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Explaining Suharto's Rise and Fall: International and Domestic Variables

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Explaining Suharto's Rise and Fall: International and Domestic Variables

A Thesis

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By

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Department of Political Science and International Relations

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Preface

Indonesia was my home for 18 years, but I was not taught in school about the atrocities of our post-colonial history. Over 20 years after President Suharto's resignation, his influence is still strongly felt. Yet Indonesia's dark history is not widely known.

Suharto's rise would not have been possible in the absence of US help and support – both covert and overt. Suharto's fall was largely a product of domestic divisions relating to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion. Part I of my project will examine the anti-communist purge of 1965 which facilitated Suharto's rise to power. Part II will explore the riots of May 1998 which facilitated his fall. The events of both years entailed systemic violence against the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia.

My Chinese Indonesian father, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were present in Jakarta as chaos broke loose in 1998. The direction of my research is inspired by their experiences. My hope is that this thesis does justice to their stories, and to those of everyone else who was affected.

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PART I: SUHARTO'S RISE (1965)

Introduction

The bipolarity of the Cold War era prompted a major shift in global politics. Countries that had fought tirelessly for independence and freedom from colonialism were faced with a new ideological battle – that between capitalism and communism. The main concern of the United States was to guarantee that these regions aligned themselves with the West, or, at the very least, dissociated themselves from communism. This paper examines the case of Indonesia as the country navigated the Cold War battleground while engaging in the complex tasks of nation-and-state-building. Since proclaiming independence from the Dutch in 1945, Indonesia has undergone many changes and crises that have shaped its society and government. When Indonesia began establishing stronger ties to the People's Republic of China in the 1950s, the United States moved covertly against founding father of Indonesia President Sukarno to contain the communist threat. American support of General Suharto in his bloody elimination of Indonesian communists was indicative of America's calculating and interest-driven posture towards communists and communist sympathizers. Suharto's anti-communist credentials allowed the United States to overlook the Indonesian dictator's assault on democratic processes rather than call him to account. Indonesia provides an illustrative case study on how the rhetoric of making the world safe for democracy and against communism was often undermined. Indonesia fell victim to the US propensity for installing dictators in countries for the purpose of upholding its own strategic interests.

Context

The Cold War was a struggle for global leadership between two superpowers that drew both on ideological differences and geopolitical competition. The US interest in containing the

spread of communism stemmed from concern over the lack of access to markets and resources if countries turned communist. While the objective of spreading democracy was important, it often was a secondary concern. According to Hartman, the primary motives for stopping the spread of communism had more to do with the protection of US private power and the pursuit of US capital through the protection of "a favorable investment climate for private business interests" (467). Anti-communist rhetoric and policy resulted from the notion that communism posed a grave threat to the needs of a capitalist society (Hartman 468). When democratic leaders adopted progressive economic policies that were perceived by the United States as *communist*, Washington used the fear of communism to justify its support of brutal military dictatorships, overthrowing governments that had been elected through legitimate means, rigging elections in its own favor, and even supporting covert assassinations of foreign policy leaders. Washington used the preservation of democratic norms and the protection of human rights as grounds for its aggressive anti-communist Cold War policy yet often subverted these very norms in order to achieve strategic objectives in the US national interest.

The Vietnam conflict serves as an example. The 1954 Geneva Accords aimed to unite North and South Vietnam under one leader via mandated elections. Yet Secretary of State John Foster Dulles refused to sign the accords knowing it was very likely that North Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh, whose nationalist credentials were impeccable, would win these elections by a landslide. This is when the United States also decided to install Ngo Dinh Diem, who was anti-communist and pro-US, as the president of South Vietnam. Diem's position was solidified through a rigged referendum enabling him to claim 98 percent of the public's vote. Moreover, to bolster Diem's weak political base, "the CIA stirred rumors in the North of a coming persecution of Catholics by the communists" (Atwood 192). The Diem years were

characterized by religious persecution and flagrant human rights violations, yet the United States continued to endorse him until he became a political liability due to his eroding domestic support. This example is illustrative of the US propensity to pick and choose where it upheld democratic processes, contingent on whether such processes supported US interests. The 'domino theory', which asserted that the fall of Indochina would cause other Southeast Asian states to fall to communism, also served as a tool to justify the US backing of political leaders who were pliable to US influence. Yet intelligence has since demonstrated that "even the CIA did not believe this assertion [domino theory] but it served to frighten the public" (Atwood 192).

The United States also supported corrupt and brutal regimes in the Middle East. In Iran, the United States covertly engineered the 1953 overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh, replacing him with dictator Shah Reza Pahlavi. The US justification for the coup was to curb Soviet influence, but a clear economic objective was to protect Western access to Iranian oil and geopolitically to increase US military presence in the region. The CIA trained Iran's secret police, which "brutally crushed all opposition, engaging in widespread torture, murder and suppression of all dissidents, especially of Fundamentalists" (Atwood 208). The Shah was overthrown in 1979, but at the same time there were equally repressive regimes in neighboring Muslim nations relying on US support to rule over their citizens. Saudi Arabia, for instance, established a symbiotic relationship with the United States wherein "the US would have access to Saudi oil and the Arab nation would be guaranteed American military guardianship" (Atwood 200). The United States thus committed itself to defending King Ibn Saud's illiberal and authoritarian rule. The United States "organized or aided at least six forcible actions against elected governments between 1947 and 1991" (Forsythe 386). US intervention in Indonesia, the case study that forms the focus of this paper, was therefore not

an isolated event during the Cold War. The United States viewed Indonesia as a strategically important country and actively sought to prevent the spread of communist influence there.

Sukarno

Following a long history of colonization which began in the 16th century, the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, proclaimed Indonesia's independence in 1945. During his presidency, Sukarno implemented a system of 'guided democracy' which contained elements of authoritarianism and the restriction of certain political and civil rights. He also brought together three prominent forces in Indonesian politics: *nasionalisme* (nationalism), *agama* (religion), and *komunisme* (communism). The incompatibility of these elements made NASAKOM a risky endeavor, requiring the careful management of a fragile balance of power among the three to contain tensions and resentment among the Indonesian political factions.

A 1957 briefing by the House Committee on Un-American Activities stated that "Communist encroachments in Indonesia, actively abetted by President Sukarno… threaten the entire United States defense line in the Pacific" (Willoughby 1). The briefing included a consultation with General Charles A. Willoughby, US Army general and chief of intelligence to General Douglas MacArthur during the occupation of Japan and the Korean war. Willoughby highlighted Sukarno's previous and current affiliations to communism, alongside his promotion of cooperation between the PKI and the PNI (the communist and nationalist parties of Indonesia) (Willoughby 26). He also noted that one of Sukarno's mottos was "*Inggris kita linggis, Amerika kita setrika*" (Let us bash the English and iron out America).

The implementation of proportional democracy in Indonesia posed a problem for the United States when Sukarno filled a quarter of his cabinet positions with Indonesian communists, proportional to their winning 25% of the popular vote. The PKI was then the world's third

largest communist party. Sukarno's declaration of a Jakarta-Beijing Axis and the strengthening of Indonesia's relationship with the People's Republic of China unnerved American policymakers. Indonesia's size, location, and abundance of natural resources meant that its hold on American commercial interests was strong. By 1960, these included "$300 million worth of private investment held by U.S. oil companies" (Jones 249) making the country an important geopolitical and strategic asset. Indonesia's increasing alignment with communism was viewed with concern by American officials, who were wary of Indonesia turning into the 'next China'.

Consequently, in 1958, the State Department and the CIA sponsored the Permesta (*Piagam Perjuangan Semesta,* or Universal Struggle Charter) Rebellion against the Sukarno regime. This was a rebel movement led by members of the Indonesian Army which ultimately failed due to a strong response by the Indonesian government. The Eisenhower administration collaborated with and aided regional rebellion forces, supplying them with military equipment and B-26 bombers. When American pilot Allen Lawrence was captured in May of 1958, this "gave Sukarno irrefutable confirmation of U.S. involvement in the rebellion" (Kim 66). The United States subsequently started "an upgraded military assistance program to Indonesia in the order of twenty million dollars a year" (Scott 246). This aid, as made evident in a 1958 US Joint Chiefs of Staff memo, was directed to the Indonesian Army, referred to as the only non-communist force with the capability of obstructing the PKI (Scott 246). The Army, backed by US contributions, introduced anti-Chinese programs to soil Indonesia's relationship with China.

Furthermore, the CIA attempted to use Sukarno's reputation as a womanizer against him by hiring someone to create a pornographic film wherein an actor depicting Sukarno engages in sexual activity with a KGB agent. This attempt to humiliate him in front of the Indonesian populace had the opposite effect as the film only bolstered his masculine image and citizens were

not particularly bothered by Sukarno's personal life. Although Sukarno was not a communist, the inclination of the United States to view the world through a capitalist-communist binary meant that even non-aligned nations were seen as threats to the US anti-communist agenda. About this attempt at maligning Sukarno, David Forsythe said:

> "The fact that the USA tried to discredit Sukarno through attempting to make a pornographic movie about his romantic proclivities indicates the climate of the times. A non-aligned regime could become the target of US covert intervention, despite considerable political moderation and absence of close ties to the Soviet Union. Under Eisenhower and Dulles, Washington developed a foreign policy that equated Third World non-alignment with evil" (388).

US dissatisfaction with Sukarno grew more potent as the Indonesian leader took on an increasingly anti-Western stance. In 1962, Sukarno adopted a policy of confrontation against British colonial endeavors in Malaysia, Singapore, British North Borneo, and Brunei. This policy entailed small-scale raids into the Borneo territories, as well as the withdrawal of Indonesia from the United Nations (which supported Malaysia's membership), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, effectively cutting the archipelago off from significant amounts of foreign aid and exacerbating the deterioration of Indonesia's economy. In 1964, Sukarno is famously quoted to have told US Ambassador Howard P. Jones: "Go to hell with your aid" (Pauker 95). He repeated this statement once more in response to the US threat to end aid to Indonesia unless Sukarno called off confrontation with Malaysia: "When any nation offers us aid with political strings attached, then I will tell them… Go to hell with your aid!" (Brands 794).

The deterioration of US-Indonesian relations was seen in demonstrations and attacks against the US Embassy in Jakarta and US Consulate offices in Medan and Surabaya in 1964,

alongside the seizing of the three libraries of the United States Information Service in Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Jakarta in the same year (Trager 1). Indonesia also refused to handle non-first-class mail from the U.S.I.S., and rejected U.S.I.S. air freight on Garuda Airlines, which was owned by the government (Trager 1). After seven years in his role, in May of 1965, Howard P. Jones left his post as American Ambassador to Indonesia, during which he had become a friend to President Sukarno. Following his departure, it became increasingly clear that the Indonesian foreign ministry viewed the United States as its political adversary.

Indonesia's policy of non-alignment, demonstrated through its hosting of the 1955 Bandung Conference, signified Jakarta's interest in staying clear of the division between the Eastern or Western blocs. In the 1960s, Sukarno implemented a new foreign policy involving the 'New Emerging Forces' – namely, the "'oppressed nations' in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Socialist (i.e., Communist) countries, and 'progressive groups' in the capitalist countries" (Trager 5). He established the Conference of the New Emerging Forces (CONEFO) in January 1965, with China, North Korea, and North Vietnam as member states. These nations would work against the 'Old Established Forces' (which included the United States and Britain) as bulwarks against imperialism and colonialism. Sukarno ushered in this 'era of emerging nations' to bolster cooperation among countries of the Third World and to uphold their interests. That same year, however, Sukarno was ousted from power following the 30th of September Movement (known colloquially as *Gestapu*, or G30S), a coup attempt which brought about the killing of six senior generals of the Indonesian Army. CONEFO was later dissolved in 1966 by President Suharto, who took Sukarno's place.

G30S & The Communist Purge

There is no commonly accepted account of how the 30th of September Movement came to be. The government's official position was that *Gestapu* was orchestrated by the PKI and its supporters. However, scholarly literature on the topic offers several alternative interpretations of the movement's origins. Some scholars posit that the movement took place as a consequence of an internal struggle within the Indonesian Army. Some also believe that General Suharto, determined to consolidate power, was the mastermind behind the assassinations. Others say that President Sukarno himself approved the assassinations to weaken the Indonesian Army. Yet other explanations place the blame on foreign intelligence operations aimed at ousting "the left-leaning Sukarno from his influential role in Indonesia and among Third World nations" (Zurbuchen 566). Most, however, believe a combination of these theories were at play.

Instead of the official government account which depicts G30S as a leftist plot, evidence points to internal divisions within the Indonesian Army as the primary culprit behind the 30th of September Movement. The General Staff were separated into two main groups: those unwilling to go against President Sukarno's "policy of national unity in alliance with the Indonesian Communist party" (Scott 240), and those who were opposed to Sukarno's policy. The former camp was spearheaded by Army Commander General Yani, and the latter camp was represented chiefly by right-wing General Suharto. Although both were against the PKI, they differed in their views of Sukarno.

On the 30th of September 1965, General Yani and his inner circle were killed, which enabled Suharto's right-wing faction to step in and fill the power vacuum. The anti-Sukarno group had grievances against General Yani and also had much to gain from eliminating him and his supporters. Suharto deflected responsibility by pinning the blame on the PKI, launching a

campaign to eliminate Indonesian communists and Sukarno's supporters. There is reason to believe that *Gestapu*, the response of Suharto, and the mass killings formed "a single coherent scenario for a military takeover" (Scott 245). In the aftermath of the 30 September Movement, Sukarno was viewed much less favorably, and in 1966 thousands of students took to the streets of Jakarta to call on Sukarno to step down. Suharto was able to use the anti-Sukarno sentiment to his advantage when he told Sukarno that his life was being threatened by demonstrators and that Suharto could only protect him if he was granted emergency powers, to which Sukarno was forced to agree (Green 484).

A telegram from the US Embassy in Indonesia to the Department of State just days after the 30 September Movement presented suggestions to guide the US posture on the unfolding power struggle. These suggestions emphasized the need to avoid overt involvement in the affair – specifically, to make known to right-wing army general Suharto and his fellow army officials the US government's willingness to supply help in a discreet manner, especially with regard to spreading "the story of PKI's guilt, treachery and brutality" (Green 307).

During this period government-sanctioned violence against Indonesian communists gathered momentum. The Indonesian Army had soldiers and local militias target members of the PKI, and, in fact, anyone they suspected to be a communist. Over the next year, the campaign of mass killings would result in a death toll of at least half a million citizens. All the while, officials of the United States were given detailed insight on the brutal massacres as they were taking place. In November of 1965, the United States agreed to provide unconditional assistance to the Indonesian Army, as Washington believed it was "important to assure the Army of our full support of its efforts to crush the PKI" (Nuechterlein 352). In the month of December, American Ambassador to Indonesia Marshall Green requested funding to civilian and military groups to

allow them to continue in their "repressive efforts targeted against PKI" (Green 379). Joshua Oppenheimer, director of Oscar-nominated documentaries *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) pertaining to the events of 1965, wrote in the *New York Times* about this operation, saying:

> "When genocide broke out, Washington provided equipment, weapons and money—as well as lists with thousands of names of public figures likely to oppose the new regime, presumably expecting they would be killed. Billions of dollars in aid to Suharto's dictatorship began flowing while corpses still clogged Indonesia's rivers. The American media celebrated Suharto's rise and campaign of death. Time magazine called it the 'best news for years in Asia'" (Oppenheimer 1).

Documents from the US Embassy in Jakarta, declassified by the National Security Archive in 2017, have revealed the complicity of the United States in the atrocities. Excerpts from the documents make evident the sheer scale of the affair, noting limited housing and food for prisoners – an issue that many provinces overcame "by executing their PKI prisoners, or killing them before they are captured" (Kine). One telegram stated that five East Java railway stations had closed due to its workers not showing up for the fear of being murdered like their colleagues. Another cable shed light on the perspective of members of *Muhammadiah*, Indonesia's oldest Muslim mass membership organization, to whom "PKI members are classified as the lowest order of infidel, the shedding of whose blood is comparable to killing a chicken" (Kine). Anti-communist propaganda by the Indonesian Army resulted in the dehumanization and slaughtering of communists, both real and alleged. With the backing of the United States, the bloodbath went on for months. The United States applauded a military

dictatorship that murdered its own citizens. Suharto was put on the front of Time Magazine in 1966, with a cover story that sang his praises.

Sukarno's power eroded until he was finally ousted by the Armed Forces in 1967. The following year, Suharto was formally appointed as president of Indonesia, marking the beginning of his 30-year dictatorship, known as *Orde Baru*, or the New Order. His administration continued to enjoy US support, as Washington had great stakes in the outcomes of Suharto's leadership. A 1967 air-gram from the American Embassy in Jakarta to the US Department of State shows the favorable view that US officials held of the new Indonesian government, which "…dedicated itself to fighting domestic communism and…quietly moved away from state control of the economy towards private enterprise" (Green 1). A 1968 report by the Congressional Research Service asserted that the Suharto regime "has exhibited a responsible international attitude" (Nanes 15). The fragile and precarious situation in Indonesia in the years prior had begun to work to the advantage of the Americans.

The Contemporary Scene

In Indonesia, those affected by the events of 1965 have not received the justice they deserve. Throughout decades of alienation and hostility under Suharto's rule, survivors and their families awaited the day that their perpetrators would finally be held accountable. They hoped that in the post-Suharto era, successive governments might provide them with financial compensation, or, at a minimum, issue an official apology for the trauma they endured. It would take another 17 years after Suharto's fall, however, for any semblance of justice to be attained. In November 2015, the International People's Tribunal for 1965 (IPT) held public hearings at The Hague to bring awareness to the inhumane acts of 1965, encourage reconciliation in Indonesia, promote the formation of a political climate in Indonesia that upholds human rights and the rule

of law, as well as affirm that justice is still attainable even 50 years onward (Wieringa et al. 3). In July 2016, the Panel of Judges ruled that Indonesia was guilty of committing crimes against humanity, including mass killings, unjustifiable imprisonments, enslavement, torture, enforced disappearances, and systemic sexual violence. They also found that the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia were complicit (Santoso and Klinken 602).

Although the hearings constituted a major leap in the process of truth seeking and achieving justice for victims whose trauma had been ignored for decades, the verdicts were not legally binding. The Indonesian government has yet to acknowledge its crimes, and the hearings elicited a negative response from government officials and conservative groups. Jusuf Kalla, the vice president at the time, condemned the public hearings, and a few organizers of the Tribunal were "personally targeted for their involvement after they returned to Indonesia" (Wierenga et al. 4). Indonesia has a strong culture of impunity, one which is compounded by "the utter lack of leadership or political will by successive administrations since the fall of the New Order to deal with past crimes" (Wierenga et al. 14). Indonesia's political climate has prevented the nation's government from being held accountable for violating human rights. In such conditions, exposing the forgotten tragedies of the Cold War is but one small step to allow survivors to heal and for mankind to learn from the mistakes of history.

The Cold War provided the structural international context that made possible the rise of Suharto. US geopolitical and economic interests blinded Washington to the ways in which a binary East-West perspective allowed US support of a brutal dictatorship in Indonesia in the name of anti-communism. Suharto used US backing to implement harsh rule that exacerbated domestic divisions and ultimately led to his fall. The next section addresses the domestic variables that explain Suharto's hold on Indonesia.

PART II: SUHARTO'S FALL (1998)

Introduction

Suharto's authoritarian rule, through which he retained power for three decades (1968-1998), was marred by various ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious divisions. These cleavages often became sources of social unrest, primarily due to the regime's lack of inclusivity in its institutions. Throughout the duration of the New Order, the disconnect between the Chinese-Indonesian and *pribumi* (native Indonesian) populations was exacerbated by the state's preferential treatment and inequitable policies, utilized by Suharto to promote his own political agenda.

Credited with economic growth and success during its early years, the Suharto regime quickly and decisively grew into personalized and autocratic rule characterized by oppression, corruption, and human rights abuses. Although possessing elements of civilian government (at least in its inception), the military underpinnings of the Suharto regime were highly pronounced and became even more salient as time went on. Military support of the regime contributed greatly to its overall stability. However, the Indonesian population would, over the decades, grow increasingly dissatisfied with authoritarian rule leading to the rise of internecine conflict. Known also as the "1998 Tragedy", the May 1998 riots marked an extraordinarily low point in Indonesian political affairs. What initially began with peaceful pro-democratic student demonstrations on college campuses soon spiraled into violent rioting and looting on the streets, leaving behind many casualties and a lasting scar on the Indonesian government. The minority ethnic Chinese population bore the brunt of the looting and aggression, and the atrocities which occurred are broadly considered to have been caused by widespread economic discontent attributed to the surface-level liberal economic reforms of the later Suharto years. Accordingly,

this section seeks to examine the economic, social, and religious factors that may have played a role in the political conflict that led to Suharto's forced resignation, and to ask why the ethnic Chinese became the main targets of violence.

As we noted in Part I, the New Order emerged within a political context rife with polarization - a battle of ideologies between the left and the right, most prominent in the rivalry between the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) and the right-wing army leadership. The 30 September Movement of 1965 helped to justify Suharto's villainization of the PKI. He sought to eliminate the Communist Party completely by initiating a campaign which depicted the PKI as duplicitous and corrupt. The narrative of this campaign would form the basis of the 1965 Communist killings, the army-sponsored extermination of up to a million communists, both "real and imagined" (Eklof 45). Leaders of the PKI were either killed, arrested, or forced to flee the nation. At the same time, the New Order coalition, encompassing several civilian groups, grew stronger. Despite holding opposing and contradictory values, the factions were united in their shared hatred for communism. Sukarno's best attempts to regain the support of the people backfired chiefly due to his disproportionate dependence on leftist sympathizers who estranged those who held more moderate views. He was thus forced by Suharto's military supporters to surrender his power and presidency in March of 1966. Suharto and his military-led regime replaced Sukarno's government shortly thereafter. Ironically, however, while political and societal divisions paved the way for Suharto's rise to power, these divisions would later lead to his undoing.

The subsequent toppling of the Suharto regime in 1998 will be studied within the context of an overarching hypothesis – namely, that the lack of intergroup accommodation during Suharto's New Order formed the foundation for anti-Chinese violence, which would ultimately

lead to his downfall. Scholars have noted that intergroup accommodation leads to a higher likelihood of successful democratization. Hence the exclusion of a specific group by those in power is likely to cause or exacerbate intergroup conflict. When authority is concentrated within elites who exercise their power to the detriment of the general population, this will eventually lead to uprisings protesting the inequitable system. Additionally, a regime that besmirches the reputation of one group is likely to poison the views of other groups against them. Suharto's three-decade-long presidency exacerbated resentment among and between various factions in society. The lack of intergroup accommodation during the Suharto era hinged chiefly on three factors at the root of societal divisions fomented by the regime: ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and religion. These divisions and conflict were most salient in Indonesia's May 1998 riots.

Ethnic Considerations

Indonesia is a nation of diverse peoples and cultures. In fact, the country's official motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, translates to "Unity in Diversity". Yet, ethnic diversity in Indonesia has proven to be a double-edged sword: although a major source of national pride, it has also been a source of tension and conflict. The primary racial divide exists between the *pribumi* and Chinese Indonesian citizens, who make up less than 5 percent of the total population. Ethnic Chinese peoples have resided in Indonesia for generations, having first arrived on the archipelago as early as the 13th century. However, there have been difficulties, contemporarily and historically, with the assimilation of the Chinese minority group into Indonesian society. They have struggled to prove themselves as 'real' Indonesians and have suffered prejudice and discrimination because of their race. These issues were particularly prominent during the Suharto era, lending evidence to support the assertion that the lack of ethnic inclusivity during Suharto's authoritarian regime led to the targeting of Chinese Indonesians in the May 1998 riots.

Suharto, who is ethnically Javanese, played a large role in exacerbating anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia. This was evident in various discriminatory anti-Chinese policies enacted during his presidency. For instance, the government "banned all Chinese newspapers and did not even allow any Chinese characters to be displayed in Indonesia" (Lee 241). Local authorities pressured Chinese Indonesian individuals to stop speaking Chinese altogether, and there was a stigma surrounding Chinese culture. According to a 1967 Presidential Instruction, "Chinese religion, beliefs, and customs (in Indonesia)… may generate unnatural influence on the psychology, mentality and morality of Indonesian citizens and therefore impede natural propensity" (Suryadinata 780). Most Chinese citizens did not have access to education for two years in the aftermath of the 1965 coup, due to the shutting down of all Chinese schools. In 1968, the government finally issued a decree allowing for the establishment of SNPCs (*Sekolah Nasional Project Chusus*), which were "schools sponsored by private groups within the Chinese community" (Suryadinata 776). Still, lessons had to be taught in the Indonesian language, and the enrollment of non-Indonesian students could not exceed 40 percent of the student population. Moreover, the government actively encouraged Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent to change their names to Indonesian ones and streamlined the system of doing so.

Despite the efforts of the ethnic Chinese to conform to Indonesian societal and cultural norms, they were hit the hardest in the attacks of May 1998. They were raped, killed, their stores looted, their properties destroyed, and many were left with no choice but to flee the country for other nations such as Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, and the United States. These occurrences can be explained, in part, by the assertion that "the risk of ethnicized conflict, exclusion, or hierarchy during democratization is higher if authoritarian processes constituted ethnic identities as exclusive and/or hierarchical" (Henders 11).

Violence against Chinese Indonesians was not a new phenomenon. The anti-communist purge of 1965, for instance, had also placed a target on their backs. Despite most of them having minimal ties to Communist China, many were executed or had their properties burned to the ground. The 1965 Communist killings played a significant role in the perceived efficacy of the New Order regime. The Indonesian military was not implicated, but rather viewed as "the essential vanguard against the resurgence of social upheaval and mass violence" (Eklof 46). Government officials likewise painted the regime in such a way as to have citizens to view it as the "guarantor of order and stability" (Eklof 46). On the other hand, the masses were portrayed as the cause of all the chaos and brutality that ensued. Deemed as dangerous and unpredictable, the masses were presented as needing to be kept in check. This formed a major justification for the regime's use of repression against the Indonesian people to keep a firm hold on its authority, a justification that was compounded by the suppression of the army's role in the massacres in official reports and histography. In this way, Suharto was able to draw attention away from the severe ethnic tensions by grouping factions together as one and attributing the genocide to the violent and vengeful tendencies of 'the masses.'

Suharto was considered a so-called 'champion of the little people,' to suggest that his policies were aimed at helping the civilian groups which helped him to power, even at the expense of minority populations such as the Chinese. Given his desire to maintain political control, one of Suharto's foremost priorities was to gain the support of the majority native Indonesian population. For authoritarian regimes to remain in power, the risk of uprisings against them must be minimized. Thus, to maintain governmental stability, New Order officials appealed to the *pribumi* population. Suharto's regime rose to power with the help of a military-civilian coalition, rather than being the result of a coup against the civilian government (Aspinall 21).

Despite having the support of the military, Suharto needed to consider the desires of the people, at least initially.

In 1990, ethnic divisions "previously swept under the rug" (Elson 268) made their way to the forefront once more. In an attempt to broaden the foundations of his support, Suharto extended invitations to the heads of leading business conglomerates (the vast majority of whom were Chinese Indonesian) to partake in discussions, wherein they would be asked to surrender "up to a quarter of their assets to cooperatives as a means of closing the gap between the rich and poor" (Elson 268). These individuals were already generally disfavored because of their economic success and prominence. This specific meeting, which took place in Tapos (a province located in West Java) on national television, reinforced and strengthened the "general perception that the activities of Sino-Indonesian businesspeople were somehow inimical to broad national prosperity" (Elson 270). This blatant alienation of the Sino-Indonesian businessmen was designed to imply that their socioeconomic success had occurred at the expense of the rest of the population. This is a prime example of Suharto using Chinese Indonesians as a scapegoat for the economic woes of the public, deflecting blame away from himself and the drawbacks of his government's economic policies. Moreover, there were various instances where Suharto personally called on Chinese businessmen to partner with native Indonesians to raise the socioeconomic posture of the latter group. In a policy that was never truly implemented, he went so far as to assert that nonindigenous firms would need to sell half of their shares to the government, which would, in turn, sell them to *pribumi* businessmen (Suryadinata 775).

Suharto created a sense of otherness among Chinese Indonesian citizens, ultimately undermining national unity. He built a sense of nationalism based on an ethnic category instead of pushing for nationalism founded on an inclusive nationhood. Chinese Indonesians, regardless

of their status as Indonesian citizens, were simply not considered ‘authentic’ Indonesians. Racial cleavages, apparent both in the outset of the New Order regime and in its eventual decline, are therefore an important component to account for in explaining the reasons for the violence faced by Chinese Indonesians as well as why Suharto lost power. Broad political representation of all socioeconomic and ethnic groups by providing a voice for minority groups in government is important for political stability. Placing ethnic identities on a hierarchy of sorts, excluding one and catering to another, was not a sustainable political strategy in the long run.

Socioeconomic Considerations

Economic grievances fueled much of the rioting of 1998, further destabilizing the Suharto government. Indonesia’s global success had faded dramatically as a result of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which had caused a meltdown of the nation’s economy. Indonesia was plagued by the decline of the rupiah (its official currency), skyrocketing interest rates, mass unemployment, and poverty. Furthermore, socioeconomic inequalities were exacerbated by the regime’s policies of economic liberalization between 1983-1992, which created resentment against the more well-off segments of the population, including the ethnic Chinese. The economic accomplishments of the Chinese business community during this time meant the obvious wealth divide became even more of a delicate issue. In March 1998, in an interview with *Nihon Keizai Shimbun,* Vice president B.J. Habibie stated that 3 percent of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia controlled 90 percent of Indonesia’s economy (Lee 251). He additionally noted that he sought to provide more opportunities to native Indonesians. Wealthy Chinese businessmen, typically the owners of large companies, came to be known colloquially as *cukongs*. The word *cukong* is rooted in the Hokkien term for ‘master’, yet it also has negative connotations. Generally recognized for their involvement in pollutive practices, corruption, and nepotism,

cukongs had a reputation for allegedly exploiting people from the lower strata of society. In light of policies against the operation of firms that had minimal Indonesian ownership (i.e. 'alien enterprises'), it became common practice for the Chinese businessmen to collaborate with indigenous Indonesian license-holders in what came to be known as the 'Ali Baba' system. These arrangements were founded on mutual interest, as "the former provided the capital, ran the business and split the profit with the latter" (Suryadinata 773). This cooperation between the two groups, however, generated bitterness on the part of *pribumi* businessmen who were less successful. It was also evident that foreign investment disproportionately benefitted Chinese businessmen: "foreign investors preferred to work with Chinese businessmen rather than their indigenous counterparts…the Chinese were generally better equipped in terms of business experience, capital, and technical know-how" (Suryadinata 774). Furthermore, in the eyes of poorer communities, the vast accumulation of wealth by *cukongs* came at the expense of everyone else. The actions of *cukong*s were often misconstrued to be the actions of the Chinese Indonesian community as a whole. There was a lack of differentiation between them: "Although not all Chinese are rich…the bad image created by the minority *cukongs* [affected] the well-being of the majority of innocent Chinese" (Lee 247). There was a noticeable wealth disparity between the two communities, and this disparity contributed significantly to the anti-Chinese nature of the 1998 Tragedy.

During the earlier years of Suharto's presidency, his economic policies were largely state-centered, involving much government intervention. In the 1980s, however, Suharto introduced several liberal economic principles. There was a reform period involving the deregulation of the economy which took place, in part, because of a shift which occurred in the early 1980s: "the oil boom which had always underpinned Indonesia's economic growth and

secured its political stability began to dissipate…in 1986, the economy grew by only 1.9 percent" (Elson 246). Suharto thus realized that he needed to implement new measures to improve Indonesia's economic health so that he could ensure his own political security. Therefore, his new economic paradigm was one which was "efficient, deregulated and market-oriented, and 'a radical departure from the introspective import-substitution regime that oil and aid had allowed to prevail for so long but which was no longer sustainable'" (Elson 247). Suharto had aimed to move toward a more export-oriented economy in order to take advantage of the nation's cheap urban labor. However, this economic reform was only partial, as Suharto maintained certain elements of the old patrimonial system. Although the country was as close as it had ever been to becoming a true market economy, the economy was never left completely unregulated. Instead, it was characterized by a dualism of deregulation on the one hand, and patrimonialist aspects on the other. Full economic transparency and a lack of economic control on his part, in his eyes, was not conducive to the maintenance of his own political supremacy.

This dichotomy also emerged in Suharto's attempts to attain greater equity. In 1984, he introduced *Repelita IV*, a five-year development plan revolving around pursuing interregional equity, particularly through the even distribution of resources across the archipelago "by means of a gigantic and highly centralized bureaucracy in Jakarta" (Elson 248). Ironically enough, however, Suharto had a history of corruption and providing favorable treatment to his children and other favored businessmen. *Cukongs* held close ties to the military, the Suharto family and other political elites via mutually advantageous partnerships. In return for the regime's protection and certain benefits including "privileged access to license, contracts, and state bank credit" (Chong 36), *cukongs* would offer up a portion of their profits in the form of generous 'donations' to the institutions of their political sponsors. Not only did these corrupt alliances reflect badly on

Suharto and the Chinese Indonesian tycoons, but they exacerbated the already-negative stereotypes surrounding the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. It was clear that the president utilized his connections to the Chinese capitalists to add to his own wealth: Suharto's family assets were estimated to range from two to three billion U.S. dollars, according to the CIA (Vatikiotis 50). Nonetheless, from his perspective, gaps in income between individuals and communities were not a justifiable cause for discontentment or dispute. Given the inconsistencies in Suharto's views and actions, it was unsurprising that the general Indonesian population grew resentful, both against him and against those who stood to benefit from his leadership, such as the *cukongs*. The regime placed a target on the backs of the minority Chinese Indonesians: "By confining the Chinese to the economic sector and forming an alliance with a handful of well-connected Chinese tycoons, the New Order regime managed to fortify the perception of the Chinese as economically powerful and responsible for social and economic inequalities in the country" (Chong 37). The gradual buildup of dissatisfaction among the masses would later grow into full-fledged hostility against those in power. It was understandable, then, that in pursuit of revenge, or perhaps out of pure desperation, the people would finally resort to the violent tactics of the 1998 uprisings to remove Suharto from power and take their anger out on the scapegoats of the regime: the ethnic Chinese.

Religious Considerations

Aside from ethnic and socioeconomic factors, extremist state-led religious movements in the majority Muslim nation played a significant role in the targeting of the minority ethnic Chinese population. Suharto's government was not initially favorable for Muslims, and even prior to the New Order, Muslims lacked major sway in governmental and political affairs. Under the colonial rule of the Dutch, Indonesian Christians were offered favorable treatment over

Indonesian Muslims with regard to the recruitment of individuals to become teachers, army officers and government workers. Likewise, in the post-colonial era, major military, administrative and bureaucratic positions were occupied by individuals who had received Christian or secular educations, not by people who had undergone Muslim schooling (Chong 38). Furthermore, the absence of an organization to represent the entirety of Indonesia's Muslim population made it difficult for them to have an effective say in certain matters. The Muslim organization *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) was a spokesperson solely for rural Muslims, and the All-Indonesian Association of Islamic Intellectuals (ICMI) only acted on behalf of middle-class Muslim professionals.

In urgent need of allies, Suharto made it known both before and in the initial years of his presidency that he was willing to incorporate certain features of political Islam. Thus, at first, the emergence of the New Order was viewed by some as a potential opportunity to strengthen Islamic representation in government. However, this did not end up being the case. It was not long before Muslim political ideology began to be viewed as a hindrance to the nation's modernization. The Suharto government was described to be "emulating the old Dutch policy of emasculating political Islam while outwardly promoting its spiritual health" (Vatikiotis 120). In 1971, under the first general election during Suharto's rule, *Golkar* (Suharto's political party) received 62.8 percent of the votes while all four Muslim political parties (*Nahdatul Ulama*, *Partai Muslimin Indonesia*, *Persatuan Tarbiyah Ismayah*, and *Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia*) won only 27.1 percent of the votes combined - a significant decrease from the 43 percent they had garnered during the 1955 general election (Raillon 202). Two years later, in 1973, the four Islamic parties merged to become the Unity Development Party (PPP). This constituted a major loss for them because its name did not have anything to do with the religion, and the party

remained “under the close scrutiny of the military which interfered with it until it took on the expected form” (Raillon 202). Muslim extremism was considered a dormant danger that needed to be kept in check, and many purported Muslim extremists were placed on trial. In the economic realm as well, Muslim businesspeople were placed at a disadvantage as the regime focused on exogenous methods of development founded on foreign investment. This “impaired small-scale Muslim enterprise” and caused many to fall victim to “ruthless anti-inflation and monetary adjustment policies” (Raillon 202). In addition to the rise of the *cukongs*, these government policies gave rise to indignation among the Muslim community, as feelings of discontentment bubbled to the surface. Noticing their unfair treatment, many Muslims blamed their economic woes on the ethnic Chinese, the majority of whom were non-Muslim. Violent episodes targeted Chinese people throughout the nation.

Their anger at the state, furthermore, was demonstrated at the *Malari* Incident of January 1974. Violent riots by *pribumi* citizens took place in response to a visit by the Japanese Prime Minister at the time, Kakuei Tanaka. While Japan posed a threat to the success of local businesses, the protests and looting were a result of bigger-picture inequalities in the economic treatment of the native Indonesian Muslim population. People were killed and injured, buildings were destroyed, and Japanese cars were burned in the *Malari* Incident, marking a turning point in the treatment of Muslims by the regime thereafter. To assuage their anger and aggressiveness, the government founded *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (the Indonesian Council of Ulama) – a Muslim clerical body comprising various Islamic groups -- to be a pipeline for Muslim politics. The regime’s attempts to appease the religious faction were evident in “a greater empowerment of Islamic courts, the removal of petty school restrictions on the wearing of the Islamic head covering, the *jilbab*, an enhanced focus on Islam in school education, and the severity of the

state's reaction to the publication by a magazine, *Monitor*, of a popularity poll in which the Prophet Mohammed was ranked only eleventh (Suharto came first)" (Elson 270). In the late 1980s, in fact, Suharto himself moved to adopt a more Islamic identity. When he and his family made a pilgrimage to perform the *hajj* in Mecca in 1991, their journey was deliberately promoted and broadcasted. The founding of the Indonesian Association of Muslim Individuals (ICMI) in 1990 by Suharto's vice president B.J. Habibie was also a manifestation of the government's aim to ease the disgruntlement of the Muslim opposition. The formation of the ICMI signified Suharto's intent to attain the support of Muslim intellectuals and extend his base of political supporters to encompass those from the Muslim population. Enacted for the purpose of "distancing him from his Sino-Indonesian cronies and propelling a new *pribumi* business thrust", the creation of the ICMI allowed him to present himself as "pro-*pribumi*, pro-Islam, and pro-modern technology" (Elson 269). These new policies allowed for Muslims to regain respectability and reverse some of the subordination they faced at the start of the New Order.

Regardless of governmental policies aimed at reconciling the relationship between the state and Muslim *pribumi*, political Islam faced a significant decline under Suharto's rule. The Muslim community was filled with disapproval for the president by the latter half of the 1990s, mainly for political and economic reasons. Religion therefore played a large role in the aggression displayed during the May 1998 riots, which unfolded in a context where Islamic forces were pushing for more national power. As a matter of fact, various ICMI leaders traveled to Yogjakarta on the 14th of May "to organize themselves politically so that sustained pressure could be mounted on Suharto" (Singh 119). The mobilization of the Muslim majority added anti-Chinese hostilities to the mix and was fueled also by the ICMI's assertion that "for the sake of Indonesia's unity, stability, and to prevent further bloodshed, Suharto should be persuaded to

step down" (Singh 120). Civil disorder plagued the nation, and deepening divisions among societal factions could no longer be neglected or ignored.

Who is to Blame?

The revolution against Suharto in 1998 began with non-violent student demonstrations at the Trisakti University, which turned violent when the National Army opened fire on protestors, killing four students and sparking outrage across the nation. The masses, mainly comprising indigenous Indonesians, subsequently ransacked the country targeting predominantly Chinese areas. In *Glodok*, Jakarta's Chinatown, mobs set fire to a large shopping mall, destroying thousands of businesses and many homes in the surrounding area. In *Pantai Indah Kapuk*, a residential area in North Jakarta inhabited mainly by people of Chinese descent, 64 houses were burned down and more than 400 were looted (Siegel 81). In addition, there were numerous accounts of Chinese women being yanked out of cars and off motorcycles by gangs of men who mocked them and forced them to undress. Several women were gang raped, and some of them died in fires set to their homes after they were raped (Siegel 92). Others committed suicide, and many fled to neighboring nations. In light of the physical and psychological damage suffered, victims were overcome by feelings of outrage and betrayal, directed especially at the police force, army, and government, who, not only failed to protect them from harm, but were also widely thought to have played a role in inciting the riots. Several of those affected by the pillaging and devastation reported that the looters arrived in trucks, and some were wearing military boots (Siegel 81). The people believed that Suharto, who was in Egypt to attend a Group of 15 summit in Cairo at the peak of the chaos, was the one issuing these orders to the military. He was accused of inciting the public to harm the Chinese, primarily to deflect blame for his own political and economic wrongdoings, and for the woes of the Asian Financial Crisis. Moreover,

Suharto's son-in-law, General Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo (Indonesia's current Minister of Defense), is believed by many to have carried out Suharto's demands. Others suggest that he acted in his own interest, primarily in pursuit of more political power. Even before the riots, there were various instances of civilian and military government officials urging Islamic groups to act upon their hatred of the Chinese. In January of 1998, General Prabowo showed his support for Islamic organizations such as the Indonesian Islamic Propagation Council (DDII), as well as the Indonesian Committee for World Muslim Solidarity (KISDI), both of whom were "well known for their strident attacks on Christian and Chinese predominance in many spheres of Indonesian business and society" (Sidel 114). Thus, while the masses were directly responsible for much of the wreckage and brutality that ensued, it is likely that much of the blame can also be traced back to various elites of the New Order regime.

Conclusion

Ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious divisions plagued Suharto's Indonesia. However, it should be noted that none of the impact of these variables is mutually exclusive. These factors intersected with one another, multiplying their effects to give way to the tragedy of May 1998. Suharto introduced various blatantly anti-Chinese policies and discriminatory laws which voiced the rhetoric that Chinese Indonesians did not truly belong in Indonesia, solidifying their position as outsiders and justifying prejudice against them. Yet, he also took advantage of Chinese capital through the *cukong* system which resulted in the vast accumulation of wealth by Chinese tycoons and worsened negative stereotypes surrounding the already-stigmatized Chinese Indonesian population. Using these negative stereotypes to his advantage, he was able to use the Chinese as scapegoats for his own corrupt economic practices. Resentment among *pribumi* and Islamic groups burgeoned, as they blamed both the government and the wider Chinese Indonesian

population for their lack of success in the business realm. Given the lack of Muslim political representation and the government's favorable treatment of Christian and secular individuals, Islamic groups resolved to fight for Suharto's downfall.

Suharto's fundamental flaw was the lack of inclusivity in his policies. Only when it was in his own interest did he lend assistance to or attempt to uplift different societal factions. Therefore, it is true that the lack of intergroup accommodation during Suharto's New Order formed the foundation for anti-Chinese violence, ultimately paving the way for his forced resignation.

The developments of the New Order unfolded within a structural context of the Cold War. This context provided the frame for the change from Sukarno to Suharto and for the interplay of domestic-level variables. Without US support of the Suharto regime, perhaps the outcome would have been different. The occurrences of Suharto's three-decade-long presidency are still felt in Indonesia today, and Chinese Indonesians remain vigilant for the fear that history may repeat itself.

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