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A PRAYER FOR DEMOCRACY: SECRETARIAN VIOLENCE AND REGIME TYPE IN INDONESIA

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Indonesia has a long history of conflict with roots in ethnic, religious, communal and political difference. This was the inevitable consequence of unresolved tensions when the Republic of Indonesia was born in 1945. While a variety of differences over the nature of the state have emerged over the past 76 years, none have been more protracted or resistant to solution than those over religion. In a country where Islam commands the adherence of 87 percent of the population, but five other religions are officially recognized, it is not surprising that these divides should persist.¹

For the most part, disagreements over the role of Islam in politics and society have been resolved peacefully. The overwhelming majority of Indonesians have managed to sustain an inter-religious *modus vivendi* underpinned by the state ideology Pancasila and the constitution, which acknowledged the belief in “one God” and allowed scope for the practice of other monotheistic religions. Indonesia was neither a theocratic nor a secular state (Elson 2013). But from this initial compromise flowed others. Islamists remain aggrieved over the failure to accord their beliefs what they see as the rightful place for them in political and social life.

¹ The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) extends official recognition to six religious groups or beliefs: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism.

This tension between the numerical dominance of Islam and the legal foundations of the state have been a source of bitter conflict over the years, stoked by political-religious brokers for manifold, and often self-interested, purposes. It remains an unresolved and evolving challenge for the future of Indonesian politics and society (Bouchier 2019).

Grievances over the national role of Islam have provided the impetus for periodic mass protest and episodes of collective violence throughout Indonesia's post-independence history. At times, religion has conflated with local disputes and power struggles to provide the gasoline to inflame them. This happened in Maluku in the late 1990s and in Central Sulawesi in the early 2000s when both regions erupted in what was in effect sectarian civil war (Bertrand 2002; Sidel 2006). Parallel to these conflicts, terrorism re-emerged as a strategy to advance the aspirations of radicals for the replacement of the Republic of Indonesia with an Islamic caliphate (Solahudin 2013).

The violence peaked during the years immediately after the end of the authoritarian New Order as Indonesia consolidated a transition to democracy. As democracy has become more entrenched over the past two decades, religiously inspired, large scale collective violence has waned. That is not to say religious intolerance and discrimination has abated; that acts of sectarian violence have been eliminated; or that there is a clear trend towards greater pluralism and a shift away from hardline interpretations of religious doctrine (Wahid 2018). Yet even in this regard, researchers point to positive signs, including a 2019 decision of the mass Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama to scrap the use of the term *fiqh*, or infidel, which has often been used to demonize other religions (Religious Freedom Institute 2020).

The evident decline in acts of sectarian social unrest and acts of collective violence would appear to reflect a long-term trend. Indeed, the idea that democracy has pacific virtue – both internally and in relation to other democracies – has gained a considerable following in both academic and political circles over the years, even

as democracy has come under pressure, including in well-established democratic states. Certainly, it has innate appeal to its champions. US president George W. Bush once argued democracy taught societies “the peaceful resolution of differences”, which he believed validated an American mission to spread it (Bush 2003).

The question addressed here: Is that true? If so, the experience of sectarian violence in Indonesia – surely one of the most protracted and difficult to resolve forms of organized, collective violence – should make a good focus of analysis. The following sections will set out the analytical arguments for why the advocates of democracy think it contributes to international and domestic peace. We can then explore how these ideas stack up against the long history of sectarian violence in Indonesia. As Indonesia persists with an unsteady commitment to democracy, blotted by occasional controversial affairs like the blasphemy trial of Jakarta’s former Chinese Christian governor, it is worth assessing whether there has been a democratic dividend in pacifying the character of political contention – one that the country might build on.

Does democracy contribute to civil peace?

How reliable a guide is a country’s system of government to the behavior of its domestic political actors in the resolution of conflict? Is there a correlation between consolidation of democracy and a reduction of collective violence? Are autocracies any less capable of controlling and channeling contention?

Researchers have matched regime type with the historical record of civil wars, concluding that democracies do “experience significantly fewer civil war years than their non-democratic counterparts” (Krain and Myers 1997: 114). An

examination of data of civil war years between 1816 and 1992² confirmed the “proposition that different regime types have different consequences for internal conflict” (ibid: 114).

Inspired by work on the concept of an interstate democratic peace, this idea has been termed a “democratic civil peace” (Hegre *et al* 2001). It is a domestic political complement to the so-called “Kantian Triangle” – the proposition that shared democracy, joint membership of international organizations, and economic interdependency practically eliminate the risks of interstate conflict (Russett and Oneal 2001).

The existence of a democratic civil peace would be an important discovery. Since the end of the Cold War the prevalence of extreme internal violence has proved to be a greater threat to human security than major interstate war. But a key question is what mechanisms are at work if indeed there is evidence that democracies experience a lower risk of collective violence. Recalling, say, the riots in Los Angeles in 1992, race-based protest in the USA today, and the country’s presidential transition this year, surely suggests collective political violence is not absent from even well-established democratic systems.³ Moreover, autocratic regimes have demonstrated they are effective in suppressing dissent.

While studies confirm a distinct pattern in the relationship between regime type and collective violence, the results do not neatly fit the case for spreading democracy. Established democracies are revealed to be effective in containing collective violence. But established autocracies perform well in this regard too (Hegre *et al* 2001; Muller 1985; Muller and Weede 1990). Indeed, there was little

² Krain and Myers utilised data from J. David Singer and Melvin Small, “Correlates of War Project: International and Civil War Data, 1815-1992”, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Mich., (1994).

³ For example, the death toll from the 1992 Los Angeles riots reached 51 (NYT 1992), paralysing parts of one of the biggest cities in one of the most robust democracies. In contrast, Singapore, which Freedom House (2010) rated as only “partly free” in its world freedom rankings, has experienced major riots only once in its entire post-independence history when four people died during a spill over of riots in neighbouring Malaysia in 1969 (Conceicao 2007).

discernible difference between strong democracies and strong autocracies when it came to the risk of civil war.

Rather, the greatest risk occurred in countries either transitioning between the two or that were neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic. In “semi-democracies” or regimes “intermediate between a democracy and an autocracy” (ibid: 33), the risk of civil war was greatest. This inverted-U relationship between democracy, autocracy and civil war was pronounced during changes from one regime to another, regardless of the direction of the transition. Witness Myanmar today.

This pattern of collective violence has been attributed to distinct characteristics of autocracies and democracies. In the case of autocracy, the power and reach of state agents and the penalties imposed by extreme repression affects the capacity of dissident groups to organize and lowers their expectations that collective protest will succeed. Conversely, an open or fully democratic regime created “many feasible nonviolent alternatives” for political participation (Muller 1985: 48). As democracy consolidates, this pattern of resolving political and social grievances is expected to consolidate too, ensuring limits are placed on “life-and-property threatening forms of public, collective claim making, substituting for them highly visible but less directly destructive varieties of interaction” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 269). It is under regimes of “intermediate repressiveness” that high death rates from political violence are seen as “most likely to occur” (Muller 1985: 59). It follows that the highest levels of collective violence are likely to be found under weak authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes which lack the will or capacity for effective repression.

A further key finding from civil democratic peace research is that a significant increase in the risk of civil war is caused by the act of transition between authoritarian and democratic regimes, with the risk remaining elevated for several

years after the transition (Hegre *et al* 2001: 38)⁴. Transitions between types of regimes are likely to weaken central government control over the instruments of state coercion, the effectiveness of coercive powers themselves or the willingness of political leaders to use coercive power. This phenomenon was evident in Indonesia during the years of democratic transition between the fall of President Suharto in 1998 and the first direct elections for President in 2004.

There is an important qualification to attach to the predictions of a lower frequency and intensity of collective violence under democracies and autocracies. As noted, the incidence of collective violence in support of a claim is shown to reduce, not cease under both regime types. It begs an explanation of what factors explain the emergence of collective violence in either the most repressive or most open regimes. The work on the idea of civil democratic peace based on counting incidents in the historical record points to a pattern but would appear to lack a convincing explanation.

One answer is suggested by analysis of the dynamics of social movements themselves (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, 2009; Tilly 2003, 2006). This brings into focus factors such as the existence of a grievance or perceived threat experienced by a group (and their gravity), ability to mobilize (via an organization and its leadership), and perceptions of whether an opportunity reasonably exists to resolve the source of group anxiety. All three elements are necessary conditions for collective action. Clearly, group solidarity or the strength of shared identity, as in a religious belief, is a key element driving motive, organization, and resolve (or willingness to take risks).

Of the factors driving or enabling collective action, it is the nature of perceived opportunity that relates most directly to the character and strength of regimes, which can vary over time within and between regime types. Strong

⁴ The finding of an elevated risk of civil war during democratic transitions has its parallel in the interstate democratic peace. Mansfield and Snyder (1995) are among a number of scholars to argue the risk of interstate war actually increases between two *democratizing* states – a significant qualification of the interstate democratic peace.

regimes can exhibit weakness; weak regimes can demonstrate strength. Factors that increase or decrease the opportunity for claimants include the degree of openness among domestic political institutions; the stability of elite alliances that support a regime; the presence of elite allies for potential challengers; and the state's capacity and willingness to employ repression (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1998).⁵ Collectively, these variables have been termed a *political opportunity structure*⁶. In turn, this structure of opportunity can be shaped by a wide variety of changes in political, social, economic and security conditions caused, for example, by wars, pandemics and natural disasters, technological innovation, rising unemployment, and demographic shifts.

Another instructive way of looking at the power relationship between regimes and claimants is in terms of “state capacity”⁷ – the “extent to which governmental agents control resources, activities and populations within the government's territory” (Tilly 2003: 41). In a democracy, social movements can engage in claim making by petitions, media conferences, demonstrations, and lobbying (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2009). Under high-capacity democratic regimes, it is both the more peaceful nature of this repertoire of protest and the regime's capacity to respond to and repress claim making that minimizes the potential for violent conflict. But in the case of low-capacity democratic regimes – such as those in a transitional or democratizing phase – institutions are generally less able to respond effectively to claims at a time when expectations are often high and the means to counter popular movements is weak. This might occur for various reasons, including weak and contested leadership, elite splits (especially between civilian rules and the security apparatus), and ineffective government

⁵ McAdam (1982 [1999]) and Romano (2006) add a fifth variable to the list: international and foreign influences that either support the state or its opponents. This is arguably a variable of growing importance.

⁶ This term was first used by Eisinger (1973). However, he referred to the political opportunity structure in municipal-level government. It now is applied to opportunity structure at the national level.

⁷ The question of how to evaluate and measure state capacity has been a subject of debate and controversy. See Berwick and Christia 2018.

institutions. The presumed effect is an increase in the risk of peaceful protest actions becoming violent or groups including violent acts in their protest repertoire.

The same pattern is thought to occur in authoritarian regimes of high and low capacity. High-capacity non-democratic regimes restrict protest performances leaving dissidents to make their claims by “tolerated performances” or “adoption of forbidden performances such as armed attacks” (Tilly 2006: 76). Although this limitation on legitimate expressions of dissent is presumed to make strong authoritarian regimes somewhat more prone to violence than strong democratic ones, the ubiquitous presence and power of government agents in strong authoritarian regimes tends to suppress most forms of protest and collective violence. By contrast, in low-capacity non-democratic regimes government agents are likely to be less effective and command less popular support and legitimacy, while their opponents, who might feel strongly aggrieved or threatened by state policy, are still constrained in how they can pursue claims. In turn, this greatly increases the scope for violence.

An analysis along a spectrum of regime and capacity is expected to produce the following correlations: low levels of collective violence in high-capacity democracies, medium levels of collective violence in low-capacity democracies and high-capacity non-democracies, and high levels of collective violence in low-capacity non-democracies (Tilly 2006: 80-81). This schema suffers from the difficulty of defining and quantifying state capacity. But nonetheless it is a broadly useful analytical framework.

Drawing on the purported pattern of collective violence in the transition from authoritarian to democratic systems described above might tell us something about the history and future risks of sectarian conflict in Indonesia. We will now turn to an analysis of sectarian violence in Indonesia between the early 1980s and 2010s – a period that covers strong authoritarian and democratic regimes and a destabilizing transition from authoritarian to democratic rule that lasted several years. The focus of the analysis will be episodes of public contention and civil

unrest, rather than the clandestine methods of terrorism. But if the correlation between regime type and violence is established, it should be true of all forms of organized violent contention.

Patterns of Sectarian Violence in Indonesia

Suharto Ascendant, the 1980s

By the mid-1980s, Suharto was almost 20 years into his rule and at the “apex of his power and influence” (Elson 2001: 236). Despite the New Order’s political ascendancy, the mid-1980s were also marked by serious incidents of significant sectarian violence. One of the most infamous occurred in Jakarta’s Tanjung Priok neighbourhood on 12 September 1984. In a clash with security forces, dozens of Muslim protestors were killed, including a prominent local Islamic activist and leader Amir Biki. According to various accounts, the proximate cause was the desecration several days earlier of a local *musholla* (prayer house) by soldiers (Bourchier and Hadiz 2003; Burns 1989; Effendy 2003; Sidel 2006; Suparyati 2004; Tempo 2002). Three or four local people were arrested when they retaliated. On 12 September, Biki led a march on the district police station and local military command post to demand the release of those arrested where the clash occurred.

The response of the regime was to launch a crackdown on Muslim activists and political opponents. Several elite political figures were taken into custody, including a former general and minister who, with 21 others, had signed a statement contesting the government’s account of the Tanjung Priok killings and calling for an independent investigation (Burns 1989; Elson 2001). Despite several episodes of sectarian collective violence in Indonesia in the 1980s, hostility between the government and Muslims was largely contained. Suharto’s supremacy at this time was evident in the “sullen and cynical mood of political quiescence and passivity which descended over the country” (Elson 2001: 243). By then, Suharto had created “a larger and more embracing state apparatus” (Vatikiotis 1993: 37).

At the time of the Tanjung Priok incident, Suharto was engaged in a highly contentious exercise to assert the secular foundations of the state under a new law to require all national organizations, including political parties and religious groups, to make the state ideology *Pancasila* their *asas tunggal*, or sole ideological basis. The maneuver provoked deep hostility among Islamic groups who saw it as

a “deliberate attempt on the part of the regime to depoliticize, if not dethrone, Islam” (Effendy 2003: 51).

This heightened tension prior to the violence at Tanjung Priok. But that incident also reflected a range of wider religious, communitarian, economic and political grievances that had been steadily building due to demographic, economic and political change. The mix of grievances was a potentially volatile combination awaiting a suitable trigger. The extent to which the Islamic leaders and residents who mobilized in Tanjung Priok felt threatened, if not existentially, then certainly in terms of core interests, is evident from a close reading of the statements of Amir Biki. On the day of the march, he gave a speech in which he listed a series of complaints: the drafting of the *asas tunggal* law, the takeover of land belonging to local people for sale to Chinese business interests, and evidence that churches were being built in Muslim-dominated areas⁸ (Bourchier and Hadiz 2003: 152-153).

The potency of perceptions of threat in framing a decision to mobilize is evident from his speech. But the decision to march against security officials was not perceived as foolhardy. The political environment at the time hinted at an opportunity to prevail. At the time, it was reasonable to assume the presence of elite allies for the cause. Many former senior military and civilian officials, devout Muslims, had expressed concerns over the abuse of *Pancasila*. They included a former army chief, a former governor of Jakarta, and two former prime ministers (Elson 2001: 231). The then Jakarta military commander Try Sutrisno, a future armed forces chief, who projected “a cultivated image of piety” (Vatikiotis 1993: 89). On the morning before the Tanjung Priok killings, Biki had met Sutrisno at the latter’s office (Suparyati 2004).

Other wider factors eroded the authority of the government. Oil prices collapsed in 1983, causing the devaluation of the Rupiah (Rickleffs 1993). This generated an economic crisis of “unforeseen dimensions and gravity for Suharto”

⁸ For a transcript of a tape recording of his speech see Bourchier and Hadiz 2003.

(Elson 2001: 246). Suharto himself felt the protestors had been calling the government's bluff. He said those who "incited the people to rebel" had calculated "the government would not dare take action" (Elson 2001: 239). The climate engendered by this mix of conditions could not have gone unnoticed.

Ascendancy and decline, the 1990s

By the 1990s, as the New Order aged, civil society was openly mobilizing, emboldened by social and political change to press a range of grievances from the religious to the economic and political (Vatikiotis 1993; Schwartz 1999). The longevity of the regime, the fraying of Suharto's links to the military, and demographic, socio-economic and political trends favoring Islam ensured Muslims would win a greater voice (Elson 2001; Liddle 1996; Ramage 1995; Schwartz 1999). These factors formed the backdrop to a wave of collective violence, mobilized by religion. Three episodes of sectarian violence and large-scale rioting by Muslims received special prominence in national debate, having occurred in just three months on the island of Java.

The first occurred in October 1996 in Situbondo, East Java, a town where 98 percent of the population were Muslim (Sidel 2006). The immediate trigger was an internal Muslim matter. It centered on the trial of a mosque attendant, called Saleh, charged with blasphemy. After several packed hearings, on 10 October the court sentenced Saleh to the maximum of five years in jail. According to various accounts (Eklöf 1999; Purdey 2006; Sidel 2006), thousands of Muslims immediately started to riot over the perceived inadequacy of the sentence. Although Saleh was Muslim, mobs torched 24 churches and numerous government buildings and businesses owned by Christian ethnic-Chinese (ICCF 1998). Saleh was alleged to have confided a series of heretical views, including that the Prophet Muhammad was not the messenger of God and that the Koran was manmade, to a local Islamist preacher K.H. Achmad Zaini. Zaini, a leader of a devout *sufi* brotherhood began a relentless campaign to have Saleh brought to court (Purdey

2006). It is instructive of the mood of the time that Zaini was able to use his influence to have Saleh arrested and prosecuted.

This incident set off a chain of violent sectarian confrontation on Java. On 26 December, churches, government buildings and businesses owned by Christian ethnic-Chinese were targeted in the West Java town of Tasikmalaya (Eklöf 1999; Purdey 2006, Sidel 2006). It too was a devout Muslim town, counting 99 percent of the population as adherents. This time, the trigger was the beating of a policeman's son – a student at a local *pesantren*, or Islamic school – as punishment for alleged theft. Police retaliated by summoning *pesantren* teachers and meting out their own beating. As news of the police action spread, general rioting ensued, setting parts of the town ablaze. Church buildings, Christian schools, police stations, and various businesses were destroyed (ICCF 1998; Sidel 2006). Weeks later, sectarian riots struck Rengasdengklok, in West Java (Eklöf 1999; Purdey 2006, Sidel 2006). As in Situbondo and Tasikmalaya, the population was known for Islamic piety; only two percent were ethnic-Chinese Christian. This time the violence erupted following conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. On 30 January 1997, during the Muslim fasting month, an Indonesian Chinese family was woken before dawn by Muslim youths beating a drum to remind residents to wake and eat before the start of the fast. Complaints by the Chinese family about the noise resulted in an altercation. Word spread, sparking a riot. The house of the Chinese family was the first target. Rioting then spread to the market, where Chinese businesses were attacked. Churches and temples and modern shopping centers and banks were then hit (ICCF 1998).

These episodes of sectarian collective violence between October 1996 and January 1997 were all set against a background of rising tension over the commercial success of Chinese Indonesians and the spread of more and grander churches, which produced fears of “surreptitious Christianization” (Sidel 2006: 79). Moreover, the response of the security forces was deemed either slow or ineffective (Purdey 2006: 72). But they can be viewed in a wider political context.

One of the most important shifts in the politics of the New Order occurred in the years leading up to the riots. From the late 1980s, Suharto started to embrace policies long advocated by Islamists, yet previously resisted by the New Order (Effendy 2003; Liddle 1996). For example, in 1989, a new law “strengthened the status and function of religious courts” (Effendy 2003: 157). In 1991, a policy of forbidding the wearing of the *jilbab*, or Islamic head scarf, in state schools was abandoned. Meanwhile, Suharto outwardly displayed his piety. On the eve of his 70th birthday, he made a “heavily publicized” pilgrimage to perform the *hajj* in Mecca (Elson 2001: 270).

A striking innovation in this period was the establishment in December 1990 of the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (*Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia* or ICMI) under B.J. Habibie, Suharto’s confidante and powerful Minister for Research and Technology. The significance of ICMI is that it gave a new breed of professional Muslims, mainly associated with the modernist thinking of Muhammadiyah, a platform for influencing government policy and securing personal advancement (Ramage 1995; Elson 2001; Hilmy 2010). It had a “profound impact on political and ideological discourse in the 1990s” (Ramage 1995: 75). These changes fed Islamic activism, The tenor of comments against perceived opponents of Islam became more bellicose. Statements by Islamic preachers “took a sharper anti-Christian and anti-Chinese tone as the 1990s progressed” (Schwartz 1999: 331). Amien Rais, then chairman of Muhammadiyah, warned that Muslims had become “victimized” by the rapid spread of Christianity and advocated affirmative economic action for *pribumis* because “racial minorities”, code for Indonesian Chinese, had disproportionately benefited from economic development (Ramage 1995: 98-99). The strident rhetoric went largely unchecked.

Suharto’s embrace of a modernist Muslim agenda presaged structural changes in the government and TNI. Suharto had fallen out with his powerful military commander Benny Murdani, a Catholic often blamed by Islamists for

suppressing their aspirations. This represented the end of the high point of secular nationalist and Christian influence in TNI. It also reflected a fraying of Suharto's relations with the military as his regime aged, prompting some to suggest there were signs of either a weakening of his grip on power or in the coercive capacity of the regime (Liddle 1992; Schwartz 1999). By the time of the riots in Java, the TNI commander was General Feisal Tanjung who "made overtures to national as well as local Islamic leaders" (The Editors 1997). Feisal and his army commander were regarded as dutiful Muslims and close to Habibie, leading to "much speculation about the Islamization" of the military (Liddle 1996: 629).

There are various theories for what motivated Suharto to shift policy. As he entered his 70s, there was inevitable speculation about succession. Opinions over what motivated the new Islam policy thus ranged from self-preservation ahead of the 1997 national elections (Liddle 1996) to simply recognition of the changing sociological forces in Indonesia, which left Suharto "no option other than to identify with (Muslim) interests" (Vatikiotis 1993: 138). But Suharto's motives are less important than the fact he made a decisive shift in regime policy.

For Muslim activists, the political opportunity was plain to see. First, the institutionalized political system opened considerably – to Muslim claimants at least. Secondly, the broad set of alignments that undergirded the regime was in a state of flux. There had been a clear shift away from the secular nationalists who had dominated the military. Thirdly, mainstream Muslim leaders, particularly those in the modernist camp associated with ICMI, could count on elite allies in the regime. Fourthly, there were questions about the state's willingness to engage in the kind of repression it had in the past.

It is against the backdrop of greater openness and tolerance of Muslim preferences and grievances, attempts to stir up fears about growing Christian influence, and doubts about the regime's willingness to use repressive measures, that the sectarian riots erupted on Java. In the first of the riots at Situbondo, there was some evidence of prior planning (Eklöf 1999; Purdey 2006). But by the time

of Tasikmalaya and Rengasdengklok the rioting appeared to take on a more spontaneous flavor. It strongly suggests the emergence of an expectation of a restrained response from the security forces. The confidence of protesters grew with successive episodes to the point where “this type of violence as an expression of dissatisfaction (could be) carried out with near impunity” (Purdey 2006: 70).

Democratic transition, 1998-2004

In the years after the fall of Suharto in May 1998, sectarian violence increased in intensity spread geographically, and widened in the repertoire of violent acts. As acts of collective violence expanded from Muslim-dominated Java to more contested religious terrain in Indonesia’s eastern islands, it also became bloodier. In a part of Indonesia where protestant churches had large congregations, both Christians and Muslims were implicated in public acts of violence and large numbers of followers of both religious traditions were killed. The violence centered on contestation over resources and religious space at the local level, albeit with the national implications widening over time (Aragon 2001; Sidel 2006).

A key feature of sectarian violence in this period was the increased sophistication of claimants in three key dimensions that greatly enabled the capacity for contention – leadership, organization, and mobilization. On all three measures, the capacity of claimants, particularly among Islamic groups, was greater than during any period of political contention since the era of weak national government in the 1950s and 1960s.

Sectarian violence erupted on a large scale in eastern Indonesia at the end of 1998 and lasted several years. Estimates of the death toll ranged from 5000 to 10,000 (ICG 2002; Van Klinken 2007). There were three primary centers of conflict – the provinces of Central Sulawesi, Maluku, and North Maluku. These locations shared three important features, which help explain both the location and timing of conflict. First, sizeable Muslim and Christian populations lived in proximity.

Protestant churches constituted “important alternative structures of authority and access to state power to those provided by their Islamic counterparts” (Sidel 2006: 155). Secondly, the agencies of the state were more significant as sources of wealth and power than on Java because of the relative underdevelopment of the remote eastern provinces. Thirdly, political flux in Jakarta, devolution of the New Order system of centralized control, and impending elections for local office created “tremendous uncertainty and anxiety along the local borders” of religious faith (Sidel 2006: 155). Given the similarities of the environment in which violence broke out and was transmitted, and the fact it played out largely simultaneously, only the case of Central Sulawesi is analyzed here to illuminate connections between patterns of violence and political structure.

The first sign of trouble in Central Sulawesi came on Christmas Eve 1998, in what analysts describe as Phase I of a five phase conflict (Aragon 2001; HRW 2002; ICG 2004; Sidel 2006). Christmas that year coincided with the Muslim fasting month. A scuffle between two youths, one Protestant and one Muslim, resulted in a Muslim youth being slashed with a knife in Poso town, which was to become the main arena of the province’s sectarian violence. The following day wider conflict broke out between Protestant and Muslim youths. False rumors of attacks on churches drew in truckloads of Protestants from surrounding areas of Poso district, who attacked homes and other buildings in urban Poso. Muslims too were reinforced by co-religionists from around the district. By the end of the month, thousands of residents of Poso town and several nearby areas had participated in violent clashes, several hundred people lost their homes and hundreds had been injured. The situation was calmed with the intervention of security forces, but tensions festered, especially after a weak law enforcement response prompted fears the security forces were “unable or unwilling to control the situation” (Aragon 2001: 62).

The situation remained quiet until April 2000 – the start of Phase II of the conflict. In the intervening period, Indonesia peacefully held its first competitive

national elections in four decades. But the opening of the electoral system heightened competition for positions at the local level across the country. In Poso, competition was intense between Protestants and Muslims and among competing Muslim factions. The trigger for renewed violence appears to have been elections for the second highest district official in Poso. Fighting between Protestants and Muslims broke out on 16 April, a day after a Muslim member of the local assembly had warned of renewed riots if his preferred candidate lost. This time paramilitary police were called from the provincial capital Palu to quell attacks on houses of worship and shops and homes. Police shot three Muslims, increasing local Muslim anger. By the end of the month at least seven Protestants and three Muslims were dead. The arrival of 600 soldiers sent by the regional military command halted the bloodshed (Sidel 2006).

The imposed peace did not last long. In late May, Phase III of the conflict began with Protestant gangs launching attacks that sharply increased the bloodshed. In the most violent incident, dozens of Muslim transmigrants from Java were massacred on 28 May at a village in Poso district (HRW 2002). By this phase, Protestants were better armed and had been given rudimentary training, highlighting the growing levels of mobilization and coordination. In early June, hundreds of Protestants and Muslims clashed in pitched fighting in Poso. Alarm was growing among authorities, resulting in 1500 additional soldiers being brought in along with paramilitary police reinforcements from Jakarta. A “peace accord” was signed in August 2000 at a meeting of governors from around Sulawesi and then Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, leading to violence subsiding for about a year, but the “top-down” agreement was heavily criticized (HRW 2002: 20). Many key stakeholders felt “uninvolved and unconvinced” (Aragon 2001: 70).

The peace that created by this accord therefore remained fragile, with continuing small episodes of violence. In July 2001, fighting erupted again on a large scale, lasting until the end of the year. The outbreak of Phase IV of the conflict was linked by key local leaders to another contest to fill a local government post

(HRW 2002; Sidel 2006). In one incident in July, a dozen Muslim villagers, nearly all of them women and children, were killed by a Protestant gang. The resumption of such atrocities set the scene for the entry into the conflict of well-trained and armed Muslim militia from outside Sulawesi Island. The highest profile militia, Laskar Jihad, injected a level of “intense militarization” (Sidel 2006: 165). Although its arrival was “no secret”, the “security forces did nothing to prevent about it” (HRW 2002: 23).

The escalation of the conflict coincided with the elevation of Megawati Sukarnoputri to the presidency, which in turn resulted in a firmer security response. In contrast to earlier crackdowns, troops participating in the new operations forcefully confiscated weapons and directly engaged religious combatants, having been urged by superiors “not to let the fear of being accused of human rights violations” prevent them asserting control (HRW 2002: 28). These operations led to the signing of yet another peace agreement in December that proved more effective in ending open clashes, partly because it was seen as more representative of the community and more comprehensive in scope (HRW 2002). Nonetheless, clandestine acts of violence continued in the following years. In Phase V of the conflict in 2002-2003, the forms of violence shifted to terrorist-style tactics of bombings and attacks by small groups who went to considerable effort to disguise their identities (ICG 2004). A series of attacks on buses in mid 2002 resulted in the deaths of several passengers. Many of these attacks were attributed to fundamentalist Muslim militia waging a “jihad” style campaign (ICG 2004). The pattern of small, isolated attacks attributed to pro-Islamic State groups such as Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) persisted over the years and resisted resolution despite large, periodic deployments of security forces (BBC 2020; Sumpter and Newton 2020).

The national backdrop to the eruption of organized sectarian violence was the chaos of a political system in transition. The six years following the fall of

Suharto were marked by “economic instability, security challenges, social fragmentation, and extensive experiments with new institutional concepts” (Mietzner 2009: 195). Indonesia changed presidents three times: B.J. Habibie (1998-1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004). The frequent changes of leadership were accompanied by reforms aimed at political opening so that it would take “six years before an institutionally coherent framework for the new political system emerged, marking Indonesia’s entry into the phase of democratic consolidation” (ibid: 195). The fall of Suharto in May 1998 left a sudden vacuum at the head of government.

When Habibie took office, he was regarded as “unquestionably a much weaker figure than was Suharto” (Liddle 1999: 108). Habibie lacked an independent military power base and, therefore, access to one of the central tools of control exercised by Suharto (Greenlees and Garran 2002). Despite Habibie’s weakness, or perhaps because of it, he led a flourish of political reform, including Indonesia’s first competitive parliamentary elections since 1955 (Liddle 1999). One of the most far-reaching reforms of his presidency was to initiate legislation that would grant greater autonomy over administration and financial management to provinces and districts, including freedom to choose governors, mayors, and regents without interference from Jakarta (Schwartz 1999). It was hoped decentralization “would appease provincial elites and help keep national borders intact” (ibid: 425). But free national elections for parliament and the devolution of power to Indonesia’s province and district governments intensified political competition. Under Suharto political competition was “confined and channeled... vertically”; under Habibie, local elites found themselves suddenly competing “collectively and horizontally” for power and resources (Sidel 2006: 140-141). It was thus amid intense political uncertainty and instability, a loosening of centralized control over the state, and heightened political competition at the local and national levels that episodes of sectarian collective violence played out.

Sectarian violence in Central Sulawesi and elsewhere in the eastern archipelago started several months after Habibie took over from Suharto. As Sidel (ibid: 161) notes, the violence broke out in the context of the looming 1999 national elections and “mounting uncertainty, excitement and anxiety” over the selection of local officials. The initial phase of violence resulted mostly in property destruction and a relatively low death toll. At the end of 1999, Wahid, then the leader of NU, assumed the presidency. His ascension in theory marked the high point of Islamic control of government and the assertion of popular electoral legitimacy⁹. In fact, his administration was riven with elite conflict because of competition between various strands of political Islam and a contested process of military reform (Honna 2003; Mietzner 2009). Wahid was sometimes viewed as pro-Christian by Islamists, who accused him of “insensitivity” toward Muslim victims of violence in the eastern islands (Mietzner: 263).

During the Wahid presidency – “one of most chaotic periods of Indonesia’s post-authoritarian transition” (ibid 2009: 224) – the eastern islands of Indonesia became inflamed in sectarian violence. One of the reasons commonly attributed to the large scale of the bloodshed in this period was the decline in the effectiveness of security responses in the years after the fall of Suharto (ICG 2000, 2001). In the early days of the sectarian violence in the eastern islands “incompetent or uninterested” security personnel ignored low-level incidents, leading to “an inevitable process of snowballing... and vigilante justice” (ICG 2000: 4).

From the ascension of Megawati, the security response in eastern Indonesia markedly improved. It was under Megawati that a peace accord was signed in Central Sulawesi that ended mass open conflict between Protestant and Muslim forces. The election of Megawati initiated a transition to democratic consolidation. It reduced elite conflict around the presidency, as attention of political parties

⁹ Wahid was elected president by the supra-parliamentary People’s Consultative Assembly in October 1999. Although he was not elected by popular mandate, his elevation followed the first free parliamentary elections since 1955, giving him certain democratic legitimacy.

shifted to winning the 2004 elections (Mietzner 2009). Megawati, a staunch secular nationalist who headed the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (*Partai Demokratis Indonesia Perjuangan* or PDI-P), also established a close relationship with military commanders and adopted a firmer security policy in general. Impatience with the sectarian violence in eastern Indonesia and separatist conflicts in Aceh and Papua led to “an increasingly nationalist and security-focused rhetoric” among Jakarta politicians and the view that sectarian violence would only be solved “by swift and harsh interventions” (ibid: 227).

Analysis of the sectarian conflict in eastern Indonesia during the democratic transition has tended to emphasize local factors in instigating and sustaining conflict (Aragon 2001; Sidel 2006; Van Klinken 2007). The evidence suggests local factors played a bigger role in conflict during the democratic transition than in the violent episodes of the 1990s. But an analysis of the national scene remains pertinent as a key permissive factor in the eruption of violence. In the Poso case, the end of Suharto’s rule removed “the military control mechanism” and sowed distrust in the state’s ability to provide security and justice (Aragon 2001: 78).

There were several national-level factors that influenced patterns of collective sectarian violence during this period. The first and most important was a weakening of the state’s repressive capacity. After decades in which the president exercised effective control over military, sharp divisions emerged within the military’s senior ranks over issues such as increasing civilian control and accountability for human rights violations (Greenlees and Garran 2002; Mietzner 2009). Neither Habibie nor Wahid found their instructions to the army and police always being followed. For example, Wahid issued a firm order that Laskar Jihad be prevented from sending militia units by ship from Java to fight alongside Muslims in the eastern islands. But the security forces failed to make “any serious effort to carry out the President’s order preventing them from going” (ICG 2001: 13). Simultaneously, the effectiveness of soldiers and police on the ground deteriorated. In sectarian conflicts at times there were signs the security forces had

“failed to play the role of an impartial peacekeeper” (ICG 2000: 19), siding with co-religionists.

A second major factor was the opening of the political system and the intensification of competition for power and resources. After decades of politics being “manipulated and constrained” (Schwartz 1999: 386) by the New Order, in the early period of democracy, amid uncertainty over the future constellation of power both nationally and locally, “the level of mistrust and paranoia” (ibid: 386) among the elite and wider community was high. In this climate of sudden opening of the political system and high levels of uncertainty, the sense of potential opportunity and threat among competing interest groups was also heightened. Although violence was often localized, it was widespread, such that “throughout the country there was vigorous competition among local elites to capture state power” (Aspinall 2010: 25).

A third factor in initiating and sustaining conflict was the presence of elite allies for Muslims and Christians alike. At a local level, they included government officials and soldiers and police close to the sources of violence. At a national level, there also strong signals of support for combatant communities¹⁰.

The government in Jakarta started to have some success in reducing mass sectarian violence in eastern Indonesia after the elevation of Megawati. Megawati established a closer rapport with the military, installed her own senior commanders and gave them a freer hand to control their internal affairs. This coincided with a shift in attitude in government and military ranks that permitted the reassertion of coercive measures to resolve conflict. Meanwhile, elite political competition at the

¹⁰ Amien Rais, one of the most influential Muslims on the national stage, was among a number of prominent Muslims to publicly support a *jihad* in defence of Muslims in the fighting in eastern Indonesia (Davis 2002; Schwartz 1999). It is hard to trace the direct impact of such statements, but they would have undoubtedly helped bolster confidence among groups such as Laskar Jihad which was sending militias to eastern Indonesia and among local elites. Rais served as speaker of the supra-parliamentary MPR during Wahid’s term in office and was a former chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia’s second largest Muslim organisation, giving him considerable clout.

national level switched to preparing for the 2004 elections. In this environment, the effort to broker more durable peace accords in eastern Indonesia garnered strong elite support compared to the ineffective efforts under Wahid. In this phase the “government at last put resources and clout behind the peace process” (HRW 2002: 46).

Democratic consolidation, 2004-2014

Following the ascension of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in Indonesia’s first direct elections for president in October 2004, the form of mass sectarian violence again began to shift. It was manifested in two forms: small scale conflict over religious proselytization and practice and conflict between Islamic groups over the purity of belief (ICG 2010). The peace initiated in eastern Indonesia during Megawati’s presidency largely held (ICG 2004; Van Klinken 2007).

The first direct presidential election marks a significant point of departure in post-Suharto democracy. Growth of democratic practice was evident at all levels of government, in large part due to the start of decentralization in 1999. This “blossoming of local democracy” was viewed as one of the “signature achievements of Indonesia’s reform” (Aspinall 2010: 26). But in this environment of greater political openness religious hostility persisted. Levels of violence against people and property declined dramatically, yet there were concerns about “a worrying increase in religious intolerance” over the course of Yudhoyono’s presidency (Jakarta Globe 2010a).

Among the flashpoints for religious hostility was the Bekasi area of Jakarta. Rivalries between Muslims and Christians over proselytization, conversions, and church building were at times intense, resulting in protests and occasional physical clashes. Campaigns against what Muslims claimed was a program of *kristenisasi* in Bekasi was spearheaded by a variety of radical Islamist groups that succeeded in mobilizing popular support (ICG 2010). In a report on the tensions in Bekasi, the

International Crisis Group (2010) cited aggressive proselytization activities by a Christian foundation, Yayasan Mahanaim, as contributing to increased Muslim anxiety. Plans by Christian groups to build new churches also incited controversy in Bekasi and various other locations, particularly over the management and issuance of building permits (Jakarta Globe 2010b).

Protests over Christian activities tended to be intimidating rather than violent. But in one instance on 12 September 2010 an Islamist group beat a pastor and stabbed a church elder who were on their way to Sunday prayers (Reuters 2010). Inter-religious tensions continued to simmer. On 8 February 2011, two churches were vandalized, and several cars set on fire, in Central Java after a man was jailed for five years for blasphemy against Islam – a sentence deemed inadequate by some Muslims (Jakarta Globe 2011b).

Hostilities were stoked by radical Islamist groups and evangelical Christians. The International Crisis Group (2010) identified a dozen Islamist groups in Bekasi opposing *kristenisasi*. The Islamic Defenders' Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI) was one of the most active perpetrators of violence and intimidation (ICG 2010; Jakarta Post 2010b). FPI, founded shortly after the fall of Suharto in 1998, had initially focused on an anti-vice crusade, although its real motives were often attributed to extortion (Mietzner 2009).

The pattern of low-level violence and intimidation carried out against Christian groups repeated a campaign against Ahmadiyah, a Muslim sect accused of heresy¹¹. Ahmadi members had lived peacefully in Indonesia since the 1920s (Crouch 2009; ICG 2008). This started to change in July 2005 when a group of Islamic leaders issued a religious edict or *fatwa* calling for steps to have Ahmadiyah banned (Crouch 2009; Platzdasch 2009). The following week a group of Islamists, including FPI members, attacked an Ahmadiyah annual meeting in Bogor outside

¹¹ This group, following the teachings of a 19th Century Indian Muslim preacher, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, adopts a religious doctrine that mainstream Islam regards as heretical, particularly that revelation did not stop with the Prophet Mohammad (see Crouch 2009)

Jakarta, hospitalizing several sect members (ICG 2008). This attack was followed by a June 2008 attack by FPI on protestors at the national monument in Jakarta who were calling for freedom of religion (ICG 2008).

Although some perpetrators of attacks were arrested, the government was often accused of taking a weak stance against displays of religious intolerance or collective violence. International Crisis Group argued Ahmadiyah was cast as a “troublemaker”, while the government showed a “tendency to blame the religious group that attracts mob action” (2010: 17). Indeed, in 2006 the government responded to the calls for a *fatwa* against Ahmadiyah by issuing a controversial decree that required Ahmadis to “cease all activities not consistent with the general interpretation of Islam” (Platzdasch 2009: 339). The government action failed to calm the situation. In early February 2011, three Ahmadi sect members were killed when they were attacked by a mob of 1500 villagers in West Java (Jakarta Globe 2011a).

Despite concerns the government was failing to take sufficient action to promote religious tolerance, and the publication of opinion surveys showing a rise of intolerance of other religions by Muslims (Jakarta Post 2010a), Indonesia from 2004 onwards did not experience a repeat of major sectarian collective violence. Still, the persistence of attacks on churches and Ahmadiyah represented a continuing challenge to the suppression of sectarian collective violence and the supposed pacifying effects of democracy.

Once the Indonesian government removed electoral restrictions in 1999, new political parties emerged across the ideological spectrum, from secular nationalist to mainstream pluralist Muslim and Islamist. The three elections that followed the fall of the New Order – 1999, 2004 and 2009 – tested how far voters were prepared to go in mixing religion with politics. Scholars noted with interest the poor performance of parties espousing the Islamist ambition of ensuring a special place in the Constitution for Shari’a law. Muslim voters repeatedly showed a tendency “not to cast their vote on the basis of ideological preferences but rather

on a pragmatic basis” (Hilmy 2010: 78). At the same time, Indonesia provided a powerful lesson in “the capacity of democratic rule to tame Islamism” (Aspinall 2010: 29).

But with the political winds blowing against Islamism in politics, there was another trend: a move by secular parties to capture a bigger share of the Islamic vote by shifting “towards a pro-Islamic ideological centre” (Platzdasch 2009: 333). In an environment where political parties could “no longer afford to be seen as neutral towards Islamic Interests” (ibid: 333), politicians from secular nationalist parties, including Yudhoyono’s Democratic Party, were often keen to support initiatives such as an anti-pornography law and local by-laws imposing shari’a obligations to display their Islamic credentials. The 2006 decree to restrain Ahamadiyah was one example of the government balancing a desire to “accommodate Islamic sentiments” and uphold the “ideals of Pancasila” (Platzdasch 2009: 340). Attitudes to the issue of *kristenisai* and church construction could be viewed in the same light. In political debate over religion, many Muslims saw calls for tolerance as support for Christians as exemplified by the leader of the FPI Habib Rizieq, who was described as “furious” (ICG 2010: 12) over a compromise in Bekasi that would have allowed a church to be built if the site of construction was moved away from a disputed area.

Even as Indonesia opened its political system, aspects of the power structure were supportive of those prepared to pursue sectarian goals through violence. Groups such as FPI counted on influential elite allies, which contributed to an occasionally muted security response to their acts. The International Crisis Group (2010: 17) observed that “the governor of Jakarta, the newly-appointed national police commander and the religious affairs minister (have) all appeared at FPI events” and added that “taking on allies known for their intolerance is not the way to inculcate religious harmony”.

Despite the on-going contention in various locations in Indonesia over how to manage constitutional rights of religious freedom, the consolidation of

democracy after the chaos of the transitional period did have a tempering effect on sectarian collective violence. Although some violence has persisted, democratization enabled a repertoire of peaceful protest for mainstream Muslims and Islamists alike, with the prospect of affecting change without the high risk of violent performances. Indonesia's transition became a "dramatic and even inspiring testament to the capacity of democracy" to curb intractable, violent conflicts (Aspinall 2010: 28).

Importantly, democratic consolidation restored institutional capacity and credibility. The combination of political will and effective law enforcement was critical to containing and turning back the threat of serious violence. It was this restoration of the government's ability to employ the coercive power of the state as much as the alternative avenues for advancing a religious political agenda that contributed to a more peaceful environment than experienced in the mid-1990s and early 2000s.

Although the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism was not analyzed here, there is evidence that it responded to similar patterns of regime change and consolidation. Terrorist planning and execution peaked in the transition after the fall of Suharto and steadily declined amid a stronger political and law enforcement response, starting in the latter period of Megawati's presidency, and continuing into the Yudhoyono years. This long-term decline is reflected in data on numbers and types of attacks, choices of targets, and casualty rates (GTD 2021).

Assessing Evidence for the Pacific Power of Democracy

During the four periods analyzed here, some distinct patterns of collective sectarian violence emerged. Changes in the intensity of sectarian collective violence and the forms were apparent between each period, manifested in the intensity of violence, the types of targets, and the patterns of mobilization. Regime type provided a broad context for interpreting and understanding changes in claims and the propensity

for violence between each period. But insight into causal factors in the political structure requires a closer examination of each episode. Under the authoritarian New Order regime in the 1990s, it was shown that a range of demographic, socio-economic and political factors had weakened the New Order's bargaining position relative to Muslim challengers. But at the start of this period Suharto was "the master of the political system" (Elson 2001: 253). The regime continued to wield almost exclusive control over the instruments of state policy, particularly repressive capability. Its ability to implement desired policy and control territory, resources and population ensured the regime exercised a high degree of control. Sectarian violence rose, but not as a direct challenge to state authority. Mobilization was directed at changing regime policy rather than toppling the regime itself. It also was manifested against socially and politically more vulnerable groups, in particular ethnic Chinese and Christians. Moreover, the targets were property rather than people. While violence rose, it remained within expectations of regime type.

The sudden fall of Suharto and the rapid unwinding of his New Order regime in the late 1990s initiated a chaotic period of democratization. During the transition, Indonesia was coping with "an imploding economy" and an immediate post-Suharto leadership that "lacked legitimacy" (Schwartz 1999: 372). Senior military officers complained of a lack of control over the army. In this situation, there was a significant loss of the state's ability to implement desired policy, control security forces, and exercise control over the geographic periphery. The decline in state capacity, particularly in the effectiveness of the tools of state coercion, permitted competing local elites in eastern Indonesia to turn a conflict over power and resources into a horizontal conflict under a religious banner in which the targets of violence included both people and property. The same factors were conducive to the re-emergence of terrorism as a method of pursuing political objectives.

The first two presidents of the transition – Habibie and Wahid – had limited authority and were at the center of intense elite conflict. The erosion of presidential power coincided with laws decentralizing significant power to regional governments. Under a weak democratic regime, horizontal violence is viewed as likely because governments “do not serve as effective third-party enforcers of agreements much less inhibitors of escalation” (Tilly 2006: 129). This weakness can be exploited by actors employing a range of violent methods and should not be seen as restricted to civil unrest. The elevation of Megawati to the presidency saw a consolidation of government and the restoration of a tough approach to security disturbances. The government’s ability to effectively implement policy in the security realm reflected some recovery in central government capacity. At this point, sectarian violence in Poso and elsewhere in eastern Indonesia started to decline. It is evident that the large-scale unrest in eastern Indonesia did reach its highest levels under the weak Habibie and Wahid governments in the transition from authoritarian rule. The planning and execution of a wave of Islamist terrorist acts also was initiated at that time.

The holding of Indonesia’s first direct elections for president in 2004 signaled a vital shift in the democratization process, which some analysts view as the start of democratic consolidation (Aspinall 2010; Meitzner 2009). The election of a president with a direct mandate alongside a directly elected legislature marked a continuing recovery in the legitimacy and capacity of government. This affected the type of claim making so that it was largely directed at government agents, especially via demands for legal reforms to enhance the social agenda of Islam or its status as the dominant religion. The capability of the state was arguably still weaker than under the New Order. But the broad pattern of sectarian violence was consistent with expectations of lower levels of violence as democracy strengthened.

While the trajectory of sectarian collective violence in Indonesia would appear to be consistent with predictions, a close analysis of individual episodes is vital to understanding the location, timing, and form of violence. In the 1990s, the

influence of Muslims grew as the regime recognized the growing political power of Islam and employed a strategy of cooption. For example, evidence of elite allies for Muslims with a modernist or Islamist agenda was apparent with the formation and growth of ICMI and changes in the leadership of the armed forces. The willingness of the regime to embrace an Islamic social agenda underscored the expanding political opportunity for Muslims. In this environment, the risks associated with mass mobilization under an Islamic banner declined, especially if mobilization was not directed against the regime. Vulnerable groups that were identified with a wide range of material and non-material grievances became obvious targets for displays of violent opposition.

When Indonesia embarked on democratization from the late 1990s several elements of the political environment changed dramatically, with implications for challengers ranging from religious groups to separatists. At a national level, the political system was pushed open, elite alignments became very unstable, Muslims could count an increased number of allies among the regime elite, and the state's propensity for repression declined. But there also were significant changes at the local government level. The opening of the local political system under decentralization laws was quickly exploited by elites anxious to ensure they did not lose out from dramatic power shifts taking place at the national level. Perceptions of potential opportunity and threat played an important role in framing conflict in areas in eastern Indonesia where religions were both sources of power and patronage and the size of religious communities was relatively evenly balanced. The absence of an effective policy response, including the use of repressive measures, to restrain local elites resulted in escalation of what was essentially an intra-elite conflict into mass sectarian violence.

The gradual consolidation of democracy after 2004 saw the restoration of the state's repressive capacity and stability of elite alignments. Although elite allies existed for challengers pursuing an Islamist agenda, most of the elite embraced a moderate view of religion, particularly in terms of its place in the political system.

However, the desire of even secular political parties to attract a more devout Muslim constituency saw many politicians support measures such as Islamic bylaws, an anti-pornography law, and restraints on the Ahmadiyah sect. Politicians were slow to condemn signs of Islamic militancy. This, in turn, potentially signaled to Islamists the existence of an opportunity to go beyond prescribed repertoires of protest.

Although this is no more than a preliminary analysis of religious mobilization that led to collective violence in Indonesia, it does highlight the significance of structural factors, particularly the role of regime type in patterns of collective sectarian violence.

Staying the Course of Democracy

The process of democratization proved a bloody experience as Indonesia witnessed a wave of sectarian, ethnic, communal, and separatist violence. At the time, it prompted questions about whether democracy would prove viable; whether separatism might break the country apart or an “Islamist surge” would shatter its “multi-religious mosaic” (Schwartz 1999: 434).

Against the background of that violent democratic baptism, the question here is whether democratization offered a solution to the persistent problem of sectarian collective violence. There are two separate analytical themes that shed light on that question – the idea of a “democratic civil peace” (Hegre *et al* 2001), which aims to establish proof by historical correlation, and a behavioral approach that proposes social movements have a different propensity to turn violent under different regime types. The two approaches have generally been treated separately in the study of collective violence. Combining them helps increase assurance in both prediction and explanation. According to both approaches, strong democracies and strong autocracies should have a low probability of experiencing civil war, although the propensity for violent political contention should be

somewhat higher under autocracies than democracies. The highest risk of civil war is predicted in regimes in transition from one state to another.

The historical episodes assessed here covered four different structures of regime. They incorporated factors including the openness of governments to the aspirations of interest groups, availability of elite allies for interest groups, stability of elite alignments undergirding governments, and the propensity for repression or tolerance of groups and their protest actions. The role of national regimes proved important even in cases where sectarian conflict was triggered by changes in local political structures.

The contemporary relevance of the analysis of sectarian collective violence was underscored by Indonesia's post-2004 experience. The consolidation of democracy coincided with a reduction in the large-scale sectarian violence witnessed in earlier periods. While deadly attacks on Ahmadiyah sect members and vandalism of Christian churches in Central Java in February 2011 were a reminder of the protracted nature of sectarian conflict, the record lends support for the argument in favor of democracy's pacifying effects.

There are two lessons for Indonesia from this analysis. The first is that staying the course of democracy is likely to offer the best means of ensuring that political contention is managed peacefully. It does not mean there will be an absence of violence, particularly if grievances are profound or mismanaged and splits occur within the political elite. Democracy appears to reduce the frequency and intensity of collective violence – evidence in the case of sectarian violence in Indonesia – but it is no panacea. But sustaining and consolidating democracy will help minimize the risk of contention becoming violent.

The second lesson is more complex. It is that governments need to display the will to contain contention when it does become violent by using the coercive and persuasive powers of the state. The record of sectarian contention since the 1980s shows that episodes of violent claiming making were resolved when the state employed the power of its security agencies to restrain violent actors. State

coercion proved effective in suppressing and preventing public violence even in the absence of measures to address underlying grievances, which is not to say the cause of grievances ought to be ignored. It is a fine line because democracies are expected to exhibit a strong commitment to human rights. The use of coercive power is legitimate – particularly in protecting vulnerable civilian populations – but it needs to be used cautiously and wisely.

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