounts of the unrest is mirrored in histories focusing on anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia. For instance, Jemma Purdey's *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* insists that May 1998 cannot be understood only as undifferentiated urban disorder.[7] More specifically, by placing the riots within a longer sequence of anti-Chinese violence present in the archipelago's history, Purdey demonstrates that ethnicity, prejudice, political manipulation, and social tension were all central to the violence. Charles Coppel's scholarship likewise highlights the longer history of Chinese-Indonesian vulnerability and the ways anti-Chinese violence has been embedded in Indonesian political life.[8] This literature has been decisive in shifting the historiographical center of gravity away from regime collapse alone and toward the specific racialized

[5] John T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).
[6] Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).
[7] Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006).
[8] Charles A. Coppel, ed., *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

character of the violence. It established that Chinese Indonesians were not incidental casualties of generalized unrest, but among its principal targets, and that any subsequent serious history of May 1998 must reckon with that fact.

This idea has echoes in scholarship on identity, erasure, and the politics of belonging. Ariel Heryanto's work has been particularly important here, because it helps explain how Chinese Indonesians could be simultaneously hypervisible and politically precarious.[9] His scholarship on political identity and post-authoritarian culture underscores that violence in Indonesia cannot be separated from the discursive production of belonging and exclusion. This is especially relevant both for this thesis and for analyzing the dynamics of May 1998. Here, the importance lies in that Anti-Chinese violence relied on a representational logic in which Chinese Indonesians could be marked as proximate objects of resentment while remaining vulnerable to displacement from the national "we." Crucially for this thesis, this idea demonstrates that racialized violence is as much about the political and cultural terms through which attacks could be narrated than just the physical violence.

Taking a step back, a further strand of scholarship has focused less on causation than on recognition. Purdey's influential article on the "place of victims" in Reformasi Indonesia marked an important historiographical shift by showing that the struggle after May 1998 was not only over what had happened, but over whose suffering could be publicly acknowledged and subsequently, on what terms.[10] This was especially significant in relation to the rapes that occurred. The problem was never merely evidentiary in a narrow legal sense. It was also social, political, and epistemic and involved questions regarding who could speak, who would be believed, what kinds of testimony counted, and how claims became vulnerable to

[9] Ariel Heryanto, ed., *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2006); Ariel Heryanto, *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics* (London: Routledge, 2008).
[10] Jemma Purdey, "Problematizing the Place of Victims in Reformasi Indonesia," Asian Survey 42, no. 4 (2002): 605–22.

denial. This concern has become even sharper in more recent work on gendered violence and memory activism. Katharine McGregor's *Systemic Silencing* is particularly important because it shows that silence around sexual violence in Indonesia is an active social and political process as much as it is about an absence of testimony.[11] Her work helps illuminate why some forms of violence remained fragile within the post-1998 archive even when they were widely discussed in activist and community settings. The significance of this literature for my thesis is substantial. It demonstrates that the archive of May 1998 was unstable from the beginning, not only because evidence was missing, but because certain harms were structurally harder to stabilize as credible public knowledge.

To further complicate this picture, scholarship on visual culture, mediation, and the urban afterlives of violence has pushed the field in another crucial direction. Karen Strassler's *Demanding Images*, for example, has shown how images acquire evidentiary force in democratic transition and public life.[12] Her analysis helps explain why certain scenes from May 1998—burning buildings, smoke-filled streets, shattered shops, and large crowds in motion—could circulate as compelling, self-evident proof, while other forms of violence moved more precariously through rumor, testimony, and contested witnessing. Similarly, Abidin Kusno's work on the mnemonic life of urban form complements this by showing how violence can persist spatially and affectively even when it is unevenly integrated into public memory.[13] Read alongside broader Indonesian memory scholarship such as Mary Zurbuchen's *Beginning to Remember*, this literature makes clear that the post-Suharto opening did not simply liberate the past into transparent visibility.[14] What is made clear is the repeating idea that the riots created a new field of struggle over which pasts could be publicly

[11] Katharine E. McGregor, *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023).
[12] Karen Strassler, *Demanding Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
[13] Abidin Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[14] Mary S. Zurbuchen, *Beginning to Remember* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005).

narrated, by whom, and in what forms. For a history of May 1998, this is indispensable, because it directs attention away from the archive as a neutral storehouse of facts and toward the politics of visibility itself.

Much of the literature above has illuminated separate dimensions of the riots. Scholarship has covered regime collapse, oligarchic continuity, anti-Chinese violence, victim recognition, gendered silencing, image politics, and memory. What has received less sustained attention is how these different dimensions relate to one another at the level of historical production. My thesis intervenes here by arguing that the historical record of May 1998 was structured from the outset by an evidentiary partition; namely, that a division exists between violence that was immediately photographable, countable, and institutionally legible, and violence that circulated through rumor, shame, fear, and vulnerable testimony. This is not an argument about missing evidence. On the contrary, evidence about ethnic targetting, sexual violence, and suspect state actors were readily available. Instead, the argument presented is centred on the unequal conditions under which evidence became public fact. In this sense, the thesis contributes to the scholarship above not by offering one more explanatory account of why the riots happened, but by asking how different archives made different versions of May 1998 possible.

This methodological move draws on a broader body of work in oral history, archival theory, and historiography. Oral history is especially important for this thesis, but not because it straightforwardly fills in the gaps left by documentary sources. As a field, oral history is concerned with evidence, interpretation, ethics, archiving, and public memory rather than as a simple technique for harvesting supplementary facts.[15] As Alessandro Portelli's work has shown, oral sources are valuable because they reveal how people confer meaning on events,

[15] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

how memory organizes the past, and how narrative itself becomes historical evidence.[16] Lynn Abrams's *Oral History Theory* has developed this further through concepts such as subjectivity, intersubjectivity, memory, performance, power, trauma, and ethics.[17] Such literature is central to my third chapter because it demonstrates that oral testimony is to be treated neither as inferior to the written archive nor as a pure corrective to it, but as a distinct mode of historical knowledge.

This point is especially important because my oral history material comes from family interviews. Here, too, oral history scholarship is instructive. Michael Frisch's concept of "shared authority" reminds us that oral narratives are produced relationally, through an encounter in which meaning is shaped collaboratively, though not evenly, by the interviewer and narrator.[18] Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes's *Oral History and Public Memories* similarly emphasizes that oral history does not stand outside public memory; it both reflects and reshapes it.[19] These insights matter for my project as it means that the oral histories included within my thesis will be treated like any other historical primary source. These oral histories are mediated memories, shaped by hindsight, silence, proximity, fear, kinship, and the wider public narratives that have circulated since Reformasi. To treat them historically is therefore to ask what kinds of experience they preserve that other archives could not easily hold, and how those memories have themselves been formed in relation to public discourse.

The same critical stance applies to documentary archives. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* remains foundational in demonstrating that power enters history not only through overt censorship, but through the very processes by which facts are produced,

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[16] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
[17] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016).
[18] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).
[19] Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, eds., *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

archived, narrated, and retrospectively authorized.[20] Ann Laura Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain* pushes this further by insisting that archives be read not as inert containers of information but as epistemic and political formations, shaped by the classificatory habits, anxieties, and practical routines of governance.[21] Antoinette Burton's *Archive Stories* likewise challenges the notion of archival neutrality by foregrounding how archives are constructed, policed, and experienced.[22] These works have greatly informed the approach taken in the first two chapters. They make it possible to read newspapers, official reports, and NGO dossiers as distinct genres of historical production that each carries its own assumptions about credibility, evidence, and public address. Each structures what can appear as fact.

Taken together, this survey of existing scholarship and methodological approaches suggest that May 1998 should be approached as both multivalent and nuanced. It was certainly a crisis of authoritarian rule, racialized violence, and social upheaval, but also a crisis of historical legibility. The scholarship on regime change explains why the New Order collapsed. The scholarship on anti-Chinese violence and victimhood shows who was targeted and how suffering became contested. The scholarship on images, memory, and public culture reveals why some traces of violence circulated more forcefully than others. Oral history and archival theory, finally, provide the tools to analyze how these uneven traces became part of the record at all. My intervention is to bring these bodies of literature into a single analytic frame. Rather than assuming that newspapers, official investigations, NGO documents, and oral testimonies together form a progressively fuller record of the riots, I argue that they reveal a more difficult truth; namely, that the past was never evenly available to documentation in the first place. The central history of May 1998 is therefore not only the

[20] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
[21] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[22] Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

violence itself, but the unequal production of evidence through which that violence has been remembered, denied, and made narratable.

To trace these dynamics, the thesis proceeds through three interconnected chapters. Chapter One examines contemporaneous newspaper reporting to show how visual and lexical conventions rendered certain forms of violence legible while obscuring others. Chapter Two turns to institutional and civil society documentation, analyzing how official inquiries and NGO records expanded the evidentiary field while reproducing its unevenness. Chapter Three draws on oral histories to explore how the violence was experienced and remembered at the level of everyday life. Collectively, these chapters argue that May 1998 should be understood as an ongoing problem of knowledge and representation.

Chapter 1: Flames, Silence, and Memory: Media, Politics, and the Public Record

In mid-May 1998, smoke drifted across Jakarta in long, dark columns visible from flyovers and schoolyards; storefronts were destroyed in just a few minutes; crowds surged through commercial districts, some fleeing, others looting; and soldiers moved uncertainly in armored convoys that seemed at once present and absent. For many, the May 1998 riots unfolded through first-hand experience; many were victims of the violence, while others felt the heat, noise, and rumors that carried across the city. But, for many others, these days unfolded through images. Photographs of burning markets, overturned cars, and masses of people circulated quickly through television broadcasts and on the front pages of newspapers the following morning. It is these photographs that fixed the chaos of May 1998 into a recognizable visual grammar. They became, almost immediately, the shared vocabulary through which Indonesians could begin to make sense of the catastrophe.

As many began to see photos of the riots, the violence depicted in the photos gained an evidentiary force. Many of the photos that were taken depicted harms that could be photographed, counted, and verified; violence was evident in the pictures of destroyed storefronts, looted inventories, and lifeless bodies carried from the streets. However, at the same time, other parts of May 1998 were not so easily rendered. Forms of violence that left few public traces, such as sexual assault, targeted attacks on Chinese-Indonesian homes and businesses, and the coordinated movement of *preman* (Indonesian gangsters) and government security forces, did not condense into a single decisive image. Subsequently, many of these harms were much less discussed in the press and public sphere and instead travelled across hotline reports, whispered accounts, and NGO appendices. In a time when institutions were not transparent, reporting was not consistent, and policing was anything but impartial, the very mechanisms that might have made these events legible were themselves strained.

It is because of this that historians approaching May 1998 face a twofold problem. First, they must reconstruct events in a landscape where the public record is both fragmented and contested. Second, they must ask why certain harms entered national consciousness and formal archives while others remained marginal, unspeakable, or branded as rumor. The result is not simply an absence of information but a patterned absence, an evidentiary tension that continues to shape what of the May 1998 riots can be known, argued, and remembered even today.

This chapter tells the story of what happened in Jakarta and, simultaneously, traces how the press, an important propagator of knowledge, interpreted and framed the violence of May 1998. In analyzing how journalistic practices, political incentives, and broader social dynamics interact, I argue that the organizing role of the media produced an evidentiary partition—a patterned demarcation of what could be credibly known and publicly acted upon in the immediate aftermath of the riots. Subsequently, to develop this argument, the chapter proceeds in three parts. The first section situates May 1998 within the political and media landscape of the late New Order, outlining the institutional constraints and inherited habits of self-censorship that shaped how reporting unfolded. The second reconstructs contemporaneous coverage in *Kompas*, *Republika*, and *Suara Karya*, paying close attention to headline vocabularies, quoting practices, and the photographic controversies that followed. And finally, the conclusion of this chapter aims to answer why the newspapers reported in the way they did, despite the general public knowing of the mass rapes and violence against Chinese-Indonesians. Through closely examining these aspects, this chapter draws out the tensions present within contemporaneous reporting practices at the time and what those tensions then mean for memory, accountability, and historical practice.

Political and Media Context: Institutions, Crisis, and the Space of Reporting

To understand how newspapers represented the riots, it helps to rehearse briefly the political and media-institutional field into which reporting was released. By early 1998, the political and economic foundations of Suharto's New Order (Orde Baru) were beginning to fall apart. For over three decades, the regime had maintained power through a variety of systems and hierarchies blending military dominance, bureaucratic patronage, and a state-managed economy deeply intertwined with conglomerates linked to Suharto and his family.[23] This political machine rested on an implicit social contract; namely, that political quiescence was traded for economic growth. For much of the 1980s, this system projected an appearance of stability. Indonesia was seeing rapid annual economic growth, showcasing its industrialization projects, and the visible rise of an urban middle class created the impression of a successful developmental state.[24] With that in mind, as scholars such as David Bourchier have emphasized, this stability was always underwritten by the depoliticizing project of the regime. Suharto's New Order grounded its legitimacy not only in economic performance and coercive power, but in a deeply embedded "family-state" ideology that imagined Indonesia as a harmonious household under a paternal leader.[25] In this vision, political contestation was construed as inherently destructive. Stability, in other words, was less the product of consensus than the outcome of institutionalized political silence.

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 fractured this illusion. As the rupiah lost more than 80 percent of its value, inflation soared, and basic commodities became unaffordable.[26] Soon, it became clear that Suharto's governing bargain that traded economic growth for political quiescence had collapsed. The crisis exposed the fragility of the state-capital,

[23] Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).
[24] Anne Booth, *The Indonesian Economy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
[25] David Bourchier, *Illiberal Democracy in Indonesia: The Ideology of the Family State* (London: Routledge, 2015).
[26] H.W. Arndt and Hal Hill, *Southeast Asia's Economic Crisis: Origins, Lessons, and the Way Forward* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1999).

particularly the system of state corporatism and crony capitalism that had fueled growth while concealing deep structural vulnerabilities.[27] Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz's seminal analysis of the period concludes on this effectively, arguing that the crisis revealed how the New Order's economic success had depended on networks of oligarchic patronage, rather than institutional resilience; subsequently, when credit evaporated, and investor confidence collapsed, so too did the scaffolding that stabilized Suharto's rule.[28]

Taking another angle, the late New Order was also characterised by a fracture within the political elite, which functionally weakened another stabilizing pillar of the New Order. At this point, the regime's long-standing alignment between Suharto, his trusted technocrats, and military leadership started to unravel. Once-loyal technocrats began withdrawing support, and military commanders split into competing factions.[29] Crucially, this fragmentation was especially damaging because it struck at the heart of the institution Suharto had relied on most—ABRI, the Indonesian Armed Forces. Under the doctrine of *dwifungsi* (dual function), the military was deeply embedded throughout the political system, with officers occupying parliamentary seats, provincial governorships, and key bureaucratic posts.[30] As political cohesion faltered, many began to see the flaws in blurring the lines between the military and politics. As Marcus Mietzner has shown, *dwifungsi* had long been justified as necessary for nation-building, but by the late 1990s, it had come to symbolize military impunity and the ossification of political life.[9] Reformist officers and students alike targeted it as a symbol of authoritarian stagnation, and as internal military fissures widened, both the regime and ABRI appeared increasingly unable to offer a unified response to the crisis.[31]

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[27] Andrew MacIntyre, "Institutions and Investors: The Politics of the Indonesian Financial Crisis," International Organization 54, no. 1 (2000): 81–122.
[28] Richard Robison and Vedi R. Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[29] Benedict Anderson, *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2001).
[30] Sukardi Rinakit, *The Indonesian Military After the New Order* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005).
[31] Marcus Mietzner, *Military Politics, Islam, and the State in Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009).

Against this backdrop of political fatigue and economic breakdown, Suharto's inner circle, dominated by his children and business cronies, became easy targets for public anger.[32] New actors began to articulate alternative moral and political visions. Student demonstrations spread across major cities, calling for *reformasi* (reform). As Edward Aspinall argues, these students forged a new moral-political vocabulary, one grounded in anti-corruption and anti-nepotism, fundamentally challenging the New Order's depoliticizing ethos.[33]

When the shootings at Trisakti University on 12 May 1998 left four students dead, the moral tenor of protest shifted into open confrontation. The killings galvanized public outrage, and in the days that followed, riots engulfed Jakarta. Ethnic Chinese communities—long cast by the regime as politically suspect "outsiders" within the nation—were disproportionately targeted.[34] This dynamic was not new; Robert Hefner and others have shown how the New Order's assimilationist policies framed Chinese-Indonesians as economically privileged yet culturally suspect, producing a latent racialized resentment that authoritarian governance managed but never resolved.[35] The violence of May 1998 thus revealed how quickly these tensions could erupt once the state's coercive and ideological controls weakened. While the exact role of government actors in inciting or enabling the riots remains contested, it is clear that the chaos of the riots further eroded Suharto's legitimacy and signaled that the regime's ability to contain social unrest had collapsed, paving the way for the president's resignation just days later.

For many Indonesians, the atrocities of the events of May 1998 were lived through, but for many others, these days unfolded through the lens of the press. Yet, even as the state's

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[32] Jun Honna, *Military Politics and Democratization in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[33] Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
[34] Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).
[35] Robert Hefner, "The Politics of Multiculturalism," in *The Politics of Multiculturalism*, ed. R.W. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

grip on information loosened, decades of censorship had produced ingrained habits of self-restraint. During the New Order, a SIUPP permit was required for the press to publish, and under this licensing regime, newspapers could be suspended or shuttered without warning, editors could be replaced, and journalists could be interrogated for crossing ambiguously defined red lines.[36] The banning of *Tempo*, *Editor*, and *Detik* in 1994 stands as the clearest example of how the state used regulatory power to curtail investigative journalism and cultivate a press culture wary of political risk.[37] Each of these papers published separate critical investigative reports on corruption and political scandals and all three were subsequently banned for 'violating press restrictions'. Krishna Sen and David Hill's studies of Indonesian media emphasize that such disciplinary moments produced not just fear but enduring newsroom habits and culture; more specifically, editors learned to anticipate state preferences, to avoid implicating powerful actors directly, and to frame disorder in ways that preserved the rhetorical unity of the nation.[38] By May 1998, formal controls were loosening, but these internalized habits proved remarkably durable. It is within this transitional media landscape, where authoritarian structures were weakening but not yet dismantled, and where journalistic routines bore the imprint of decades of self-policing, that the coverage of the May riots must be situated.

To examine how these dynamics materialized in practice, this chapter now turns to three newspapers whose coverage shaped the earliest public narratives of the May 1998 riots: *Kompas*, *Republika*, and *Suara Karya*. The press of the late New Order was far from homogeneous, and these papers occupied distinct institutional, ideological, and rhetorical positions within Indonesia's media landscape. *Kompas*, with its Catholic intellectual heritage,

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[36] Ang Peng Hwa, *Ordering Chaos: Regulating the Internet in Indonesia (*Singapore: NUS Press, 2005), esp. ch. 2.
[37] David Hill and Krishna Sen, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[38] Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Press and Development: Mass Media and the Middle Class in Indonesia* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1986).

cultivated a tone of cautious respectability; it was socially influential, institutionally trusted, and consistently oriented toward themes of national cohesion. *Republika*, by contrast, spoke to a predominantly Muslim readership and frequently framed political developments through moral and religious vocabularies. *Suara Karya* operated in yet another register in that it served as the official newspaper of Golkar—the political party Suharto had aligned himself with and through which much of the New Order's political machinery was organized. In this sense, *Suara Karya* functioned as an extension of the regime's informational apparatus. But despite these differences between the various press organizations, their coverage displayed a striking convergence in both what was foregrounded and kept silent.

In this sense, despite differences in audience, institutional authority, and ideological orientation, the collapse of Suharto's regime did not unleash a truly pluralistic press. The sheer atrocity of the violence, combined with decades of entrenched newsroom habits and ongoing political uncertainty, did not produce a wide spectrum of interpretations. Instead, these three papers, knowingly or not, collectively generated a mediated space in which certain narratives of the riots—especially those legible through spectacle, official statements, or photographic evidence—gained visibility, while others remained ambiguous, marginal, or unspoken. Simply put, contemporaneous reportage of the riots was strikingly similar. Across all three newspapers, reporters relied on parallel vocabularies of disorder, comparable photographic motifs, and aligned moral framings that emphasized chaos but obscured racialized and gendered harms. To understand press coverage of May 1998, then, requires attending not only to what the newspapers printed, but also to the subtle, often invisible ways in which they navigated risk, institutional memory, and the expectations of their readers at a moment when the boundaries of permissible speech were shifting but far from settled.

Making Violence Legible: Sequence, Spectacle, and the Early Public Record

The May 1998 riots did not first enter Indonesian public consciousness through court cases or truth commissions. They arrived instead as headlines, photographs, and brief quotations on the front pages of newspapers. Before the violence could be remembered, it had to be narrated—shaped into a story that readers could follow and that the state could plausibly respond to. In this sense, the newspapers created not only a timeline of events but a structure of recognition in that they determined what kinds of violence would appear as "facts," which would remain peripheral or ambiguous, and which would not appear at all.

Across *Kompas*, *Republika*, and *Suara Karya*, contemporaneous reporting of the May 1998 riots followed a broadly similar narrative arc. Each paper began with the shootings at Trisakti University; before pivoting quickly to days of burning and looting framed as *kerusuhan* (riots, mass unrest), *amuk massa* (mob rampage), and *kekacauan* (chaos); and ending with accounts of elite manoeuvring leading to Suharto's resignation. This shared structure was reinforced by an equally consistent descriptive vocabulary. Headlines and lead sentences invoked *kerusuhan*, *amuk massa*, and *kekacauan*, terms that carried particular and specific cultural and political resonances. *Kerusuhan* suggested sudden, spontaneous disorder; *amuk massa* evoked the archetype of the uncontrollable crowd; *kekacauan* implied a total breakdown of order. The importance of these specific words lies in the fact that they did more than label the events; they organized their meaning and signaled to readers that the violence was irrational, eruptive, and detached from identifiable perpetrators or motives.

With that in mind, differences in reporting did exist, but were subtle in nature. To gain insights into the newspapers, we have to look more closely, analysing how they chose to name the violence, which actors to foreground, and which experiences to leave implicit or

invisible. It is these editorial questions of what to highlight, what to soften, and what to omit that shaped the earliest public memory of May 1998.

The Trisakti Tragedy: Constructing the Opening Frame

The narrative of the May 1998 riots begins almost uniformly across Indonesia's major newspapers, with the events of 12 May 1998 at Trisakti University. The killings of four students—Elang Mulia Lesmana, Heri Heriyanto, Hendriawan Sie, and Hafidin Royan—became the trigger point through which the national press explained and temporally anchored the violence that followed. What matters for this thesis is not only that the shootings formed the chronological starting point, but that the newspapers' descriptions of that event constructed the foundational interpretive frame for understanding the larger crisis.

Among the three newspapers, *Kompas* established the most direct causal chain between state action and student deaths. Its front-page headline, "*Insiden di Universitas Trisakti: Enam Mahasiswa Tewas*" (Incident at Trisakti University: Six Students Dead), opened with,

> *Enam mahasiswa Universitas Trisakti, Jakarta, tewas terkena peluru tajam yang ditembakkan aparat keamanan…*
>
> Six students of Trisakti University, Jakarta, were killed by live ammunition fired by security forces…[39]

In the tightly controlled media environment of the late New Order, this was a significant rhetorical gesture. It positioned state forces not as neutral managers of unrest but as active agents of lethal violence. To directly print that students were killed by bullets fired by security forces was to assert, without euphemism, that the state had shed civilian blood. This

[39] *Kompas*, 13 May 1998. The report was published contemporaneously, while information about the shootings was still developing. Although *Kompas* reported six student deaths, the now commonly accepted figure is four Trisakti students killed.

line momentarily ruptures the broader narrative tendency to cast state violence in oblique or passive terms. The fact that *Kompas* chose to begin its coverage with this explicit causal chain reveals the newspaper's self-positioning within the shifting political landscape of early Reformasi. Even before Suharto resigned, *Kompas* positioned the Trisakti shootings as a moral and political indictment of the regime. The Trisakti Tragedy thus emerges not just as a spark for later unrest, but as the moment when state violence becomes momentarily visible, even undeniable, in the mainstream public sphere.

Bearing that in mind, the clarity of this framing was far from universal. *Republika*'s coverage on the same day already signaled a retreat from *Kompas*'s directness. Its headline, "*Mahasiswa Trisakti Bentrok dengan Aparat, 6 Orang Tewas*" (Trisakti Students Clash with Security Forces, 6 People Dead) reframed the shootings as a *bentrok* (clash or altercation), implying reciprocity and mutual escalation. Its lead sentence read,

> *"Enam mahasiswa… meninggal setelah terjadi bentrokan antara aparat keamanan dan mahasiswa…"*
>
> Six students… died after a clash between security forces and students…[40]

Here, rather than explicitly stating that bullets fired from security forces caused the deaths, the causal chain is reversed in that the deaths followed the clash. The grammatical structure shifts from active to passive, from identifiable perpetrators to an ambiguous, indeterminate sequence of events, and in doing so, a layer of ambiguity is added. In presenting the Trisakti Tragedy this way, *Republika* began a pattern that would later characterize its broad coverage of the riots. Whereas Kompas briefly renders state violence plainly visible through naming the shooters and identifying the mechanism of harm, *Republika*'s shift into the language of *bentrok* (clash) anticipates the newspaper's later tendency to emphasize communal suffering, moral exhortation, and appeals to unity over sustained interrogation of perpetrators or

[40] *Republika*, 13 May, 1998.

structures of power. In this frame, violence becomes less a matter of deliberate action than a tragic eruption within the social fabric.

This trend toward ambiguity is pushed even further by *Suara Karya*, which described the same event through the words,

> *"Korban jiwa mulai berjatuhan ketika aparat berusaha membubarkan aksi mahasiswa."*
>
> Fatalities began to fall when security forces attempted to disperse the student action[41]

This phrasing transforms a moment of lethal state intervention into an almost naturalized consequence of crowd dispersal. In a way, the grammar used in *Suara Karya*'s reportage embodies and mirrors the ideological work of the New Order itself; it obscures agency, neutralizes blame, and situates state action inside a depoliticized discourse of order maintenance.

Taken together, the differences in contemporaneous reporting and the framing of the Trisakti shootings reveal the contested epistemological ground on which the public narrative of May 1998 was constructed. Here, the newspapers go beyond simply recording the details of an event; they negotiate what could be said, how directly violence could be named, and which actors were rendered visible as perpetrators. Even before Jakarta's streets were engulfed in flames and the vocabulary of *kerusuhan*, *amuk massa*, and *kekacauan* took hold, the Trisakti tragedy had already begun to delimit the boundaries of perception.

Kompas: Moral Witnessing and the Limits of Proof

If the Trisakti shootings formed the narrative doorway into the May 1998 riots, *Kompas* became the newspaper that most forcefully attempted to frame the unfolding

[41] *Suara Karya*, 13 May 1998.

violence through a language of moral witnessing and visual evidence. Across its front pages from 13–20 May, *Kompas* constructed a version of the crisis that foregrounded the spectacular destruction of Jakarta's urban landscape even as it struggled—and often failed—to articulate the racialized and gendered dimensions of the violence that many Indonesians experienced directly. In doing so, *Kompas* helped consolidate what Karen Strassler terms the "dream of transparency" or the belief that truth inheres in what can be seen, photographed, and verified by authoritative witnesses.[42]

As discussed earlier, *Kompas* took an unusually direct stance in its reporting on the Trisakti shootings. But as the locus of violence shifted from campus confrontation to citywide destruction on 14–15 May, the paper's tone shifted as well. Its reporting turned away from explicit accounts of state violence and toward images of public catastrophe, foregrounding the material devastation that blanketed the capital. On 14 May, one of the front page titles declared "*Jakarta dilanda kerusuhan massa*" (Jakarta struck by mass riots).[43] This headline directly placed the city itself as the primary subject, and the agent of violence was the abstract *massa*. In this way, violence became an eruption rather than an act, a force that swept across the city rather than one carried out by identifiable perpetrators.

This interpretive direction was sharpened the next day. On 15 May, *Kompas* ran the headline "*Perusuh Menjarah*" (Rioters Loot) above one of the most widely reproduced descriptions of the riots:

> *"Gelombang kerusuhan di Jakarta… diwarnai perusakan, pembakaran, dan penjarahan… Langit Jakarta diselimuti kabut hitam akibat pembakaran ratusan gedung, pasar, toko, mobil, dan motor."*

[42] Karen Strassler, "Gendered Visibilities and the Dream of Transparency: The Chinese-Indonesian Rape Debate in Post-Suharto Indonesia," *Gender & History* 16, no. 3 (2004): 689–725.
[43] *Kompas*, 14 May 1998.

> The wave of riots in Jakarta… was marked by destruction, burning, and looting… Jakarta's sky was blanketed in black smoke from the burning of hundreds of buildings, markets, shops, cars, and motorcycles.[44]

It is important to highlight here that the words *gelombang kerusuhan* (wave of riots) and *perusuh* (rioters) signify mass, irrational movement rather than agency. The photograph accompanying the headline showed burning *rukos* (shophouses) in Glodok, thick plumes of black smoke rising behind blurry figures. Importantly, faces were barely visible and not the focus and no perpetrators were named. The spectacular destruction of property became the dominant visual and narrative anchor.



Figure 1. Photograph reproduced from the 15 May 1998 edition of Kompas. Digital colorized version accessed through Kompas Online

From this point forward, the imagery that dominated *Kompas*'s front pages settled into a recognizable visual grammar. Fires swallowing rows of *rukos*, thick black smoke suspended over the districts of Glodok and Senen, overturned vehicles abandoned at intersections, and indistinct crowds moving through debris-filled streets became the primary way the paper rendered the crisis visible. These photographs worked to establish a vocabulary

[44] *Kompas*, 15 May 1998.

of images through which the riots were translated into a legible public event. A burning building, photographed at just the right angle, could stand in for danger, collapse, and generalized panic; it required no caption identifying individuals, no explanation of why this building in particular was targeted, and no engagement with the social life of the community that once inhabited it.

Subsequently, it is this reliance on spectacle that produced a paradoxical form of clarity. On the one hand, *Kompas* excelled at documenting the macro-level trauma of Jakarta's burning cityscape. As seen in the description of the riots on May 15th, *Kompas* invites the reader into a scene of devastation whose very vastness becomes a kind of truth. The sheer quantity of destruction—hundreds of buildings, hundreds of vehicles—renders the riots legible as a catastrophic rupture in urban life. But it is exactly this expansiveness that obscures more intimate forms of suffering. A blackened skyline is a powerful image, but it does not show *who* was trapped inside those burning structures, *whose* livelihoods were destroyed, or *which* communities were targeted.

This tension becomes especially apparent in *Kompas*'s coverage on 16 May, when the paper published one of its most arresting, and in some ways most ethically fraught, images. The photograph shows several people—mostly men—standing in a dimly lit room, their faces partially covered with handkerchiefs or cloth as they look upon a pile of burned bodies inside body bags.[45] The image breaks, momentarily, from the visual grammar of distant flames and anonymous crowds. Here, the violence is much more focused; it is no longer a large panoramic but corporeal in nature. It is not only Jakarta that burns, but real humans with lived experience. Still, *Kompas* frames this photograph with notable restraint. The accompanying story does not identify the victims, specify the circumstances of their deaths, or reflect on the patterns of arson that disproportionately affected Chinese-Indonesian families trapped in

[45] Refer to fig. 2

burning *rukos*.[46] The image itself and the horror of the situation is also mediated through a lens of caution The faces of the viewers are obscured, with no one making eye contact with the camera, the bodies are contained within black bags, and the scene itself within a confined interior space. Even in its most visceral moment, *Kompas* stops short of making violence fully personal or politically charged. The photograph gestures toward the human cost of the riots, but the narrative surrounding it does not articulate the structural or racialized nature of that loss.



HARIAN UNTUK UMUM

KOMPAS

AMANAT HATINURANI RAKYAT

HARIAN PAGI TERBIT 16 HALAMAN

Presiden Bantah Katakan "Siap Mundur"

Jakarta, Kompas

Presiden Soeharto menegaskan, pihaknya tidak pernah menyatakan siap mundur. Presiden menyatakan, tidak apa-apa bila masyarakat sudah tidak lagi memberi kepercayaan, karena dirinya akan *madeg* (menjadi) *pandito*, yakni mendekatkan diri kepada Tuhan, membimbing anak-anak supaya menjadi baik, serta kepada masyarakat bisa memberi nasihat dan *tut wuri handayani* (membimbing dari belakang). Karena itu, Presiden tak akan mempertahankan kepercayaan rakyat itu dengan kekuatan senjata.

Penegasan Presiden itu disampaikan Menpen Alwi Dahlan kepada wartawan di kediaman Jalan Cendana, Jakarta, Jumat (15/5). Presiden yang mendarat di Bandara Halim Perdanakusuma pukul 04.41 WIB, mengadakan pertemuan dengan Wakil Presiden BJ Habibie, Menseneg Saadillah Mursjid, Mendagri Hartono, Menhankam/Pangab Wiranto, Menko Polkam Feisal Tanjung, Menkeh Muladi, Menpen Alwi Dahlan, Kepala Bakin Moetojib, dan Jaksa Agung Soedjono C Atmonegoro.

Pada kesempatan itu, Presiden memperjelas pemberitaan tentang keinginan Presiden untuk mundur, sekaligus meminta laporan perkembangan terakhir di dalam negeri.

Tidak jadi masalah

"Beliau menyatakan, kalau saya boleh kutip, sebetulnya kalau masyarakat tidak lagi memberi kepercayaan, sebetulnya tidak apa-apa. Kalau tidak dipercaya, ya sudah. Saya tidak akan mempertahankan dengan kekuatan senjata," lanjutnya.

"Saya akan *madeg pandito*, akan mendekatkan diri dengan Tuhan. Membimbing anak-anak supaya menjadi orang yang baik, dan juga kepada masyarakat bisa memberi nasihat, bagi negara *tut wuri handayani*," kata Alwi mengutip Presiden. Karena itu, kata Menpen, tidak menjadi masalah bila Presiden tidak mendapatkan kepercayaan kembali dari rakyat.

Dikatakan, hal itu tidak akan menjadi penghalang, apalagi sampai mematikan kelangsungan hidup negara dan bangsa. "Jadi, kalau kita baca hati-hati ucapan ini, maka jelas bagi beliau yang penting adalah kelangsungan hidup negara dan bangsa ini, yang tentunya sangat berkait dengan kelangsungan UUD. Jadi, berarti, apa pun yang dilakukan, harus secara konstitusional. Jadi, jelas bahwa beliau tidak mengatakan, saya siap mundur seperti yang telah banyak diinterpretasikan oleh banyak pihak," kata Alwi.

Dukung reformasi

Presiden juga mendukung dan menyambut baik langkah-langkah reformasi di bidang politik dan ekonomi, yang telah digulirkan DPR. "Bapak Presiden juga mengatakan, beliau selalu terbuka terhadap saran-saran tentang reformasi politik, dan bergembira melihat perkembangan tanggapan terhadap imbauan beliau terhadap saran-saran itu," ujar Alwi.

(Bersambung ke hlm 7 kol 1–4)

Letih, Lesu? Mungkin Anda menderita Anemia.
Sangobion
Vitamin dan zat penambah darah dengan zat besi
MERCK

Figure 2. Kompas Newspaper Front Page on 16th May 1998, shows accompanying picture of survivors looking at burnt bodies.

This illustrates the structural limits of *Kompas*'s moral witnessing. The paper sought to show violence, but it was constrained by journalistic norms that prioritized what was

[46] See also analyses of Chinese-Indonesian victims in Glodok and surrounding districts: Asvi Warman Adam, *Crisis and Transition, Catastrophe and Progress: Indonesia 1997–2000* (Geneva: Writenet/UNHCR, 1998).

photographically or officially verifiable. Fires, thick smoke, unruly crowds, and toppled vehicles could be captured with a lens and thus entered the public record with relative ease. These forms of spectacle fit comfortably within the newspaper's long-standing epistemology of *bukti* (proof) or the conviction that what could be seen, recorded, and verified constituted the boundaries of truth. By contrast, the deaths of civilians in burning *rukos*—often Chinese-Indonesian families trapped on upper floors—proved far more difficult to narrate. These were not scenes easily photographed without violating the dignity of the dead or the privacy of survivors, and they carried implicit claims about racialized targeting that the newspaper was either unwilling or institutionally unprepared to articulate.

Even more profoundly, the forms of violence that left no acceptable photographic trace—rape, coerced stripping, sexual humiliation, and intimate terror—fell outside the representational capacity of *Kompas*. Such acts were socially taboo, legally sensitive, and difficult to corroborate without testimony, which the Indonesian press had historically treated with suspicion unless validated by state authorities. In the absence of visual evidence or official confirmation, these experiences remained in the category of *isu* (rumour), implicitly rendered less credible in the public sphere. This was not only a failure of courage or empathy; it reflected a deeper legacy of New Order media culture, which for decades had subordinated private testimony and treated the voices of women, ethnic minorities, and the urban poor as epistemically fragile.

By 18 May, this tension between visibility and silence gave way to an altogether different register as *Kompas* shifted to a more technocratic form of reporting. *Kompas* declared that the riots had caused "*kerugian fisik Rp 2,5 trilyun*" (physical losses of Rp 2.5 trillion), translating human suffering into economic loss.[47] The shift from spectacle to quantification performed its own form of abstraction. The crisis was reframed as a ledger of

[47] *Kompas*, 18 May 1998.

destroyed assets, a problem for state planning and reconstruction. Victims disappeared behind numerics, their experiences converted into totals of burned buildings, lost vehicles, and damaged infrastructure. In this register, violence no longer appeared as something inflicted upon bodies and communities but as something that could be budgeted and eventually absorbed into national development planning.

This technocratic turn prepared the ground for the rapid reassertion of state authority. On 17 May, just a day prior, *Kompas* had already printed General Wiranto's assurance that "*Situasi Jakarta sudah normal*" (The situation in Jakarta is already normal).[48] Positioned in the paper above images of soldiers directing traffic amid debris, the statement signalled narrative closure. The riots had been contained and order had been restored. The presence of the armed forces functioned not only as an image of stability but also as a symbolic reoccupation of interpretive authority. What the public should know and how they should understand what they had witnessed, would once again be mediated through official voices.

Taken together, *Kompas*'s coverage reveals a deep structural paradox. It produced some of the most searing images of the riots and offered readers the clearest temporal sequence of the crisis. It demonstrated genuine moral seriousness in documenting the city's devastation, and in rare moments—such as the 16 May photograph of survivors confronting burned bodies—it approached the threshold of intimate witnessing. However, its epistemological commitment to "seeing as knowing," combined with enduring constraints born of the New Order's long shadow, meant that the riots' most consequential forms of harm remained largely unarticulated. The spectacular was visible, but the structural was obscured; catastrophe could be photographed, but violence rooted in race and gender—precisely the violence that many survivors would later identify as the core of the trauma—could not easily enter print.

[48] *Kompas*, 17 May 1998.

In foregrounding the spectacular while withholding the intimate, *Kompas* helped construct a version of May 1998 that continues to shape Indonesia's collective memory. Theirs was a story of chaos, fire, and looting, but one in which the racialised and gendered violence experienced by Chinese-Indonesian families remains obscured. Consequently, the newspaper's coverage is thus both indispensable and incomplete. In essence, an archive of what could be shown, and a silence surrounding what could not.

Republika: Moral Order, Piety, and the Politics of Interpretation

Republika's coverage shared many of *Kompas*'s visual emphases but translated them into an Islamic moral register, one that was grounded in moral order, communal responsibility, and an Islamic-inflected public ethic. While it was narratively similar to *Kompas*, the interpretive work it performed inside that narrative structure was certainly distinct. *Republika* positioned its readers not primarily as observers of a political crisis, but as members of a moral community confronted with an unfolding test of unity, patience, and faith.

This interpretive frame was already taking shape before the riots in Jakarta started. On 7 May 1998, covering unrest in Medan, *Republika* informed its readers that "*Kerusuhan meluas ke pinggiran Kota Medan*" (Riots spread to the outskirts of Medan), presenting disorder as a spreading phenomenon.[49] Three days later, on 10 May, the paper prominently featured the National Police spokesman's denial that the unrest was engineered:

> *"Kerusuhan di Medan dan daerah lain [bukan] rekayasa untuk membuat shock therapy agar peristiwa tersebut tak terjadi di Jakarta." (The riots in Medan and other regions were not engineered as 'shock therapy' to prevent similar events in Jakarta.)*[50]

[49] *Republika*, 7 May 1998.
[50] *Republika*, 10 May 1998.

Already here, violence is framed through two paired moves. Firstly, the use of *kerusuhan* again takes away from the actual victims and perpetrators, turning violence into an abstract social phenomenon rather than a series of targeted actions with identifiable actors. Secondly, by placing official denials of orchestration at the center of the article, *Republika* positioned the state as the authoritative interpreter of the crisis. Violence is allowed to appear, but only through frames that render it spontaneous, unplanned, and morally neutral. Ordinary people may have witnessed arsonists, mobs, or targeted assaults, but the meaning of these events is drawn back in *Republika*'s reporting.

As the unrest spread across Jakarta on 14–15 May, *Republika* adopted the same descriptive lexicon seen across the national press: *kerusuhan*, *amuk massa*, *kekacauan* Its 14 May front page headline read "*Jakarta Terbakar: Mari Kita Berdoa*" (Jakarta in Flames: Let Us Pray) and paired a large photograph of burning cars with an editorial appeal for unity.[51] The lead article called on citizens to remain calm and *"bersabar menghadapi cobaan"* (be patient in facing this trial). Like *Kompas*, *Republika* listed deaths and property losses, but it framed them as evidence of "*ujian iman dan persatuan bangsa*" (a test of faith and national unity).[52] The affective focus was on repentance and moral renewal, not accountability. In eyewitness reports from Glodok, the newspaper described looting and panic, but again, there was an avoidance of explicitly naming Chinese-Indonesian victims, instead referring to them as "*pedagang*" (trader/merchant), "*warga*" (residents), or "*pengusaha kecil*" (small business owners).[53] This universalization of suffering erased the ethnic dimension of the violence, subsequently narrating a collective national ordeal rather than a series of ethnically targeted attacks. In doing so, *Republika* repositioned the meaning of violence within a moral and spiritual framework that chose social harmony over structural critique.

[51] *Republika*, 14 May 1998.
[52] *Republika*, 16 May 1998.
[53] Ibid.


REPUBLIKA

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Figure 3. Front-page photograph from Republika, 24 May 1998, showing stalled buses surrounded by dense crowds as Jakarta's transportation corridors became sites of mass gathering in the aftermath of the riots

Republika's most consequential intervention, however, came several months later, during the so-called "rape photograph controversy." As reports of mass rape circulated through Jakarta, as NGOs gathered testimony, and as pressure mounted for a government inquiry, the newspaper became a key arena in which the truth status of these allegations was shaped. On 20 July 1998, *Republika* reported that "*setidaknya ada 168 perkosaan*" (there were at least 168 rapes) connected to the riots.[54] The next day on 21 July, it urged the legislature to press for a formal fact-finding team stating, "*DPR harus desak pemerintah bentuk TPF kerusuhan Mei*" (The House of Representatives (DPR) must urge the government to form a fact-finding team (TPF) for the May riots).[55] These articles seemed to open a space

[54] *Republika*, 20 July 1998.
[55] *Republika*, 21 July 1998.

for acknowledging sexual violence, or at least for allowing the claims to be investigated officially.

But within days, *Republika*'s tone completely shifted. On 22 July, the paper warned that rape allegations were being used "*untuk sudutkan Islam*" (to corner Islam), suggesting that political actors were manipulating the narrative to vilify Muslims.[56] On 23 July, the headline "*Perkosaan massal jangan terulang*" (Let mass rape never be repeated) simultaneously condemned rape in principle while framing the debate as a political threat rather than a humanitarian crisis.[57] And on 2 August*, Republika* published the now-infamous Sunday feature asking "*Benarkah terjadi perkosaan massal?*" (Did mass rapes actually happen?).[58] Here, the headline alone reframed the discussion. Instead of asking what survivors experienced, the question became whether the events had occurred at all.

In these articles, the object of concern subtly shifted. Rather than centering the violated bodies of women, the newspaper centered the moral integrity of the nation and the *ummah* (Muslim identity/community/nation). The fear animating the coverage was not only that horrific acts had occurred, but that Indonesia and subsequently, Islam, might be defamed by rumors or fabricated evidence. With that in mind, it would, however, be inaccurate to portray *Republika* as a monolith of denial. Its pages also carried demands for investigation and expressions of solidarity. The paper oscillated between recognizing the gravity of the allegations and questioning their credibility. But this oscillation itself is revealing. In essence, it reflects a deeper tension embedded in *Republika*'s moral thought and understanding; namely, for *Republika,* it is imperative to uphold communal honor, protect Islam from public blame, and respond ethically to violence committed against vulnerable citizens.

[56] *Republika*, 22 July 1998,.
[57] *Republika*, 23 July 1998.
[58] *Republika*, 2 August 1998.

Tying this back to the larger issue at hand, what matters is not merely what *Republika* did or did not believe, but the interpretive structure it imposed on the riots. The newspaper's framing transformed violence into a moral drama. The riots themselves were a test of faith, meaning that rumors arising from the riots were not just rumors but also threats to unity and truth, while rape allegations were a matter of national dignity. Importantly, however, this framework fails to fully confront or deny outright that racialized and gendered violence occurred. Consequently, it becomes clear that *Kompas* demonstrated the limits of an evidentiary regime built around visibility, while *Republika* revealed the constraints of a moralized public sphere in which recognition of harm competes with anxieties about honor and cohesion. In both cases, the boundaries of what could be publicly spoken certainly shaped the boundaries of what could be publicly known.

Suara Karya: Bureaucratic Control and the Manufacture of Silence

If *Kompas* moralized and *Republika* spiritualized, *Suara Karya* bureaucratized. As Golkar's official newspaper, it consistently echoed the regime's claim that order was being restored. *Suara Karya* functioned less as an independent observer than as a relay station for official interpretations of the May 1998 violence. This institutional position that *Suara Karya* held shaped its coverage of the riots in ways quite different than the other commercially oriented papers. Instead of acting as an outlet for moral witnessing or public solidarity, *Suara Karya* functioned as a medium through which the state's framing of the crisis, its containment, and its narrative of order could be broadcast.

On 15 May, it declared, "*Pemerintah Kendalikan Situasi, Kerusuhan Terlokalisasi*" (Government Controls Situation, Riots Localized), asserting that "*aparat keamanan bekerja cepat dan tegas*" (security forces acted swiftly and decisively).[59] Follow-up pieces praised military discipline, urged calm, and accused "*pihak-pihak tertentu*" (certain parties) of

[59] *Suara Karya*, 15 May 1998.

spreading dangerous rumors.[60] In other words, what for many residents of Jakarta—especially Chinese-Indonesian families in Glodok, Klender, and other commercial districts—registered as intimate loss and mortal fear was reframed in *Suara Karya* as a problem of public order.

In the days that followed, *Suara Karya* articles maintained this framing. On 16 May, the paper repeated reassurances that "*situasi pada prinsipnya dapat dikendalikan*" (the situation is essentially controllable) and warned citizens to remain vigilant against "*isu-isu yang tidak bertanggung jawab*" (irresponsible rumours), once again shifting attention away from victims' experiences and toward the alleged dangers of public speculation.[61] This language is not incidental. In continuing with this framing, the language functions as a deliberate rhetorical strategy that stabilizes authority and narrows the boundaries of acceptable public discourse.

Rather than documenting the human cost and looking deeper into survivor testimonies or eyewitness accounts, the paper foregrounded the language of state capacity and bureaucratic reassurance. Damage to the city appeared in abstract administrative categories, buildings listed as *rusak berat* (severely damaged), markets *terpaksa ditutup demi keamanan* (forced to close for safety), vehicles *dibakar massa tak dikenal* (burned by unidentified crowds). Individuals became *warga* (residents), *masyarakat* (the public), or *pedagang* (merchants/traders), rarely specified beyond these generic labels.[62] The importance here lies in that this vocabulary stripped violence of its targeted character. It was not Chinese-Indonesian shopkeepers whose premises were systematically attacked, but anonymous "shop owners"; not women of Chinese descent whose bodies were threatened or violated, but an undefined "public" endangered by "rioters." Again, the riot appears as a formless eruption of *kerusuhan*, not as an event with discernible victims and perpetrators.

[60] Ibid.
[61] *Suara Karya*, 16 May 1998.
[62] *Suara Karya*, 18 May 1998.

Perhaps most strikingly, *Suara Karya*'s contemporaneous reporting gave space to official dismissals of emerging accounts of sexual violence. Reports of rape circulated through Jakarta as early as 14–15 May, but *Suara Karya* amplified military and police statements labelling these claims "*tidak berdasar*" (without foundation) or "*berlebihan*" (exaggerated).[63] In a way, this stance reinforced a stark epistemological hierarchy in that only the state could authenticate truth, while testimonies from survivors, neighbors, or activists remained suspect by virtue of lacking official confirmation. The effect was to delegitimize the most intimate and gendered forms of violence, rendering them invisible within the newspaper's public narrative.

The paper's orientation remained consistent even as the political situation shifted dramatically. As pressure mounted on President Suharto to resign, *Suara Karya* reproduced the government's own language consistently emphasizing stability. This was particularly visible in its coverage of the 18 May statements, in which DPR/MPR Speaker Harmoko appealed for the president to "*secara arif dan bijaksana sebaiknya mengundurkan diri*" (for reasons of wisdom and prudence should step down) and simultaneously called on citizens to remain calm.[64] When Suharto ultimately resigned on 21 May, *Suara Karya* reinforced this narrative by prominently disseminating his speech, which cast his departure as necessary "*demi persatuan dan kesatuan bangsa*" (for the unity and cohesion of the nation).[65] Through this framing, the resignation was transformed from a moment of rupture into a moment of orderly transition, governed by the same vocabulary of bureaucratic stability that had shaped the paper's coverage of the riots.

In essence, *Suara Karya* helped shape a version of May 1998 in which the state appeared steady, responsive, and ultimately triumphant in restoring order—even as the voices

[63] *Suara Karya*, 18 May 1998.
[64] Ibid.
[65] *Suara Karya*, 21 May 1998.

of those most harmed remained unacknowledged on its pages. Its bureaucratic vocabulary, its reliance on official statements, and its refusal to engage with the intimate dimensions of violence reveal the logic of a press institution still functioning inside the ideological architecture of the New Order. In this sense, *Suara Karya* did not just report on the May 1998 violence; it actively curated a state-aligned narrative of what the crisis meant.

Convergent Silences: The Shared Limits of Press Representation

When read together, *Kompas*, *Republika*, and *Suara Karya* do not merely reveal three distinct frameworks for interpreting the May 1998 riots; they expose the contours of a shared silence. While each paper used different rhetorical strategies such as *Kompas*'s moral witnessing, *Republika*'s religious grounding, and *Suara Karya*'s bureaucratic reassurance, the violence that readers encountered remained incomplete. The basic chronology was agreed upon, and the language of *kerusuhan*, *amuk massa*, and *kekacauan* saturated the newsstands, but across the national press, racial targeting, gendered violence, and the systematic vulnerability of Chinese-Indonesian communities fell outside the boundaries of what could be publicly articulated.

This silence is all the more striking because, as historians have shown, many Indonesians understood almost immediately that the riots were not simply episodes of urban chaos but events marked by the targeted vulnerability of Chinese-Indonesian communities, particularly women. Secondary scholarship demonstrates that this understanding circulated broadly at the level of neighborhoods, families, and street-level rumors long before it appeared in official investigations or later testimonies. Jemma Purdey notes that "from the earliest hours of the riots, the ethnic Chinese were widely perceived as the primary targets," and that this perception shaped how families fled, sought shelter, or barricaded their homes.[66] This basic fact, however, never entered the newspapers' reporting. Bringing back Strassler's

[66] Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 145–180.*

idea of "the dream of transparency" aids in explaining why this might be the case. The newspapers' reliance on visible, photographable destruction created a representational framework in which only certain forms of harm could appear as "evidence." Violence that left no acceptable photographic trace, especially sexual assault or the targeted attacks on Chinese-Indonesian-owned spaces, fell outside of what could be shown and subsequently outside of what could be said. This visual epistemology shaped not only what the newspapers chose to publish but what they could imagine as news. As Strassler argues, the belief that photographs guaranteed truth pushed journalists to prioritize material spectacle over intimate or structurally patterned forms of violence.[67] In practice, this meant that the racial and gendered logic of the riots, which was perceptible to those present in real time, became increasingly illegible in print. What circulated publicly were images of disorder rather than narratives of persecution.

Other historians trace the silence differently. Annie Pohlman argues that sexual violence during the riots existed as a "public secret" in that it was widely known, acknowledged in private, but absent from public discourse because survivors feared stigma and journalists knew the boundaries of permissible speech.[68] Susan Blackburn similarly observes that, as in earlier episodes of anti-Chinese violence, "rumor raced ahead of the press," creating an immediate, if often fearful, understanding of what was unfolding, even as newspapers maintained the fiction of generalized unrest.[69]

In the tension between what was known but left unsaid, the architecture of the silence surrounding the riots becomes visible. What the newspapers could not say, ordinary Indonesians sought to articulate through other means. The violence of the riots was not

[67] Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 240–260.
[68] Annie Pohlman, "Women, Sexual Violence and the 1965–66 Indonesian Killings," *Journal of Genocide Research* 14, no. 6 (2012): 441–463; see also Pohlman and Louis, "The 1998 Rapes of Ethnic Chinese Women in Indonesia," *Indonesia 113* (2022).
[69] Susan Blackburn, *Jakarta: A History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 238–240.

merely chaotic but patterned; not merely public but also intimate; not merely destructive but deeply racialized and gendered. Subsequently, the absence of racialized and gendered violence from the newspapers was not a simple oversight. This absence was a structural silence rooted in the media's inherited habits, its evidentiary regimes, and the moral and political boundaries that governed what could and could not be printed.

Thus, the early public record of May 1998 was shaped not only by what was written, but by what was structurally unable to be said. The riots were spectacular, but their deeper logics were not. The city burned in the headlines, but the stories whispered revealed a different map of harm—one that newspapers, for institutional, moral, and political reasons, were not yet prepared to print. It is within this gap that the most consequential silences of the period reside. Bearing this in mind, a fundamental question arises: namely, why did contemporaneous news coverage privilege certain harms over others? Why did narratives of Chinese-Indonesian sexual violence only arise later, filtered through NGO reports, survivor testimonies, and transnational advocacy rather than domestic journalism?

To answer these questions, we have to read between the lines. First, attacks on Chinese-Indonesian communities carried the double burden of ethnic targeting and the politics of national unity.[70] Anti-Chinese violence during the riots was often narrated in language that emphasized looting and property damage rather than racially motivated assault. More specifically, when we look directly at articles published by *Kompas* and *Republika*, when ethnicity appeared as a frame, it often did so as a subordinate theme rather than the primary organizing explanation.[71] In part, this reflected a broader post-New Order imperative to preserve the rhetorical cohesion of the nation. As the nation was transitioning out of an authoritarian regime, it was much easier to reaffirm narratives of collective suffering than to

[70] Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia*, 145–180.
[71] *Kompas*, 18 May 1998.; *Republika*, 20 July 1998.

confront the fractures of ethnic violence that challenged Indonesia's self-image as a unified nation. To name Chinese-Indonesians explicitly as victims would have risked exposing the persistence of racial hierarchies and the state's complicity in sustaining them.

Second, sexual violence is structurally difficult to document in the short term. Immediate forensic evidence may be limited, survivors often refrain from public disclosure for reasons of stigma and fear, and the journalistic standards for verifying such claims can be high. In Indonesia in 1998, these evidentiary hurdles were compounded by political incentives to downplay or deny gendered harms. Official statements, whether cautious or explicitly dismissive, circulated widely, and many newspapers, concerned with legal risk or with political stability, deferred to official accounts or simply kept quiet.[72] The result, as Karen Strassler and other scholars have shown, was that allegations of mass rape became subject to intense scrutiny and delegitimization; the very testimonial forms by which survivors sought recognition were recast as rumor or incompletely documented claims.[73]

Conclusion: The Evidentiary Partition

Taken together, the patterns analyzed regarding contemporaneous reporting of the May 1998 riots generate the concept I use throughout this thesis, an evidentiary partition. More specifically, the patterned division between harms that could quickly be made public, corroborated by a shared narrative between newspapers, photographic evidence, and official statements, contrasted with those that remained epistemically inaccessible, produced a clear hierarchy of recognition. Harms rendered visible through spectacle and state confirmation were granted immediate legitimacy, while those lacking such markers were deliberately disenfranchised or entirely excluded from mainstream reporting. This partition is not a neutral descriptive; it is a historical product. It emerges from the intersection of editorial

[72] Sen & Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia,* 60–68.
[73] Strassler, *"Gendered Visibilities and the Dream of Transparency: The Chinese-Indonesian Rape Debate,"*689–725.

routines (who is quoted; what evidence is accepted), institutional interests (the political costs of acknowledging certain harms), and social stigma (the silencing of survivors).[74]

The newspapers of May 1998 did an important public work in that they made a chaotic and traumatic set of events visible to a broad national audience, and in so doing, they helped to forge a collective sense of political crisis that contributed to the fall of Suharto. But the terms of that visibility were neither neutral nor complete. Editorial choices, evidentiary standards, political incentives, and social stigma cohered into an evidentiary partition that privileged visible, countable harms and relegated gendered and ethnicized violence to alternative archives or private memory. Recognizing this is not to indict journalists individually but to insist that historians pay attention to how routine practices and institutional contexts shape the archival record we inherit.

Subsequently, two analytic implications follow. First, the evidentiary partition shaped the contemporaneous public record in ways that had durable consequences. If courts, commissions, and later historians treat the public record as their principal evidence base, then the initial press-heavy emphasis on visible harm will bias later legal and historiographical outcomes. Second, the partition is itself a dynamic object of study; it can be strengthened, weakened, or reconfigured by later media practices, NGO persistence, and political change. Subsequently, to explore this idea in more detail, the next chapter of this thesis asks precisely how that dynamic has played out from 1998 to the present, tracing moments when alternative archives (official documents, NGO files, and oral histories,) have expanded the public register and moments when official and media practices have reasserted limits to recognition.

[74] The phrase "evidentiary partition" is my analytic coinage informed by Trouillot and Fricker; see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), and Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Chapter 2: After the Flames: Commissions, Civil Society, and the History of Making Violence Evident

When the fires and looting began to die down in late May 1998, the violence that had occurred did not simply fade into the past. What emerged after the violence was a new and uncertain phase, defined less by spectacle and more by dispute. What had happened and to whom were no longer questions that headlines or photographs attempted to answer. Instead, a slower and more fragile process of resolving these questions began to take shape. Testimony accumulated through disparate channels, and these fragments of lived experience did not cohere into a single narrative. Rather, they exposed the limits of the existing public record and raised a more fundamental problem: how could the violence that occurred be made evidentially legible once the moment of visibility had passed?

The problem here is not solely one of missing information. Many Indonesians already *knew* that the riots had involved targeted attacks on Chinese-Indonesian communities and that widespread sexual violence against women had occurred. Instead, what was more at stake was the translation of that knowledge into forms that could be more publicly recognised and, subsequently, both institutionally defended and politically acted upon. This chapter examines this tension directly by analysing the reports produced by investigative commissions and non-governmental organizations in the months and years following Suharto's resignation. Here, the goal is not to treat these materials as neutral repositories of facts but as sites of historical production. More specifically, this chapter treats post-riot documentation as a process, as a space of struggle rather than resolution. In doing so, we are asking not only what these records reveal about the riots, but how their very form shaped the kinds of truths they were able to assert.

The establishment of formal investigations after May 1998 reflected both political rupture and continuity. On the one hand, the creation of ad hoc fact-finding bodies signaled a break from the New Order's reflexive suppression of inquiry. On the other, these bodies operated within institutional landscapes still marked by military influence and legal ambiguity. As Edward Aspinall has observed, early Reformasi was characterized less by a clean transition than by a prolonged negotiation between reformist demands and entrenched power.[75] It is within this ambiguity that both political and epistemic outcomes were shaped. Here, another central tension emerges in that investigations were authorized to uncover "facts," yet they were still constrained in how far those facts could implicate powerful actors.

The most prominent of these efforts, the Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta (TGPF), occupied an especially uneasy position. Mandated to investigate the riots while maintaining political balance, the TGPF attempted to assemble a comprehensive account from fragmentary and uneven sources. Its final report combined narrative reconstruction with annexes of testimony, lists of incidents, and cautious assessments of responsibility.[76] The resulting document is often cited for its findings—particularly its acknowledgment of sexual violence and indications of organized involvement—but perhaps its deeper significance lies in how it staged credibility.[77] Within the document, testimony was not just presented but also graded, and responsibility was articulated through implication rather than accusation. In this way, a close reading of the report reveals that it did not simply *uncover* facts, but that it also negotiated their admissibility.

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[75] Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
[76] Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta, *Laporan Akhir Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan 13–15 Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 1998), 1–3.
[77] Ibid; Human Rights Watch, Indonesia: The May 1998 Riots and Their Aftermath (New York, 1998); United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (New York, 1999); Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan, Tragedi Mei 1998 dalam Perjalanan Bangsa. Disangkal! (Jakarta, 2010).

Alongside and sometimes in tension with state-linked inquiries, NGOs developed their own infrastructures of documentation. Women's organizations, human rights groups, and volunteer networks collected accounts of the riots that rarely appeared in official reports. While these materials were ethically powerful, they were at the same time institutionally fragile. As scholars of human rights documentation have long noted, testimony gains force not only from its content but from the frameworks that render it legible to authority.[78] It is because of this that NGOs faced the challenge of both protecting survivors from further harm while translating their experiences into forms that could survive skepticism.

Taken together, the records produced by commissions and NGOs did not resolve the fundamental question of what happened in May 1998 so much as they restructured the terms on which that question could be asked. While the evidentiary field was expanded beyond spectacle and what the government officially stated, the archive that emerged was still heavily stratified. More specifically, while the violence could be acknowledged, the question of whether the violence could then be legally verified remained unanswered. In the same vein, while testimony could be recorded and responsibility suggested, it could not always be acted upon. Subsequently, the archive that emerged after the riots certainly added to the already disparate public archive, but it did not complete it or reveal a singular truth. The archive was still stratified, marked by differing degrees of authority, visibility, and political risk.

To understand how this stratification took shape, the chapter now turns to a closer examination of the TGPF report itself. Instead of relying solely on its conclusions, the following section analyzes its structure, evidentiary logic, and modes of verification in order

[78] Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 83–110.

to show how credibility was both constructed and limited within this period of fragile political transition.

The TGPF and the Puzzle of Post-Riot Inquiry

The TGPF was the first sustained attempt to convert the May violence into an authoritative public account. Established by President B. J. Habibie, who assumed the presidency after Suharto's resignation, the TGPF assembled seventeen members drawn from government institutions, *Komnas HAM* (National Human Rights Commission), non-governmental organizations, and other civil-society groups. This hybrid composition reflected both the promise of Reformasi and the unresolved hierarchies that continued to structure political authority.[79] More specifically, its hybrid composition reflected the values of early Reformasi, signalling openness and accountability after decades of authoritarian control. However, the team still remained embedded within institutional hierarchies that had not completely disappeared with Suharto's resignation. In this sense, the TGPF was thus neither a fully independent truth commission nor a routine state inquiry, but something more provisional and politically negotiated.

With that in mind, the team was tasked with an expansive mandate and a brief working period. Its mandate included finding and disclosing facts, perpetrators, and the background to the violence that had occurred in May. Despite this expansive mandate, from its inception on the 23rd of July 1998 to its final report, the team was only given three months. The timeline here is important to keep in mind as the TGPF entered a landscape where the violence had already receded from public view. By late July 1998, the riots no longer appeared as immediate spectacles of fire and destruction. Instead, to understand the riots, the team had to look through circulating rumors, fragmented testimonies, and contested

[79] Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta, *Laporan Akhir Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan 13–15 Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 1998), 1–3.

claims about who was responsible. While knowledge of what had occurred was widespread, it was certainly uneven.

Many Indonesians already believed that the riots had involved targeted attacks on Chinese-Indonesian communities, that sexual violence had taken place, and that the government was potentially involved. Still, belief alone did not translate into institutional recognition; more had to be done. By the time the TGPF began its investigation, the central challenge was no longer whether violence had occurred, but how it could be rendered evidentially credible after the moment of visibility had passed. What is important to note here is that the team did not operate within a vacuum. The investigation was conducted amid competing narratives, public skepticism, and the lingering uncertainty about the limits of permissible accusation. Consequently, the report it produced was shaped just as much by questions of method and credibility as by the substance of its findings. To then understand what the TGPF concluded, it is necessary to examine how its inquiry was defined.

The TGPF Report and the Grammar of Credibility

The final report produced by the TGPF is best approached not as a transparent window onto the events of May 1998, but as a carefully constructed document that sought to construct credibility under conditions of political uncertainty through procedure and calibrated uncertainty. In essence, the report formally acknowledges sexual violence, patterned attacks, and failures within the security apparatus, while at the same time preserving uncertainty around responsibility and legal proof. The idea that the document sought to construct credibility is made evident in the way the document presents its procedures, constraints, and modes of verification. From the outset, the report foregrounds method as a prerequisite for truth, repeatedly emphasizing *cara kerja tim* (the team's mode of working) before turning to substantive claims. Here, the sequencing is deliberate. It reflects

an awareness that in the volatile aftermath of the riots, where competing narratives and public skepticism existed greatly, the legitimacy of findings depended as much on how they were produced as on what they asserted.

In the section outlining its mandate and approach, the report states that the TGPF was formed to *"menemukan dan mengungkap fakta, pelaku dan latar belakang peristiwa kerusuhan tanggal 13–15 Mei 1998*" (to find and uncover the facts, perpetrators, and background of the May 13-15 riot events).[80] Looking at this phrasing more deeply, we see that it is both modest and telling. Facts are not presumed to be self-evident; they must be uncovered (*mengungkap*) and found (*menemukan*). This language positions the inquiry as an active, interpretive process rather than a passive act of collection. At the same time, the report repeatedly notes the constraints under which this search took place, referring to "*keterbatasan waktu, situasi, dan akses*" (limitations of time, circumstances, and access).[81] This places the document under an interesting tension in that the mandate to seek facts is paired with an awareness of the forces that obstruct their full articulation. The result is a document that asserts its legitimacy while simultaneously marking the boundaries of its own claims.

The emphasis on procedure continues in the report's internal organization. Before it presents its findings, the document devotes substantial space to describing the composition of the team, the sources it consulted, and the steps it took to verify information. Interviews, site visits, document review, and coordination with volunteer groups are listed in detail, creating what can be described as a cumulative impression of diligence.[82] Only after this procedural groundwork is laid does the report move into *temuan* (findings) and *analisa* (analysis). Here, the structure itself thus enacts a theory of credibility; facts become persuasive only once the

[80] Laporan Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta (TGPF), *Peristiwa Tanggal 13–15 Mei 1998*, section on mandate and objectives (*tujuan pembentukan tim*).
[81] Ibid., methodological overview (*pelaksanaan kegiatan*).
[82] Ibid.

reader has been shown the scaffolding that supports them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the report's handling of uncertainty. Rather than presenting all claims in the same register, the TGPF moves across different levels of uncertainty between *fakta* (facts), *indikasi* (indications), and *dugaan* (suspicions). For instance, in discussing the simultaneity of unrest across multiple districts, the report notes *"adanya kesamaan waktu, sasaran, dan pola tindakan*" (the presence of similarities in timing, targets, and patterns of action), while stopping short of asserting any form of centralized coordination.[83] This restraint is important to highlight, as while the phrasing allows the report to register structure without overstepping what it can conclusively demonstrate, it can also lessen the political weight of each claim. The effect is a layered account in which certainty is calibrated rather than assumed.

The same evidentiary restraint shapes the report's discussion of state involvement. When addressing the role of security forces, the TGPF does not issue direct accusations. Instead, it refers to "*indikasi keterlibatan unsur aparat*" (indications of involvement by elements of the apparatus) and, more pointedly, to "*terjadinya pembiaran*" (the occurrence of permissiveness) during the violence.[84] It is key to highlight the passive construction present here. Agency is suggested but not fully assigned, subsequently leading to accusations of responsibility that are not determinately fixed. While the language might initially seem innocuous, when we looking at this more carefully it becomes clear that this language reflects an attempt to keep the inquiry within politically survivable bounds while still recording what witnesses and patterns implied. Subsequently, what the report offers is a carefully displaced judgement in that the permissiveness or lack of action from the government casts doubt on state neutrality. At the same time, without naming specific chains of command or individuals, responsibility becomes diffused across an abstract apparatus rather than concentrated in identifiable actors.

[83] Ibid., sections addressing security forces and responsibility.
[84] Ibid.

In the same vein, sexual violence is treated through a similarly careful evidentiary grammar. The report explicitly acknowledges that "*kekerasan seksual, termasuk perkosaan, telah terjadi*" (sexual violence, including rape, did occur) during the riots.[85] However, after stating this, the report immediately situates this acknowledgment within a discussion of why such violence was difficult to document. Survivors are described as constrained by "*rasa takut, trauma, dan stigma sosial*" (fear, trauma, and social stigma), and the report notes the absence of formal complaints and medical documentation.[86] Still, rather than dismissing these accounts, the TGPF uses these explanations to justify its reliance on aggregated testimony and corroborated patterns. Individual cases remain elusive, but the phenomenon is affirmed as real.

Lastly, and equally important to analyze, is the partial organization of this material within the report. Much of the most sensitive documentation—particularly that originating from volunteer teams and NGOs—is placed in the *lampiran* (appendices).[87] This documentary choice expands the archive while insulating the core narrative from its most politically volatile claims. The appendices preserve testimony that exceeds the report's capacity to fully stabilize as fact, allowing the document to acknowledge harm without forcing definitive resolution. In archival terms, they function as a threshold space between recognition and action.

This leaves us at a crossroads. On one hand, the report succeeds in making violence legible by assembling patterns, testimonies, and procedural rigor into a coherent account that resists outright denial. On the other hand, its careful grammar of credibility, seen in its passive constructions and at times deliberate vague nature, delineates the limits of what can

[85] TGPF, *Temuan Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999), section on sexual violence.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Laporan TGPF, "Lampiran," including documentation from Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan.

actually be acted upon. Thus, the TGPF report occupies an ambivalent position in the post-riot landscape. It made denial increasingly untenable by formally acknowledging patterns of violence, including sexual violence and indications of organized involvement, yet it simultaneously stopped short of producing accusations that could be readily converted into judicial prosecutions or political reckoning. In this sense, the report did not resolve the crisis of truth that followed May 1998 so much as it stabilized it.

Bearing that in mind, the historical significance of the report lies less in the finality of its conclusions than in the terrain it helped to create. Instead of ending uncertainty about May 1998, the TGPF intervened in how uncertainty itself could be publicly managed. It shifted the aftermath of the riots away from outright denial and rumor toward documented acknowledgment. In a larger sense, what the report ultimately produced was a newly structured evidentiary field. This outcome had concrete implications for the politics of accountability that followed. Subsequent responses from the Attorney General's Office reveal how the TGPF's caution shaped its afterlife.[88] Because the report repeatedly emphasized evidentiary limits and stopped short of naming perpetrators, those same limits were later cited as grounds for declining prosecution.[89] The report's restraint made official acknowledgment of the violence possible, but it also furnished a rationale for legal inaction. In this sense, both the report and the early Reformasi period in general expanded the space for public recognition more readily than they produced mechanisms of accountability.

At the same time, the report's authority reshaped civil society practice. Women's organizations and human rights groups repeatedly invoked the TGPF not because it named perpetrators, but because it constituted an official acknowledgment that could anchor further claims. As Jemma Purdey has shown, the report's careful confirmation of sexual violence

[88] Attorney General's Office of the Republic of Indonesia, public statement on the TGPF findings, 2000.
[89] Harold Crouch, *Political Reform in Indonesia after Soeharto* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), 95–120.

altered the terms of debate by making disbelief less defensible, even as survivors remained exposed to renewed scrutiny and contestation.[90] As such, the TGPF did not displace NGO documentation but rather re-sorted its value. Testimony gained force when it could be aligned with the report's procedural standards, and lost traction when it exceeded them. Consequently, the archive that emerged was expanded, but more importantly, internally hierarchized.

Internationally, the report's implications were somewhat different. Its cautious findings circulated within transnational human rights discourse as evidence that serious violations had occurred, lending weight to external pressure on the Indonesian state while leaving domestic mechanisms largely unchanged.[91] It is in this context that the report's restraint functioned as a form of legitimacy. In other words, it was allowed to travel across institutional contexts precisely because it did not overclaim. This divergence between international reception and domestic consequence underscores the extent to which evidentiary credibility was unevenly convertible into action.

Taken together, these intersecting trajectories reinforce this chapter's central argument; namely, that post-riot documentation after May 1998 was not a neutral process of truth recovery, but a historically specific struggle over how violence could appear, be authorized, and be constrained. The TGPF report crystallized this struggle at the level of the state. It rendered violence visible again after the moment of spectacle had passed, but it did so through a grammar that disciplined the political effects of that visibility. In sum, its legacy lies not in what it definitively proved, but in how it reorganized the relationship between testimony, authority, and responsibility in early Reformasi Indonesia.

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[90] Jemma Purdey, "Problematizing the Place of Victims in Reformasi Indonesia: A Contested Truth about the May 1998 Violence," Asian Survey 42, no. 4 (2002): 605–22.
[91] Kathryn Robinson, "Gender, Islam, and Democracy in Indonesia," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43, no. 1 (2009).

At the same time, the limits revealed by the TGPF's evidentiary caution also point to why non-state forms of documentation became so central in the aftermath of the riots. Precisely because the official inquiry translated violence into a restrained and politically survivable register, it left significant experiential and moral claims unresolved. These gaps did not remain empty. They became sites of intensified activity for NGOs, women's organizations, and volunteer networks that sought to record what the state could only acknowledge partially or indirectly. Where the TGPF prioritized procedural credibility and institutional defensibility, NGO documentation operated according to a different set of imperatives. The following section, therefore, turns to NGO documentation as a parallel—and at times corrective—mode of making violence evident, examining how these actors navigated the tensions present in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Hotlines, Witness Protection, and the Making of a Civil-Society Archive

If the TGPF report shows how official credibility was *performed* through procedural restraint, NGO documentation demonstrates exactly what that restraint left unresolved and what kinds of work then filled in the gaps. In the weeks after May 1998, the struggle was not only to "find facts," but to create channels through which people could speak at all, without exposing themselves to retaliation or renewed stigma. It is because of this that some of the most consequential post-riot documentation arose from telephone hotlines, ad hoc counseling networks, and volunteer-led fact-gathering, all of which treated anonymity and protection as methodological necessities.

Human Rights Watch's September 1998 report captures this early moment vividly. Indonesian human rights groups were receiving reports of rape and other sexual violence through phone calls and informal channels, often without the kinds of "witnesses" or paperwork demanded in public debate. The problem was not simply that information was absent, but that public controversy over whether rapes "really happened" discouraged

reporting and made serious investigation less likely.[92] Throughout the riots and in the months after, any organisation aiming to document the violence did so in an atmosphere where the evidentiary demand itself was part of the political struggle. For survivors, being asked to "prove" rape in a hostile and skeptical public arena entailed real risks of stigma, retaliation, and renewed trauma. As a result, the insistence on visible, prosecutorial-style evidence was much less neutral than it may have first seemed. Testimony became costly and precarious, thereby narrowing the range of experiences that could enter the public record at all.

The materials produced by the *Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan* (TRuK)—a large local volunteer-based humanitarian network—make these dynamics clear. TRuK's *Dokumentasi Awal* (Initial Documentation) series prioritized the rapid preservation of testimony under conditions of fear and uncertainty, drawing on "*kesaksian para korban, kerabat korban dan saksi mata*" (testimonies of victims, victims' relatives, and eyewitnesses) while insisting on "*kerahasiaan identitas*" (confidentiality of identity) as a foundational principle.[93] This reflects a markedly different evidentiary orientation from that of state inquiries in that the primary goal was to preserve accounts of violence that risked disappearing altogether if subjected to public scrutiny or formal complaint procedures. Importantly, TRuK's reports are also explicit about their own limits in practical terms, noting that information from cities outside Jakarta lay "*di luar jangkauan kami*" (outside our reach).[94]

At this point, *Komnas Perempuan* (the National Commission on Violence Against Women), a separate body from TRuK, became the crucial intermediary through which volunteer testimony was stabilized into a more durable public record. In the preface to its *Seri*

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[92] Human Rights Watch, *Indonesia: The Damaging Debate on Rapes of Ethnic Chinese Women* (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 1998), 6–10.
[93] Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, "Dokumentasi Awal No. 2," in *Laporan Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan tentang Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999).
[94] Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, "Dokumentasi Awal No. 1," in *Laporan Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan tentang Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999).

Dokumen Kunci (Key Document Series), the commission frames its intervention as an effort to disseminate and secure what it calls *fakta-fakta penting* (important facts) about the May riots. Specifically, Komnas Perempuan argues that these materials must be *diketahui dan dinilai oleh masyarakat luas* (known and evaluated by the wider public), and which it presents as having been gathered "*dengan cara yang dapat dipertanggungjawabkan*" (through methods that can be accounted for).[95] What is especially revealing here is how Komnas Perempuan narrates civil-society documentation as both politically explosive and institutionally necessary. It notes that the TRuK report on sexual violence "*mengejutkan masyarakat Jakarta*" (shocked the Jakarta public) and "*mengundang reaksi keras*" (provoked strong reactions), while also linking this controversy to the state's decision to establish the TGPF amid persistent doubt about whether sexual violence had occurred at all.[96] Read closely, this is an argument about evidentiary politics. Komnas Perempuan positions itself as a vehicle for translating fragile, protective forms of NGO testimony into materials capable of withstanding public contestation, while insisting that the purpose of publication was not only historical record but "*tanggung jawab negara*" (state responsibility).[97] This role also reflects the commission's founding mandate. Keputusan Presiden No. 181 Tahun 1998 (Presidential Decree No. 181 of 1998) explicitly tasked Komnas Perempuan with "*pemantauan dan penelitian, termasuk pencarian fakta*" (monitoring and research, including fact-finding), as well as with disseminating the results of that work to the public.[98] It is in this sense that Komnas Perempuan thus institutionalized civil-society knowledge even as it exposed the structural limits of post-riot accountability.

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[95] Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan (Komnas Perempuan), "Kata Pengantar," in *Temuan Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998* (Seri Dokumen Kunci) (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999), i.
[96] Komnas Perempuan, "Kata Pengantar," i.
[97] Komnas Perempuan, "Kata Pengantar," i–ii.
[98] Republik Indonesia, Keputusan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 181 Tahun 1998 tentang Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan, 9 October 1998, Pasal 5(c)–(d).

Subsequently, what emerges here is a civil-society archive that is both expansive and structurally vulnerable. It is expansive because it captures forms of experience the state could only cautiously affirm—sexual violence, terror, displacement, the everyday mechanics of intimidation. At the same time, the archive is vulnerable as it rests on fragile infrastructures—hotlines, volunteer labor, informal referrals—and because its strongest material is often least compatible with later institutional demands for public proof. This is where the relationship between NGO documentation and the TGPF becomes historically important. The TGPF could and did incorporate NGO material. For example, Komnas Perempuan's "*Seri Dokumen Kunci*" (Key Document Series) explicitly situates TRuK's documentation as part of this post-riot evidentiary project. With that being said, the translation into an official register tended to re-sort that material according to hierarchies of verification.[99]

It is because of these dynamics that NGO documentation did not simply "supplement" the official archive; it also contested the terms on which legitimacy itself was assigned. The most basic contest concerned who could be a credible witness. Human Rights Watch notes multiple reasons rape victims might hesitate to file charges, including fear of extortion and distrust of police.[100] NGOs responded by treating indirect reporting, such as the use of hotlines, as meaningful evidence of patterns. Here, it is important to note that while TRuK operated some of the most visible telephone hotlines during and immediately after the riots, it was not the only site through which such reports were gathered. Women's organizations and activist groups that later contributed to or worked with Komnas Perempuan similarly collected testimony through emergency phone lines, safe houses, and intermediary reporting by volunteers.[101] In practice, this meant that many accounts did not originate as direct victim

[99] Komnas Perempuan, introduction to *Temuan Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999).
[100] Human Rights Watch, *Damaging Debate*, 11–13.
[101] Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan, *Documentation Report: Special Rapporteur of National Commission on Violence Against Women Regarding Sexual Violence in May 1998 Riot and Its Impacts*

testimony. Instead, callers frequently reported incidents they had witnessed, or relayed information about relatives and neighbors who were unwilling or unable to come forward themselves.[102] In several cases, multiple hotline reports pointed to similar incidents occurring in the same locations and timeframes, allowing volunteers to identify recurring patterns even when individual testimonies could not be independently verified or publicly pursued.[103] Rather than treating such accounts as insufficient, NGOs incorporated them into their documentation as evidence of patterned violence, thereby expanding the category of what could count as credible knowledge under conditions of fear, stigma, and institutional distrust.

A second contest concerned what it meant to document responsibly in a context of fear and vulnerability. The TRuK reports place sustained emphasis on anonymity, on the ethical necessity of not exposing identities, and on treating the destruction of "*rasa aman*" (a sense of safety) as a form of violence in its own right. This framing reflects an understanding that the harm of May 1998 was not limited to physical injury, but extended to issues of who could speak about the violence, under what conditions, and at what personal cost. Protecting identities was a way of keeping testimony possible, ensuring that documentation did not reproduce the high risks it sought to expose.

Third, NGO documentation mattered institutionally because it helped drive the creation and shaping of new bodies tasked with violence-against-women advocacy and fact-finding. Komnas Perempuan's own institutional history explicitly links its establishment to a post-1998 mandate of monitoring, fact-finding, and documentation regarding violence against women, grounded in Keppres No. 181/1998.[104] This is one of the more concrete ways NGO documentation changed the evidentiary terrain. The deeper implication, then, is that

(Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 2008); Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan, *Tragedi Mei 1998 dalam Perjalanan Bangsa. Disangkal!* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 2010).

[102] Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan, *Dokumentasi Awal Peristiwa Mei 1998* (Jakarta: TRuK, 1998).

[103] Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan, *Tragedi Mei 1998 dalam Perjalanan Bangsa. Disangkal!* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 2010).

[104] Republik Indonesia, *Keputusan Presiden No. 181 Tahun 1998 tentang Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan*; Komnas Perempuan, "Sejarah Komnas Perempuan."

the post-riot evidentiary field became dual-tracked. Official inquiries could confer a kind of public recognizability, but they often did so by narrowing the range of claims that could be stated with prosecutorial force. NGO documentation could preserve a wider range of experiences and patterns, but it frequently did so in forms designed for protection and advocacy rather than courtroom conversion. The stratified nature of the archive is why subsequent struggles over May 1998 so often turned into struggles over proof or evidence.

Conclusion: Evidence Without Reckoning

What this chapter has traced is not the gradual clarification of May 1998 into a single narrative about what definitively occurred, but the institutionalization of uncertainty. In the months following the riots, the violence of May entered a dense field of documentation in which recognition and restraint advanced simultaneously. The proliferation of commissions, reports, hotlines, and volunteer archives did not resolve disagreement so much as reorder it. What changed after the flames died down was not simply what was known, but how knowledge could circulate, who could authorize it, and what consequences it could plausibly generate.

In this perspective, it becomes evident that the post-riot archive should not be read as incomplete in a straightforward sense. In diving into the sources present in the historical archive, we begin to see that the fragmentation of the archive arose not as a residue of chaos, but as the outcome of deliberate evidentiary calibration through decisions that were made about what could safely be said and formally recorded. Investigative commissions narrowed claims in order to protect their findings from political rejection, while NGOs widened the record in ways that prioritized survivor safety over legal conclusiveness. The archive fractured not because actors failed to document violence, but because they documented it for different purposes under unequal conditions of risk.

It is because of this that the post–May 1998 archive must be understood as historically produced rather than merely technically limited. The forms of evidence that survived into the public record were shaped by the political inheritance of the New Order and by the uncertain authority of the early Reformasi state. Investigative commissions operated in a landscape where military influence had not disappeared and where accusations against state actors still carried real political risk. Caution was therefore not incidental but structural. The narrowing of claims reflected an attempt to secure institutional survival in a moment when the boundaries of permissible truth were still being negotiated.

At the same time, civil-society documentation emerged from a longer history of constrained activism. Human rights groups, women's organizations, and volunteer networks had learned under authoritarian rule that visibility could be dangerous and that protection often mattered more than publicity. This informed their post-riot practices, seen in the use of hotlines, anonymity, and aggregation. These practices were deliberately developed and used in response to decades of repression. In this sense, NGO documentation after May 1998 did not just fill gaps left by the state; it also carried forward an alternative historical repertoire of making violence recordable under conditions of fear.

These two trajectories converged in the late 1990s without ever fully aligning. The Reformasi state was willing to acknowledge violence in general terms as part of its break with the past, but it remained reluctant to anchor that violence to specific chains of command inherited from the New Order. Civil society could document those continuities more directly, but it lacked the authority to compel judicial or political action. What resulted was a historically specific arrangement in which evidence accumulated faster than reckoning. The past was named, but not settled. This dynamic helps explain why May 1998 quickly became a reference point in public discourse without becoming a resolved chapter of Indonesian history. The riots were neither forgotten nor fully addressed. Instead, they were stabilized as

an event that could be cited, commemorated, or denied, but rarely adjudicated. The evidentiary practices forged in the immediate aftermath—careful official acknowledgment alongside protected but vulnerable civil-society testimony—set the terms for this outcome. As such, May 1998 entered Indonesian history as an unfinished episode.

The next chapter turns to how this unresolved status was sustained over time by turning from documentation to memory. In asking how the violence of May 1998 has been remembered and contested over time, we shift focus from the production of the historical record to the lasting impact of recognition and silence that continues to shape Indonesia even today.

Chapter 3: After Visibility and the Problem of Evidence

Taken together, the previous two chapters demonstrate that the historical record of May 1998 was not produced through a single unified process of recovering the truth; rather, it emerged through multiple forms of documentation operating under different constraints and pursuing different objectives. Media reporting attempted to describe events as they unfolded, but was shaped by the pressures of immediacy and editorial caution. Institutional investigations sought to stabilize the violence within formal frameworks of evidence and accountability, but were constrained by the political conditions of early Reformasi Indonesia. Civil-society organizations documented experiences that official channels struggled to accommodate, but their work often circulated outside the structures capable of converting testimony into judicial action.

Even when we consider both of these archives together, the archive of May 1998 still remains incomplete. Newspapers, investigative commissions, and NGO reports all represent attempts to translate lived experience into forms that can circulate publicly as evidence. In doing so, they necessarily transform the events they describe. They condense uncertainty into narrative, convert testimony into documentation, and translate fear, rumor, and confusion into statements that can be both recorded and cited. But perhaps what these archives fail to capture fully is what it really felt like to move through the city while the riots were still unfolding.

Thus, this chapter turns to a different kind of source in the form of oral history interviews conducted with members of a Chinese-Indonesian family who directly experienced the riots in Jakarta in May 1998. These interviews provide access to the sensory and emotional dimensions of the violence that rarely appear in contemporaneous reporting or official investigations. They capture the harsh cacophony of sounds of crowds gathering on

major roads, the smoke rising from burning buildings across the city, the uncertainty produced by contradictory rumors, and the fear experienced by individuals attempting to return home through streets that had suddenly become unpredictable and dangerous.

With that in mind, these interviews should not be treated as transparent windows onto the past. Like the documents examined in the previous chapters, oral histories are themselves historical artifacts shaped by memory, interpretation, and the passage of time.[105] They reveal not only what happened but also how those events have been remembered, discussed, and sometimes even silenced within families and communities.

My own positionality is central to this process. As a member of the same family from which these interviews are drawn, I hold a curious position as both a researcher and a participant in the afterlives of these memories. I have a proximity to the family and a level of trust and openness that, for an external interviewer, would be impossible. With that in mind, this position also shapes the dynamics of what is shared, withheld, and how the stories are framed as the interviewees' answers are all influenced by existing familial relationships, generational dynamics, and my own presence within them. My interpretation of these accounts is similarly inflected by this proximity, requiring an ongoing reflexive awareness of how personal connection informs both the questions asked and the meanings drawn from the responses. With these considerations in mind, the interviews analyzed in this chapter will be treated as historical sources and as another layer of the historical archive through which May 1998 continues to be understood.

The interviews presented in this chapter were conducted with four members of the same extended family; namely, a mother, father, grandfather, and aunt who were living in Jakarta at the time of the riots. Each experienced the violence in different ways and from different vantage points within the city. The mother was returning home from the family store

[105] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

when crowds began to gather in the streets. The grandfather remained behind at the family store in Central Jakarta as looting began nearby. The aunt, then a university student, attempted to make her way home through districts where violence had already intensified. The father, working in an office in another part of the city, found himself stranded as roads closed and fires spread across Jakarta.

Taking a combined look at these accounts offers various views of the riots that moved across different parts of the city and different social contexts. Perhaps more importantly, they also reveal how knowledge about the violence circulated among ordinary people long before it appeared in official reports or investigative findings. Interviewees recall hearing rumors about attacks on Chinese-Indonesian communities, witnessing crowds targeting Chinese-owned shops, and learning about sexual violence through word of mouth, even as public debate continued to question whether such violence had occurred. In this sense, the interviews highlight an important tension already visible in the sources examined in earlier chapters. Specifically, they make clear the gap between what people experienced and what could be publicly recognized as evidence.

Subsequently, the accounts analyzed illuminate dimensions of the riots that are difficult to capture through other archival sources. They truly reveal the lived experience seen in how violence was perceived and interpreted by those who lived through it, how rumors and fragments of information circulated through neighborhoods and workplaces, and how the experience of fear and uncertainty shaped decisions about how to get home safe. Importantly, the interviews also reveal explicitly the racialized targeting of Chinese-Indonesians and how they then made sense of the event. At the same time, they also reflect the longer afterlife of the riots within personal and family memory. Several interviewees noted that the events of May 1998 were rarely discussed openly in the years that followed. Conversations about the

violence were often avoided due to stigma, fear, political repercussions, or a broader desire to move forward after a traumatic period.

Consequently, in placing and examining these interviews alongside the documentary archives explored in the previous chapters, this chapter argues that lived memory provides a crucial perspective on the riots that neither media reporting nor institutional investigations fully capture. While Chapter 1 focused on news reporting and Chapter 2 examined official reports, this chapter, through the form of oral history, then demonstrates how the violence was experienced on the ground and how those experiences have continued to shape personal and collective understandings of May 1998. In a larger sense, the oral histories enhance our understanding of the violence that occurred by providing access to meaningful, and at times, emotional accounts of what happened in May 1998. Oral testimony is distinct in that it preserves the meaning that narrators attach to events in retrospect. To read these interviews well, then, is not to ask only whether they verify or correct the written record, but to ask what their form, emphasis, hesitation, and emotional texture reveal about how violence was lived and carried forward in memory

The importance here lies in the idea that these interviews do more than just add new details to the already existing historical record. They reveal the limits of the archival processes examined earlier in the thesis. The violence of May 1998 exists not only within headlines and investigative reports but crucially, also within the memories of those who moved through the city while it was burning. By bringing these memories into conversation with the documentary record, this chapter seeks to illuminate the gap between experience, documentation, and accountability that continues to define how the riots are remembered today.

The Long Walk Home: Movement, Risk, and Early Recognition

For many residents of Jakarta, the riots of May 1998 unfolded as immediate disruptions to everyday routines. This is made evident in the oral histories collected for this chapter. In all of the accounts, the first day of violence appears as a moment when daily life suddenly became urgent responses to a rapidly deteriorating urban environment. The recollections of my mother, who was working at our family shop in Central Jakarta at the time, illustrate how quickly the situation was understood as dangerous and how people acted accordingly. The shop was a small family-run business that sold mainly chairs and other office furniture. Everyone in the family worked at the shop in some capacity and it served as central source of livelihood for the household. At the time, the shop was the only source of income for the family and any damage to the shop would have been devastating in ways that extended beyond the immediate loss of property. The relatively cramped shop was a *ruko* with two small floors dedicated to office space and the third floor serving as a small house that my mom's family would occasionally use to rest. The shop was surrounded by other *rukos* on a large street and the shops and businesses nearby were owned by both Chinese-Indonesians and *Pribumi*.[106] At the time, the family shop was everything.

By the afternoon of the first day of riots, the family had already begun to worry that Chinese-owned businesses would be targeted. Reports of unrest circulated rapidly through workplaces and neighborhoods following the shooting of students at Trisakti University on 12 May, and by the following day, rumors of looting and attacks on shops were common. Like many other Chinese-Indonesian families who depended on small businesses for their livelihoods, the immediate concern was not the larger political currents present but the

[106] The term pribumi (literally "of the soil") refers to so-called "indigenous" Indonesians and has historically been used to distinguish non-Chinese Indonesians from ethnic Chinese minorities, often carrying political and racialized connotations shaped during the colonial and New Order periods.

possibility that property and livelihoods could be destroyed and that family members might become trapped in buildings or on the streets as violence escalated.

In response to these fears, and under the instruction of my grandfather, my mother left work early with my grandmother on the 12th of May in order to return home and avoid becoming stranded if the situation worsened. She recalled that by the time she began her journey home, the atmosphere in the streets had already changed dramatically.

> *Semua orang langsung pengen pulang… Beneran semua orang takut. Jalan besar yang di depan ruko sudah mulai penuh dengan orang yang berkumpul dan berteriak-teriak. Terus aku aja nggak tahu gimana bisa pulang. Rasanya sangat ramai dan sangat menakutkan. Yang aku paling ingat Popo sama I sudah ngomong kita musti pake jalan tikus pulangnya soalnya jalanan besar pasti sudah penuh dengan orang.*
>
> Everyone immediately wanted to go home… Really, everyone was afraid. The main road in front of the shop began filling up with people gathering and shouting. I had no idea how to get home. It felt extremely crowded and very frightening. Something I remember the most is your grandmother and me talking about having to use small roads on our journey home because we knew larger roads would be filled with people.[107]

What emerges from this account is the speed with which fear circulated and was translated into practical action. Before large-scale destruction had even begun in many areas, residents were already thinking about how the violence would spread and how they would then accordingly adjust their movements, leaving work early, and attempting to return to the relative safety of their homes. Although brief, my mom mentioned how she received calls

[107] "Interview with Mother," Zoom, March 14, 2026.

from worried friends and families on the office landline that told her to head home as soon as possible as the violence seemed like it would only get worse. Rumors and fragments of information about attacks on Chinese-Indonesian-owned shops and about the unrest spreading to different parts of the city functioned as an informal warning system that shaped how people then interpreted unfolding events. Scholars of the riots have noted that the violence spread rapidly through Jakarta through precisely such informal networks of communication, as word of attacks circulated through workplaces, markets, and neighborhoods faster than official information channels.[108] In this way, rumor was not only a reflection of panic but also played an active role in structuring how people behaved in the early stages of the riots.

For Chinese-Indonesian families in particular, these interpretations of risk were informed by a longer historical awareness of vulnerability. Although the events of May 1998 were unprecedented in scale in Jakarta, they resonated with earlier episodes in which Chinese communities had been singled out during moments of political instability. Anti-Chinese violence had recurred periodically throughout Indonesian history, and as mentioned in Chapter 1, the economic crisis of the late 1990s once again positioned Chinese-Indonesians as visible scapegoats for broader social grievances. As scholars have argued, longstanding stereotypes that associated the Chinese minority with economic privilege made Chinese-owned businesses particularly visible targets during the riots.[109] It is within this context that we can begin to understand that the fear that shops would be looted or destroyed was not just speculative but real and grounded in historically recognizable patterns of violence.

[108] Ariel Heryanto, "Racialising the Chinese Indonesians," in *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Ariel Heryanto and Sumit Mandal (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 70–89.
[109] Charles A. Coppel, *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Within this context, my grandfather's instruction that my mother and grandmother leave work early illustrates how family networks functioned as mechanisms of protection. Ordinary people did not wait for an official statement from the government or for more formal confirmations of the danger; common people relied on their own precautionary judgment and shared understandings of risk to minimize exposure to violence. These decisions were shaped not only by immediate circumstances but also by inherited memories of discrimination and insecurity experienced by earlier generations.

Taking a step back, the sensory dimension of these memories is striking. Rather than recalling the riots primarily through specific incidents, my mother emphasized the sounds and density of the crowds that filled the streets. The overwhelming noise and movement of people created a sense that the city had become unstable and unpredictable.

> *Yang aku paling ingat itu suaranya Guan. Orang-orang di jalanan teriaknya keras banget, terus kayak gimana ya, ...kayak nggak bisa konsen gitu loh.*
> What I remember most clearly is the noise, Guan [informal nickname for me]. People in the streets were shouting very loudly, …and I don't know, it was like I could not even focus.[110]

Her recollection draws attention to how the experience of unrest was mediated through the senses. The shouting of crowds, the density of bodies in the street, and the difficulty of concentrating all contributed to an atmosphere in which normal perceptions were disrupted. The noise on the streets suggested that the situation was escalating even before the full scale of the violence was visible. As rumors circulated and people attempted to leave the area, the growing volume of the streets reinforced the perception that the city was entering a moment of instability. Similar descriptions appear in other testimonies from the riots, where witnesses

[110] "Interview with Mother," March 13, 2026.

recall the sound of crowds gathering, glass breaking, or people running as early signals that violence was spreading through commercial districts.[111]

At the same time, these recollections also reveal that the crowds themselves were not perceived as politically neutral. My mother remembered hearing slurs directed towards her and at other Chinese-Indonesians as she made her way through the streets.

> *Saya juga ingat orang-orang berteriak 'Cina luh!' di jalan. Suaranya keras sekali terus Popo and I takut jadi sambil jalan nggak berani lihat siapa yang teriak, pokoknya menduduk kepala sambil jalan.*
>
> I also remember people shouting 'Chinese [derogatory]' in the streets. The noise was extremely loud, and your grandmother and I were very scared, so we did not dare look at who was shouting, we just kept our heads down as we walked.[112]

The shouted slur served as a clear marker that the violence unfolding in Jakarta was not simply spontaneous unrest but had an ethnicized dimension. The shouted word "*Cina*," both typically and historically used in a derogatory manner, functioned as both an insult and as a way to identify Chinese-Indonesians, marking them as visible outsiders within the crowd. At a more immediate level, my mother's description of lowering her head while walking reveals how individuals navigated this hostile environment. Avoiding eye contact, moving quickly, and refusing to respond to those shouting were practical ways of minimizing confrontation.

Importantly, the journey home did not take place in isolation. My mother traveled with her own mother and with a trusted Indonesian friend who worked for my grandfather.

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[111] Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia*, 1996–1999 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).
[112] "Interview with Mother," March 13, 2026.

Saya juga nggak terlalu ingat sih, tapi pulangnya pasti sama Popo, terus kayaknya juga ada anak buahnya Kungkung yang Kungkung suruh ikut kita dan melindungi kita.

I honestly do not really remember, but I definitely went home with grandma, and I think one of your Grandfather's friends who your Grandfather told to come with us to protect us on the way home [113]

This detail is important to highlight as it complicates the portrayals of the riots as a uniformly antagonistic confrontation between ethnic groups. While Chinese-Indonesian communities were widely targeted during the violence, the interviews conducted for this chapter also reveal instances of solidarity and protection within local social networks. In moments of crisis, personal relationships and neighborhood ties could provide critical assistance, even as larger crowds engaged in violence and looting. This solidarity between friends and the importance of neighbors continued:

Habis kita sampai rumah, tetangga-tetangga kami memastikan bahwa kita baik-baik. Kita kan deket sama tetangga-tetangga. Pikiran aku sih, karena kita tinggal di lingkungan yang ada Chindo sama Pribumi juga, kita tidak terlalu menjadi sasaran gerombolan besar yang lebih fokus pada lingkungan-lingkungan yang mayoritas Chindo. Selain itu, banyak orang di lingkungan kami yang memastikan orang asing tidak masuk ke lingkungan kami.

After we got home, our neighbors made sure we were okay. We were close with our neighbors. I think because we lived in a neighborhood with both Chinese and Native Indonesians, we were not really a target for the larger

[113] Ibid.

mobs, which were more focused on neighborhoods with large Chinese majorities. Also, there were a lot of people in our neighborhood who made sure strangers did not enter our neighborhood.[114]

After finally reaching home, my mother said her memory was unclear for the next few days. The walk home that usually would have taken ten minutes, took around the same time today as she hurriedly rushed home, but the initial feeling of danger and the sights and sounds of the walk would linger as the days of rioting continued. She mentioned how she felt a sense of relief after everyone in the family made it home but how she still felt anxious as she stayed waiting for the riots to die down. When my mother was asked why her memory may have been unclear, she said the mix of emotions and the intensity of the situation forced her to disassociate and create distance from the violence that was happening. While waiting she mentioned that on multiple occasions, she would climb to the roof of the house and look out at the city.

Yang aku ingat, saat kerusuhan berlanjut, setiap kali QQ lihat kepulan asap besar dia memanggil I, terus kita berdua melihat dari kejauhan sambil bertanya kapan ya kekerasan itu akan berhenti.

What I remember is that as the riots continued, QQ [mom's younger brother] would call me to the roof every time he saw a large plume of smoke, and then we would both watch from a distance, asking when the violence would stop.[115]

What my mother's long walk home reveals is how the violence of May 1998 was not only enacted through large acts of destruction, but through the reordering of ordinary life that happened in anticipation of the violence. Fear was present before, during, and after the violence, but what gives that fear historical weight is the way it was anchored to recognition

[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.

rather than abstraction. The decision to leave early, the instinct to avoid main roads, and the act of lowering one's head while walking were responses to a situation that had already been interpreted as both patterned and dangerous.

The violence of May 1998, then, operated across multiple temporalities. There was the moment of eruption that would later be captured in photographs of burning buildings and in reports documenting destruction. But there was also an earlier moment that appears much less in the archive, in which the possibility of violence became legible and began to shape behavior before it fully materialized in any single location. My mother's long walk home belongs to this earlier moment. It captures the point at which the city had not yet been entirely overtaken by destruction, but where both the conditions for that destruction were already widely understood and the persistent feeling of danger had already begun to impact the lived experience of those present. Although the walk was only ten minutes, it certainly loomed in my mother's consciousness for far longer.

But what happened to those who could not avoid the violence entirely? To those who could not go home? Although it may not be a complete answer to the question, my grandfather's account of staying behind to lock up the shop offers some insights.

Holding Ground: Chinese-Owned Spaces and the Logic of Exposure

If my mother's walk home reveals how violence became legible through movement, my grandfather's experience at the family store reveals how that same recognition operated in place. The family store, situated on a major road in Central Jakarta, could not simply be left behind without consequence. He did not leave immediately because he could not. As the person responsible for the shop, he remained behind even as crowds began to gather outside, aware that the space itself had already become exposed to risk.

Waktu itu sudah mulai banyak orang kumpul di jalan depan toko Guan. Saya lihat situasinya bisa jadi tidak terkendali, jadi saya suruh Mama sama Popo pulang dulu. Saya harus tinggal untuk menutup toko.

At that time, a lot of people had already started gathering in front of the shop. I saw that the situation could get out of hand, so I told your mother and grandmother to go home first. I had to stay behind to close the shop.[116]

What distinguishes this account from the previous one is not a difference in perception, but a difference in constraint. Where my mother could respond to danger by leaving, my grandfather was compelled to remain, even as the same cues signaled that the situation was deteriorating. He remembered hearing shouting outside and realizing that the situation was becoming threatening, not because of a sudden eruption of violence, but because the crowd had begun to identify the shop as Chinese-owned. As my grandfather rushed to lock up the shop and make his way through a side exit, he recalled to me how the crowd outside began to go through the different *rukos* along the street, identifying the ones that were Chinese-owned.

Susah dengar sih, tapi yang aku ingat ada yang teriak, "yang ini Cina! Yang ini Cina!

It was a little difficult to hear, but I remember there was someone shouting (in front of the store). This one is (owned by) Chinese! This one is Chinese![117]

This is an important detail to mention, as it pushes back against the flattening language used in the newspapers.[118] Chinese-Indonesian shops were being targeted seen in the way the mob differentiated between Chinese-Indonesian shops and those owned by *Pribumi*.

[116] "Interview with Grandfather," Zoom, March 17, 2026.
[117] Ibid.
[118] See Chapter 1's discussion of the press archive's "evidentiary partition," especially its argument that visible, countable harms were privileged while ethnicized and gendered violence was relegated to alternative archives or private memory.

Going back to my grandfather's decision to send both my mother and grandmother home, my grandfather spoke about how this decision came from his experiences in the past. He mentioned how growing up he was always told by his parents to be cautious and prepared. Although he was hesitant, my grandfather referenced the Indonesian mass killings of 65-66 and compared it to the riots. He told me that he felt the same danger and sense of urgency during the mass killings as he did in the riots:

> *Dulu Guan, pada tahun 1965 dan 1966, ada banyak Chindo di bunuh, dituduh sebagai komunis. Aku pernah diseret keluar dari rumah terus disuruh berbaris. Gila banget, Guan. Mereka yang berada dalam antrean dipenggal, namun polisi turun tangan sebelum giliran saya tiba. Aku tidak tahu apa yang akan terjadi kali ini, tetapi aku tahu aku harus menjaga keluargaku tetap aman.*
>
> Back in the day, Guan [informal nickname for me], in 1965 and 1966, there were a lot of Chinese-Indonesians that were killed. I was once dragged out of my house and forced to line up. It was insane, Guan. Those in the line before me were beheaded but the police stopped before it got to my turn. I did not know what would happen this time [referencing the May 1998 riots], but I knew I had to keep my family safe.[119]

This adds another layer to the previously mentioned idea in which Chinese-owned shops, homes, and businesses were repeatedly positioned as visible objects of resentment during periods of political and economic instability. Although academics looking back at Indonesian history have made this conclusion, the lived experience of those who endured these moments reveals a more immediate and deeply personal dimension of vulnerability. For my grandfather, these were not abstract patterns identified in hindsight, but recurring realities that

[119] "Interview with Grandfather," March 2026.

shaped how he assessed risk and protected his family. At the same time, his comparison of the 98 riots and the 65-66 mass killings situates the riots within a longer history of anti-Chinese violence and the insecurity felt by those affected. His recollection suggests that May 1998 was terrifying not only because of what was unfolding in the present, but also because it revived the possibility that violence once thought to belong to the past could return with devastating force.

Another layer to add here is the specificity of how this vulnerability operated on the ground. What emerges is not simply the vulnerability of Chinese-Indonesian wealth in the abstract, but the peculiar exposure of small and mid-level Chinese commerce. My grandfather is not an oligarch, and the family business was certainly not a symbol of oligarchic access, but this fact offered no protection when the heavy rioting began. In moments of crisis, "Chinese-owned" became a flattening category, collapsing vastly different economic positions into a single target. For instance, a wealthier Chinese-Indonesian who was acquaintances with my grandfather owned the store next to us. His *ruko* was larger than ours, and more economically prosperous, but when the violence intensified, there was no meaningful distinction between his shop and ours. Both sat along the same stretch of road, both bore the same visible markers of Chinese ownership, and both were equally exposed to passing crowds, Seen in this light, my grandfather's decision to lock up on shop and send my mother and grandmother home reflects an awareness that threat did not depend on scale or prominence, but on visibility itself.

The family store survived, but only because of a large iron gate that my grandfather had installed in anticipation of a moment like this one. The iron gate was installed years before the riots, as a precaution shaped by my grandfather's previous experiences of uncertainty and vulnerability. He remembered seeing the crowd attempt to use a truck to pull the gate free.

> *Toko sebelah kami dihancurkan. Gila banget, orang langsung masuk. Kungkung sih nggak pengen tahu apa yang terjadi di dalem, pokoknya pergi aja dulu. Waktu saya mau pergi, saya lihat mereka coba kaitkan truk ke pintu besi toko kami supaya bisa dibuka, tapi untungnya gagal.*
>
> The shop next to ours was destroyed. It was crazy, people went straight in. I don't even want to know what happened inside, I just knew to leave. When I was about to leave, I saw them try to hook a truck to our iron gate so they could pull it open, but thankfully they failed.[120]

This is an important corrective to any account that treats the riots as indiscriminate chaos. The violence was devastating, but it was not spatially uniform. Some shops were burned, some were looted, some were bypassed, and some survived through a combination of contingency, architecture, timing, and neighborhood conditions. The archive of spectacle examined in Chapter 1 necessarily compresses these differences into scenes of smoke, fire, and ruined storefronts. Contrastingly, oral testimony restores the narrower scale at which people actually experienced the violence.

What emerges from my grandfather's testimony is an account of how danger was inhabited through familial role. As fearless as my grandfather is, his narrative does not present him as fully in control. On the contrary, he recalled confusion, anger, and apprehension as the situation around the shop grew more volatile. What stands out is that those emotions were inseparable from a parallel sense of obligation. He positioned himself as the one who had to remain, assess risk, and absorb uncertainty on behalf of the family. He recalled feeling unsettled and unsure of what was happening beyond the immediate surroundings of the shop, but at the same time, he always reassured me that this was his role — to stay composed so as to not alarm those closest to him. The performance of calm, in this

[120] Ibid.

sense, becomes a form of labor. It reveals how masculinity operated for him as a set of expectations that structured how one responded to crisis in real time.

Consequently, this is another reason why my grandfather's testimony matters. It places responsibility and masculinity inside the event rather than outside it. His description of himself as angry, frightened, and confused, but also responsible for appearing calm and strong in front of others matters because it shows how family roles shaped behavior under threat while demonstrating the emotional lived experience of navigating uncertainty.

> *I pastinya marah, takut, dan bingung banget Guan, tapi aku juga tahu aku bertanggung jawab untuk tetap terlihat tenang di hadapan Popo sama Mama. Saya tahu saya harus memastikan toko itu terlindungi karena bagi kami, toko itu adalah segalanya. Kami hanya punya ruang tinggal kecil di lantai atas untuk menyimpan barang-barang pribadi, dan tanpa ruang itu atau toko itu, kami pasti sudah kehilangan segalanya.*
>
> I was definitely angry, scared and confused Guan, but I also knew I was responsible for being calm in front of your grandmother and mom. I knew I had to make sure the shop was protected because to us the store was everything. We had the small living space upstairs that held personal belongings and without the space or the store we would have lost everything.[121]

While newspapers made burning *rukos* and destroyed commercial districts central to the visual grammar of May 1998, even as the lives structured around those spaces often disappeared behind the image of destruction, my grandfather's account returns social meaning to that image. The family *ruko* was attacked and withstood only because we were

[121] Ibid.

lucky enough that our iron gate held down the intruders. It reminds us that the attack on Chinese-owned commercial space was not just property damage. It was an assault on livelihood, family continuity, and belonging.

Witnessing the Body in Public: Gendered Violence Near Pluit

My aunt's testimony shifts the discussion from property to the body. Although not directly a part of my close family as she married my mom's younger brother, her account is the most direct witness in these interviews to the public violence against Chinese-Indonesian women, and it does so in a way that sharply illuminates the limits of both the press archive and the post-riot evidentiary field.

On May 12, 1998, she was a high school student and had stayed at school as the city deteriorated around her. Her parents were busy with their own situations, trying to get out of work to pick up their daughter. Thankfully, her dad was able to make it to her campus, but by the time she was trying to get home, the situation in North Jakarta had become far worse. Unlike the family shop, my aunt's house was near Pluit, a large Chinese-Indonesian majority district. On her way home what she remembered most clearly was not a burning building or a line of looted shops, but a scene of Chinese-Indonesian girls being :dragged from houses, beaten when they did not listen," and forced into public humiliation.[122] Some people, she noted, tried to help, but the crowd was too large.

> *Yang paling jelas saya ingat itu lihat cewek-cewek Chindo dikeluarin dari rumah, dipukul kalau nga dengar, terus dipermalukan di jalan. Sampe di suruh lepas baju. Aku nga ingat sih ada beberapa. Habis itu I sudah nga lihat lagi, langsung lari sama Kungkung Chiew. Sambil lari, aku lihat ke belakang, terus ada beberapa orang yang coba nolong, tapi kalah sama massa yang*

[122] "Interview with Aunt," Zoom, March 2026.

jauh lebih besar. Nggak tahu Guan emang begitu, setahu aku pasti ada banyak kasus dimanana.

What I remember most clearly is seeing Chinese girls dragged out of houses, beaten if they did not listen, and humiliated in the street. They were told to take off their clothes. I don't remember how many there were. After that, I stopped looking. I just started running with my dad. As I ran, I looked back and saw that some people were trying to help, but they were overpowered by a much larger crowd.[123]

My aunt's recollection sits in the gap between those two archives looked at previously. Unlike the first chapters, which showed how newspapers rendered the riots legible through images and vocabularies of chaos, and how official and NGO documentation later translated violence into calibrated claims and structured evidence, here the account returns to lived experience before it is stabilized as record. Her memory does not resolve uncertainty so much as inhabit it. This memory was both difficult for her to talk about and for me to write about, but that difficulty is perhaps part of the historical point. She wanted to make sure I knew she saw what happened, but it was clear her narration shifted. When asked about who she was at the time she was quick to answer, but the pacing drastically slowed as we talked about her journey home. Her hesitation over the exact details, served as traces of how the event was experienced and remembered.

Bearing that in mind, her account is not anomalous. Human Rights Watch's 1998 report on the rapes of ethnic Chinese women emphasized that the public debate around whether the rapes "really happened" obstructed investigation and discouraged testimony. The issue was never about numbers; it was the political and social cost of making such violence

[123] "Interview with Aunt," Zoom, March 2026.

speakable.[124] Survivors were traumatized, many had fled, and official denials made witnesses less likely to come forward. Inside Indonesia, later published eyewitness testimony from Muara Angke, a coastal neighborhood in Pluit, describing a woman dragged from a car, stripped, and raped, and stressed that the broader public debate after May 1998 often worked to deny what victims and witnesses already knew.[125]

What makes my aunt's recollection especially important is that it also captures the publicness of the violence. The violence occurred as humiliation was staged in the street. The importance here lies in the fact that the sexual violence during the riots did not operate only as an individual violation but as a visible social message. It marked Chinese-Indonesian women as vulnerable and made their bodies part of the spectacle of the riot. This contributes to the contested nature of the riots, the riots both brutal and politically explosive. To acknowledge the full extent of the riots would be to admit that the riots were not just spontaneous or a period of disorder, but a racialized and gendered campaign of terror.

At the same time, her insistence that some people tried to help is equally important. During our conversation, it felt as if she wanted me to know or to understand that what she witnessed was not reducible to a single, unified crowd, but was composed of different responses unfolding at once. In emphasizing those moments of attempted intervention, however brief or ultimately unsuccessful, she resists a narrative in which the violence can be attributed wholesale to an undifferentiated mass. It refuses a simplistic picture in which the crowd speaks for the whole neighborhood or city. It reveals a social field fractured by fear, coercion, opportunism, and moral limits. Some watched, some fled, some attacked, some attempted intervention, and some were simply overwhelmed. This complexity matters

[124] Human Rights Watch, *Indonesia: The Damaging Debate on Rapes of Ethnic Chinese Women* (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 1, 1998).
[125] Thushara Dibley, "Rape Is Rape," *Inside Indonesia*, September 22, 2007.

historically because it prevents moral flattening without weakening the central fact of targeted violence.

Safe Zones, Empty Streets: Uneven Protection and the Geography of Abandonment

The last testimony to cover is my father's, which introduces another different dimension of the riots in the uneven geography of protection. He was at work when he first heard about Trisakti. Like many others, he continued the workday at first, but as roads began closing and fires spread, returning home became impossible. He ultimately spent the night at his boss's house in Kemang in South Jakarta, which he remembered as safer and visibly more protected than the areas where rioting was worst.

> *Di tempat yang paling parah, saya justru tidak lihat polisi atau tentara. Aneh banget. Tapi waktu sudah masuk ke arah Kemang, rasanya beda. Di sana lebih aman, kan di situ Jakarta Selatan, jadi ada lebih banyak orang kaya. Terus, di situ malah ada banyak polisi.*
>
> In the worst places, I actually didn't see police or soldiers. But once we got toward Kemang, it felt different. It was safer there, I mean, over there, it was South Jakarta, where a lot of richer people lived. Also, there were a lot of police over there.[126]

In earlier chapters, the problem of state responsibility emerged largely through questions of implication, permissiveness, and the difficulty of proving command. Here, though the focus shifts the question from whether the state was present at all to where and for whom it was present. My father's account adds a lived spatial dimension to that problem. The state failed, and it failed unevenly. Some zones felt abandoned, others protected. That unevenness is part

[126] "Interview with Father," Zoom, March 2026.

of what made suspicion of organized involvement or selective non-intervention so durable in popular memory.

In their later summary of events, Human Rights Watch noted that in the immediate aftermath that security forces in many areas "seemed to stand by unwilling to take action," even as the state continued to narrate the violence in generalized terms.[127] The oral histories here do not prove orchestration in a legal sense, but they do show why the question took hold so quickly. People were not comparing "order" to "disorder" in the abstract. They were noticing that some areas saw much more violence than others and that some roads were protected while others were left to the large crowds. The significance of this uneven geography is that it turns May 1998 into more than a story of collapse. The story is nuanced, and only through looking at the entire historical archive, including oral histories, can we really see the full extent of it all.

Conclusion: Silence, Stigma, and the Unfinished Event

The final thread connecting these interviews is not only what was remembered, but what was not said afterward. Across the family accounts, the same pattern recurs. People knew what had happened, knew that Chinese-Indonesians had been targeted, knew that sexual violence had occurred, and still rarely spoke about it openly in the years that followed. Even in the interviews, there was a careful barrier that was slowly broken as interviewees eased into the conversation. For instance, my mother was hesitant to tell me anything about the riots, only slowly opening up as I engaged her in questioning both on and off record. Across the interviews, there was a shared sense that some memories required careful handling, as if speaking too directly risked unsettling something that had long been kept contained.

[127] Human Rights Watch, *Indonesia: The Damaging Debate on Rapes of Ethnic Chinese Women* (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 1, 1998).

As each of the interviews ended, I asked the interviewees why we do not talk about May 1998 more, and the reasons given were tellingly consistent: stigma, fear of government power, uncertainty, and the sense that no one would be held accountable anyway. In some way, each interviewee returned to these themes. What was most noticeable about this line of questioning is that each interviewee talked about this feeling that those truly behind the horrific violence would always be beyond reach and not held accountable. This lingering feeling of an awareness that responsibility existed somewhere but could not be named, proven, or pursued, continues to linger even in contemporary Indonesia. In 2025, Indonesia's minister of culture, Fadli Zon, publicly dismissed the May 1998 mass rapes as rumor or as claims lacking evidence, prompting condemnation from Komnas Perempuan, Amnesty International Indonesia, and other civil society actors, and later contributing to legal challenges and public controversy that continued into 2026.[128] For families like mine, such moments do not feel like isolated political statements. They echo a longer Indonesian history in which violence can be widely known and at the same time remain perpetually open to doubt, reinforcing the sense that recognition itself is fragile and reversible.

In this sense, perhaps the reason why my family keeps quiet begins to make sense but at the same time, this silence should not be mistaken for amnesia. To stop talking openly about the riots was not the same as forgetting them. To my family, it was a way of living with an event that had entered family memory without ever becoming a settled public truth. This is also true in my own experience. Growing up, May 1998 was not something we discussed openly or in detail. I knew, in a general sense, that something significant and violent had happened, but it remained indistinct, without the specificity or emotional weight that only later emerged through these interviews. It was only in the process of writing this thesis, and

[128] Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan (Komnas Perempuan), Laporan tentang Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan dalam Kerusuhan Mei 1998 (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999); see also public responses to statements by Fadli Zon reported in national and international media, 2025.

in asking questions that had not previously been asked, that these memories began to take shape as something more concrete. What became particularly striking was the realization that this silence had also shaped decisions about the future. In speaking with my father, I learned that part of the reason he chose to live and work abroad was a deliberate effort to ensure that his children would not experience what he had experienced in 1998. The move was not only economic or professional, but in a way also deeply protective. The uncertainty of May 1998 had and continues to linger.

Perhaps this is why Chapter 2's phrase "evidence accumulated faster than reckoning" is so useful here. The interviews show the intimate afterlife of that imbalance. The past was known, but not settled; acknowledged, but not resolved. In this sense, this helps explain why May 1998 remains, as Bronwyn Duke put it, an object of "public amnesia" sustained by denial, even though many of the sexual assaults were later confirmed.[129] The problem is not that the event vanished from history. It is that it entered history in a fractured form. The riots were visible in smoke and ruins, partially recognized in reports, preserved in testimony, but never fully adjudicated.

Conclusively, what the oral histories add, then, is not merely emotional depth. They force a different historical chronology. They show that recognition began in lived experience, long before public discourse could stabilize it. People heard the slurs, read the streets, protected the shop, ran through side roads, saw bodies exposed to public violence, noticed where the state was and was not, and then carried those recognitions forward into a silence that was never empty. In a larger sense, the event remained unfinished not because nothing was known, but because what was known could not be converted into an authoritative and enforceable truth.

[129] Bronwyn Duke, "Remembering May 1998," *Inside Indonesia*, March 9, 2015.

Final Conclusion: Evidence, Memory, and the Limits of Knowing May 1998

If the preceding chapters have shown anything, it is that the violence of May 1998 cannot be understood solely through the accumulation of more evidence or the recovery of a single, definitive account. This thesis has shown that what emerges is a fragmented and uneven field of knowledge in which different forms of documentation, narration, and memory have produced distinct, and at times incommensurable, understandings of the same event. It is within this understanding that the riots continue to exist as an ongoing problem of representation, where the question of what can be known remains inseparable from how that knowledge was produced.

This is made evident through the thesis' argument that the aftermath of May 1998 was structured by an evidentiary partition that shaped the trajectory of both recognition and accountability. Chapter One demonstrated how contemporaneous newspaper reporting rendered certain forms of violence immediately legible through visual and lexical conventions, while leaving others difficult to name or verify. In doing so, it showed that the earliest public narratives of the riots were already selective, privileging spectacle and material destruction over less visible, though no less significant, forms of harm. Chapter Two traced how this unevenness was carried into the post-riot archive, where institutional and civil society efforts to document the violence expanded the field of evidence but did so through different and sometimes incompatible logics. The TGPF's careful calibration of claims enabled a form of official acknowledgment, but one that remained bounded by what could be credibly asserted under conditions of political constraint. At the same time, NGO and volunteer documentation preserved testimonies and patterns of violence that exceeded these limits, all while struggling to attain the same degree of public authority. Chapter Three then showed that oral histories reveal a different mode of knowing altogether, one grounded in lived experience, affect, and the circulation of rumor and fragment. In going deeper into these

accounts, the assumption that the archive can ever be made complete is made much more complicated, demonstrating instead that memory operates alongside, and sometimes in tension with, institutionalized forms of record-making.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the enduring difficulty of assigning responsibility for May 1998 is certainly a matter of political will or legal capacity, but also concurrently, a consequence of how the violence itself was made knowable. Recognition and limitation were not sequential stages, where the truth was first uncovered and then subsequently suppressed. What we see through this thesis' analysis is that they were both co-produced through the same processes that sought to document the events. The very practices that enabled acknowledgment also structured its boundaries, determining which claims could be stabilized as credible and which remained open to doubt. In this sense, while the absence of accountability is in some way the result of later inaction, the true root lies in the epistemic conditions under which the riots were first recorded and interpreted.

This has broader implications for how we understand the relationship between violence, evidence, and justice in post-authoritarian contexts. Transitional moments are often imagined as opportunities to establish truth through new institutions and investigative mechanisms. With that in mind, the case of May 1998 suggests that such processes are themselves constrained by inherited vocabularies, evidentiary standards, and political sensitivities that shape what can be said and proven. The historical archive that emerges is therefore not a neutral repository of facts, but a structured field in which visibility, credibility, and authority are all unevenly distributed. It is with this knowledge that further efforts to revisit or reopen cases must contend not only with missing information, but with the ways in which certain forms of knowledge were never fully incorporated into authoritative records in the first place.

At the same time, this thesis points to the persistence of alternative forms of memory that continue to challenge the limits of official narratives. The testimonies preserved by NGOs, the fragments carried in personal recollections, and the stories that circulate within families and communities all constitute a parallel archive that resists complete assimilation into institutional frameworks. These forms of memory do not necessarily resolve the ambiguities surrounding May 1998, nor do they provide the kind of evidence required for legal redress; however, what they do offer is a reminder that the history of the riots cannot be reduced to what has been formally recognized. They sustain the presence of experiences that remain difficult to verify, yet impossible to fully dismiss.

Ultimately, to write the history of May 1998 is to confront the limits of historical knowledge itself. The task is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to account for how this uncertainty has been produced, managed, and contested over time. By tracing the formation of an evidentiary partition across media reporting, institutional documentation, and lived memory, this thesis has sought to show that the problem of May 1998 lies not only in what happened, but in the conditions that have shaped how it can be known. The legacy of the riots, then, is not only one of violence and political transformation, but of an enduring struggle over the terms of recognition, responsibility, and remembrance.

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