

## Paradox of Inferiority: Indonesia's Muslims Attitude towards the Chinese Minority until the Reformasi 1998

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Received: 23 July 2024 Accepted: 04 October 2024

### Abstract

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world with a total of around 217 million people. Despite being the world's largest Muslim country, the economy is not controlled by the Muslims, but by the Chinese ethnic group who became Indonesian citizens since its independence in 1945. This article discusses the background of the 1998 reform movement, from Suharto's grip to the Chinese ethnic group's monopoly on Indonesia's economy. It then analyzes the reasons for the unrest among Indonesian Muslims regarding the Chinese ethnic group's domination, leading to the manipulation of religious sentiments to justify condemnation and attacks. The article also assesses its impact on the Chinese ethnic group in Indonesia and the development that has occurred after the reform movement. The methodology of this article is qualitative by utilizing both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources used in this article are newspaper reports, magazines, and government documents obtained both online and from the National Library of Indonesia, the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, and the National Archives of Malaysia. Journals and books were also used as secondary references. In general, this article finds that Indonesian Muslims are prejudiced against ethnic Chinese citizens due to the unequal economic distribution during the Suharto era and emotional manipulation led by a few groups in the name of Islam. Indonesian Muslims react because they feel inferior to the dominance of ethnic Chinese over the Indonesian economy, thus creating the paradox of Muslims as a minority.

Keywords: Indonesia; Reformation; Chinese; Muslim; Inferiority

### Introduction

The Chinese in Indonesia have a long and winding history. The economic interests of the Dutch colonialists led to a massive influx of Chinese people into Indonesia starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Reid suggested that many local regents appointed Chinese traders to act as middlemen between themselves, the indigenous population, and external markets.<sup>1</sup> It was a preemptive strategy to curb the rise of indigenous merchant class that might challenge those local regents. The Chinese population at that time was considered a minority due to their fundamental differences from the indigenous population of Indonesia. The concept of minority refers to a group of people or individuals who perceive themselves as different from a larger group, and due to physical differences, skin color,

culture, and social activities, they are treated unequally.<sup>2</sup> As for inferiority, KwangYu Lee stated that “it indicates the unconscious psychological state of an individual who constantly suffers from the lack of self-worth, a doubt and uncertainty about herself. The complex occurs when a feeling of inferiority intensifies to a point that consciousness can no longer handle it properly.”<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, the term ‘paradox of inferiority’ refers to a complex psychological phenomenon in which an individual or group possesses objective qualities, skills, or attributes that, by conventional standards, should logically instil feelings of superiority. However, despite these clear merits, they paradoxically experience a profound sense of inferiority. This paradox revolves around a deep emotional and psychological contradiction in which individuals or a collective group harbour self-doubt and feelings of inferiority, even when they possess tangible reasons to feel capable, accomplished, or on par with others. This phenomenon often arises from internalized beliefs, societal norms, historical factors, or personal experiences that influence one’s self-perception, leading to this enigmatic emotional state. This concept can be related to the condition of the Muslim majority in Indonesia, who felt that the Chinese minority was more powerful and capable compared to them. The paradox of inferiority extends beyond personal or group psychology to touch on deeper issues of identity and power dynamics within society. For the Muslim majority in Indonesia, the sense of inferiority is intricately tied to historical and socio-economic factors. Despite their significant cultural and historical contributions, the Muslim majority often feels overshadowed by the perceived economic success and social influence of the Chinese minority. This sense of inadequacy is not merely a private feeling but reflects broader social realities and historical injustices.

When people or groups experience this kind of internalized inferiority, it can manifest in various social and political behaviours. For instance, they might engage in actions aimed at asserting their own status or challenging the perceived dominance of other groups. This can lead to efforts to rectify perceived imbalances, but it can also exacerbate existing tensions and deepen social divides. Understanding the paradox of inferiority is crucial because it reveals how historical and socio-economic contexts shape not only individual self-perception but also intergroup relations. Addressing these underlying issues can help in building a more cohesive society by tackling the root causes of conflict. Recognizing the importance of historical context and striving for societal reforms can pave the way for improved relationships between communities and a more equitable social landscape.

The minority status did not prevent the Chinese from developing into an influential ethnic group and dominating the economy of Indonesia, even in the presence of the Dutch as colonizers. This is because the Dutch themselves relied on the Chinese as intermediaries between the Dutch and the indigenous Indonesian society.<sup>4</sup> The progress achieved by the Chinese in the economy during the Dutch colonial period subsequently contributed to the prejudice felt by the indigenous Indonesians towards them. According to Kahin, with the support and protection of the Dutch, the Chinese were free to explore the natural resources in the Java Islands, which eventually led to the emergence of the credit industry, resulting in the Javanese indigenous population becoming indebted to the Chinese.<sup>5</sup> This situation was exacerbated by the Dutch colonial policies, which administered through a divide-and-conquer approach, without encouraging the absorption or assimilation of the Chinese into the indigenous society. The Chinese were classified into two categories: Cina Totok and Cina Peranakan (literally Pure Chinese and Mixed-blood Chinese). Cina Totok refers to Chinese people who migrated from China and had no marital or family ties with the locals. On the other hand, Cina Peranakan refers to a Chinese person born in the Dutch East Indies (old name for Indonesia) as a result of a marriage between a Chinese man and a local woman.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between the Chinese and the indigenous population cannot be considered entirely unpleasant. The Chinese have been involved in several series of struggles against the Dutch, standing shoulder to shoulder with the indigenous population, particularly in Surabaya towards the end

of 1945. Furthermore, in February 1946, Angkatan Moeda Tionghwa (Tionghwa Youth Movement) was formed to support the indigenous population's struggle against the Dutch.<sup>7</sup> Part of the Chinese populations had supported Indonesian independence struggle to express their anti-colonial feelings, in accordance with China's Sun Yat Sen anti-colonial ideology. However, the tendency of most Chinese individuals to exclude themselves from the Dutch-Indigenous turmoil created lingering feelings of prejudice and anger that were difficult to extinguish. This is what has made the relationship between the Chinese and the indigenous population of Indonesia akin to a smoldering fire. It may seem fine on the surface, but underlying dissatisfaction continues to simmer.

### **Ups and Downs in the Relationship from the Sukarno Era to the Suharto Era**

The Chinese played a crucial role in stimulating Indonesia's economic growth. The advantages they gained during the Dutch colonial era were effectively utilized to advance and dominate economic activities in Indonesia. Conversely, the indigenous Indonesian population held the view that Chinese dominance was a hindrance to their own progress in their homeland. Economic inequality permeated the psychological space, creating long-lasting animosity. Under Sukarno's governance, the Chinese, who had been accepted as Indonesian citizens since independence in August 1945, did not enjoy the same benefits they had under Dutch colonization. Driven by the spirit of a new Indonesian nation, branded as the 'Homo Indonesiensis,' Sukarno sought to assimilate the Chinese into the indigenous society. To Sukarno, 'Homo Indonesiensis' was an attempt to portray the type of Indonesian who sacrificed their life and performed activities in the name of justice, prosperity and greatness of the nation.<sup>8</sup> In Sukarno's vision for Indonesia, bringing the Chinese minority into the fold of his ideal 'Homo Indonesiensis' was deemed as a key step towards building a united nation. He believed that by integrating various ethnic groups, including the Chinese, into this new national identity, Indonesia could overcome its divisions and move forward as a cohesive society. Sukarno's idea was that if every citizen embraced the values of 'Homo Indonesiensis'—such as dedication to justice, prosperity, and national pride—it would help bridge ethnic gaps and foster a shared sense of belonging. His goal was to weave together the diverse cultural threads of Indonesia into a single narrative that celebrated common aspirations and mutual respect. Nonetheless, Sukarno's approach to assimilation wasn't without its difficulties. The process of integrating the Chinese community into this broader vision often faced resistance. Many Chinese Indonesians were concerned that their rich cultural heritage might be overshadowed or diluted by the push for a unified national identity. This tension highlighted the broader challenges of nation-building in a country with so many distinct cultural identities. Balancing the desire for unity with the need to respect and preserve individual cultural identities proved to be a complex and sometimes contentious endeavour, reflecting the broader struggles of creating a cohesive national framework in a diverse society.

To achieve the assimilation goal, Baperki (Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia) was established in Jakarta as early as March 1954.<sup>9</sup> This organization had close ties with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which wielded significant influence in Indonesia at that time. Simultaneously, Sukarno's inclination towards the PKI facilitated the organization's alignment with the PKI.<sup>10</sup> Baperki was not aimed at creating assimilation, but rather a process of integration. This means that the Chinese were still free to practice their culture and language even after becoming Indonesian citizens. With the encouragement and support of the PKI, Baperki successfully achieved a membership count reaching hundreds of thousands.<sup>11</sup> This led to suspicions that the strengthening of Baperki implied that the PKI was expanding its influence to control Indonesia. However, according to Purdey, Baperki was genuinely committed to advocating for the interests of the Chinese community and protecting them from discrimination under Sukarno's government.<sup>12</sup>

In response to Baperki, an organization promoting assimilation, a new administration under Sukarno's Guided Democracy established a body to plan assimilation efforts. In March 1963, the National Unity Development Agency (LPKB) was established in Jakarta by Roeslan Abdulgani, a key figure in Guided Democracy and a trusted associate of Sukarno.<sup>13</sup> LPKB received full support from the Indonesian National Armed Forces (ABRI) and other Islamic-oriented groups. For ABRI and the Islamic groups, LPKB served as a means to free the Chinese community from the influence of the PKI and transform the Chinese identity to align fully with indigenous Indonesians. Under the grip of Guided Democracy, the process of assimilation was heavily promoted. Even before the establishment of LPKB, the Indonesian Minister of Social Affairs, Muljadi Djojomartono, announced that all Chinese-born individuals in Indonesia should behave like Indonesians. A mental transformation was deemed necessary, starting with changing Chinese names to ones that sounded more Indonesian. Names like 'Ong' and 'Ang' were suggested to be changed to 'Onggowasito' and 'Anggreani'.<sup>14</sup> Strangely, these assimilation efforts leaned more towards Javanese culture than Indonesian culture.

The Chinese community did not fully embrace LPKB as the primary organization driving their identity transformation. Some regarded it as akin to the "Nipponization" program implemented by anti-Chinese Japan. A small portion of the Chinese community equated this assimilation effort with the "Assaatisme" movement in 1956. This movement, initiated by Mohammad Assaat, an indigenous entrepreneur, and supported by the Islamic party Masyumi, called for affirmative action to protect indigenous Indonesian businesses and prevent discrimination by Chinese traders against indigenous traders. In his speech, which fueled the growth of this movement, Assaat stated, "Every Indonesian trader faces Chinese monopolies...once again, I feel the need for special protection for indigenous Indonesians in the economic sphere".<sup>15</sup>

His statement clearly reflects the reluctance of a significant number of indigenous Indonesians to accept the Chinese community as part of the true Indonesian identity, as they perceive themselves as indigenous. There were efforts to create a dichotomy in understanding the concept of the Indonesian nation, contradicting Sukarno's efforts to build a unified Indonesian nation at that time. According to Purdey, this movement eventually led to widespread opposition against the Chinese community throughout Indonesia.<sup>16</sup> As a result, in November 1959, through Presidential Order no. 10, the Chinese were prohibited from engaging in business activities outside urban areas to prevent rural areas from being flooded and monopolized by the Chinese community.<sup>17</sup>

During the Suharto era that followed the downfall of Sukarno through the events of the 30 September 1965 coup attempt (*Gestapu*), the reaction towards the Chinese community worsened. This was due to the anti-communist sentiments associated with the *Gestapu* event, which implicated the Chinese as among the masterminds behind the communist movement. The Suharto era, known as the "New Order," categorically classified the Chinese as one of the four "Others" in Indonesian society, alongside communists, Islamic fundamentalists, and the West.<sup>18</sup> The term "Others" implied that they were different from "us." Who are "we"? "We" referred to the indigenous Indonesians who were born and originated from the Javanese islands, whose identity differed from those whose ancestors came from mainland China. Additionally, three main pillars that represented Chinese identity, namely Chinese schools, Chinese organizations, and Chinese-language media, were no longer allowed.<sup>19</sup> Efforts to suppress the Chinese community extended to the practice of their religion, to the point where any Buddhist and Confucian religious ceremonies were only allowed to be conducted privately within their own households and not in public domains.<sup>20</sup> To further enforce control, the Suharto regime introduced special codes that were attached to the identity cards and passports of all Chinese ethnic Indonesian citizens, exposing them to discriminatory actions by the bureaucratic police and military.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese community was also required to present the Letter of Proof of Indonesian Citizenship (SBKRI) every time they dealt with matters such as applying for birth certificates, passports, or

marriage certificates.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the barriers in various fields, the New Order regime, on the contrary, encouraged the Chinese community to remain active in the business sector.<sup>23</sup> This was done to stimulate Indonesia's economy, which was severely affected by the *Gestapu* events that occurred in many parts of Indonesia. Suharto took bold steps by opening up opportunities for wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs to explore broader business prospects. These individuals, known as "*Cukong*," had their demands met and established close relationships with political elites, from the President to Ministers, and even high-ranking military officials. They were granted extensive access to licenses and contracts with the protection of political elites.<sup>24</sup> However, these wealthy Chinese individuals did not have a good relationship with ordinary Chinese people, creating a gap within the same ethnic group. According to Wang Gungwu, a historian who extensively studied the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Chinese in Indonesia served as instruments of the state for its economic growth, but in the long run, they would lose their Chinese identity due to the process of assimilation.<sup>25</sup>

One influential Chinese businessman was Lim Sioe Liong, who built a good relationship with Suharto while supplying military equipment in Central Java.<sup>26</sup> Lim benefited from his ties with Suharto and successfully gained control over the domestic money lending network, special licenses, and trade monopolies.<sup>27</sup> Suharto saw individuals like Lim as important sources to help advance Indonesia while not posing a threat to the political balance due to Lim's minority ethnic status. However, Suharto's actions of this nature led to complaints from other small Chinese traders, as figures like Lim became barriers to their rapid business growth. The declaration of the national car development in February 1996 also involved a Chinese businessman with connections to the President. These further reinforced suspicions of crony capitalism, which contributed to the resentment among indigenous Indonesians. The monopoly for this industry was handed over to William Soeryadjaya, who led the Astra Group company, and he received various incentives from the Suharto government.<sup>28</sup>

The dominance of the Chinese in the Indonesian economy has been a topic of discussion since the early 1990s, with claims that there is a Chinese-Catholic effort to control the Indonesian economy and marginalize Indonesian Muslims from mainstream economic activities.<sup>29</sup> This conspiracy theory was easily accepted by many Muslims, especially those besieged by urban poverty. They needed an enemy to blame in order to justify their hardships and suffering. Indonesian Chinese were seen as wealthy individuals who were responsible for the economic inequality in Indonesia. Based on an interview by Chong Wu Ling, a case study conducted in Medan (one of the hotspots of indigenous-Chinese relations) found the following views held by the indigenous population towards the Chinese:

Many pribumis still think that ethnic Chinese are rich because they have stolen much wealth from pribumis. Some pribumi children even throw stones at any Chinese who pass in front of their houses because they are taught by their parents that the Chinese are bad. Many local Muslims often target ethnic Chinese as their scapegoat...I believe the stereotype of ethnic Chinese among the pribumis will only disappear considerably after the older and middle generations of pribumis have passed away.<sup>3</sup>

The passage paints a vivid picture of the tensions that persist between *pribumis* and ethnic Chinese, rooted in painful stereotypes and a legacy of mistrust. It speaks to the experiences of ethnic Chinese individuals who face prejudice daily, sometimes in the form of children, influenced by their parents, hurling stones as a symbolic act of rejection. The author, as we may notice here, expresses a deep sadness at the persistence of these biases, passed down through generations, and suggests that true change may only come with time, as older generations give way to new ones. It's a call for empathy, understanding, and the hope that future generations can break free from these inherited prejudices and

build a more inclusive society. Towards the 1990s, the active involvement of Chinese business elites continued to grow, pressuring the Indonesian government to take drastic measures due to the concerns of indigenous Indonesians who saw this phenomenon as a threat to their position as the true masters of Indonesian land. Suharto summoned these tycoons to one of his estates in West Java and asked them to contribute 25% of their wealth to a cooperative. This government action raised concerns among investors about the openness of the Indonesian market. As for these tycoons, it was seen as an opportunity for them to take their capital and wealth out of the country. A Chinese community figure, Kristoforus Sindhunata, once expressed concerns about the emerging trend of competition based on ethnic approaches in Indonesian business. "I detect a dangerous trend to try to counter successful Chinese conglomerates by forming (exclusively) indigenous conglomerates," he said expressing his concern.<sup>31</sup> Sindhunata also added later that, "if this trend is left unchecked, we will reach a situation as in Malaysia where business competition goes hand in hand with racial competition."<sup>32</sup> His view can be related to Malaysia's New Economic Policy, introduced in the aftermath of the racial clash in May 1969, designed to address economic disparities between the Malay majority (*pribumi*) and the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities in Malaysia. The policy's focus on creating Malay-owned businesses and supporting indigenous entrepreneurship sometimes led to an increased perception of racial competition. This dynamic is reflected in Sindhunata's concern that forming exclusively indigenous conglomerates to counter successful Chinese businesses could exacerbate similar issues, making economic rivalry a matter of ethnic competition and potentially deepening social divides. According to Sindhunata, only one in 10 Indonesia Chinese was wealthy. The Chinese community, which represents three percent of Indonesia's 160 million people at that time, has lived under tight constraints since an abortive communist coup in 1965 after which President Suharto came to power.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1990s, there was an increasing frequency of opposition and attacks against the business interests of the ethnic Chinese community in many areas of Indonesia. It was not limited to business premises but also spread to places of worship and private residences of ethnic Chinese individuals. Such attacks were a manifestation of the dissatisfaction of indigenous Indonesians, not only towards the dominance of the ethnic Chinese, but also towards corrupt and greedy political rulers and local administrators. WRITENET, a research network sponsored by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), stated that many of the riots were carried out under the guise of Islam, using calls to restore Islam to its status as the guardian and monitor of public activities.<sup>34</sup> The report states that...these protests also represented the culmination of trends in Indonesian society which had already begun to take shape in the mid-1990s. Two decades of rapid industrialization and urbanization under Suharto had swelled the ranks of the urban working and middle classes, whose grievances against the Suharto regime and aspirations for democratization gained expression through an emerging network of labour unions, human rights bodies, student groups, and civic and religious associations. Given its problematic minority and "foreign" status, the largely ethnic-Chinese (and Christian) business class was inclined towards quiescence rather than participation in opposition politics. Thus, the movement for "Demokrasi" and "Reformasi" that emerged in March 1998 on university campuses in various Indonesian cities was led not by prominent businessmen but by loosely linked student groups, prominent intellectuals, and religious leaders such as Amien Rais, head of the modernist Islamic association Muhammadiyah.<sup>35</sup>

During the severe economic crisis that plagued and destabilized Indonesia, Suharto agreed to accept assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in April and May 1998, which resulted in the withdrawal of subsidies and consequently led to an increase in the prices of basic commodities in the market. The Suharto regime hoped to redirect public anger over the price hikes towards the IMF, but this attempt failed. The people rose up and blamed the Suharto regime, demanding that Suharto step down. At the same time, the Minister of Home Affairs, Syarwan Hamid, attempted

to divert attention by blaming Chinese traders, referring to them as “unfaithful rats to Indonesia,” accusing them of hoarding essential goods. Eklof quotes Syarwan Hamid, who incited hatred against Chinese traders, portraying them as rats that were leaking Indonesia's economy, and called on the Indonesian people to act in order to eradicate them. The term “eradicate” here carries connotations that Chinese traders could become targets of violence and even murder.<sup>36</sup>

In January 1998, in response to inflation and currency depreciation, Suharto's daughter, Siti Hardijanti Rukmana (known as Tutut), launched the ‘Gerakan Cinta Rupiah’ or ‘GETAR’ (Love the Rupiah Movement) to encourage Indonesian citizens to exchange their US dollars for Indonesian Rupiah. However, this financial campaign soon took on a tone of ethnic prejudice and attacks against the Chinese community after a prominent Chinese businessman, Sofyan Wanandi, refused to cooperate and participate in the campaign.<sup>37</sup> In order to vilify and scapegoat the Chinese, General Feisal Tanjung issued instructions for Wanandi's name to be quoted in the newspapers using his original Chinese name, Liem Bian Koen, to provoke sensationalism and direct anger towards the Chinese community. Demonstrations by an Islamic group called the ‘Front of the Islamic Youth Action of Jabotabek’ were also held in front of a local newspaper office that was said to have written an article defending Wanandi.<sup>38</sup> Based on the available evidences, the GETAR campaign launched by Tutut actually received support from several Chinese business elites such as Liem Sioe Liang and Tommy Winata.<sup>39</sup> However, this did not prevent the search for faults among the Chinese community based on Wanandi's unwillingness to participate in the campaign. The support provided was insignificant compared to the rejection towards the GETAR campaign.

Manipulation of emotions and sentiments towards the Chinese did not stop there. Major General Prabowo from the elite military unit Kopassus also played a role in fueling hatred against the Chinese. During an *iftar* gathering, on the fasting month, attended by thousands of activists and Islamic leaders at the Kopassus headquarters in Jakarta, Prabowo's close ally, Major General Syafrie Syamsuddin, attempted to link Wanandi to previous bombing incidents in Jakarta. At the same time, a book titled “Lords of the Rim” by Sterling Seagrave, which exposed the economic activities of the Chinese in Asia. It explores the profound influence of Chinese business leaders in Southeast Asia, highlighting how their economic power and networks have shaped regional politics and societies. Seagrave notes that Chinese communities often faced a complex interplay of integration and resistance, as they navigated their roles within various national contexts. He argues that while Chinese entrepreneurs contributed significantly to economic development, their success sometimes intensified local rivalries and social tensions.<sup>40</sup> The book was distributed for free so that attendees could read and become aware of the Chinese's efforts to dominate the economy, thereby arousing anger and hostility towards the Chinese.

Prabowo also collaborated with Ahmad Sumargono, the founder of KISDI (Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the Muslim World), known for his hardline approach towards non-Muslims and non-indigenous Indonesians. Sumargono exploited the hatred of Muslims towards Jews, Christians, and the United States and associated them with the Chinese.<sup>41</sup> A book titled “Konspirasi Mengguling Suharto” (Conspiracy to Overthrow Suharto) was circulated by Sumargono's network in February 1998, accusing Jewish groups, the IMF, and Indonesian Chinese of conspiring to overthrow Suharto. Allegedly, the reason for targeting Suharto was because he was a Muslim who was hostile to all the mentioned groups.<sup>42</sup> The inclusion of Jewish groups in the conspiracy narrative is significant in understanding the broader context of anti-Semitic and anti-Chinese sentiments. Historically, Jewish communities have often been depicted in conspiracy theories as manipulators behind various global or national events, a trope that has been used to fuel anti-Semitic rhetoric. In the context of Indonesia, where historical and political tensions were already high, the accusation of Jewish involvement served to intensify anti-Semitic views and frame the political turmoil as part of a larger, malicious plot.

This narrative not only targeted Jewish groups but also implicated Indonesian Chinese, who were frequently scapegoated in times of social and economic unrest. By linking Jewish groups with Indonesian Chinese in a supposed conspiracy, the book sought to consolidate these prejudices, reinforcing the perception of a unified external threat against which Suharto's regime and its supporters were defending themselves. This strategy of combining multiple targets into a single conspiracy theory helps to solidify and justify antagonistic attitudes among Muslim communities towards Chinese Indonesians. It taps into existing stereotypes and fears, exacerbating ethnic and religious divisions by portraying them as part of a coordinated effort to undermine local leaders and interests. This approach can be seen as part of a broader pattern where external groups, often including Jewish communities, are blamed for local conflicts and political challenges, thereby shaping and reinforcing antagonistic perceptions toward targeted ethnic or religious groups, in this case, the Indonesian Chinese.

Anti-Chinese sentiments reached their peak during the general assembly held at Masjid al-Azhar, Jakarta on February 8, 1998. It brought together ulama (Islamic scholars) and Muslim leaders from across the Java Islands, calling for unity to combat any elements that threatened the power of Muslims and the Indonesian economy. All the labels and accusations against the Chinese were repeated and shouted with great enthusiasm.<sup>43</sup> A few days later, the Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Hasan Basri, called for a national jihad to defend Indonesia from the traitors, indirectly referring to Chinese traders and entrepreneurs.<sup>44</sup> Suharto apparently endorsed these actions, especially since the MUI showed support for Suharto's re-election as President of Indonesia.

According to John T. Sidel, the mobilization of popular support in the name of Islam was heavily carried out during the Suharto era, leading to the worsening of majority-native sentiments of hatred towards minorities.<sup>45</sup> All the developments that occurred throughout the 1990s, prior to the outbreak of the Reformasi movement in May 1998, indicate that anger and hostility towards the Chinese ethnic group were systematically nurtured by the state apparatus. The predominantly Muslim nation gradually fostered a sense of inferiority towards the economic dominance of the Chinese, creating a new paradox in the thinking of Indonesian natives, who are mostly Muslim, that "we have become a minority in our own land." With all the damage inflicted by Suharto, a massive uprising finally took place in Jakarta in May 1998, reshaping the direction and pattern of Indonesian democracy for the years to come.

### **Reformasi 1998: The Last Nail in the *Chinese* Coffins**

Reformasi officially began on May 12, 1998, marked by the Trisakti tragedy, where four students from Trisakti University in Jakarta were shot dead by Indonesian security forces.<sup>46</sup> The pressure and public unrest stemmed from this tragedy eventually led to Suharto stepping down as the President of Indonesia on May 21, 1998. From May 13 to 15, 1998, riots quickly spread throughout Jakarta and even reached Medan, Solo, Surabaya, and Palembang. Dozens of buildings were damaged, either burned or vandalized. Banks and hotels were looted, Chinese-owned shops were broken into, and even police stations were attacked by the rioters. The house of Lim Sioe Liong, a businessman and Suharto's crony, was also set on fire.<sup>47</sup> Pictures of Lim inside his house were taken out and destroyed with sharp weapons. Fearing the threats from the rioters, non-Chinese residents of Jakarta took measures by hanging signs or posters in front of their homes to indicate that they were native or Muslim.<sup>48</sup>

Jemma Purdey explains that a systematic approach was used to encourage violence and brutality, with instructions originating from certain sources.<sup>49</sup> In Jakarta, Solo, and Surabaya, there was a significant number of deaths and injuries inflicted upon Chinese Indonesians. Chinese individuals were attacked, killed, and many women were subjected to rape. International media outlets such as



CNN and BBC extensively covered the riots taking place in Indonesia at that time. According to the report by The Joint Team of Fact Finding (TJTF), the security forces failed to effectively intervene during the riots, as they were unable to prevent attacks on the property and lives of the Chinese community, which were most at risk.

Subsequently, findings by the Team of Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes revealed that at least 152 women fell victim to group rape, with 20 of them losing their lives as a result.<sup>50</sup> To avoid becoming targets of sexual assault, both Muslim and Chinese women had to wear hijabs and *pardah*, a type of veil that covers the head and face, with only their eyes visible.<sup>51</sup> Sexual violence also occurred in other locations such as Surabaya, Palembang, and Medan between 14-16 May 1998.<sup>52</sup> While not all victims were Chinese, the TJTF report indicates that the majority of them were Chinese.<sup>53</sup>

Based on the writings of Evi Lina Sutrisno who obtained oral sources from involved witnesses, much of the turmoil occurred because the general public did not understand what was happening. They were swayed by the passionate emotions of the masses who fueled anger towards the Chinese. According to the witness she interviewed:

At first, I did not know what really happened...people shouted dirty words, for example “police are dogs”, “Chinese are dogs”, “Chinese are traitors”, and “banish the Chinese” ... I was on my way home when I saw the people of my *kampung* were opening a paint shop. I was provoked and also took several gallons of paint...I heard many people say that it was not a sin to take Chinese property; they steal it from us, we take it back.<sup>54</sup>

The witness, who had received religious education in Surabaya, became involved in attacking the properties of Chinese people in their neighborhood. After two days of participating in the riots, they were arrested by the police, tried, and sentenced to four months in prison. It became evident that the wrongdoing was driven by long-standing emotions and sentiments, to the extent that they felt no guilt in attacking the properties and lives of the Chinese, despite it being against the teachings of Islam.

The TJTF report found that the riots and violence were deliberately planned and orchestrated by certain parties who exploited existing sentiments.<sup>55</sup> While in many instances the instigators acted alongside others, much of it was organized mobilization. Indonesian security forces, particularly the ABRI (Indonesian Armed Forces), were directly involved by allowing the riots to continue without any intervention. The report recommended legal action against all known individuals involved in provoking public anger. Additionally, the Indonesian government was urged to ratify international conventions related to discrimination among ethnic groups. As a result, on June 25, 1999, Indonesia ratified the ICERD (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination). In this context, the ratification of ICERD was a significant step toward addressing the systemic discrimination faced by Chinese Indonesians and other ethnic minorities. By committing to ICERD, Indonesia acknowledged the need to confront and eliminate racial discrimination, reflecting a broader effort to move away from the divisive and exclusionary practices that had characterized the previous decades.

## Conclusion

Suharto's resignation from the presidency of Indonesia on May 21, 1998, marked a significant turning point in Indonesia's democracy after 32 years under the New Order regime. BJ Habibie, an engineer educated in Germany, took the oath to replace Suharto. He received full support from the Indonesian military, with General Wiranto openly declaring his support for the new president to ensure economic

recovery and political stability in the troubled country. Under Habibie's administration, several policies were introduced to restore inter-ethnic relations in Indonesia, which had been a hindrance to economic recovery efforts. After years of suppression under the Suharto regime, the Chinese community was finally allowed to openly practice their traditional ceremonies and celebrations. Chinese New Year celebrations were permitted on a large scale, and their original names could be used in the public domain without fear of any threats. Confucianism was also recognized as one of the major religions in Indonesia, alongside Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. However, these changes were not utopian in nature. In reality, the acceptance of the Chinese community in the public sector, particularly in the police and military, remained limited.

Based on the discussion above, the Chinese community in Indonesia faces opposition and discrimination for several reasons, including a long historical factor. Indigenous and Muslim Indonesians perceive that the Chinese have enjoyed privileges since the Dutch colonial era, which has allowed them to have greater social mobility compared to indigenous and Muslim Indonesians. The reaction of Indonesian Muslims can be anticipated because they feel that the economic domain is generally dominated by the Chinese in a predominantly Muslim country. This situation indirectly creates a paradox of inferiority, where the majority becomes a minority while the minority dominates the majority.

### Acknowledgement

This article is supported by the FRGS Grant 2021-0173-108-02 (FRGS/1/2021/WAB01/UPSI/02/2) from the Ministry of Higher Education.

### Notes

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