

BANJARMASIN RIOT IN 1997: A POLITICAL VIOLENCE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN SOUTH KALIMANTAN

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Abstract

This paper describes a political violence during the 1997 general election campaign in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. It focuses on the main social factors that motivated the riot on May 23, 1997. This case needs to be revisited and reinterpreted in order to be a lesson for Banjarmasin people to avoid the same tragedy in the coming future election. This paper finds that political pressure and unfairness, racial issues, and economical barriers constituted the most important factors that led to the 1997 riot in Banjarmasin.

Introduction

The 1997 General election is the last election during the Soeharto regime, well known as New Order. This election leaves a bad memory for South Kalimantan (South Borneo) people, primarily those who live in Banjarmasin city. Banjarmasin people must face the high risk of the election because it also brought a mass chaos in May 23, 1997. The event was commemorated by the people as Cloudy Friday. General Secretary of National Commission for Human Right Baharudin Lopa evaluated that the riot is the biggest and the worst in the series of riot during the general election riot in the New Order era.

The 1997 general election is the same as the previous elections. Syamsuddin Haris concluded that the crucial problems of the 32 years old New Order in power is the role of general election which was limited to legitimate the politic of Golkar, the party of the New Order.¹ People were placed and conditioned only as “vote givers” and ignored as power owners. Such treatment upon them made the election stuck. Its four basic principles (direct, general, free, and confidential) could not take effect. Even the political jargon “Democracy of Pancasila²”, as sees as the propaganda tool or trick to manipulate people.³

There are fundamental problems of the General Elections during the New Order era. First of all, the role of government was too dominant in the processes of election. Secondly, the government bureaucracy tended to have such a hidden agenda to interfere into the process of election in order to make Golkar a winner of the election. Thirdly, the government dominated the counting of the poll result. This enabled the government to manipulate the result.⁴

The facts made people, especially the rival parties (PPP⁵ and PDIP)⁶, unsatisfied and disappointed. Such unfair condition stimulated the riots in some regions during the poll processes. One of them was Banjarmasin riot on May 2, 1997. It happened on Friday, several days before the poll was done. Thus the incident

was well known as *sad Friday*. A national magazine *Detektif dan Romatika* described it as *Banjarmasin Lautan Api* (Banjarmasin: Ocean of Fire).⁷ This paper attempts to analyze contributing factors to, and the process of the riot.

From Campaign to Riot (May 23, 1997)

Campaign is one of communication channels of a party to offer and deliver its political messages and program to its constituents and to educate its prospective voters. Until the 1997 election, political parties in Indonesia preferred to have an outdoor and in monologue way of the campaign. They considered the campaign pattern as the most effective way to gather and move people. Ryaas Rasyid criticized campaign sessions during the 1997 general election.⁸ He questioned if the campaign pattern reached its goal and gave much benefit. He thought that patterns were not effective by considering their reasons. Firstly, monologue, open and outdoor campaign dismissed the integrity of constituents, and the campaign, thus, tended to arise the emotion of the campaign members rather than arise their brain. In this way, the open campaign was not effective in promoting the parties programs; secondly, open and outdoor campaign also failed to appeal people's sympathy, for the campaign tended to be chaotic and became public arena of brutality. This made people scared and reluctant to participate in the elections. Thirdly, as a part of democracy, general election in Indonesia needed to be questioned: what kind of democratic system? Wrong perception of the poll committee in considering the poll might also contribute to break the laws and rules.

Considering all the things happened, Rasyid inferred that mass campaign to show up in the 1997 ballot failed to get its target in some regions. The campaign pattern, as Rasyid described, also happened in Banjarmasin that the situation of the city is very lukewarm. This tied to the competition and rivalry among the poll constituents in gathering supporters though it often deviated from the true rules.

Friday on May 23, 1997 is the latest schedule of series of political campaign in Banjarmasin. It was Golkar⁹ Party time. The poll committee had determined the place of the Golkar campaign in Kamboja square, in the centre of Banjarmasin city. It stated on 2 pm. However, when most people in the city did Friday Prayer, some Golkar constituents went to road by motorcycles with irritating sound and shout, "Yellows are ready to campaign." They pass the Pangeran Samudera street where many Muslims were still praying in Mosque Noor, meanwhile the Pangeran Samudera street has been known as the home base of PPP.

The activity of Golkar constituents certainly disturbed Muslims in the mosque. They became angry and went to search the motor bikers who considered has done such honor harassment to Muslim. Mass clash became undeniable. It extended tremendously and bad news about the clash broadened throughout the city and the riot increased and widened. Masses in green shirt (the symbolic color of PPP) hunted another masses in yellow shirt (Golkar costume) that has gathered in the Kamboja Field and on the street. The green masses forced the yellow masses to undress. They didn't care about whether they were women or men. Traditional knives like *celurit* and *mandau* were directed to their necks if they objected or disobey the emotional masses' command. The masses clash gradually became anarchy. Rioters set fire to a shopping mall, destroyed the prayer places, and robbed shopping places around the area.

The anarchy amplified by rumors saying that those passed by the Mosque Noor were Golkar supporters who were Christians. The rumors inspired the Muslim masses to destroy the Cathedral Church (the greatest Catholic Church in Banjarmasin). They continued to destroy another church, HKGP Church, near the Cathedral and 151 people's homes and a drugstore Casio around it. Other targeted churches were Eben Esser, GKKA, and Yellow Church in Veteran Street and other. There were around 11 churches.¹⁰ Troops and Indonesia Army were not ready to control the chaos. They only prevented shopping centers and government offices from the attack.

Finally the rioters were able to penetrate the security barricade and set fire on several shops like Lima Cahaya (Five Stars) dan Sari Kaya, Junjung Buih Plaza, and the biggest shopping mall in Banjarmasin, Mitra Plaza. Golkar office in Lambung Mangkurat Street was also attacked and burned by them. Banjarmasin at the time was very scared and frightened. *Detektif dan Romantika* magazine, No. 41/XXVIII/31 May 1997, reported based on legal report from police that there were two died in Lima Cahaya shop, and 121 people in Plaza Mitra. This numbers did not yet include injured victims and missing people. The exact number of the victims so far has been a mystery leaving a question mark. This mystery implied in many overlapping reports, such as *Jawa Post* reported 136 bodies that were successfully evacuated, meanwhile *Banjarmasin Post* had another version, about 135 bodies that were successfully evacuated. Another rumor rose speculating the causes of the death. Some thought that those who died in the shopping mall are thefts that trapped in the fire, and another rumor said that they died because the army shot them.

Causal Factors of the Riot

Preliminary studies on the series of conditions and events implied a conclusion there are about four possible causal factors of Banjarmasin riot on May 23, 1997; first, high tension rivalry among the election contestants; second, Issue about tribe, race, and religion; third, economical gaps; and fourth, violence abuse during the riot

High tension rivalry among the election contestants

The three contestants of the 1992 general election obtained almost the same numbers of voters in Banjarmasin. PPP gained 84.782 voters, Golkar 105.956 and PDIP 53.384. This showed that rivalry tension between PPP and Golkar was in top position. The majority of Banjarmasin people are Muslims. Muslim informal leaders, *kiai* or *ulama* became respected persons in the Muslim community, and they were very familiar with their followers. Parties' leaders used to approach them to maximize political influences to their voters. Even public officers who were also members of Golkar used to make hidden policies that were politically benefiting Golkar. The Former Information Minister Harmoko (Golkar leader) visited Muslim boarding schools all over Indonesia during the fasting month, Ramadhan. The event was called as *Safari Ramadhan*, integrating political campaign through religious events. With a reason to see Golkar constituents, Harmoko invited *kiai/ ulama* to persuade them as Golkar supporters.

This also happened in South Kalimantan. Regional bureaucrats also visited Muslim boarding schools to get the political sympathy from the *kiai*. Even some of

the *kiai* were appointed to be key speakers in the Golkar Campaign. Hence, some *kiai* who were previously members of PPP moved to be Golkar backers. This made PPP angry and condemned Golkar for abusing power to attain its interest by using the bureaucrats. The anger of PPP, for instance, could be identified through the statement of *kiai* Afifudin Musytari.¹¹ According to him, *kiai* of PPP who moved to Golkar were *kiai kontrakan* (hired Muslim scholars).

This condition made PPP constituents confused. Hence, the Branch office of PPP Banjarmasin invited a charismatic *kiai*, Alawy Mahmud from Sampang, Madura. This was done because most PPP constituents in Banjarmasin were Madurese people living in Banjarmasin. His coming to Banjarmasin warmed the political climate in Banjarmasin because of his critical and provocative speeches about social unfairness, social gaps, and the government policies.

Issue about tribe, race, and religion

Most Banjarmasin people are Muslims who practice the principles of Ahlus Sunah Wal Jama'ah that follow the Shafiite school of thought (madhhab) in the applied shari'ah (fiqh) and believe in Al-Asya'ari teachings of tauhid and Al-Gazali and Al-Junaid of Sufism. Their traditional way of life was tolerant and egalitarian. They actually live with other different religious groups peacefully. However, the harmonious life suddenly disappeared when the riot happened.

Although the General Secretary of National Commission for Human Right, Baharuddin Lopa, who came to Banjarmasin to investigate the tragedy, argued that there was no evidences of SARA factors (*suku* (tribe), *agama* (religion), *ras* (race), and *antargolongan* (between groups)) as the causes of the riot, looking deep into the sequences of the riot, religious issues were, to some extent, triggering it. As it was evident in the following: first of all, Golkar constituents, who marched by motor bikes when Muslims performed the Friday prayer, insulted the Muslim dignity. That was why Muslims considered it done by non-Muslim and the mocking deed could not be tolerated by them. Therefore the masses claimed that they destructed what ever related to non-Muslim properties, such as churches, business centers, and other.

Economic gaps

Economic gaps marked the end of the New Order regime as the global impact of economic crisis in Indonesia. Social indicator of the crisis in Banjarmasin could be seen through the existence of slum along the Martapura River, and unemployment. Statistic Center Board data in 1990 shows that the number of unemployment reached 6.11%. Their ages ranged 15-24 years old. This condition could also be seen in the data of job seekers in 1995 whose amount around 11.359 people, while the available job fields were only 556 fields. Economic crisis as the triggering motive of the riot could also be seen in the mass movement that robs the shopping places and set fire the Mitra Plaza.

Shopping mall Mitra Plaza initially was a traditional market in slum and crowded kampong. In the late 1980s the kampong and also the market burned out. Government moved people whose houses were burned to other suburb. Establishing a super mall in the area was very contrast to slum and crowded condition of the people living house behind the building. Those had been moved

to suburb were disappointed with the policies. They thought that the policies made them far from their business places.

Burning business places mainly owned by Chinese were tied to the racial issues with the riot. In fact, most Chinese dominated the ownership of big shopping centers in Banjarmasin, meanwhile non-Chinese called *pribumi*; mainly Banjarese people in this case only owned small shops in the traditional market. Therefore robbing centers happened to the Chinese shops.

Violence Abuse in the Riot

Riot that happened during the 1997 general election campaign was followed by violence. By seeing the destructed effects, riot in Banjarmasin on May 23, seemed to be destructive: 123 persons died, one church broke down and other ten churches shattered, 151 houses and one drugstore were burned, 144 shops robbed, three shopping and entertainment centers were set on fire, 36 cars and 34 motorbikes and some government offices were damaged. National Commission for Human Right reported that the riot was followed by violence that could be categorized into human right violation, such as, first, violation to the right of property.¹² Such violation could be seen in burning and destruction of houses and people's vehicles; secondly, violation to the right of dignity. This happened when the rioters forced Golkar supporters to put off their dresses, especially among the women; thirdly, violation to the right of life. This happened when the rioters attacked, wounded, and killed others. The final human right violation that could be identified from the violence was violation to freedom of religion because rioters also destroyed and damaged the church, vihara, and other buildings related to non-Muslim religious places.

Banjarmasin riots reflected the dysfunction of security system in Indonesia. Besides, it also was social expression of people towards the unfair attitudes of government elites, especially Golkar leaders. The election campaign gave people a chance to express their disappointment, and, to some extent, led the rebellion against the security elites who preferred protecting elites in power rather than saving people lives.¹³

Conclusion

At least three conclusions can be derived from above discussion. First of all, the end of New Order regime that had been in power for 32 years left a very bad memory for South Kalimantan people, especially those who lived in Banjarmasin during the riot on the Friday May 23, 1997 which was known as "Jum'at Kelabu" (Black Friday). The tragedy happened several days before the general election took place. It was the worst riot during New Order era.

Secondly, there were two main factors that contributed to the riot. First, there was such a structural pressure that pushed people to do the riot, for they wished to release themselves from such pressure. This could be seen from the hard and hot rivalry between Golkar and PPP. Their rivalry intensified when PPP knew that Golkar was unfair, for it used the bureaucracy as means to gain its own political interest. Moreover, collective awareness to do the riot was affected by the emergence of provocative issues that stigmatized non-Muslims as the motor bikers marched in front of the mosque during the Friday prayer.

Thirdly, the religious, ethnic, and economic issues were used by irresponsible people to provoke the masses' emotion. As a result, people blindly thought that the riot was a religious conflict between Islam and Christianity. Chinese tribes, on the other hand, became the target of the robbery, as the people felt a big economic gaps among the Chinese and local inhabitants who are Muslims.

Endnotes

¹ See in Syamsuddin Haris (ed.), *Menggugat Pemilu Orde Baru* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1998).

² Pancasila is the philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state. Pancasila consists of two Sanskrit words, "*panca*" meaning five, and "*sila*" meaning principle. It comprises five principles: the first, Belief in the one and only God; the second, Just and Civilized humanity (Internationalism, it does not mean Cosmopolitanism); the third, the unity of Indonesia (Nationalism, not Chauvinism; Sukarno quoted Gandhi: I am a nationalist, but my nationalism is humanity); the fourth, Democracy led by wise guidance through consultation/representation (representative democracy); and the fifth, social justice for the whole Indonesian people. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancasila_\(politics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancasila_(politics)), (accessed on February 17, 2008).

³ R.William Liddle, "Rezim Orde Baru," in Donald K Emmerson (ed.), *Indonesia Beyond Soeharto: Negara, Ekonomi, Masyarakat, Transisi* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2001), p. 65.

⁴ Syamsuddin Haris (ed), *Menggugat Pemilu Orde Baru*, p. 12

⁵ PPP is acronym for *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* or United Development Party

⁶ PDIP is acronym for *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* or Struggle Indonesian Democratic Party

⁷ *Detektif dan Romantika*. No.41. Th. XXVIII (31 Mei, 1997).

⁸ Ryaas Rasyid, *Kajian Awal Birokrasi Pemerintahan dan Politik Orde Baru* (Jakarta: Yarsif Wantepoe, 1998), p. 297.

⁹ Golkar is Indonesian acronym for *Golongan Karya* (translates as functional group), the government-backed ruling political organization

¹⁰ Mohtar Mas'oe'd dan Setia Budi, *Amuk Banjarmasin* (Jakarta: YLBHI, 1997), p. 2.

¹¹ *Forum Keadilan*, No.I th.VI (12 April 1997).

¹² Mohtar Mas'oe'd dan Setia Budi, *Amuk Banjarmasin* , p. 2.

¹³ Hermawan Sulistyio "Kekerasan Politik dalam Pemilu 1999: Acuan Teoretik Pengalaman Masa Transisi," dalam bukunya *Kekerasan Politik dalam Pemilu 1999 Laporan dari Lima Daerah* (Jakarta: KIPP Indonesia, 2000), p. 3.