

# Describing Kekerasan

## Reconciling the Local and the National

Research >  
Southeast Asia

Since the fall of the Suharto government in May 1998, Indonesia has experienced an increase in the frequency and intensity of violence. This has included communal violence, terrorism, lynchings, criminal violence, and state terrorism. The increase in both gruesome violence and everyday instances of deadly criminal violence has made many Indonesians feel increasingly unsafe in their own nation. Some have even begun to reflect on the 'good old days' of the New Order when violence, although pervasive, was controlled.

By Jemma Purdey

Numerous scholars, historians, social scientists, and anthropologists, from Gellner to Pandey and Friedlander, have contemplated the question of how exactly we can write about violence, particularly mass violence. It is a highly contested discursive space: How do you locate the truth about an event which, in its re-telling by perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, defies a single narrative? In post-New Order Indonesia do we need an understanding of violence that is less focused on the centre?

Scholars of recent violence in Indonesia have constructed narratives and histories of violent events by stepping back and observing the ways in which Indonesian society responds to violence, and have closely examined political and military contexts and structures to understand how they contribute to violence. The sheer number of articles and papers written by Indonesianists from all disciplines on this subject reflects the range of violence in Indonesia but, also, our fascination with it. This interest is particularly remarkable when compared to the still relatively small amount of research and writing about the killings in 1965-1966, in which it is estimated up to 500,000 people died: why this 'sudden' interest in violence? Furthermore, what approaches are scholars taking towards this subject?

In his volume *The Indonesian Killings, 1965-1966*, published in 1990, Robert Cribb concludes his introduction by reflecting on what had, at that time, been written about the killings. Cribb found that, on the one hand, analysis lacked understanding of the pervasive structural nature of the 'national', that is, the political, in relation to the killings and, on the other, that 'local', that is to say personal or cultural, explanations were also absent or overlooked. This difficulty in reconciling the national and the local persists in writing about violence, in all its forms, in Indonesia today. The difference today is that the area of analysis focused on the struc-

tural dimensions of violence is now vast. In most recent writing about violence in Indonesia, sources of conflict are sought in the processes of the state and its Jakarta-centred authority. This is the predominant form of analysis, regardless of whether it is led by a belief that the prevalence of New Order structures supported conflict after 1998, or by a profounder historical analysis looking back to colonial or pre-colonial times. Yet questions still remain about the agency and responsibility of individuals or members of the crowd involved in carrying out violence in Indonesia. Together with the historical and political context, local sources of agency for violence need to become part of the explanation. Paul Brass put it simply, 'If the state is responsible for riots and pogroms then the people are relieved of responsibility...But the state does not operate independently of its citizens and subjects, who are themselves implicated in these conflict-generating processes...'.<sup>1</sup> We need to know more about the perpetrators of violence: as Veena Das suggests, we need to understand 'the moral and ethical processes and judgments of those who participated'.<sup>2</sup> But how do we get at the world view of perpetrators of violence, especially mass violence, given the anonymity and impunity accorded to so much violence in Indonesia?

### The problem of describing violence as cultural

Some scholars, although their numbers remain limited, have brought us closer to understanding violence in Indonesia. One of the reasons for a lack of significant research focused on local, and personal, sources for violence is the reluctance among scholars to enter into a discourse which labels violence as cultural, arguing that to do so would further absolve the agents, individuals, and groups of responsibility. However, the fact in Indonesia is that the cycle of impunity for violence is made possible by the existence of the opportunity to blame the state, the colonial powers, and the social structures they put in place. The consequence of this view is that responsibility is rarely taken by anyone. However, if we understand 'culture', with respect to violence, not as being primitive or primordial but, rather, a way of feeling and acting which is historically and socially constituted and constantly reinvented and learned, our understanding of it demands consideration of both the local conditions and the conditions at the centre which facilitate violence.

The prominent discourse within Indonesia about violence, however, continues to exclude the agency of the individual or community member. Following the bomb attacks in Bali on a busy tourist-strip in October 2002, which killed up to 185 people, mostly foreigners, prominent Indonesian commentators described these acts as sympto-

matic of the sickness within Indonesian society, and its moral depravity and lack of humanity as the consequence of an oppressive past.<sup>3</sup> In an interview with *The Jakarta Post* at around that time Franz Magnis Suseno, a professor at Jakarta's Driyarkara School of Philosophy, described the current state of the 'body of the nation' as being scarred by its past. 'The people are sick. They are confused and lack vision after years of having been oppressed. There are no exemplary figures who are able to help them escape this problem.' The view presented is of a nation or a people, which, not unlike Pandey's 'passive victim(s)',<sup>4</sup> is a product of colonialism or some other system of institutional oppression and therefore takes no responsibility for the violence it now inflicts upon itself. The source of the violence is external. At a point in time when many scholars within and outside Indonesia are working to rediscover its histories of violence and Indonesia's institutions of transitional democracy are barely standing, comments like these from Suseno, and others, are disturbing. Quoted in another recent news article, Azyumardi Azra, Rector of the Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta [the State Islamic University], asked himself the question, 'A man suspected of stealing a chicken is set ablaze. How can that be?' His response was, 'Our society is suffering schizophrenia and hypocrisy.'<sup>5</sup> This comment was made alongside those of others that Indonesia was mentally ill. Such a dialogue is disturbing in the context of reading Pandey's critique of approaches to remembering the Partition in India, which censor the recovery of memory. The descriptions used by scholars of Partition, and those cited above which refer to Indonesia, hark back to the past. The 'people' or, alternatively, the *massa*, are portrayed once more as 'innocent masses' who, Pandey comments, 'have no will of their own' and 'who must be allowed to

forget so that they can return to their normal, everyday lives.'

This urges us to ponder, then, what precisely is 'normal, everyday life' in Indonesia today and at the time of the violent events we record. An article by Ariel Heryanto, written in response to the statements of outrage from experts in Indonesia and the international media about the way in which one of the suspects in the Bali bombing, Amrozi, was interviewed by police, addresses this issue directly. The smiles of both the Bali police and Amrozi, displayed before the world's media, were interpreted by many, particularly in Australia, as being insensitive. Heryanto, on the other hand, remarked 'what most angry commentators...have failed to understand is the extent to which similar gestures, and smiling in particular, has been embedded in social lives of most Indonesians with diverse meanings'.<sup>6</sup> He describes this gesture as cultural, as something done unconsciously and without political motive. Like Pandey's insistence of acknowledging the work of 'regular citizens' in the violence of Partition, in its new version the history of violence in Indonesia needs to incorporate the local, individual, and cultural when analysing the political conditions leading to violence.

Explanations of the pervasive violence in Indonesia as an illness experienced by the nation as a whole presents a normative and generalized view which excludes, once again, the individual from this history. Victim, perpetrator, bystander are rolled into one. The assessment of individuals and their actions is medical rather than political, judicial, or social. Therefore, instead of seeking a solution through the law or through social policy, a medical solution is sought. Thus, language used to refer to violence has major implications for the manner in which it is resolved, and for the level of responsibility taken by the perpetrators. Narratives of the victim and perpetrator are essential in any process which attempts to block the notion of violence – in whatever form – becoming 'normal' or everyday in Indonesian society. By adding humanity and the individual to this story it necessarily denies normalization.

Writers on violence in Indonesia

face multiple dilemmas when confronting their subject. Like historians and social scientists in any field, theirs is a responsibility to weigh the evidence and produce that version of 'history' which they see as best. More than that though, when writing about violence morality, emotion, and notions of responsibility and seeking justice weigh just as heavily as the pursuit for factual truth. Scholars writing about violence in Indonesia, a nation state in transition to democracy, do their work within circumstances in which the search for truth about violence as a means to justice is an elusive one for victims and their supporters. This is perhaps a heavy burden for scholars to bear but, nonetheless, it is one they must take on in the absence of state institutions and international regimes willing to carry it out. ◀

Dr Jemma Purdey recently completed her thesis on 'Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996-1999' at the University of Melbourne. She is currently an affiliated fellow at the IIAS, sponsored by an Australian Research Council Grant. [jepurdey@hotmail.com](mailto:jepurdey@hotmail.com)

### Notes >

- 1 Brass, Paul R. (ed.), *Riots and Pogroms*, London: Macmillan (1996), pp.34 and 42.
- 2 Das, Veena et al (eds.), *Violence and Subjectivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2000), pp.16-17.
- 3 'Corruption, lawlessness: The root of all problems', *The Jakarta Post*, 18 November 2002.
- 4 Pandey, Gyanendra, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2001), p.62.
- 5 Nafik, Muhammad and Sri Wahyuni, 'Indonesia Mentally Ill: Experts', *The Jakarta Post*, 16 November 2002.
- 6 Heryanto, Ariel, 'Politically Incorrect Smiles: Bali incident', *The Jakarta Post*, 25 November 2002.