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# Explaining Anti-Chinese Riots in Late 20th Century Indonesia

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**Summary.** — In this essay we ask why anti-Chinese riots took place in some Indonesian cities but not in others during the upheaval of May 1998. Employing process-tracing within a sub-national comparison of four cities, we argue that anti-Chinese riots in May 1998 were a frame-shifting strategy employed by security forces to distract public attention from their failure to control anti-government student demonstrations. Anti-Chinese rioting took place only where the local government and the security forces failed to limit the repertoires and spatial reach of protests used by prior student demonstrators.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The fall of President Suharto and collapse of Indonesia's New Order in May 1998 were marked by severe violence against ethnic Chinese Indonesians. While these riots had a national context—mass mobilization against the New Order regime and in particular against President Suharto—they erupted in some places but not in others. For example, rioting erupted in Solo but not in Yogyakarta (Yogya), just 60 kilometers away and demographically very similar. Why riots in Solo but not in Yogya? In this essay we ask the question more broadly as well: why did anti-Chinese riots take place in some Indonesian cities but not in others?

A final report by the Joint Fact Finding Team (TGPF) assembled by the Indonesian government to investigate this violence hinted at the involvement of state security forces (TGPF 1998, chaps. 4–6, especially Sections 4.2 and 5.2; see also Purdey, 2006, pp. 121–140). This suspicion has strong support among numerous scholars of Indonesian politics as a statement about the armed forces and their deployment of criminal elements for such actions (see, e.g., Aspinall, Feith, & van Klinken, 1999; Barker, 1998; Bourchier, 1990; O'Rourke, 2002; Ryter, 1998; Tanter, Ball, & van Klinken, 2006). Eyewitness accounts from Jakarta, Solo, and Medan and the consensus of the Joint Fact Finding Team (TGPF) all point to military or military-trained advance teams working to provoke violent attacks on Chinese targets. The *Human Rights Watch* (1998) cites Indonesian police investigations uncovering evidence of organizational meetings between army officers and criminals to plan anti-Chinese violence in East Java in early 1998. Indeed, O'Rourke (2002, p. 12) refers to the use of *preman*<sup>1</sup> as proxies for direct military intervention in social crises as a “standard procedure” in a discussion of the July 1996 raid on one of Indonesia's sanctioned opposition parties, the *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia* (Indonesian Democratic Party—PDI). In short, there is substantial evidence that the Indonesian armed forces were implicated in anti-Chinese violence.

However, that violence took place only in certain locations and escalated into full-scale rioting only in three cities. Yet current studies focused on national-level communal violence (e.g., Bertrand, 2004; Sidel, 2006) and on anti-Chinese violence

(Purdey, 2006) focused solely on episodes or locations where violent conflict took place. If it is the case that anti-Chinese violence had national causes either in politics or in ethnic resentment, why did it not manifest itself everywhere nationally? Second, if the army was centrally implicated in the riots, why would it have orchestrated violence that ostensibly undermined the stability it was charged with maintaining? Third, why the choice of anti-Chinese rioting as opposed to other forms of violence or frames of mobilization? In this paper, we use paired comparisons of four cities on Java and Sumatra—Medan and Solo, which experienced extensive violence, and Surabaya and Yogyakarta, which experienced none—to uncover the causes of anti-Chinese violence in the months before Suharto's fall.<sup>2</sup>

Employing process-tracing<sup>3</sup> of the day-to-day and sometimes hour-to-hour events that culminated in ethnic rioting in some places but not others, we argue that anti-Chinese riots in May 1998 were a frame-shifting strategy employed by the army to distract public attention from its failure in certain locales to control student demonstrations against the government. While generally orchestrated by security forces or organized criminal groups tied to them, anti-Chinese rioting took place only where the local government and the security forces failed to limit the repertoires and spatial reach of protests used by prior student demonstrators. Where state-society relations prior to protest events allowed for collaborative

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“management” of anti-state demonstrations, students generally refrained from violence. Subsequently, security forces refrained from provoking anti-Chinese violence to distract from (a) their inability to control protests and (b) their own targeting in protesters’ rhetoric. In short, army-orchestrated riots against Chinese Indonesians were a form of contentious politics aimed at changing the frame of mass political mobilization from one aimed at the state to one aimed at economically dominant ethnic minorities.

We also contend that local government officials were instrumental to preventing student protests from exceeding what local military units could handle. In Yogyakarta, and to a degree in Surabaya, local administrative and university officials moderated negotiations between student leaders and army officers, helping to set the parameters within which students could and did stage protests and thereby making political protest much less threatening to the army. Anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in 1998 confirm some of the main arguments in ethnic politics studies about the constructed nature of ethnic enmity but also suggest that scholars should situate ethnic violence within a broader repertoire of collective violence during political transitions. Moreover, we illustrate how central state or para-state actors can be to the activation of ethnic identities for mobilizing violence. In Medan and Solo, Indonesia, we show that widespread anti-Chinese violence would simply not have occurred without the active intervention of state security forces and their proxies.

On an empirical note, it is extremely difficult to find irrefutable proof of military involvement in the rioting in Solo and Medan, and the Joint Fact Finding Team’s methodology was imperfect. However, the parallel conclusions reached in Solo’s own local government-funded report, in independent eyewitness accounts, and in media reporting in both cities lend case-specific support to the JFFT’s conclusions. Furthermore, the evidence indicating military involvement in a broad array of other forms of collective violence in early 1998 (again *Aspinall et al.*, 1999; *Barker*, 1998; *Bourchier*, 1990; *Cribb*, 2002, pp. 227–242; *Mietzner*, 2009, pp. 208, 209; *O’Rourke*, 2002; *Ryter*, 1998, 2002; *Tanter et al.*, 2006; *Wessel*, 2001, p. 71; *Zen*, 2004, pp. 92–98) helps us to situate anti-Chinese rioting in a large body of research documenting such an involvement. But our goal here is not to chase down a conspiracy theory of army involvement in rioting. Rather, it is to employ the comparative method to explain variation. In two of our research sites, security forces worked actively to prevent violence from escalating and in many other cases worked admirably to prevent injury to demonstrators. So state-orchestrated violence, we suggest, was not a first-step tactic but rather a last-ditch effort to bring anti-regime protests under control. And it appears to have been employed as a tactic in Jakarta and Solo significant part because it was successful in Medan the week before.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the striking similarities in the sequence of events that built into violent anti-Chinese rioting in Solo and Medan casts serious doubt on what might be called a “fog of war” hypothesis, in which order broke down organically. We suggest in the city narratives that follow that there is simply too much systematic similarity in the sequence of events that led to ethnic rioting to conclude that it was the result of a breakdown of law and order. In addition, the sudden surge in anti-Chinese violence, followed by quick and efficient reestablishment of order by security forces in Medan and Solo, suggest to us not that order broke down but that it was intentionally withdrawn, and then reinforced once the new ethnic frame of collective violence had served its purpose—to distract urban protesters from the regime’s failures.<sup>5</sup>

The paper employs a number of different research methods and data sources. First, we draw on an original survey conducted in 2007 in Yogyakarta and Solo. These survey data show little difference between the cities demographically and also little difference between how Chinese and Javanese (“pribumi”) in the two cities view one another and interact. Second, we draw on extensive interview research in Yogya and Solo with members of both communities and with former army, police, and local government officials stationed in or working in the two cities in 1998. Third, and most broadly, we employ process tracing within a sub-national city-level comparative framework (see *Bennet & George*, 2005; *Varshney*, 2002) to tease out the differences in how prior student protests created incentives for local army commanders either to provoke anti-Chinese riots or to refrain from doing so in Medan, Solo, Surabaya, and Yogya. Using detailed event narratives from the UNSFIR data project (*Varshney, Panggabean, & Tadjoeuddin*, 2004) and from local media in each city, we show how similar precursor events in the four cities created the potential for further, ethnically framed violence, but were followed by anti-Chinese rioting in only Solo and Medan.

## 2. THE CAUSES OF ETHNIC RIOTS: INDONESIA IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

We take as a point of departure *Horowitz’s* (2001, p. 1) definition of the ethnic riot: “an intense, sudden, though not necessarily wholly unplanned, lethal attack by civilian members of one ethnic group on civilian members of another ethnic group, the victims chosen because of their group membership.” That is only a start, however, for *Horowitz* himself, as well as three prominent students of riots in India (*Brass*, 1997; *Brass*, 2003; *Varshney*, 2002; *Wilkinson*, 2004) all acknowledge that state actors are frequently bit players, willing bystanders, or even central actors in the production of ethnic riots. *Horowitz* focuses on non-state actors in part to explicate the role of group identity in catalyzing violence in riot or other forms (see also *Horowitz*, 1985), but pinpointing state involvement is not incompatible with such a focus. As he outlines (2001, pp. 14–17), riots are lengthy processes, and initial state involvement does not preclude subsequent dynamics that are driven partially or even largely by inter-group conflict or resentment. Indeed, *Brass* has suggested that state actors who foment ethnic riots “activate existing prejudices” rather than create them.<sup>6</sup> Given all of this, what causes ethnic riots, and what caused them in Indonesia? Some established structural factors were in evidence in Indonesia in early 1998, for example serious economic crisis, immense political uncertainty, inequitable material endowment across ethnic groups, and the emergence of other forms of collective violence (see, e.g., *Purdey*, 2006). Again, however, these were nationally salient factors and yet violence varied immensely across locales. Below we address some major lines of argument advanced to explain variation in ethnic violence in India.

### (a) *Interethnic civic life*

*Varshney* (2002) suggests that interethnic civic life and, in urban centers, particularly interethnic civic associations can serve as a barrier to the organization and escalation of ethnic violence. Our survey of Chinese and Javanese (*pribumi*) residents of Solo and Yogya in 2007, however, reveals little difference in the degree to which residents of these two cities report interethnic membership in the organizations to which they belong (see *Table 1*).<sup>7</sup> As these survey data suggest, the most

Table 1. *Everyday and associational interethnic life in Solo and Yogyakarta: selected responses from June to July 2007 survey*

	Solo	Yogyakarta
Are there members of another ethnic group in your neighborhood?	Yes: 83%	Yes: 95%
	No: 17%	No: 5%
Do you visit each other's families?	Yes: 64%	Yes: 70%
	No: 35%	No: 30%
Do you attend weddings in the other's families?	Yes: 91%	Yes: 89%
	No: 9%	No: 11%
Do you attend festivals the other group hosts?	Yes: 62%	Yes: 59%
	No: 38%	No: 41%
Do your children play with children from another ethnic group in your neighborhood?	Yes: 64%	Yes: 70%
	No: 25%	No: 17%
At your workplace, are there members of another ethnic group?	Yes: 57%	Yes: 67%
	No: 42%	No: 29%
If so, describe your relationship with them	Good/positive: 93%	Good/positive: 66%
	Negative: 1%	Negative: 4%
Are you a member of an organization or club?	Yes: 67%	Yes: 60%
	No: 33%	No: 40%
If so, are there members of another ethnic group in it?	Yes: 71%	Yes: 87%
	No: 29%	No: 13%
Is there an organization in your neighborhood with both Pribumi and Chinese members to resolve social problems?	Yes: 25%	Yes: 49%
	No: 75%	No: 50%
Was the organization formed by government imitative?	Yes: 36%	Yes: 96%
	No: 56%	No: 4%
Was the organization formed by citizen initiative?	Yes: 83%	Yes: 14%
	No: 14%	No: 84%

Source: Survey conducted by Panggabean and Smith, June–July 2007, Solo and Yogyakarta.

substantial difference between Solo and Yogyakarta appears to be in the origins of neighborhood associations created to resolve Chinese–Pribumi tensions. In Solo, the vast majority of respondents report that citizens themselves created such associations, while in Yogyakarta government initiative is the most prevalent catalyst for them. Neither the “quotidian” nor associational forms of interethnic interactions that Varshney (2002) has conceptualized appear to differ substantially across these two cities. Indeed, the Solo local government-supported

effort to catalog and document the May 1998 violence is marked by the theme of explaining how the sense of “Soloness” presents before the riots somehow broke down. When considered next to the similar sense of “Surabayaness” or *arek Surabaya* that we discuss in that city’s narrative, one gets the sense that to some degree a feeling of common identity as city residents is colored by whether or not the city succumbed to serious ethnic violence during this period.

#### (b) *Political competition*

Brass (1997), Brass (2003) and Wilkinson (2004) argue that political competition shapes the likelihood of elites organizing ethnic riots. This line of argument—and in particular its dependence on a democratic national context—has some scope conditions that leave Indonesia in May 1998 outside its parameters. In May 1998, Suharto’s New Order regime was attempting to stay in power, not to win an election. Later violence—in 1999 between Christians and Muslims in Ambon and Poso, and between Dayaks and Malays on Kalimantan—was clearly tied to electoral uncertainty and imminent regional autonomy enactment (see Davidson, 2008; Van Klinken, 2007)—but during this pre-transition phase it was not at all certain whether Suharto would even step down. In short, ethnic riots in Indonesia prior to Suharto’s resignation took place in a political context of regime crisis. This context, combined with compelling evidence of state involvement in the production of riots, suggests we ought to ask, as Brass suggests (2003, p. 11), who benefits from such riots and why at these particular times and in these particular places.

The dynamics of anti-Chinese violence in late-20th century Indonesia have important implications as well for how we study ethnic riots in a comparative perspective. The most systematic and cumulative research to date on ethnic riots has focused on India and, as a result, has generated a body of theory aimed at riots that for the most part are socially orchestrated and driven in significant part by political competition.<sup>8</sup> These findings, we suggest, are constrained by the scope conditions of the body of cases into which India falls. Indonesia before 1999—ruled by an authoritarian regime—represents a different set of conditions that imply different causal mechanisms for ethnic rioting. Indonesia is one of a set of authoritarian cases in which state actors were not simply periodic accomplices but direct participants in violent contentious politics.

On a final introductory note, we see this essay as an entry into the knowledge accumulation process in explaining, not representing, collective violence in late 20th-century Indonesia. Where, for example, Wilkinson and Varshney take an explicitly positivist approach to communal violence in India while Brass takes a representational one,<sup>9</sup> we contrast our explanatory efforts with the more representational approach in Purdey (2006). That is, we seek to understand the root causes of anti-Chinese violence in some cities and its absence in others, not to understand the roots of anti-Chinese prejudice or how violence is represented after the fact to create either ethnic or non-ethnic frames of understanding. Finally, we concur with Davidson (2008) in suggesting that different kinds of communal violence in Indonesia surrounding the fall of the New Order probably had different causes. Where Sidel (2006) and Bertrand (2004), for example, seek to explain a wide array of events by reference to a single set of structural or historical causal factors, we argue that anti-Chinese violence has a particular set of causes that makes it analytically different than separatist mobilization in Aceh and Papua or Muslim-Christian violence in eastern Indonesia, to take two other examples.

### 3. FRAMING VIOLENCE AS “ETHNIC”: ANTI-CHINESE RIOTS AS STATE-LED CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

Given the regime crisis context that defined these riots, and given that the Indonesian armed forces as a major pillar of Suharto's New Order were (a) charged with maintaining order and (b) also centrally implicated in the violence of May 1998, why would they have fomented anti-Chinese riots in some locales but not others? We suggest below that it is important to understand the May riots as part of a month-long repertoire of collective violence orchestrated both from bottom up and from the top down. This repertoire began in earnest in January 1998 with protests and then rioting and looting in response to a major increase in the price of major consumer goods such as rice and kerosene.<sup>10</sup>

Beginning in January, 1998, episodes of violence against ethnic Chinese Indonesians grew in size and organization, from probably spontaneous demonstrations against food price increases to riots preceded by large convoys of young men on motorcycles. These violent events demonstrated that the political potential for anti-Chinese riots both to displace contentious politics against the regime and the willingness of state officials at both local and national levels to incite violence against ethnic Chinese as a diversionary strategy aimed at stabilizing the regime nationally.

The first significant anti-Chinese events in 1998 were small-town riots on Java. On January 12, for example, in the village of Lengkong outside the East Java city of Jember, villagers responding to threats by the Attorney General and the head of the *Badan Urusan Logistik* (Logistical Storage Agency, or *Bulog*) against hoarding and price hikes demanded that local Chinese merchants retain the *harga biasa* or “normal prices” suggested by Bulog (Purdey, 2006, p. 86). The next day, a convoy of trucks and motorcycles proceeded from town to town around Banyuwangi, east of Jember, attacking Chinese-owned stores and warehouses. Farmers joined the violence, in part responding to a government hike in petrol prices and to economic difficulties related to a drought. Notably, this convoyed violence continued for three days before security forces intervened (pp. 87, 88). But the five-day episode demonstrated that there were active anti-Chinese prejudices at work that could be encouraged on a small scale simply through government statements. These events also “catalyzed” larger-scale and almost certainly organized events in short order. Finally, the absence of armed forces intervention for several days suggests either implicit endorsement or active involvement.

Later in January, a new round of anti-Chinese violence began on the northern coast of Java between the cities of Semarang and Surabaya. On January 26, fishermen protesting at the price of kerosene in the village of Kragan near Rembang threatened and looted from Chinese store owners. On January 27, more violent anti-Chinese activity took place in Sarang with burning and looting of shops. Between January 28 and 30, increasingly large-scale violence spread eastward along the road between Semarang and Surabaya (Purdey, 2006, p. 92). Following these episodes, Indonesian police found evidence of organizational meetings between army officers and criminals to plan the violence (Human, 1998).

On February 2, 1998, another motor convoy entered the city of Pasuruan just before widespread violence against Chinese targets began and went beyond looting to the burning of goods. Purdey (2006) takes this as evidence against a hardship explanation of the riots, following Horowitz (2001). However, one might also consider the destruction of Chinese property in this episode as an expression of a desire to destroy the material

symbols of Chinese cultural status on Java (see, e.g., Siegel, 1986, pp. 246, 247). Whatever its meaning, the growing signs of larger, organized anti-Chinese violence following small-scale events provides more evidence that the political utility of using ethnic Chinese to distract popular attention away from the regime's culpability for citizens' growing economic difficulties acquired increasing salience in the first months of 1998.

During the first half of February, following the end of Ramadan, a new round of government rhetoric against Chinese Indonesians emerged, this time linked with important Muslim organizations. Following a meeting on January 23 between Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law and Commander of the army's Special Command Unit, and leaders of the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), demonstrations against Chinese targets close to the regime escalated. The Council of Indonesian Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, or *MUI*) declared a need to protect *pribumi* business interests against outsiders. Army generals Feisal Tanjung and Syarwan Hamid made statements accusing Chinese Indonesians implicitly or explicitly of hoarding capital. In short, the regime both cultivated and responded actively to the expression of popular anti-Chinese sentiment on Java by stoking those prejudices and giving them official cover. What it did not generally do yet, however, was to actively cultivate violence in the absence of prior local violent events.

### 4. THE CITIES AND CASE SELECTION: MEDAN, SOLO, SURABAYA, AND YOGYAKARTA

Other than the capital of Jakarta, no locales saw more destructive anti-Chinese rioting than Medan and Solo. Medan was the site of the first large-scale riots during the week before the shooting of four students at Trisakti University in Jakarta on May 12, 1998, after which protests exploded around the country. Solo was probably on a *per capita* basis hardest hit of any city in Indonesia by rioting, with Rp. 457 billion (US\$46 million) worth of damage in a city of only 400,000 (BPS 2000). But violence was not uniformly distributed in Indonesia and was severe only in a few places. Explaining why Medan and Solo were so hard-hit by anti-Chinese violence requires understanding as to why other places were not, and to that end we pair the two cities with ones of similar size and ethnic makeup (see Table 2).

Surabaya<sup>11</sup> is Indonesia's second largest city (Medan is third), has a significant Chinese population, and like Medan is home to several universities. Yogyakarta is roughly the same size as Solo, like Solo is a central Javanese cultural heartland city, and like Solo has an economically dominant Chinese commercial population as well as a large student population

Table 2. *Ethnic demographics for Medan, Solo, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta*

	Population (2000)	Chinese as % of population	Pribumi as % of population
Medan	1,904,104	10.7	85.4 <sup>a</sup>
Solo	460,080	3.6	94.9
Surabaya	2,595,359	4.4	91.5
Yogyakarta	396,371	1.6	94.2

Source: *Biro Pusat Statistik Indonesia, Sensus Penduduk 2000* (Indonesian Statistics Bureau Population Census 2001) and *Penduduk Kota Medan* (Hasil Pengolahan SP 2000-L2). BPS Kota Medan, December 2001, pp. 19 and 35.

<sup>a</sup> Includes both Javanese (33.03%) and Tapanuli/Toba Batak (indigenous Sumatran) (19.21%).

at several universities. These four cities provide a useful set of contrast cases that within pairs hold roughly constant size, ethnic makeup, and a national context characterized by limited but significant acts of violence against ethnic Chinese targets in early 1998. They also all evince what Kuran (1989) has referred to as “sparks,” catalyzing events that can, but do not always, result in escalating violence. We detail these events in each of the four city narratives below.

### 5. LOSING CONTROL TO STUDENTS AND PLAYING THE CHINESE ETHNIC CARD: THE RIOTS IN MEDAN AND SOLO

In this section we trace the narratives of events in two of the hardest-hit Indonesian cities in May: the large city of Medan on Sumatra and the much smaller Central Javanese city of Solo. In both cities, we argue, anti-regime demonstrations by students grew out of control *vis-à-vis* security forces and only when that happened did anti-Chinese riots become a likely outcome. Moreover, security forces themselves were directly implicated in engineering violence in both Medan and Solo by deploying criminal organizations affiliated with the army or police to shift the center of mass mobilization away from a focus on the central government and toward local Chinese residents and businesses.

#### (a) *Establishing the Anti-Chinese Repertoire: Medan, May 2–7 1998*

The Joint Fact-Finding Team appointed to investigate the May 1998 riots concluded that “the violence in Medan, it seems, [was] used as a template for the pattern of violence in other places like Jakarta, Solo, Surabaya, and Lampung” (JFFT p. 6, quoted in Purdey, 2006, p. 113). A member of the Team, Bambang Widjoyanto, said that the riots in Medan were a rehearsal or a “try out.” (*D&R*, 7 November 1998). Once put to use, the security response to protests in Medan proved to be sufficiently useful that it was then used in other cities a week later.

Whereas student protests in other Indonesian cities ballooned only after the Trisakti University shootings in Jakarta, in Medan they became unmanageably large for security forces more than a week earlier. Moreover, the repertoire evidenced in Medan appears to have become the template for security forces in other cities in dealing with student demonstrators and the increasingly massive number of Indonesians eager to support their demands for reform. But it only became such a template in cities where student protesters overwhelmed the capacities of security forces to control the streets, as we detail below.

Before May 2, clashes between students and security forces occurred around several campuses in Medan, many of which were located next to the main streets of the city. Although stone throwing, tire burning, Molotov cocktails, and tear gas were used during such clashes, no destruction of property or looting took place. However, on May 2, students in Medan attacked a Timor car showroom located across the street from Nommensen University; the Timor company was a holding of President Suharto’s son Tommy. While the violence failed to spread beyond students and police were able to contain it, it is useful to note that this event both invoked the Suharto family and involved property destruction.

On May 4, the central government’s announcement that subsidies on both fuel and electricity would be lifted provoked more heated student demonstrations. Police created a barrier

around the approximately 500 protesters through the evening before finally allowing them to leave, but a group of officers allegedly stopped one group and assaulted a female student. In response, a group of students and non-student Medan residents attacked a police traffic post, forcing the officers to flee before destroying and burning it. Thousands of others took to the streets to do the same to other traffic posts and to smash traffic lights, police cars, and small businesses and to burn piles of tires (Purdey, 2006, pp. 115, 116). Around 100 people, most of whom were arrested while destroying the Buana Plaza and burning other stores on Pancing Street, were questioned by the police during the night (Waspada, 5 May 1998; Suara Pembaruan, 5 May 1998).

On the morning of May 5, news that 50 participants in the previous evening’s violence had been arrested drew a crowd to the police post where they had been detained. This crowd attacked the building and then began to move through the city attacking, looting, and burning business that were overwhelmingly Chinese-owned. Riots and looting took place in business sectors of the city, such as Pancing Street, Sukaramai, and H.M. Yamin Street. Dozens of stores and cars were burned. All shopping malls and offices were closed. The Mobile Brigade unit from the police and army troops arrived in the afternoon to disperse this group. Later in the evening, the regional military commander, Major General Ismed Yuzairi, said that the city was under control and asked the residents not to panic.

However, the following morning, on May 6, massive looting and destruction outstripped the ability of police and army units to maintain order. More than 50 vehicles were burned, hundreds of stores were torched and looted. Security forces fired bullets, real and rubber, in their effort to control the city. A rumor about a security officer shooting one looter did not reduce the violence but instead fanned more arson and torching. Local newspapers reported that some of the rioting was triggered by unidentified roving groups of people who incited locals to burn and loot before leaving for other areas (Waspada, 7 May 1998). All of the stores, factories, and houses looted belong to ethnic Chinese. Some Chinese store owners tried to resist and defend their property, but most of them gave up and fled. Newspaper reports said six people died—two of gunshot and four trapped in a burning store. More than one hundred people suffered from injuries, mostly from gunshots (Suara Pembaruan, 7 May 1998).

On May 6 and 7, Polonia airport in Medan was full of Chinese families hoping to flee to Singapore and Malaysia, or to Batam Island and from there to Singapore by ferry. Some Chinese families left for Hong Kong. Those who could not get tickets took refuge in hotels and motels in Medan. Riots also spread to surrounding towns such as Tanjung Morawa, Lubuk Pakam, Perbaungan, and Pantai Labu. On May 7, other cities of North Sumatra, such as Binjai, Tebing Tinggi, Pematang Siantar, and Pangkalan Brandan also suffered from riots and looting and burning. On the same day, looting and burning occurred still continued in other parts of Medan, such as Brigjen Katamso Street, Simpang Limun, Glugur, Tembung, and Delitua. Nonetheless, the regional military commander, who appeared with the governor of North Sumatra and the provincial police head said that the situation was under control and therefore no curfew was needed (Suara Pembaruan, May 8, 1998).

During the May 6 and May 7 rioting, a small group of 10 or so civilians was seen in various parts of Medan, firing on protesters (Purdey, 2006pp. 116, 117). The Joint Fact Finding Team concluded after investigating the Medan violence that local *preman* had instigated much of the violence. Many

Chinese businessmen reported in the days before May 6 receiving threatening phone calls or visits from *preman*. And during the evening of May 6, witnesses reported Mobile Brigade troops releasing, following, and actually assisting *preman* engaged in looting or destruction of Chinese property. In the aftermath of the riots, the journalists asked Major General Ismed Yuzairi whether elements of the armed forces were involved in the riots. The regional military commander said he did not find any involvement (*Waspada*, 9 May 1998).

What to make of the five days of violence in Medan that preceded subsequent episodes on Java? We suggest that the answer lies in the chronology of popular and state-organized rioting until May 5 and during May 6 and 7, respectively. Anti-regime demonstrations carried the day in the prior period and it was not inevitable that violence would take an ethnic and anti-Chinese turn until the crucial uncontrollable events of May 5, during which a crowd outraged at the arrest of the previous day's demonstrators attacked and destroyed police stations. The inability of either police or army units to manage these events set the stage for their deployment of *preman* to shift the frame of rioting from anti-regime to anti-Chinese. Some of these gangsters apparently worked to notify their extortees that violence was imminent, perhaps to protect future revenue flows. Ultimately, the result was more massive anti-Chinese violence than had taken place in 30 years, and that forced hundreds of Chinese families to flee the island to Penang, Malaysia, across the Straits of Malacca (O'Rourke, 2002, p. 85). In addition, the orchestration of anti-Chinese riots in Medan demonstrated the potential value of shifting mass violence away from targeting the state or the regime and toward targeting ethnic Chinese.

#### (b) Solo

Rioting in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, and in the largest city on Sumatra, Medan, garnered most of the public attention in May 1998 but as Purdey (2006) and O'Rourke (2002, p. 100) have noted, the violence in Solo, Central Java was at least as destructive in scale given the city's size. In this section we illustrate how escalating student challenges both to the regime and to local security units appeared to exceed the latter's capacity to maintain order. In response, the armed forces were largely withdrawn from the Solo metro area and what replaced them was a seemingly chaotic two days of violence that overwhelmingly targeted Chinese residents and their businesses.

While the ethnic riots beginning on May 14 mark the first sustained attention to the Solo violence in many accounts, we suggest here that its origins lie in an escalating set of clashes between students and security forces that began in March and finally began to grow out of control on May 7. As was the case in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Medan, and other cities with sizable universities, contentious politics in 1998 took the form in Solo first of student demonstrations against the New Order regime. Beginning in March, student protesters called for an end to corruption, collusion, and nepotism (*korupsi, kolusi, dan nepotisme* or KKN), the military role in politics, and increasingly the end of Suharto's rule (Purdey, 2006, p. 125). In line with a law barring students from leaving campus grounds during such protests, Solo student demonstrators initially stuck to campus. Thus, even though the size and scope of the protests before May 14 continued to grow, they did not cross the threshold that would trigger the army response of organizing ethnic riots. Despite the acts of local anti-Chinese violence detailed above, none of these student demonstrations were followed by large-scale rioting against ethnic Chinese.

In early May, Suharto's decision to lift fuel and other subsidies catalyzed escalating student protests. Thousands of Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) students belonging to Students in Solidarity Caring for the Homeland (*Solidaritas Mahasiswa Peduli Tanah Air—SMPTA*) clashed with police units on May 7, pelting them with rocks. The confrontation began when students responded to police orders to disperse by throwing a stone. However, despite what the local police commander described as a later "rainstorm of stones" from student protesters and a police response with tear gas, he negotiated a peaceful settlement with student leaders in which they returned to campus along the side of Jalan Raya Solo-Kartasura. Police Colonel Sriyanto interpreted the security implications of the event: "These student actions are still within the limits of [police] tolerance" (*Solo Pos*, 8 May 1998).

While there is no way to guess counterfactually what might have happened had this settlement not been reached, the early events—several thousand protesters engaging in limited violence against police units with police eventually responding with tear gas—suggest that further escalation was entirely possible. Had that happened, army units would probably have been called in to reinforce the police and things could have gotten out of hand in the same way that they did a week later. This event of May 7 provides some leverage within a single city that helps to control for city-specific factors. That is, the May 7 Solo demonstration could have escalated out of control, spurring army officers to instigate anti-Chinese violence, but did not because police were able to negotiate a controlled end to student mobilization.

On May 8, the day after the UMS demonstration, a demonstration took place at Universitas Negeri Sebelas Maret that began with "hundreds of demonstrators" and grew beyond them to an estimated ten thousand protesters including thousands of non-students. This was precisely what the New Order laws constraining student gatherings to campuses sought to prevent: the mobilization of ordinary citizens by student groups for anti-state protests in the streets. The demonstrators ultimately battled police with rocks and Molotov cocktails, leading police Captain Noegroho Djajoesman to describe the event very differently than his colleague had described the UMS protests the day before: "These actions have disrupted public order." The police responded accordingly, using force to break up the demonstration and provoking claims of repression by student leaders. Independent data collection projects reported approximately 125 students injured, some by bullets fired by police forces (Tadjoeddin, 2002). The Solo command of the army issued a statement calling for "all sides to control themselves," implying a divide of some size between them and police commanders. And, here an important Muslim organization, the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, or Association of Indonesian Islamic Scholars, called on students and residents "not to come down into the streets" (*Solo Pos*, 9 May 1998).

On the evening of May 13, 25 SMPTA activists in coordination with students from UNS's Faculty of Instruction and Education (FKIP) and several social organizations planned large-scale demonstrations for the following day (LPTP, 1999, p. 470) beginning at UMS and proceeding on a "long march" to the city center. The plans were made in the immediate aftermath of the Trisakti University shootings in Jakarta on May 12. Unlike previous demonstrations, the UNS students and others specifically planned to leave the university grounds for "an hour on Ahmad Yani," a major Solo street, and to actively recruit non-student Solo residents to take to the streets with them (471).

By 8:30 in the morning, both police and army forces, including special forces troops, were stationed along Jalan Raya

Solo-Kartasura, which links UMS to downtown Solo, indicating that they had been forewarned about the planned demonstrations. The student march began at 9:30 on the UMS campus, and by 10:20 am nearly a thousand non-student marchers had joined the march along Jalan Garuda Mas on campus toward Jalan Solo-Kartasura. As they proceeded, army troops attempted to encircle the demonstrators and to erect barricades (pp. 472, 473).

Two UMS student activists attempted to negotiate an agreement with the local army commander, Lieutenant John Palupessy that would allow the students to enter the street. Palupessy, however, had a written order from the Director of Indonesia's Armed Forces prohibiting students from leaving campuses and local officers from allowing them to. Following the failed attempt at agreement, the students began pushing off campus and moving toward the gathered crowd in sufficient numbers that security forces could not contain them. The subsequent confrontation with the police and army units ultimately led to rocks being thrown from the crowd, and security forces responded with tear gas and the use of clubs. Eventually, the police and army were able to subdue this crowd near the UMS campus by about 11 am on May 14 (pp. 473–76; see also *Solo Pos* 15 May 1998).

Within 2 h, another crowd of students had regrouped at the UMS campus despite the arrival of army Special Forces reinforcements. Again, two students attempted to negotiate an agreement with Lieutenant Colonel Suherlan, the commander of Sukoharjo police forces on site but, as talks proceeded, a rock was thrown. Students claimed the rock came from the direction of army units and flew toward the gathered crowd (LPTP, p. 476) but, whatever the origins of the provocation, it destroyed the calm and catalyzed a rock-tear gas battle between students and security forces. During this conflict, one of the student negotiators, Budi Prasetya, was shot at close range and killed by a soldier while talking with Suherlan. His body was left on the street. Police and army units began chasing and beating demonstrators, even chasing them into the Islam Hospital where they were asked to leave again by hospital medical staff.

At approximately 1 pm, in response to the events at UMS, another crowd including secondary school students gathered at a major intersection in Solo, not on any campus and, therefore, in violation of the student gathering law. While the demonstration at UMS began to quiet down, the one in town picked up, with demonstrators targeting auto dealerships by shattering their large front windows with stones (LPTP, pp. 477–479). This marked the transition of contentious politics in the May riots in Solo from student- and reform-led to mass mobilization against mostly property targets.

Almost immediately after the downtown property destruction began, eyewitnesses observed motorcycles—painted green as military vehicles were and adorned with army organization stickers on their gas tanks—“easily passing through” the military barricade at the UMS site. These motorcycles let off passengers, who folded into the crowd, and disappeared. These individuals, reported eyewitnesses, were dressed in civilian clothing but unlike other protesters covered their faces with hats and batik fabric and spoke with non-Javanese accents, suggesting they were not locals (LPTP, p. 479). In the violence that ensued during the rest of May 14, 40 protesters were seriously injured, including 16 shot by security forces, and 400 more sustained respiratory injuries from tear gas. More importantly, the violence was actively ethnicized as it took to targeting highly visible commercial targets owned by ethnic Chinese in the Solo urban center. Where students at both UMS and UNS had begun their demonstrations by speaking out against

Suharto and by calling for an end to radical price hikes (explicitly tying the two together), the next round took a property-directed, and specifically anti-Chinese turn.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting the sudden change that took place as it became apparent that (a) student demonstrators had strong support among the Solonese and (b) they refused to end their protests and grew in size as the day went on. What happened was that planned student protests evolved into perhaps even more carefully planned ethnic violence against Chinese commercial targets. While students continued to drum home their anti-regime messages, and while ordinary Solo residents either watched passively or joined the students, a small group of young men on motorcycles was seen all over the city, ferrying petrol, iron bars, and alcohol, using walkie-talkies to communicate and setting piles of tires ablaze to mark subsequent targets.

These individuals did not enter the scene in previous days' protests, and even on May 14 waited until hours of protesting had already taken place before beginning to organize attacks on Chinese property. Why? To us, the timing of this sequence, as in Medan, suggests strongly that Solo's anti-Chinese riots were preorganized but not preordained; security forces acted to shift the frame of mass protest to an ethnic one only it became clear that students were intent on continuing their demonstrations against the regime and that thousands of Solonese were prepared to join them, raising the specter of truly massive protests that the army and police could not hope to control. But they could, and did, control both the intensity and duration of anti-Chinese riots.

## 6. SPARKS BUT NO FIRES: SURABAYA AND YOGYAKARTA, MAY 1998

### (a) *Surabaya*

When riots broke out during the months that led to the fall of Suharto, people in Surabaya believed that Surabaya would be affected. Rumors circulated that the so called “drop-dropan”—the deployment of provocateurs into a city to instigate riots—would also take place in Surabaya. Prominent individuals from Surabaya and East Java, including Abdurrahman Wahid, the leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, gave warnings to people in Surabaya to take whatever measures necessary to defend themselves. So why was the city spared the riots of 1998?

Citizens of the city often perceive themselves as an integrated community or “guyub” community, using the same vernacular in everyday conversation. They compare themselves with people in other large cities of Indonesia such as Jakarta and Medan where the relationship between Chinese and pribumi is less well-connected. The term used to describe Surabayaans, namely “arek” (guy) or “arek Surabaya” (fellow Surabayaans) describes both their solidarity and the imagined unity as citizens of the city, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds. This culture lubricates interethnic tensions and mitigates rumors that emerge within Chinese and Pribumi communities in Surabaya. According to two observers of Chinese and Pribumi relations in Surabaya, this “arek culture” “functions like a safety valve in a machine.”<sup>13</sup>

One Chinese community leader in Surabaya noted that there is a strong Chinese association in the city that cooperates closely with the leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama—including Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur—to mend tensions when they emerge. Most Chinese business people are members of this association. As mentioned below, this mechanism has been in place since well before 1998. During the crises of 1998,

the Chinese community also worked closely with the local government and the security apparatus—including, for instance, providing money for food and drinks to the security forces who worked long periods without suitable logistics in 1998 (Interview in Surabaya, 17 July 2008). In addition, student leaders, including Chinese youth activists, met several times during the month. One decision that came out of these meetings was to establish night watches whereby youth in a neighborhood stayed the nights to guard it. Chinese youth also participated. In short, there is a level of interethnic cooperation in Surabaya that lends some support to arguments by Varshney (2002) and others.

However, even more critical in avoiding violence in Surabaya was the role played by the security forces. During the critical weeks of May, the police and the security forces in Surabaya worked closely to maintain calm and to intervene in critical incidents. On one occasion on May 14, students from different universities organized protests outside their campuses, in the main streets of Surabaya. They concentrated in the local (both city and provincial level) parliament buildings. In the evening of the same day, looting took place when protesters passed Iskandar Muda Street, where a police office was located. There were three officers inside at the time. Four stores around the police office were looted, and some of the looted goods were burned. The police arrested four people but the crowd attacked the police. The arrested persons were released. Protesters also looted a workshop located not far from the police office and burned or destroyed 13 cars. Security reinforcements arrived consisting of marines, the army, mobile brigade, and riot police. Other incidents of looting and arson at Wonokusumo and Nyamplungan, where two stores were looted and burned, remained within the control of the security forces.

On May 14, student activists, professors, and rectors from different universities in Surabaya gathered at Airlangga University campus, to call for peaceful reform in Surabaya to avoid riots such as those that took place in Jakarta. In the afternoon, groups of students used public and private radio stations to call for “reformasi through peaceful means.” Students announced to cheers outside the RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia) building that whoever participated in riots and looting was a traitor to reform (Kompas May 16, 1998).

On May 15, a crowd attacked Timor Car showroom on Urip Sumohardjo street. As in Solo, the Timor car industry belonged to Tommy Suharto. Although there were no cars inside (they had been evacuated), protesters burned chairs and tables. The crowd looted another building occupied by a travel agency and money changer and burned computers, chairs, and papers in front of the building. The security apparatus came, shot in the air, and dispersed the protesters. Also on May 15, people threw stones at several buildings including a bank on Gubernur Suryo Street. A couple of hundred meters away at Tunjungan Street, protesters threw stones at two stores and broke their windows. A car in front of Tunjungan Plaza was destroyed and many stores and shopping malls were closed. However, these acts of vandalism did not escalate into larger riots and, more importantly did not morph into ethnic riots.

The role of the Regional Military Command was central to mitigating this situation. Djaja Suparman, the regional military commander, ordered the troops to close and guard the main streets by putting military vehicles in the roads, to deter potential provocateurs from coming into Surabaya. He also ordered them to protect markets and other public places. Also important was the unit assigned to guard and patrol the city during the month of May. Suparman sent Garnisun (Garnisun), a combined unit consisting of personnel from all ser-

vices—including the police which before 1999 was part of the armed forces. Its role includes enforcing discipline in the armed forces and it has the power to arrest military or police personnel who break the law or violate military discipline. Because of its power, the unit is feared within the armed forces. The assignment of Garnisun to Surabaya clearly indicated the determination within the local armed forces to maintain unity and to avoid whatever internal division that might occur. The police were instructed to stay alert in their posts when Garnisun patrolled the city (Interview with police intelligence officer, Surabaya, 18 July 2008).

For the Chinese in Surabaya, avoiding the storm of riots of 1998 was not their first experience. Two anti-Chinese riots in Java before 1998 present telling examples of what happened in the city in response to riots elsewhere. The first was in Purwakarta, West Java, from 1 to 2 November 1995, after a Chinese shop owner allegedly beat a girl for stealing from his shop. Many Chinese-owned stores were looted and some were burned. From 21 to 24 November 1995, a riot took place in the city of Pekalongan, Central Java, after a Chinese allegedly tore up a Qur’an and led to rioting and the destruction of Chinese-owned shops (Setiono, n.d.: 1058–1059). The riots in Pekalongan damaged 69 stores, 45 houses, several vehicles, and two churches. When the news reached Surabaya, Chinese leaders in Surabaya swiftly gathered with the Nahdatul Ulama leaders, with Pemuda Ansor (the youth wing of NU), and other Muslim leaders. Surabaya remained calm after some the tension especially within the Chinese community in Surabaya. (interview, Surabaya 17 July 2008).

#### (b) Yogyakarta

Yogyakarta (“Yogya”) was a center of student demonstrations in 1998. Later, professors and university staff joined the students. Beginning in April, high school students began participating in rallies as well, followed by other segments of Yogya society, such as workers, artists, street musicians, and even scavengers (*pemulung*). The organizers included student activist organizations located outside campus, student senates, and alliances of students from different universities including Islamic student groups. The themes of the rallies varied, from the price of basic needs, the dual function of ABRI or Indonesia’s armed forces, price of fuel, *kolusi*, *korupsi*, *dan nepotisme* (KKN), to the replacement of Suharto. Increasingly, the focus of protests became Suharto himself and this in the context of the shift to anti-Chinese violence elsewhere might have led us to expect the same in Yogya.

Student demonstrations have always had the potential for escalating into violent confrontations. As can be seen from the students’ rallies in Yogyakarta and elsewhere in Indonesia in 1998, student movements exemplified different strategies and demands and ideologies. Many of them claimed status as a moral force criticizing the government and the military (Aspinall, 1999, p. 223). But not all student movements disavowed overt violence and embraced non-violence. Encountering fierce military and police as backers of authoritarian regime, student demonstrations sometimes turned into violent confrontation with the police and military. As an integral part of contentious politics in 1998, student demonstrations in Yogyakarta clearly illustrate this potential. Why did students’ demonstrations in Yogyakarta not lead to anti-Chinese riots?

The key factor in the dynamics of student demonstrations and their relations with security forces was the location and manageability of demonstrations. Students could organize demonstrations without the interference of the security forces



as long as they remained on campus. Both university authorities and security forces agreed on this point. In April 1998, Professor Ichlasul Amal, the rector of Gadjah Mada University, said that as long as students expressed their demands and aspirations on campus, he would support them.<sup>14</sup> In May, Yogyakarta military commander Lieutenant Colonel Edhy Ryanto said that if students remained on campus, the military would not interfere (*Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 13 May 1998, p. 1). In Jakarta, General Wiranto, the chief of staff of the armed forces, also reminded students not to leave their campuses (*Aspinall*, 1999, p. 216). The location of demonstrations, therefore, provided both opportunities and constraints for student demonstrations.

Of course, there were attempts to lower the threshold. For instance, in late March, General Wiranto as the armed forces commander agreed to a dialog with students, with the purpose of reducing demonstrations and using dialog as a means for airing their aspirations and demands. To this offer, students responded by saying, "dialog yes, demonstration yes." Actually, the dialog never happened ("Dialog Yes, Demo Yes," *D&R*, 4 April 1998, pp. 16, 17). Other attempts came from the Minister of Education, Wiranto Arismunandar, who tried to ban student demonstrations on campus grounds, saying that campus should not be used for "practical politics." He also told university rectors to crack down on practical politics on campus and to call in the armed forces if necessary (*Aspinall*, 1999, p. 16). Amien Rais, a government critic and professor at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, asked the minister to clarify what he meant by practical politics because "if the aims of demonstrations are to lower prices and to carry out economic, political, and legal reforms, these are not practical politics, but high politics" (*Media Indonesia*, 6 April 1998). Most probably, the minister was only echoing President Suharto, who demanded the students focus on studying, and told the security forces to use repressive measures if students moved outside campus.<sup>15</sup> However, Parliament's deputy speaker Syarwan Hamid, himself a retired general, disagreed, saying that repression "would be pouring oil on fire" (*Asia-week*, April 17, 1998).

The New Order regime clearly had internal disagreements on whether to ban student demonstrations or to use repression in dealing with them. Yet, there was a more general agreement that rallies should remain on campuses both among the university authorities and the security forces. Students, accordingly, abided by the threshold in most of the cases until March. On the other hand, different police units, sometimes with the support of the army, guarded the students' demonstrations. They confined students to their campuses and, when they took to the streets outside the campus precincts, controlled them. However, the situation changed in April 2008, when students redefined their options and demanded to march outside their campuses. Violent confrontations resulted from this move.

On April 2, students attempted to carry out a "long march" to the local parliament, located on Malioboro Street, three to four kilometers away. However, the police blocked the road just outside their campus. The Yogyakarta police head said that the march would disturb traffic and public order. He also offered to have students driven to the parliament (sparing his forces the probable mobilization of masses along the march route), but students declined the offer. Stone throwing lasted for more than an hour, and students overturned a car parked near Gadjah Mada University gateway which belonged to the security apparatus and in which they found Molotov cocktails and tear gas. The next day, students organized another rally and this time they wanted to walk to the Sultan's court. The

police force reminded students not to violate the campus-only limit. Many protesters complied with this warning and remain on campus and continued their speech. Some, however, tried to push this limit and started walk down the road. They only managed to walk one hundred meters out of campus before police blocked their way. After several hours of stand-off, confrontation erupted. Provoked by stone throwing, police beat students and smashed dozens of motorcycles parked on campus.<sup>16</sup>

In May, students' rallies in Yogyakarta got nastier as banners displayed by students increasingly blunt—for instance calling Suharto a dog (in Javanese) and demanded him to be hanged. On May 6, demonstrations took place in many campuses, including Gadjah Mada, IKIP (The Institute for Teaching and Education), Sanata Dharma University, and IAIN (The State Islamic University). Most of these demonstrations proceeded peacefully. However, on Gejayan Street, the nearest major street to both IKIP and Sanata Dharma campuses, fighting erupted, and police chased students into the campuses. They arrested 29 protesters but assured the public that they would treat the arrested students well. (*Kedaulatan Rakyat*, May 7, p. 1).

The most aggressive encounter took place on May 8. In the afternoon, thousands of Gadjah Mada students organized rallies at the main gate of the campus. The rally, which lasted more than 4 h, was peaceful. In the meantime, less than one kilometer away in Gejayan street, students at IKIP and Sanata Dharma also organized rallies, wanting to join the students at Gadjah Mada. The security forces, however, did not allow them to leave their campuses. Fights between the mainly police force and students started around 5 pm. The police used water cannon and tear gas, as well as batons, and students used stones and Molotov bombs. The police not only beat students but also street vendors and passersby. The fighting continued until midnight. Flowerpots and traffic lamps were destroyed but no houses or stores along Samirono and Gejayan Streets were damaged. Scores of students were hospitalized and during the night one, Moses Gatutkaca, was found dead in Gejayan Street. The doctor in the hospital said his death was caused by head injury. Later, the street where he was found dead was named after him.

The following day, the Yogyakarta police chief reiterated a consistent line: that the police would tolerate students' protests as long as they remained on campus. However, the security apparatus continued to ignore the fact that many demonstrations had trespassed the threshold and continued to express its belief that student demonstrations must be, and should be on campuses. When demonstrations took place outside campus, they must by definition not be student demonstrations. For instance, the commander of the Yogyakarta military, Lieutenant Colonel Edhy Ryanto said that if the action of concern was done outside campus, and included actions such as looting and/or rioting, he would take harsh measures and arrest the looters and those who created damages to property, "since I believe that the actions have led to disturbance and looting, it must not have been done by students" (*Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 13 May 1998 p. 1). In a similar vein, Major General Tyasno Sudarto, the Central Java regional commander, said that the tension in Yogyakarta was "an effect of students' actions, and not done by the students but by outside groups." What he meant by "outside groups" was criminals and recidivists (*Kedaulatan Rakyat* 7 May 1998, p. 1).

New developments took place in mid-May, as more and more demonstrations moved off campus. On May 15, rallies and sporadic clashes between protesters and the security forces occurred again on Gejayan Street. Protesters lobbed rocks and

the police used tear gas to control them. Demonstrators burned tires in the middle of the streets. The mob of protesters threw rocks through a bank's windows but stopped short of setting the bank on fire. As the situation grew increasingly tense, all stores on Malioboro and Urip Sumohardjo Streets, the busiest business sector of the city, were closed. That afternoon on Urip Sumohardjo Street, also called Solo Street, protesters threw stones at a Timor dealership. The showroom was empty but protesters ripped down the Timor billboard from the top of the building.

The presence of security forces who promised to use harsh measures against protesters outside campus, the broken windows of banks belong to ethnic Chinese businessmen and a Timor dealership as a symbol of Suharto's family corruption, and the increasing elements of protesters outside the students—all of this seemed to suggest that Yogyakarta was headed for a more dangerous level of violence. At this critical time, however, Sultan and provincial governor Hamengkubuwono X appeared at the Urip Sumoharjo crossroad, where thousands of protesters had gathered. His presence instantly attracted the attention of the masses. Standing on top of a car, he addressed them: "I respect your struggle for reform. But you should not choose violent means. If you keep order, I'll always be here to support your aspirations." The masses applauded and no further violence occurred. The protesters went back home that afternoon.

The next day, new developments took place. Many billboards and banner appeared in many parts of the city, sending messages of restraint and non-violence. One banner read, "Yogya is not a violent city," "Peaceful reform," (*Reformasi Damai*). Posters, stickers, and headbands reading "Reformasi Damai" also proliferated on campuses. Yogya's business community also played an important role. The Yogyakarta chamber of commerce and the business community—mostly Chinese—donated money to buy food and drink for the security forces and for "peaceful action." Local newspapers printed the names of the donors. The business and community leaders worked to persuade the security forces not to use repressive measures against demonstrators (*The Jakarta Post*, 14 June 1998).

As a result, during the last week before the fall of Suharto on 21 May, demonstrations in Yogyakarta proceeded peacefully. On 20 May, the issue of site for demonstrations was no longer an issue for all contenders, and the protest against Suharto that originally led by students has transformed into a social movement or people power. Nearly one million people marched to Sultan's palace and the surrounding streets. They arrived on foot; coming from 40 or more campuses, but also from villages from all over the Special District of Yogyakarta. The presence of security forces was minimal—they were deployed in places where they were invisible to the protesters. Shop owners along the mainstreets leading to the palace provided snacks and mineral water. Not a single window was broken. Snacks and drinks were still available in front of stores when students and protesters returned to their homes and campuses in the afternoon. The next day, students in Yogyakarta watched television reports broadcasting the fall of Suharto.

In conclusion, we argue that during the months that led to the fall of Suharto, peaceful students demonstrations in Yogyakarta intersected with clashes and violent disturbances involving students and the security apparatus. But this combination was not enough to create the fire of riots as seen in cities such as Solo and Medan. In retrospect, different explanations have been given to why Yogyakarta steered clear of riots. For some, the academic environment of this college

town held back violent riots during the critical moments in April and May. Another reason is the positive role played by the Sultan, both as a cultural and political leader of Yogyakarta. He maintained close relations with different groups of the society, including the Chinese and the security forces. Although he only attended and gave speech on one or two student rallies, he is respected among students and always asked for restraint and moderation. It is also important to note that the Sultan owns businesses in different parts of the city and therefore has a keen interest in maintaining calm and safety. But central, we suggest, is the role played by the security apparatus, especially the police during the demonstration months of 1998. Despite all the clashes with students, the police and the military continued to be a force of law and order in Yogyakarta and did so because they needed not fear the escalation of protests beyond what they could monitor. They worked closely with university rectors through meetings, as well as with the Sultan of Yogyakarta. The result was expansive but not such politically threatening demonstrations.

## 7. CONCLUSION

During the first five months of 1998, Indonesia underwent a destabilizing but ultimately successful transition that culminated in 1999 in the seating of a new democratic government. The process that led to Suharto's resignation on May 21, however, was marked by some extremely heavy-handed interventions in contentious politics by elements of his regime that included the purposeful orchestration of anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta, Medan, and Solo. We endeavored in this essay to explain why Medan and Solo, in particular, were wracked by anti-Chinese violence while the similar cities of Surabaya and Yogyakarta were spared the escalation of sparking events into full-blown ethnic rioting and illustrate that anti-Chinese riots were a conscious tactic employed by state security forces. In the face of unmanageable student demonstrations that (a) began to attract large mass followings off campuses and (b) focused their rhetorical and geographical energies on the regimes' inability to cope with the economic crisis, security forces and especially army special forces units deployed *preman* with whom they had standing ties. These *preman* took preexisting mass mobilization-against the regime—and actively shifted its rhetorical and targeting frame to one focused on ethnic Chinese businessmen and their property.

These actions by no means created anti-Chinese prejudice out of thin air. A long historical legacy of active construction of ethnic cleavages by Dutch colonial authorities and then by both the Sukarno and Suharto regimes, along with a seriously skewed concentration of capital in the ethnic Chinese commercial community in most major Indonesian cities, generated a sense among pribumi Indonesians of economic favoritism toward the Chinese. However, nearly all the time interethnic relations are peaceful, if not always harmonious, and anti-Chinese violence has been rare. Only when mass politics began to grow out of the army's ability to control it in May 1998 did it turn to anti-Chinese riots as a solution. This carries one positive implication: given the transition in 1999, the successful second elections of 2004 and upcoming third elections in 2009, and the increasing retrenchment of the Indonesian armed forces from politics, it seems unlikely that such political crises would again catalyze state-orchestrated ethnic riots against Chinese.

Looking more broadly at the dynamics of ethnic riots, the May riots in Indonesia suggest that we ought to refine and expand our focus on states as not just passive builders of

structural conditions but as central and proximate actors in the development of riots. Where Brass (1997) notes that scholars of ethnic politics can learn much by asking who stands to benefit from the labeling of events as “communal violence,” we concur. Moreover, in authoritarian settings, especially ones marked by preexisting ethnic prejudices like these, crisis periods are among the most likely ones for state actors to play cen-

tral roles. What does this mean for the comparative study of ethnic riots? For one, it suggests a need for renewed and more systematic attention to local state actors alongside the already well-developed theories focused on political competition, civic life, and ethnic identity construction. To be frank, data collection, especially of the quantitative sort, is likely to be more difficult in this direction than in others but is no less important.

## NOTES

1. *Premen* refers in common Indonesian parlance to organized crime figures with ties to the state or to army or police units. For broader studies of the social concept and the political influence of *preman* in Medan and elsewhere, see Ryter (1998) and Lindsey (2005).

2. We employ a contrast-case pairing of cities that consciously builds on a research strategy employed by Varshney (2002).

3. For discussions of the analytical value of process-tracing, see Bennett and George (2005).

4. We owe thanks to two anonymous reviewers for pushing us to develop this line of argument more thoroughly.

5. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer, too, for making this point.

6. Personal communication with Benjamin Smith, November 30, 2007.

7. We surveyed 336 respondents, approximately half Chinese and half Pribumi, using a stratified targeted random sample. It is important to note that these survey data do not necessarily reflect dynamics preceding the May 1998 riots. Nine years after the bloody riots in Solo, it is plausible to us that social and political efforts to remake the city's interethnic landscape could well be behind the dynamics we observe in survey responses. While for example persistent Hindu-Muslim violence in India is an integral part of the electoral landscape in some states, the May 1998 riots had only a few historical referents and in Solo only one serious one, in 1981. This is to say that a few days of rioting had a powerful impact among the Solonese precisely because it was so unexpected. See Purdey (2006).

8. Brass, of these three scholars, leans closest to implicating the state directly.

9. Chandra (2004), among others, has argued that Brass is in fact advancing a positive argument to explain anti-Muslim violence in India, shifting to a postmodern one only in elucidating the ways in which competing actors build discourses of violent events.

10. Sidel (2006, esp. chap. 4) has cataloged extensively anti-Chinese violence in the late Suharto era. Since many of the events he analyzes were (a) targeted as much and often more at Christians as opposed to Chinese and (b) the perpetrators were local Islamic leaders, we suggest that they mostly fall outside the scope of “anti-Chinese riots” *per se*. The events in Purwakarta in October 1995 and in Makassar in September 1997, by contrast, were explicitly anti-Chinese in frame and made little distinction of ethnic Chinese as Christians. See Sidel (2006, pp. 74, 75, 96, 97), respectively.

11. Our characterization of Surabaya as a “peaceful” city to pair with Medan is not an historical statement; in fact the city suffered religious violence only a few years prior, in 1996. Rather, in the context of a specific repertoire of anti-Chinese violence in early 1998, and given the common spark events in Surabaya and the other three cities, we seek to explain why at this moment in time, just before Suharto's resignation, no anti-Chinese violence took place when we might have expected it to. We are thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing us to clarify this point.

12. See Purdey (2006, pp. 124–128) for an excellent account of the events and of the major targets and actors.

13. Putut Trihusodo and Tuti Herawati (1998). “Solidaritas Arek Surabaya,” *Gatra* 18 July, pp. 72, 73.

14. “Suatu Hari di Kampus Republik,” *D&R*, 11 April 1998, p. 23.

15. *Asian Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 1998.

16. *Adil*, 8–14 April 1998, p. 15.

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