Editorial: Rewriting History, Recreating Lies

Editorial Omong-Omong
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> “Our written history is a catalog of crime” – taken from “History Will Teach Us Nothing” by Sting

For Prabowo Subianto, now Indonesia’s president, the year 1998 remains one of the most controversial and consequential chapters of his life. He was officially held responsible by a military inquiry for ordering the abduction of pro-democracy student activists, which led to his dismissal from the Indonesian Armed Forces.

Human rights groups and independent investigations have also raised serious concerns about the involvement of military figures in the May 1998 riots, which saw widespread violence, including the mass rape of Chinese Indonesian women. While no judicial ruling has formally implicated specific military leaders in orchestrating the riots or the sexual violence, several names, including senior officers, have repeatedly appeared in reports highlighting the military’s failure to prevent or stop the atrocities.

Despite these incidents, Prabowo was never criminally prosecuted. In the aftermath, he lived in self-imposed exile, primarily in Jordan, for several years before returning to Indonesia and reentering politics.

Now that he is the nation’s most powerful man, any event in that year must be entirely rewritten, piece by piece. Starting with attacking the credibility of the event, questioning if they really happened in the first place. This is the job for one of his most trusted and

loyal men, Fadli Zon, Indonesia's Minister of Culture.

To make the rewriting credible, Fadli—like so many before him—resorts to nationalism. Or rather, *his* version of nationalism. He claims that acknowledging the mass rape scandal would humiliate the nation. But this claim is as misguided as it is absurd. There is nothing humiliating about telling the truth. Indonesia will not be disgraced by crimes committed by a group of criminals. On the contrary, we should take pride in our willingness to confront such horrific chapters of our past. Only by acknowledging them can we prevent them from happening again. Because no progress ever comes from denial.

Fadli, himself a historian by training, has quickly gathered like-minded historians from across the archipelago to rewrite the nation's history in an attempt accused of whitewashing any event implicating his boss.

First thing first. He is now targeting to create doubts on whether the mass rape of Chinese Indonesian women during May 13–14, 1998 really existed. He told a TV interview that there was no evidence that mass rape took place during that time. He questioned the word "mass," while saying that a rape or two possibly happened, but there has been no evidence of mass rape, challenging anyone to come up with evidence of such incidents.

Fadli Zon's assertion directly contradicts findings from the Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF), a government-appointed body including the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM), the Attorney General's Office, police, and various civil society groups. The TGPF confirmed at least 85 cases of sexual violence, with 52 rapes, 14 aggravated rapes, 10 sexual assaults, and 9 incidents of sexual harassment documented across Jakarta, Surabaya and Medan.

These figures align with the Volunteer Team for Humanity (TRuK), which independently recorded 168 incidents of sexual violence, the majority involving gang rape targeted at Chinese-Indonesian women. The joint team noted that the actual number of victims is likely much higher, citing widespread fear and stigma that prevented many women from

coming forward. Labeling such coordinated attacks “mass rape” is not exaggeration. Hundreds of women experienced rape in multiple cities around the same time, often in group attacks—a pattern that by definition constitutes mass sexual violence.

If hundreds of women were raped around the same time in several cities by identical groups, what else can be called mass rape?

But Fadli’s denial is not about evidence. It is about impunity. And in Indonesia, impunity is not a loophole, it is the architecture. From the mass killings of 1965 to the abductions of 1998, from East Timor to Papua, the state has mastered the art of erasure. Crimes are documented only to be dismissed. Victims are heard only to be disbelieved. Perpetrators are identified only to be promoted.

What Fadli is doing is not new. He is simply continuing the long tradition of silencing, of distorting, of protecting the powerful from accountability. When past perpetrators walk free, or become presidents, it is inevitable that history will be reshaped in their favor. If no justice follows atrocity, denial is just the next stage of crime.

His role as culture minister turns absurd when he uses it to erase memory rather than protect it. The duty of culture is to preserve truth, not bury it beneath propaganda. Yet in Fadli’s hands, the ministry becomes a weapon, not for understanding who we are, but for telling us what we are not allowed to remember.

Today, as Indonesia claims to be a democracy and a rising power, its foundations remain rotten. Because no nation can stand tall when it refuses to face the crimes it committed against its own people. No future can be built on lies, not even the well-crafted lies of ministers and generals.

The victims of May 1998 have waited for over two decades. They have endured silence, disbelief, threats, and shame. Some have died. Many still live in trauma. And now, they are asked once again to prove their pain to a country that has made a habit of not listening.

Fadli's words are not just offensive. They are dangerous. They embolden rapists, abusers, and all those who believe violence will be forgotten with time. They remind survivors that their truth will always be optional, their dignity expendable.

A country that denies the wounds of its women is a country that has not healed. And a nation that rewrites its history to serve the guilty does not deserve to be called a republic. It is merely a shadow play, a show of sovereignty, masking a rot within.

In Indonesia, the history of impunity is the history of the state. Until that changes, until someone dares to break the cycle, the ghosts of 1998, and of every unpunished crime, will continue to haunt every denial, every lie, and every attempt to silence the truth.

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