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Flaws of riot media coverage

JAKARTA (JP): The mid-May violence in Jakarta and several other cities could best be described as racialized state-terrorism, rather than racially motivated mass riots.

Failure to recognize the difference has been alarmingly endemic in media coverage. This is especially rampant in the foreign media, otherwise sympathetic toward the victims and the future of Indonesia. Not only can such misleading coverage boost racial antagonism, more seriously it implicitly exonerates the real culprits.

State-terrorism is a series of state-sponsored campaigns that induce intense and widespread fear over a large population, involving minimally these three elements. First, fear is derived from spectacularly and severely violent actions conducted by state agents or its proxies.

Second, violence is directed against individuals or social groups, as representatives of a larger population. Third, violence is displayed as public spectacles, so that the intended message of victimization is widely disseminated. The aim of state-terrorism is to spread greater fear among the large population against whom similar violence could happen at any time.

At present we have less than unequivocal evidence to indicate who exactly must bear the greatest responsibility for the violence in May.

Nonetheless, reports of independent investigations by non-governmental organizations and testimonies from witnesses confirm a widespread suspicion that the case has the qualities of state-terrorism as characterized above.

Eyewitnesses described riot instigators as heavy-built males with crewcuts who wore military boots. Some rape victims saw security uniforms in vans in which rape took place. While such testimonies may be sincere, they are inadequate for any conclusions to be drawn. Other indicators are called for.

Anyone familiar with Indonesia is fully aware that no social group outside the state can possibly have even half of the capacity to conduct the violence of the magnitude and effectiveness as took place in Jakarta and Surakarta two months ago.

No racial or ethnic groups in Indonesia, no matter how agitated, could possibly inflict the systematic violence in which 1,198 lives (of which 27 died from gunfire) were lost, 150 females were raped, 40 shopping malls and 4,000 shops were burned down, and thousands of vehicles and houses were set afire simultaneously in 27 areas in a capital city of 10 million inhabitants in less than 50 hours. All was done without the culprits having to confront

state security forces or face indictment.

The violence was just too perfect to leave any doubts about the narrow range of potential suspects. To have a better perspective, the following points are helpful. First, while no civilian groups in the affected areas had either the power or experience to take any active involvement in such violence, the Armed Forces has both in political-trouble spots of the nation: Irian Jaya, Aceh and East Timor.

Second, May's violence was not the first of its kind in Java. It was a recurrence of a series that followed a pattern. This century has witnessed periodic attacks against the ethnic Chinese. None of these attacks appeared to have been conducted spontaneously by local, angry and poverty-stricken masses of other ethnic groups.

In 1983, thousands of known criminals across Java were systematically slaughtered in front of their families, and their dismembered bodies were displayed in the busiest spots of public places (schools, shops or movie complexes).

The qualities of state-terrorism look glaringly obvious in many of these events. Locals are aware of what happened.

Yet, what, appeared in the media both inside and particularly outside Indonesia curiously betrays the phenomenon. Most news reports, investigative journalism, interviews or opinion columns on the events in May have focused only on racial issues. The history of Chinese immigrants, their relationships with locals and their disproportional control of the nations' economy have all been discussed.

Central to the dominant media coverage of Indonesia's riots is an allegation of who was responsible for the mass destruction: ethnically the so-called *pribumi* (natives), economically deprived and angry at the Chinese.

These allegations sometimes come with condemnation, sometimes with defense. The former portray the ethnic Chinese as purely innocent victims. The latter recite the problematic mantra to the effect that the Chinese constitute only 3 percent of the population but control 70 percent of the nation's economy. Either way, society is perceived to consist of only the good and bad guys.

Those blaming the poor masses are not only being unfair to the accused, but unwittingly helping the state-terrorism by protecting the perpetrators. These high-moraliz-

ing journalists and observers are free to expand their imagination, because the accused have no access to rebuke their accusers, especially in foreign media. Those who defend the

By locating the riots in the racial framework, both intensify the familiar tendency to racialize the population and send people's imagination in various directions. Some mili-

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pribumi are being self-defeating. Underlying their act of defending the *pribumi* by rationalizing the act of looting, burning or raping is an acceptance of the accusation that it was *pribumi* masses who actually committed the crimes.

Either way, both camps in the debate have missed the point.

tantly promote Chinese identities in culture, arts, history or party politics. Others emphasize exacerbating interracial hostility. Both exempt state agents from serious questioning and possible prosecution. No wonder gang rape continues well into the second month following the mid-May unrest.

Once entangled in a racial framework, many commentators draw comparisons from Indonesia's situation with unrest in Malaysia in 1969 or the Los Angeles riots in 1992. Such comparison is useful, but for reasons that are contrary to those commonly presented. In both Malaysia and Los Angeles violent conflicts involved primarily segments within civil society, each generally identified with ethnic markers. That is precisely what distinguishes them from Indonesia's case.

In Indonesia the agent provocateurs had no ethnic identity. Nor did they come from any particular groups within civil society. They victimized more than one ethnic group, although those of Chinese descent were their primary targets. In this sense, the violence can better be described as racialized than racist. It adopted racial colorings, apart from patriarchal brutality, but the motive was not genuine racism.

No wonder the *pribumi* were not left entirely untouched by the violence. Many *pribumi* risked their own safety when offering a helping hand to individual Chinese strangers both during the violence as well as afterward. Public condemnation of the state and aid campaigns for the victims have flourished among *pribumi* activists.

As repeatedly aired in public, the state suspiciously came out late with any remarks about the gang rapes.

All the aforementioned is not to deny that racial problems in Indonesia exist, more specifically the problems between the Chinese minority and self-proclaimed *pribumi* majority. What I am arguing is that existing racism among members of civil society was not responsible for the recent riots, nor most other major anti-Chinese riots in past decades. This racism must be clearly distinguished from the effective racialized, masculine and militarized state-terrorism that most analysts choose to ignore.

As elsewhere, racism in Indonesia flares up in household conversations, jokes, gossip or in private quarrels. Such pervasive sentiment partly explains the ease with which terrorism evolved last May. However, it did not cause the mass burning, raping or looting. It simply does not have the capacity. Rather than causing the May riots, civilian racism has been affected and intensified by both the patriarchal state-terrorism and the racializing media coverage.

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