A Road to "Unity in Diversity": The Case of Indonesia's Chinese Minority Group

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Abstract

Indonesia is well-known for its diverse ethnic groups. The lovely motto *bhinneka tunggal ika* (unity in diversity) has long been used to foster national identity and demonstrate how these many ethnic populations may cohabit peacefully. However, this is not always the case, especially among the Chinese-Indonesian community. This article examines the history and current situation of the Chinese-Indonesian minority, which has faced various forms of violence and discrimination since the Dutch colonial era, to understand why Chinese Indonesians are frequently used as a scapegoat for problems in the country, particularly those related to economic disparity. It explores the causes and implications of the unfavourable sentiment against this ethnic group using Johan Galtung's concepts of direct, structural, and cultural violence. It also evaluates the Indonesian government's legislative and social actions to solve the issue, concluding that they are insufficient to promote constructive peace and justice. The article argues that a genuine reconciliation process is required to heal the trauma and promote mutual understanding among Chinese Indonesians and other ethnic groups.

Key Words

Discrimination, structural violence, Chinese Indonesians, reconciliation

Introduction

For decades, the term *bhinneka tunggal ika* (unity in diversity) has been a widely known national slogan in Indonesia. It tries to encapsulate the breadth of the country's cultural riches and demonstrate its advantage of soft power when compared to other countries. However, as a country with the largest Muslim and Javanese population in the world, the fact that it officially accommodates five other religions and multi-ethnic communities

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has the potential to spark a variety of violent conflicts, particularly when viewed through the lens of ethnic group conflict.

Indonesia's ethnic conflict dynamics have been highly tumultuous both before and after independence. Out of the dozens or hundreds of ethnic groups in Indonesia, the Chinese ethnic group is most likely one of the ethnic minority groups that has received attention on multiple violent occasions over the last 30 years. One of the most notable examples occurred during the 1998 riots. Anti-Chinese riots broke out in Indonesia in May 1998 as part of the reformation process. It is a tragedy that demonstrates widespread hostility toward the Chinese ethnic minority community.

Johan Galtung (1996) defines violence as a situation in which humans are prevented, either intentionally or unintentionally, from fulfilling their basic human needs. He further categorizes basic human needs as survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. According to his typology of violence, various factors can deny basic requirements, including death and mortality, suffering and sickness, isolation, and repression. Death and mortality contradict survival needs; misery and morbidity negate well-being needs; alienation negates identification needs; and repression negates freedom needs (Galtung 1996). Using Galtung's definition of violence and an examination of the history of the Chinese ethnic community in Indonesia prior to independence, this article contends that the negative sentiment stems from intricate political plots and degrading narratives associated with various forms of violence against the ethnic group.

Indeed, the government has taken some measures to prevent tragedies like the 1998 anti-Chinese riot from occurring again. However, this article suggests that those actions are insufficient. The blasphemy prosecution of former Jakarta Governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, who is of Chinese descent, appears to demonstrate that hostility toward the ethnic minority persists (Tasevski 2017). This study will look at the persisting reluctance by analyzing the dynamic relationship between ethnic groups and the state or authority throughout history. The discussion will be expanded to find out what type of measures have been taken by the government, what is still missing in reconciliation initiatives, as well as potential approaches to encouraging peace and justice for the Chinese ethnic community.

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyse the history of the Chinese Indonesian community and the resolution of discrimination experienced by the community. This approach is suited to capture what is lacking in the resolution process needed by the Chinese Indonesian community and the Indonesian society as a whole. The data used in this

study to examine the sentiment against the Chinese Indonesian community were based on the literature study, newspaper, and social media "X," formerly known as Twitter. By analysing the primary and secondary data, this study is expected to find and fill the gap regarding what is still missing during the resolution process.

A History of Violence

The Chinese ethnic community has been an integral part of Indonesia's history and its presence can be traced way back to the Majapahit Empire era. The community of Chinese people in Indonesia's region began to notably flourish and gain a certain social status in the seventeenth century as a result of the growing economic opportunities created by the colonial economy of the Dutch East Indies as well as the migration from Mainland China (Van Der Meer and Eickhoff 2017). The rulers of the Dutch East Indies attempted to control the Chinese population by assigning them the status of "Foreign Orientals" (Soebagjo 2008:41). Initially, this status was equivalent to that of the *pribumi*, "the Natives."[1] However, it was later changed to be below that of "Europeans" but above that of "Natives." The Dutch East Indies strategy is known as "divide and rule," which tries to keep various ethnic communities in check by dividing them into separate social statuses. After the Chinese Rebellion in 1740, which resulted in the mass murder of ethnic Chinese, the Dutch rulers restricted the role of the Chinese population to only supporting the colonial economy (Soebagjo 2008:139). This system of ethnic segregation and division of labour persisted until the early 20th century, resulting in deeply entrenched social divisions in the region. This situation led to discrimination not only against ethnic Chinese but also against indigenous Indonesians.

The discrimination persisted after Indonesia gained independence in 1945. The new government under President Sukarno viewed Chinese Indonesians as a 'problem' for Indonesia's nation-building due to the Dutch's segregation system, which classified them as a separate ethnic group outside of *Bangsa* (the nation of) Indonesia (Giblin 2003). Considering such a situation, some communities within the Chinese population, known as the 'Peranakan,' who have attached themselves both socially and politically to Indonesia, made efforts to assert their standing and combat discrimination and prejudice against them (Soebagjo 2008; Winarta 2008) There were discussions within the *Peranakan* about the best approach to take, whether it be through assimilation or integration, such as joining political parties while still preserving their ethnic identity (Soebagjo 2008; Turner and Allen 2007).

In 1966, after Suharto successfully overthrew President Sukarno and assumed power, he established a 'patron' relationship with some of the Chinese minority groups in the country. Researchers have discovered that Suharto leveraged their economic influence and formed close ties with Chinese business elites (McLaughlin 2016; Soebagjo 2008; Turner and Allen 2007, 115). Suharto's successful patron relationship with a few Chinese Indonesian business elites resulted from careful manipulation. By utilising the impact of the 1965 anti-communist tragedy in which many Chinese Indonesians were being stigmatised as communist sympathisers and more vulnerable to potential discrimination and violence, Suharto coerced Chinese Indonesian tycoons to 'compensate' for his 'protection' (McLaughlin 2016; Soebagjo 2008; Turner and Allen 2007). By co-opting a small number of Chinese Indonesian tycoons and keeping them in check, Suharto created an economic system in which these tycoons became economically powerful but were ultimately beholden to him. By 1994, this system gave rise to 21 Chinese Indonesian conglomerates out of 25 existing conglomerates. Suharto's economic strategy, which relied on a small number of Chinese Indonesian tycoons, reinforced the stereotype that had existed since the Dutch colonial era: the Chinese Indonesians, in general, controlled the Indonesian economy (McLaughlin 2016; Soebagjo 2008; Turner and Allen 2007). Suharto once claimed that Chinese Indonesians controlled a disproportionate share (70 per cent) of the Indonesian economy, even though they made up a small minority (around 3 per cent) of the population (Suryadinata 1976). The claim that Chinese Indonesians dominated the Indonesian economy is not entirely accurate. While there are few affluent Chinese Indonesians, most of the Chinese Indonesian community comprises people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Many have been poor and marginalised since the Dutch colonial era (Turner and Allen 2007).

Suharto's strategy of establishing a patronage system with a small number of Chinese tycoons amplified the negative sentiment of most other Indonesians against the Chinese Indonesians. This created the perception that Chinese Indonesians were privileged and had unfair advantages while other Indonesians were discriminated against, which affected the perpetuation of violence against Chinese Indonesian people. When the 1997 financial crisis hit Indonesia, Chinese Indonesians, portrayed as economically superior, became an easy target of the anger of lower-middle-class *pribumi* who suffered severe poverty (McLaughlin 2016; Turner and Allen 2007). During the 1998 riots, angry and frustrated anti-Chinese mobs looted Chinese Indonesian businesses, rapped Chinese Indonesian women, and killed Chinese Indonesians in many parts of Indonesia (Hoon 2006).

Aside from the strategy involving Chinese Indonesian business elites as patrons, Suharto indirectly oppressed Chinese Indonesians through assimilation policies during his 30-year regime. Some regulations, for example, ban all Chinese-related language newspapers, socio-political associations, language schools, educational institutions, and Chinese festival organisations (McLaughlin 2016:9; Turner and Allen 2007:115; Winarta 2008:65). Furthermore, Suharto limited Chinese Indonesians' opportunities for education by implementing a 10 per cent quota limit for Chinese Indonesians in several courses in public universities (Turner and Allen 2007). Suharto's regime also encouraged Chinese Indonesians to change their names to sound more Indonesian and put a code on the national identity card that identified the holder as Chinese (McLaughlin 2016:9; Turner and Allen 2007:115).

The above historical narrative of the Chinese Indonesian community highlights all three forms of violence that Galtung defined: direct, structural, and cultural violence. In general, direct violence is associated with physical injuries or pain infliction caused by a specific perpetrator (Galtung 1996; Jeong 2018). However, direct violence does not only refer to physical but also verbal and psychological abuse (Jeong 2018). Meanwhile, structural violence is a form of violence built into the structure of society and cultural institutions while not having a clear subject-object relation (Jeong 2018; Galtung 1969). Structural violence could slowly reduce human quality of life and further affect their value as human beings. Oppression and discrimination are the examples. Cultural violence is a facet of culture that legitimises direct and structural violence by making it acceptable, right, or at least not wrong (Galtung 1996).

The murder and rape cases during the 1998 riots against Chinese Indonesians can be categorised as direct violence. Suharto's intimidation through several regulations during his regime could also be classified as psychological abuse, part of direct violence. Through those regulations, Suharto's regime infused fear into the Chinese-Indonesian community. As a result, they were afraid to express their culture (McLaughlin 2016). The regulations that discriminate against the Chinese Indonesian community are part of the structural violence conducted by the Indonesian government. The limited access to education and political and social representation is proof of such violence. During the Dutch colonial period and Suharto's administration, the Chinese Indonesian minority experienced alienation because their identity needs were denied by both administrations through various policies that distinguished them as a separate socioeconomic class from the indigenous population, leading to their marginalisation.

A Stigmatised Community

The violence against the Chinese Indonesians during the 1998 riots was justified because of the common belief that they were economically advantaged due to some Chinese Indonesian tycoons' involvement in the corrupt Suharto government (Winarnita 2008). The alienating narratives circulated during Suharto's regime, such as using the derogatory term "orang Cina" to associate Chinese Indonesians with communism, fuelled this belief (Budiman 2005; Eifert 2012:89). Cultural violence refers to the use of language, symbols, and images to justify or legitimise violence. In this case, the government's use of derogatory language against Chinese Indonesians created a climate of fear and resentment, making violence against them more likely.

The history of Chinese Indonesians in the country, particularly during Suharto's regime, shows that no competing narrative has escalated the latent conflict between the Chinese Indonesians and other communities or balanced the dominant narrative constructed by political elites. Nevertheless, escalation is necessary for the conflict to progress toward sustainable peace (Lederach 1995). From the Dutch colonial era until Suharto's administration, narratives have always come from elites who consistently created a sense of 'otherness' by placing ethnic Chinese in a separate socioeconomic class.

Manuel Castells (2007) argues that media is a social space "where power is decided". His argument is relevant to the case of Suharto's regime in Indonesia. During his time in power, Suharto controlled all aspects of Indonesian society, including the media. He could easily influence all of the narrative about the Chinese Indonesians. In the case of Chinese Indonesians, Suharto controlled the narrative by banning Chinese-language newspapers. Such a situation made it difficult for Chinese Indonesians to share stories and perspectives from their point of view with the wider Indonesian public.

Additionally, during Suharto's administration, all media outlets in Indonesia were required to obtain two licenses: a printing permit (*Surat Ijin Cetak* [SIC]) and a publishing permit (*Surat Ijin Terbit* [SIT]). Such a situation made it difficult for media outlets to operate, but gave the government the power to censor any media content that it deemed to be "sensitive," including issues such as ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-social group relations (*Suku*, *Agama*, *Ras* and *Antargolongan*, known as the acronym of SARA) (Kakiailatu 2007). All these factors made it difficult for Chinese Indonesians to express themselves freely in the media. The situation gave Suharto a free hand to oppress the Chinese Indonesians

without fear of public scrutiny. In contrast, the press was much freer during the Dutch colonial period. As a result, Chinese Indonesians could participate more actively in the independent movement. However, it should be noted that it is an oversimplification to say that the Chinese ethnic community was the only community discriminated against during Suharto's era. There was widespread discrimination against many communities, including the Indonesian indigenous people, which the administration conducted in various ways. Poverty, one of the main causes of the 1998 riots, is a good example of such discrimination's negative consequences.

An Unfinished Business

The 1998 riots prompted the new Indonesian transitional government under B.J Habibie to prevent such a tragedy, particularly regarding atrocities against the Chinese Indonesians, from happening again. At the same time, Indonesia was undergoing a period of national identity crisis, as people questioned what it meant to be Indonesians (Soebagjo 2008). Habibie took several important steps to address these issues. He issued a presidential instruction prohibiting the official use of the terms *pribumi* (natives) and *non-pribumi* (non-natives), and he allowed the teaching of Mandarin Chinese language. He set up a Joint Fact-Finding Team to investigate the 1998 riots and abolished the regulation requiring Chinese Indonesians to possess a special citizenship certificate, known as the SBKRI (Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia), a certificate of citizenship earmarked explicitly for Chinese Indonesians. These actions were significant because they represented a break from the past. The terms *pribumi* and *non-pribumi* had been used to justify discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, and the regulation requiring them to possess a special citizenship certificate symbolised their second-class status.

It should be noted that, however, Habibie created the Joint Finding Fact Team due to immense pressure from local and international communities. The government also later dismissed the team's findings. Despite that, Habibie's actions were a gesture that the new government was committed to creating a more just and inclusive society for all Indonesians (Eifert 2012; Soebagjo 2008).

The Indonesian government also made several legal efforts to eradicate discrimination against Chinese Indonesians even after Suharto-Habibie's transition period. In 2000, President Abdurrahman Wahid, known as Gus Dur, revoked a presidential instruction that prohibited the public celebration of Chinese religious festivals and religious practices. In 2002,

President Megawati Sukarnoputri officially declared Chinese New Year a national holiday. The Citizenship Law enacted in 2006 stipulates that children born in Indonesian territory are considered Indonesian citizens, regardless of ethnicity (The Government of the Republic of Indonesia 2006). This law provides a solid legal standing for every Indonesian not to be treated as a second-class citizen. In 2014, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono changed the term "Cina" to "Tionghoa" through a presidential decree with the hope that this change could promote a more inclusive and respectful attitude towards Chinese Indonesians (Anggraeni 2014).

Despite the government enacting legal protections, it has done little to address the trauma caused by negative sentiment against Chinese Indonesians. History shows that reconciliation, which would have been crucial to healing centuries of trauma, has never occurred. As a result, some parts of society remain indifferent and wary of Chinese Indonesians. Chinese Indonesians still experience discrimination. Johanes Herlijanto (2016) observes that certain *pribumi* elites continue to harbour negative feelings towards the Chinese ethnicity. He suggests this animosity has grown beyond economic issues to encompass cultural and political dominance. Soebagjo (288:144) concurs with Herlijanto (2016), stating that despite Habibie's attempts to repeal discriminatory laws, his approach towards Chinese Indonesians was insincere, driven more by a desire to regain business trust than by authentic compassion. This can be inferred from Habibie's interview with *The Washington Post*, where he implied that the role of the Chinese ethnicity in the country could be substituted. These circumstances highlight the strength of the disparaging narratives cultivated over centuries. However, Herlijanto (2016) also underscores that current attitudes towards Chinese Indonesians are complex, with many *pribumi* elites expressing empathy towards them.

The development of mediatisation, fuelled by the expansion of press freedom and the rise of the Internet, significantly influenced attitudes toward Chinese Indonesians in the post-Suharto era. John Paul Lederach (1995) contends that individuals construct their social understanding based on the knowledge they acquire through interactions and events in their surrounding environment. He also notes that conflict, meaning, knowledge, and culture are interconnected and influence one another. As a result, people's reactions to a conflict are heavily influenced by the information they receive, often obtained through the media. The reform and democratisation process following Suharto's downfall allowed people to access a wealth of information from the press, which was no longer subject to Suharto's control. According to records from the Press Board, hundreds of publishers

operated without censorship in 1999 (Kakiailatu 2007), allowing them to report on injustices experienced by various ethnic and racial groups in the country. For instance, a television report on the 1998 riots, which depicted how an innocent Chinese Indonesian lost his wife and daughter when they were burned alive in their home, challenged the stereotype that all Chinese Indonesians are wealthy and materialistic (Budiman 2005). This revelation altered people's perceptions, causing them to view Chinese Indonesians more nuancedly. Additionally, legislative discrimination against Chinese Indonesians has largely been eliminated, giving them greater opportunities to participate in politics and express their cultural heritage more freely. This, combined with mediatisation, has contributed to a shift in attitudes towards Chinese Indonesians.

Though there has been some progress, it is still insufficient to bring about justice and peace. As previously stated, legal actions have constituted the main focus of efforts to redress the 1998 catastrophe. While these measures are important, they do not address the psychological healing necessary to overcome the animosity caused by the tragedy. Galtung argues that "direct and structural violence create needs-deficit," which can result in trauma (Galtung 1996:200). The powerful yet anguished effects of the demeaning tactics employed by Dutch rulers and Suharto are still evident, as seen in the lingering negative sentiment towards Chinese Indonesians. Arguably, the trauma is not only experienced by Chinese Indonesians but also by other Indonesian communities. Galtung (1996) suggests that repeated violence can lead to structural and cultural violence, which can persist for generations, perpetuating a cycle of violence. In some parts of Indonesia, violence against ethnic Chinese still occurs (Eifert 2012). For example, Chinese Indonesians are prohibited from owning land in Yogyakarta (Bevins and Muryanto 2017). Additionally, there is evidence that anti-Chinese sentiment is on the rise again, fuelled by economic and political factors (Danubrata and Suroyo 2017; The Jakarta Post 2017). In social media, the resentment toward Chinese Indonesians is even more blatant. For instance, in an online discussion on gender-neutral restrooms on the social networking site "X," formerly known as Twitter, several users cursed a Chinese Indonesian woman and said that Chinese women like her should be exterminated during the 1998 riots (Pribady 2023).

Dutch rulers and Suharto exploited economic disparities and the disadvantaged position of the Chinese minority in the country. Jake Lynch (2011) argues that increasing levels of inequality can lead to violence and potentially trigger other forms of violence. Thus, reducing the economic gap between the rich and the poor is a critical issue that must be addressed.

Indeed, inequality and poverty remain significant challenges for Indonesia. According to the World Bank's data, approximately "40 per cent of the entire population remains vulnerable to falling into poverty" (The World Bank 2022). Accordingly, this paper suggests that other Indonesians were misled by the distorted reality and false image of wealthy Chinese Indonesians created by narratives propagated by Suharto and Dutch rulers. Nevertheless, efforts to address economic disparities in the country must be undertaken in conjunction with the reconciliation process.

The lingering mistrust between Chinese Indonesians and other Indonesian ethnicities impedes the achievement of positive peace. Galtung (1996) defines it as the absence of structural violence and the presence of social justice, and to attain positive peace, parties involved in the conflict must repair their damaged relationships, rebuild trust, and move forward. Achieving positive peace is crucial to overcoming economic disparities because it is almost impossible to reduce economic inequality without strong cooperation between society and the government. Consequently, a reconciliation process is essential. Hizkias Assefa (1999) suggests that the reconciliation process can help heal deep emotional grief caused by conflict by focusing on repairing broken relationships between parties involved in the conflict. Arguably, the lingering negative perspectives that lead to the marginalisation of Chinese Indonesians, a form of structural violence, can be reduced through reconciliation. Reflecting on the Chinese Indonesians and *pribumi* Indonesians' conflict handling process that Indonesia's government has conducted, the reconciliation process is still absent.

In this context, one of the key components of starting reconciliation is the willingness of the conflicting parties to release the anger and resentment caused by the conflict and its resulting harm (Assefa 1999). This readiness to release negative emotions is essential for achieving reconciliation and moving forward. Meanwhile, Sunny Lie and Todd Sandel (2020) find that Chinese Indonesians in social media conversations are still portrayed as the "other". The situation arguably might indicate that *pribumi* Indonesians are still not ready to enter such a phase. As an initial step to prepare the society's readiness, the government needs to establish a special task force at the national level to break the barrier of "otherness" in communication that becomes the gap between Chinese Indonesians and *pribumi* Indonesians. Forming such a task force is a crucial initial step as it can serve as a gateway for society to accept other reconciliation elements proposed by Assefa (1999). These include expressing genuine regret and remorse for the harm caused and making a pledge by the offender not to repeat the harm

(Assefa 1999:35). This process is essential for fostering understanding and promoting healing within the community. So far, no official task force in the country has been specifically established with such responsibility. Once society is prepared to enter the "readiness" phase, a new strategy can be formulated in line with the ensuing social and economic conditions.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the adverse sentiment towards the Chinese minority in Indonesia is a consequence of a prolonged cycle of violence, primarily instigated by the country's political and business elites. This has led to the creation and deep-seated entrenchment of a negative stereotype of this minority group within society. The 1998 tragedy is a manifestation of this negative sentiment. While the government has implemented several significant legal measures to address the issue, it has not fully recognised that economic inequality is a major factor in the conflict. Moreover, it has overlooked a critical step in effectively reducing the sentiment against the Chinese minority – initiating the reconciliation process, which could arguably help bridge the economic disparity in the country. To promote greater understanding amongst the nation's ethnic groups, the Indonesian government needs to initiate the reconciliation process by encouraging communication. It is significant to remember that this research offers a wide perspective on the circumstances so that other factors should be taken into consideration to explain better the violence against Chinese Indonesians such as ideologies and decentralization failures.

Funding

End Notes

[1] A classification made by the Dutch, which includes the people who had already settled in the Indonesian archipelago besides the Chinese, Arabs, and Indians.

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