

The May 1998 Riots and the Emergence of Chinese Indonesians: Social Movements in the Post-Soeharto Era*

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I. Introduction

The social movements launched by Chinese-Indonesians to struggle for recognition of their ethnic identity in post-Soeharto Indonesia should not be understood merely as a result of the collapse of the New Order authoritarian regime. On the contrary, the eagerness of Chinese Indonesians to participate in such movements should also be perceived as a changing process of their perception of their position in Indonesian society. This change in perception is most importantly related to a strategy of seeking security in a society where the ethnic Chinese often become the target of discrimination, violence and riots.

This paper argues that the May 1998 riots have had an important influence on changing process of perception among Chinese Indonesians. It is after this incident that the perception which encouraged Chinese-Indonesians to struggle for the recognition of their ethnic identity as well as for the abolishment of all discrimination against them began to emerge and develop. One way to understand this is by posing questions of how the Chinese-Indonesians perceived the May 1998 tragedy and how have they constructed an alternative understanding about their position in Indonesian society. These questions will be the main focus of this paper.

In dealing with these questions, this paper will discuss three important

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points. Firstly, this paper will briefly discuss the Chinese-Indonesians' perception of their position in Indonesian society during the New Order era (1966-1998). Secondly, since the May 1998 riots is considered as an important turning point in this change of perception, this paper will examine this incident, particularly the way Chinese Indonesians reacted to it, and how they perceived and constructed their understandings of it. Finally, the process of the emergence of Chinese Indonesians social movements such as Chinese NGOs in the post-Soeharto era will also be highlighted in this paper.

II. Chinese Indonesians' Perception of Their Position during the New Order Era

The Chinese Indonesians are said to have a vulnerable position in Indonesian society. They often become the target of discrimination, violence and riots, especially when the country faces an unstable political situation. The anti Chinese riots that happened during the first years of Indonesian's independence (at the end of 1940s) and during the last period of the Guided Democracy regime (at the first half of 1960s) are some examples of that. But it was only after the New Order regime came to power that the Chinese had become the target of systematic discrimination practices directed by the state. This part of this paper will briefly discuss the condition of Chinese Indonesians during the New Order era. However, more focus will be given on how they perceived the situation and developed strategies to survive.

The New Order regime implemented a policy directed discriminatively to the Chinese Indonesians soon after they established a new government in Indonesia. By this policy, Chinese Indonesians were forced to assimilate themselves into Indonesian society by abandoning every thing which could

be perceived as “Chinese”, at least in the public sphere.¹ For example, they were requested to change their names from Chinese names into names which sounded more “Indonesian”; they were not allowed to celebrate their holiday or preserve their traditional rituals in public sphere; they were also forced to close Chinese schools, Chinese mass media and Chinese associations which had functioned as important pillars to sustain Chinese identity (Suryadinata 1997: 12).

But in contrast with its assimilation policy, the New Order government seemed to maintain the image and prejudices which portrayed the Chinese as a distinct other by putting them in such situation that most of them could only participate (or choose to participate) in some certain activities within Indonesian society. Most of Chinese Indonesians, especially those who lived in the cities were led to concentrate only in business activities whether as entrepreneurs or professionals.² Only few of them chose to work in other sectors. This situation of course had reproduced the image that the Chinese Indonesians were “economic animals” who were only busy in generating money. And as this image together with other stereotypes (especially which described the Chinese Indonesians as exclusive people who were not loyal to Indonesian nation) were widespread among wider Indonesian society, the more vulnerable was the Chinese Indonesians position in the society.³

While most Chinese Indonesians seemed to share an understanding of their position as a vulnerable minority ethnic group in Indonesia, their

¹ Since 1967 the government drew up some regulations concerning ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, for examples, Circular Letter of the Cabinet Presidium no SE/06/Pres.Cab/6/1967 which decreed the use of the word Cina to replace the word Tionghoa, Presidential Directive no 14/1967 regarding Chinese religion, belief and custom, the Cabinet Presidium Directive no 37/U/IN/6/1967 regarding the basic policy to solve the Chinese problems and the Cabinet Presidium Decree no 127/U/Kep/12/1967 which regulated Chinese Indonesians to change their name from Chinese names into Indonesian names.

² For a description of the policy of New Order administration toward the Chinese Business, See Nuranto (1999).

³ For a description of the image and stereotypes about the Chinese that were so widespread among non Chinese Indonesians, see Coppel (1983: 5-27) and Winata (2001: 34).

reactions to the above described situation were by no means uniform. On the contrary, they created some diverse strategies to survive in this condition either by following what the government prescribed, that is to assimilate themselves into Indonesian society, or by hiding themselves within their own society and avoided contact with “the outsider” (Thung 1998: 90). Some of them even creatively developed a flexible strategy by going back and forth between those who chose to assimilate and those who chose to hide in their own society (Thung 1998: 90).

But however diverse the strategies that they developed, it seems that challenging the government’s assimilation policy as well as the widespread anti Chinese prejudices had never been an option. Some Chinese Indonesians instead supported the policy and actively spread the idea that the Chinese should assimilate themselves and forget their Chineseness in order to be accepted as “truly Indonesians”.⁴ Some others, especially those who engaged in business activities seemed to rely on the regime to secure their business by building relationship which resembled patron-client relation.⁵ At the same time, among many Chinese Indonesians, we could find a belief that living in cities near to military camps would be safer than living in remote places.⁶ Meanwhile, in academic level, the literature on Chinese Indonesians produced during the era, included the writings which were written by the Chinese, was dominated and captivated by the assimilation bias (Thung 1999). All these phenomena on the one hand clearly describe how strong the relative power of the New Order state was. But on

⁴ Some of them were those who supported the assimilation perspective during the decade of 1960s. However, the most important figure who actively spread the idea to assimilate was H Junus Jahja. See Suryadinata (2002: 50-54).

⁵ For the literature which provides the data about this kind of relationship, see Shin (1989: 243-244, 425), Schwartz (1994: 107-108), Supriatma (1996) and Lev (2000: 59).

⁶ This kind of opinion could be found among some Chinese, especially during Soeharto era. The author was told by some of his Chinese relatives and acquaintances some years before the May riots that although at that time there were some riots happened in some towns in Java, they believed that their town would be prevented from the riots because there was a battalion of Indonesian Army near the town and also a post of Indonesian Navy in the town.

the other hand they can also indicate that the perception which regarded the state and its apparatuses as the main party that could both protect the Chinese business interests as well as guarantee their safety was very dominant among the Chinese Indonesians during that time. And as a result of the dominance of this perception as well as the relatively strong power of the New Order state, the assimilation policy and its influences had continued to exist without any attempt to contest them.

As a conclusion, it could be said that most Chinese Indonesians clearly understood their vulnerable position in Indonesian society. But while their reactions to the situation were diverse, most of them seemed to leave the option to struggle for their rights by challenging the government's policy implemented discriminatively to them. Some of them instead kept relying on the regime for their interests and safety. This tendency on the one hand describes the relatively strong power owned by the New Order regime. But on the other hand, it can also lead us to the conclusion that a perception which considered the state as the main party which could secure the safety of the Chinese existed and became dominant among the Chinese Indonesians during that period. However, this kind of perception had undergone some changes after the May 1998 riots occurred. This change of perception, which is so pivotal for the understanding of the emergence of Chinese Indonesians' social movements, will be examined in the ensuing part of this paper.

III. The May 1998 Riots and the Changing Perception of the Chinese Indonesians

The May 1998 riots which happened in Jakarta and some other cities on May 13th - 15th 1998 shocked Indonesian society as well as the world. The riots made the capital of Indonesia resemble a dead city for several days. It was reported that about 704 buildings and houses were damaged or burned during the riots while more than a thousand of people died (Pattiradjawane 2000: 225, 230-238).

Although the victims in those riots were people from diverse ethnics, the opinion which regarded the riots as anti Chinese riots was spread among the Chinese as well as non Chinese communities. This kind of opinion was easily accepted among the people since most of the buildings damaged or burned were those which were owned by Chinese Indonesians. It was also reported that the rioters shouted anti Chinese yells while they were damaging or burning those buildings (Pattiradjawane 2000: 224). Moreover, there were also rape cases which targeted some Chinese Indonesian ladies as victims (Pattiradjawane 2000: 238-247).⁷ Observing all what happened, it is understandable if a journalist who works for a prominent daily newspaper in Indonesia wrote that the May riots could be considered as the worst tragedy experienced by the Chinese Indonesians (Pattiradjawane 2000: 252).

In spite of the debate whether the May riots could be perceived as purely triggered by anti Chinese sentiments or not, it is clear enough that they have brought fears and traumas among many Chinese Indonesians. Those fears and traumas as well as the rapid change of Indonesian situation after the riots have made some Chinese Indonesians construct alternative understandings of their position in Indonesian society. In this part of this paper, the question of what kind of alternative understandings they have constructed and how they differed from the previous perception will be examined.

1. The May 1998 Riots and the Crisis of Trust on the State

As it was mentioned above, before the May Riots, many Chinese Indonesians regarded the state and its apparatuses, particularly the military, as the main party which could protect them during unstable conditions. Some years before the tragedy, when some riots happened in some towns in Indonesia, Chinese in Jakarta as well as in other cities near to military camps would feel that they were safe because their cities were guarded by military

⁷ For the story of a woman who helped some of the rape's victims, See Sidharta (2000: 129-132).

troops. Even few months before the May riots occurred, an idea that Jakarta could become a target of such riots would be regarded as ridiculous either by Chinese Indonesians or by non Chinese people, not only because Jakarta was the capital of the country, but most importantly because the city was protected by a number of battalions of the Indonesian military forces. In other words there was a belief among some Chinese Indonesians (if not among all of them) that the presence of the state's apparatuses, particularly the military, could guarantee their safety and security whether during the normal periods or during the critical days.

But this trust on the military seemed to be in crisis when the May riots unexpectedly happened. The fact that the riots happened in a city protected by military had surprised the Chinese Indonesians as well as Indonesian people from other ethnic groups. But among the Chinese, the feeling was deeper since they were one of the groups that bore the brunt of the riots. Moreover, in some cases, the riots continued to happen though the military troops had already been in the location. In other cases, it was reported that the military or police did not even exist in the location and just came after the situation began to calm down (Pattiradjawane 2000: 228). This kind of situation had made some Chinese Indonesians reconsider their previous opinion that they could rely on the military as well as on the state in general for their safety.

The crisis of trust among some Chinese Indonesians on the state could be observed from their reactions regarding the incapability of state and military to protect them during the riots. Though the reactions were varied, all contained at least two important themes: (1) the state's failure to guarantee their safety, and (2) the need for Chinese Indonesians to take some actions in order to prevent the same tragedy to happen again in the future. For example, the secretary of Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia (PSMTI), the largest Chinese NGO led by a retired general, implied that the organization was formed as a vehicle to improve the condition of the Chinese Indonesians after the state was proved to be incapable to provide

them with security. "It is why we now form a Chinese organization, it is common for the people to go back to their primordial groups when the state can not protect them", said the secretary.⁸ Another example is an explanation of the chairman of Perhimpunan Indonesia Keturunan Tionghoa (Perhimpunan INTI), another large Chinese NGO, that the eagerness of the Chinese to join in various social movements was triggered by what happened during the May riots. He said that the May riots had made some Chinese Indonesians reconsider their position in Indonesian society which in turn led them to the decision that some actions should be taken in order to solve the problem.⁹

May be one of the best examples which could clearly picture the presence of the distrust on the state as well as the awareness of the need to do some actions among some Chinese Indonesians is the short life story told by Benny Setiono, another leader of Perhimpunan INTI. When he was asked with the question of why he decided to join a Chinese organization, he started to answer by explaining his background as a middle level entrepreneur for more than 32 years and that he did that because during 32 years of Soeharto's administration the Chinese had no choice except being entrepreneurs or businessmen. He then explained that it was the May riots that had made him aware that through out these years the Chinese had been made so powerless, put in cage, led only to do business, and finally made as scapegoats. This awareness then made him understand that, "the Chinese should wake up and do some things, at least to increase their political awareness in order to be able to struggle for the equality as citizens."¹⁰

2. The May 1998 Riots and the Challenge to the Assimilation Policy

Besides bringing the crisis of trust among many Chinese Indonesians on the state, the May 1998 riots could also be understood as an important event which led some Chinese to question the government's assimilation policy.

⁸ My Interview with I. G. Hertanto T Surya, the general secretary of PSMTI, 2002.

⁹ My Interview with Eddy Lembong, the chairman of Perhimpunan INTI, 2002.

¹⁰ My interview with Benny S Setiono, a member of Perhimpunan INTI, 2002.

Most of the questions were raised based on the data that the properties owned by Chinese had become the target of damaging and/or burning while some Chinese people had become the target of mass violence during the riots. Pointing to these data, they then began to question the effectiveness of the assimilation policy which once believed as a good prescription to solve the so called "Chinese problem" in Indonesia. However, most of the Chinese Indonesians who joined Chinese NGOs seemed to consider that the policy had failed to achieve its goal and therefore should be challenged.

The existence of the perspective which questioned and challenged the assimilation policy could be discerned from the statements of the leaders as well as activists of the Chinese NGOs after the May riots. Some statements made by some Chinese activists who joined PSMTI could be considered as one good example of it. In one bulletin distributed to its members, PSMTI's chairman stated that the assimilation policy had failed and that the Chinese had supported the assimilation program in vain.¹¹ This statement clearly showed the disappointment of the chairman and other members of this organization toward the assimilation policy. As a result, the organization chose to re-promote the idea of integration which was so well known during the 1950s because the implementation of this idea would enable the Chinese to preserve their identity.¹² Another activist of PSMTI said that in a discussion among some Chinese Indonesians soon after the riots, he raised the question to those Chinese leaders who had supported the assimilation policy. He asked Major Sindhunata¹³ to explain why the Chinese still became the target of the riots while they had already followed the instruction to change their names. He also pointed out to Junus Jahja (who had said that

¹¹ This statement was written by the chairman of PSMTI in his editorial reply to the letter of the reader of the Bulletin PSMTI, see pp. 7-8 in *Bulletin PSMTI* no. 14, May 2002.

¹² My Interview with I. G. Hertanto T Surya.

¹³ Sindhunata once was the chairman of LPKB (lembaga Pembinaan Kesatuan Bangsa, The Institute of Nation Unity Building), an institution which promoted the assimilation idea.

converting to Mohammedanism was the best way for the Chinese to solve their problem) that during the riots many Moslem Chinese's shops were also damaged and burned. Again, all that he said could imply that there was a disappointment toward the assimilation policy which in turn triggered the activist to question and challenge it.¹⁴

It is so surprising that the perspective which challenged the assimilation policy could also be found among the Chinese who could be considered as "already assimilated", that is those who had converted to Mohammedanism. H Usman Effendi, one of the leaders of Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia (PITI, Association of Chinese Moslems in Indonesia) is one of Moslem Chinese with that perspective. Commenting about another Moslem Chinese leader who always claimed himself as a Jakartan indigenous, he said that although this person did not want to acknowledge his Chinese identity and always tried to appear like an indigenous of Jakarta with an Indonesian style hat and traditional dress of Betawi¹⁵, but still he could not hide his Chinese features. He also pointed out that even the Indonesian traditional hat that the person usually wore was actually a product of hybrid culture and could not be considered as purely Indonesian. Therefore he criticized the assimilation policy as a vague idea because even if a Chinese had tried to Indonesianize himself, he could only be a mixed person at best and never totally dispense his "Chineseness".¹⁶

3. The May 1998 Riots and the Rise of Anti Racialism Awareness

The May 1998 Riots have also aroused an anti racist awareness among some Chinese who have already participated in human rights movements long before the tragedy happened. Though these people have challenged the domination of the state against civil societies since their early participation in the movements, they just began to give special attentions to the problems faced by their ethnic group after the May riots exploded. The reason is

¹⁴ My interview with Eddy Sadheli, one of the founders of PSMTI, 2002.

¹⁵ The word Betawi refers to the indigenous people of Jakarta.

¹⁶ My interview with H Usman Effendy, one of PITI leader, 2002.

because the May riots have made them aware that the problems faced by ethnic Chinese have relationship with the problem of racialism. However this awareness has also influenced some non Chinese activists who wanted to conduct systematic efforts to fight racialism in Indonesia. Together with their Chinese fellows, they then pioneered anti racialism movements in Indonesia by forming a committee named Komite Pemuda Indonesia Untuk Penghapusan Diskriminasi Ras (The Committee of Indonesian Youth for the Abolition of Race Discrimination). The members of this committee later founded an organization named as Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa (SNB, Solidarity for the Nation) which has played an important role in bringing up the idea that every kind of racialism should be fought and eradicated. However, it should be noted that these people have not only concentrated in fighting the racialism which have existed among some non Chinese people, but also which have existed among Chinese Indonesians themselves.¹⁷

4. Conclusion

This brief description of how some Chinese Indonesians perceived the condition of Indonesian society after the May 1998 riots and how they reacted to it could lead us to the conclusion that a significant change of perception has taken place soon after the riots. This change of perception included three important things. First concerned the change in the way they perceived their relationship with the state and its apparatuses, especially the military. While before May riots most of them considered the state as the most reliable party that could protect their safety and interests, after the riots they instead regarded it as incapable to guarantee their security. Second is the change in the way they perceived the assimilation policy. While before the May riots most of them were not willing to take the risk to challenge the policy, after the riots many of them began to criticize it vigorously. The third important change concerned the awareness about racialism which existed in

¹⁷ Based on my interviews with Esther I Jusuf, the chairman of SNB and Purwandono, one of the SNB members.

Indonesian society (including within Chinese Indonesian communities) as one of the important roots of the problems faced by this country. The change of perception in these three things then formed an important condition for the emergence of Chinese Indonesians social movements in the post New Order Indonesia.

IV. The May Riots and the Emergence of Chinese Indonesians Social Movements

The change of perception among some Chinese Indonesians about the condition of Indonesian society after the riots and the construction of an alternative understanding about their position in it have been important steps of the emergence of Chinese Indonesians social movements. It is this change of perception and understanding that triggered some Chinese Indonesians to struggle for their rights and interests. Many Chinese organizations, such as PSMTI, Perhimpunan INTI, SNB, Simpatik¹⁸ and Gandi¹⁹ were founded to facilitate this struggle. This part of this paper will try to describe the processes of the founding of such organizations by taking two organizations, i.e. PSMTI and SNB as examples. The reason to choose these organizations is that both of them could be considered as the first organizations to be founded after the riots. However, each of them has its own perspective about how the struggle should be carried on. PSMTI has focused itself in struggling for the rights and interests of ethnic Chinese and therefore could be considered as an ethnic oriented organization while SNB tries to conduct the struggle for the sake of the abolition of racialism in general that it could be regarded as a non ethnic oriented organization.

PSMTI was founded on August 28th 1998, three months after the May Riots. It was founded as a follow up of some discussions held soon after the riots in which the Chinese Indonesians shared their reactions to the May 1998 riots. It seems that during these discussions that the alternative

¹⁸ Solidaritas Pemuda Pemudi Tionghoa untuk Keadilan (Solidarity of Chinese Youth for Justice).

¹⁹ Gerakan Anti Diskriminasi (Anti Discrimination Movement).

perception and understanding about the condition of Indonesian society began to emerge. And as the perception was shared as a common perception, the movement that they were going to launch began to find its way.

Based on some interviews with some activists who joined the PSMTI and who once joined it but then founded the Perhimpunan INTI, the author comes to the conclusion that there were at least two separate groups which started the discussions.²⁰ One of them was the group dominated by alumni of Chinese school, especially alumni of Bahua²¹ which had already made an alumni organization named Yayasan Pancaran Hidup. However the discussions held by this group were also attended by those who were not alumni of Bahua, some of them, like Gilbert Wiryadinata who then became the vice chairman of Perhimpunan INTI, were not educated in Chinese school and could not speak Chinese. The other group was a considerably “fluid” group consisted of people who became united after attending some discussions soon after the May riots. The first discussion of this “fluid” group was held by some prominent Chinese Indonesians such as Christianto Wibisono, Junus Jahja and Sindhunata and attended by some other Chinese. As a follow up of the discussion, some of the Chinese then formed a forum named as Forum Masyarakat Demokrasi Indonesia (Formasi, Forum of Indonesian Democratic Society) where Christianto Wibisono was appointed as its chairman and Eddy Sadheli as its general secretary. Sadheli then brought up the idea to found a more established Chinese organization after the chairman, Christianto Wibisono, decided to leave Indonesia and stayed in the United States. He then shared his idea to a friend who introduced him to one of the alumni of Bahua. The unity of these two groups then paved the way for the realization of the idea. Together, they then founded PSMTI and chose Teddy Jusuf, a retired army general as its chairman. But later on, some of its members left it and founded another

²⁰ Interviews with Eddy Sadheli, I G Hertanto T Surya, Eddy Lembong and Gilbert Wiryadinata, vice chairman of Perhimpunan INTI.

²¹ Bahua is one of the oldest Chinese schools in Indonesia. Like other Chinese schools, it was also banned by the New Order administration.

Chinese Organization, namely, the Perhimpunan Inti

In contrast with the PSMTI, the SNB was founded by some activists who had already joined the human rights movements long before the riots happened. Esther Jusuf, the chairman of the SNB, was an activist of Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Jakarta (LBH Jakarta), a prominent NGO which works for the sake of human rights. She was aware of the existence of racialism problem when the May riots happened. In order to give helps to those who became victims in the riot, she then organized a crisis center. Maybe it is during these days that her awareness of the problem of racialism increased. She was then involved in some discussions about whether the May riots concerned the problem of racialism or not. While most of the activists saw the riots as only triggered by Indonesian political situation in general, few of them, included Esther Jusuf considered the riots as deeply related to the problem of racialism. Some of these activists then left their previous organizations and founded the SNB as a vehicle to struggle for the abolition of racialism which has existed among Indonesian society, including among the Chinese Indonesians. However, in some cases, SNB has developed some cooperation with PSMTI and other Chinese NGOs to conduct their struggle together.

Observing the processes of the founding of these two organizations, we could conclude that the processes of the emergence of the Chinese Indonesians social movements began in the May riots. It started with the Changing perception among some Chinese Indonesians about the condition of Indonesian society. Their new understanding of Indonesian society after the riots led them to do some actions in order to change their fate. One of the most important actions was to hold discussions where they could share their feelings and perceptions. It is after their feelings and perceptions were shared and considered as a common feeling and perception that they began to implement their idea to conduct some struggles both for their ethnic group's interest as well for the interest of Indonesian society in general. This is why, then, they founded those Chinese Organizations.

V. Conclusion

The social movements launched by Chinese Indonesians in the post-Soeharto era were not merely a result of the collapse of New Order authoritarian regime. On the contrary the emergence of these movements should be placed in a more general context that is the changing situation of Indonesian society. While the decrease of the relative power of the state after New Order regime collapsed could be considered as an important condition for the movements to emerge, the changing perception of the actors about their position in the society should also be understood as playing an important role. As argued in the paper, this change of perception happened after those actors contemplated their conditions soon after the riots exploded. Therefore the May 1998 riots could be considered as an important turning point for this change of perceptions.

This change of perception included three important points. Firstly, there was a change of perception concerning the capability of the state to protect the interests and safety of the Chinese. While before the riots some Chinese seemed to rely on the state and its apparatuses for their safety, after the riots their trust to them began to be in crisis. This crisis of trust triggered them to do some actions to protect their own interests and guarantee their security. Secondly, there was also a change of perception regarding the assimilation policy implemented by the state to them. While before the riots some of them were reluctant to challenge the policy, after the riots they became aware of the weak aspects of the policy and started to question and challenge it by bringing up some alternative perspectives. Finally there was also an increased awareness regarding the existence of racialism as a serious and complicated problem in Indonesian society. This awareness has led some of Chinese Indonesians as well as non Chinese Indonesians to conduct their struggle to eradicate it.

Although this change of perception constituted an important condition for the emergence of the Chinese Indonesians social movements, it was only after the perception was regarded as a common perception by the actors that

the movements began to find their way. This could be observed in the processes of the founding of the PSMTI and the SNB. In the case of PSMTI there were some different groups of people who then became united and founded the organization. In the case of SNB, it was the support given by some non Chinese activists which also encouraged the Chinese to form the organization. And finally, it should not be forgotten that in spite of their difference in perspectives, they still developed some cooperation in order to implement all their ideas and hopes.

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