Talking Indonesia: the people versus Fadli Zon

BY JEMMA PURDEY



Courtesy of Komnas Perempuan

4 JUNE 2026

Last month marked the 28th anniversary of the mass rioting, that shook Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, and other major cities for several days in mid-May 1998. There was widespread looting and arson, which resulted in the deaths of over a 1000 people and large-scale property damage and capital flight. Soon, it was also revealed that incidents of sexual assaults and rapes

had occurred on a massive scale. The rioters' targets were overwhelmingly properties and businesses owned by ethnic Chinese Indonesians. The victims of sexual violence and rapes were also, although not exclusively, Chinese, Indonesian women.

In the following days, Suharto's authority became fractured and his regime fell, ushering in the Reformasi era. Key actors involved in these events of almost three decades ago, are today at the centre of power in Indonesia. Prabowo Subianto, now President, was then Commander of Kostrad, the Army Strategic Reserve Command, and Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, now Defence Minister, was then Commander in charge of Jakarta, Pangkoops Jaya. At the time, Sjamsoeddin's failure to protect the capital was singled out for condemnation. Around the fringes of these events was also Fadli Zon, a long-time supporter of Prabowo, who by his own account, was close to the now president as the events of May 1998 played out.

When he was appointed the Minister of Culture in Prabowo's first cabinet in 2024, Fadli Zon immediately embarked on a controversial project to rewrite Indonesia's official history for school curricula. He had a particular interest in the way in which the history of May 1998 would be represented. This became a focus in his public statements about the project, including challenging the historical account of these events accepted by the official government-appointed task force set up after the riots, and by rigorous academic research. Then in June 2025, Zon went on the record questioning if the sexual assaults and rapes had taken place. A few months later, a group of advocates, including some of those directly involved in the fact-finding investigation and who provided support to victims at the time, filed a case against the minister in the Jakarta Administrative Court. Following several months of evidence, the trial concluded in April 2026.

What was the nature of their case against Minister Zon? How did the court respond? And what implications might this case have for the broader struggle for human rights protections and democracy in Indonesia right now? In this week's episode, Jemma chats with Airlangga Julio, associate lawyer at AMAR Law Firm and Public Interest Law Office and a member of the Advocacy Team for Democracy (Tim Advokasi Untuk Demokrasi, TAUD).

In 2026, the Talking Indonesia podcast is co-hosted by Dr Jemma Purdey [https://url.au.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/JRXqCQnzDmsBm748VtPhVHGo8Io?domain=australiaindonesiacentre.org/] from the Australia-Indonesia Centre, Dr Clara Siagian [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4413-1446] from the University of College London, Dr Jacqui Baker [https://url.au.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/G0FhCVAGLrs01Mj7BtJsvHELDbu?domain=profiles.murdoch.edu.au] from Murdoch University, [https://url.au.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/Dl4jCP7yBlsvqQAOgTzfOHxqsNL?domain=indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au] Dr Elisabeth Kramer [https://url.au.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/Dl4jCP7yBlsvqQAOgTzfOHxqsNL?domain=indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/] from the University of New South Wales, and [https://url.au.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/mvIvCROAEnsn8NPJYHPiKH1LzxK?domain=indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au] Tito Ambyo [https://url.au.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/mvIvCROAEnsn8NPJYHPiKH1LzxK?domain=indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/] from RMIT.

Privacy policy

HISTORY, TALKING INDONESIA

Share this entry

You might also like

Why the new TNI Law is legally flawed: critical notes from PSHK

Why the new TNI Law is legally flawed: critical notes from PSHK

Half a century on, victims' voices haunt a democratic Indonesia

Half a century on, victims' voices haunt a democratic Indonesia

Talking Indonesia: the history of corruption in Indonesia

Talking Indonesia: the history of corruption in Indonesia

Draconian and illiberal: Indonesia's new KUHAP is worse than the old one

Draconian and illiberal: Indonesia's new KUHAP is worse than the old one

Gibran plans to resign as VP. Is the end nigh for Jokowi's dynasty?

Gibran plans to resign as VP. Is the end nigh for Jokowi's dynasty?

Who should govern fire? Prabowo's new instruction reshapes the politics of Indonesia's burning landscapes

Who should govern fire? Prabowo's new instruction reshapes the politics of Indonesia's burning landscapes

Indonesia at Melbourne is supported by:

Melbourne Law School Asia Institute Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society
Indonesia Forum Faculty of Arts Indonesia Democracy Hallmark Research Initiative

Indonesia at Melbourne

Room 726, Level 7, 185 Pelham St,
The University of Melbourne
Parkville 3010 VIC
Australia

Phone: +61 3 83448581

Email: indo-at-melb@unimelb.edu.au

Date created: 1 July 2015

Editor: Ary Hermawan

Editorial board:
Professor Tim Lindsey
Dr Tim Mann
Aron Corbett

We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Owners of the lands upon which our campuses are situated.

Phone:13 MELB (13 6352) | International: +(61 3) 9035 5511
The University of Melbourne ABN:84 002 705 224
CRICOS Provider Code:00116K (visa information)

Disclaimer & copyright
Accessibility
Privacy

© Copyright - Indonesia at Melbourne