

Status of Chinese Indonesians in Post - Authoritarian Indonesia

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Abstract

This research paper documents findings from original research and fieldwork regarding the status of Chinese Indonesians within Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Following the post-authoritarian and violent government regime under Suharto, in which many alleged communists were massacred and discriminatory laws enacted, many Indonesians have been reluctant to speak of past atrocities and have internalized a new sense of democratic freedom. One minority group that was unfairly treated throughout Indonesia's history under the colonial and Suharto regimes was the Chinese Indonesians. This research serves to examine whether discrimination still exists towards this particular group and the implications of perceiving a fully reformed democratic society. Having participated in ten weeks of fieldwork through a summer internship, these results are limited in their applicability to all Indonesians. However, with supplementation from other academic works on this particular topic, it is possible to propose that discriminatory attitudes still exist and many Chinese Indonesians have been silenced for the purposes of "furthering democracy."

In the summer of 2009, I, along with six other American students, participated in a ten-week research-based internship in Indonesia in partnership with local NGOs and Indonesian research students. After an intensive two week Indonesian language and cultural immersion course in Yogyakarta, Java, we relocated to Bali to attend a month long research methodology and ethics class with seven other Indonesian students. Anthropologists Leslie Dwyer and Degung

Santikarma were the core instructors, but visiting Indonesian and American scholars, who specialize in other methodological approaches, also provided additional instruction. Having had limited knowledge of Indonesia's political and social situation prior to arriving, the research methodology classes served as a stimulating overview of the circulating debates regarding the progress of Indonesia's transitional government among human rights activists. With the fall of President Suharto's 40-year violent dictatorship, Indonesia has gained international recognition as a newly emerging democratic state. While the country has experienced a surge of public elections and political changes, our class discussions and materials challenged these international reports on Indonesia's perceived development by recognizing the unaddressed social problems under its reformed government and the lack of public acknowledgement regarding the abuses suffered under Suharto's regime. The notion of freedom and the complete rupture from Indonesia's history with human rights violations was therefore questionable.

Though critical of current reformative changes, we also recognized the multi-ethnic and diverse nature of Indonesia that would complicate any single approach or solution for a peaceful and truly "free" society. One of the many reasons Indonesian citizens were opposed to Suharto's regime was his rigid conception of an Indonesian nation state that excluded and systematically targeted many types of minority groups based on political affiliation, ethnicity, religion, etc. Therefore, in order to envision a truly accepting, democratic, and plural society and to promote social change, the transitioning government must address past grievances and incorporate these minority groups and concerns into the new national landscape. Within this context of identity intolerance and political abuse, interest in race relations surfaced. It was possible to question whether this nationalistic ideology still persists in the post-Suharto era and whether minority groups have in reality been incorporated into the new political order.

For the remaining four weeks, we were dispatched to our respective NGOs that provided us with general guidance in conducting a short research project on a pertinent social justice issue in Indonesia. We also worked collaboratively with an Indonesian student partner who shared similar research interests. The author worked with Andre Liem, who is also ethnically Chinese, in examining the history of and ongoing discrimination towards Chinese Indonesians.

After much discussion with Liem on our specific interests and questions, we proceeded to conduct observational fieldwork in the small Chinatown located in a busy tourist district in Yogyakarta, Java. We also read literature that ranged from historical accounts of the Chinese Indonesian community under colonial rule to recently published literature on the community's post-reformation status. After gaining a better understanding of the historical context and sense of the community through observation of a predominantly Chinese neighborhood, we then interviewed various Chinese Indonesian students from a nearby university and also spoke with university professors who have published work on the Chinese Indonesian population. Our NGO and interviewees then provided us with additional contacts. These contacts were leaders of various Chinese organizations or belonged to the older generations that experienced overt discrimination under Suharto.

In recounting the mistreatments under Suharto's regime, it is widely understood that the ethnic identity of Chinese Indonesians was deemed illegitimate and counterproductive to national unity and progress. As a result, Chinese Indonesians have experienced a history of political and economic exploitation and social rejection. Current proponents of Indonesia's success with democracy and development deny any form of racist ideology and claim ethnic intolerance only occurred in the past. From personal discussions with Liem and other Chinese Indonesians regarding the recent anti-Chinese riots in 1998, there seems to be a gap in

perceptions of a post-racial discriminatory society and the reality of this minority group's experiences.

Before beginning discussion on the study and conclusions from the internship, two important points regarding the contents of this paper must be acknowledged. First, in addition to some supplementary theoretical readings and other ethnographic pieces, the fieldwork that was conducted serves as the primary support for the analysis of the status of Chinese Indonesians in the reformation era. Therefore, the conclusions are limited in their applicability because only a very selective Chinese community in Yogyakarta was interviewed. The depiction of how Chinese perceive themselves in a new age of democratic development thus only reflects these voices and is by no means encompassing of the vast and diverse makeup of the Chinese populations within Indonesia.

Second, it must be acknowledged that the Chinese were not the only victims of Indonesia's authoritative regime and Suharto did not only politically and socially target groups on the basis of ethnicity. Therefore, the findings in this paper should not be interpreted as strictly a "Chinese problem." Instead, the consequences of democratic discourses and freedom ideologies can be made applicable to any victimized or minority group within Indonesia. The analysis of the Chinese population is then only a subtopic within this larger discourse of controversies surrounding democratic development that can hopefully contribute to the overall effort of making these discourses more apparent in Indonesia's current political arena.

An understanding of why Chinese Indonesians themselves internalize notions of a post racial society and knowingly deny instances that prove otherwise is crucial. In what ways is the post-racial attitude among Indonesians a potential byproduct of democratic ideology and jargon that provide illusions of freedom? What political or social role will they have as an ethnic group

in new conceptions of a tolerant and democratic state? How do Chinese Indonesians understand the meaning of democracy and the “freedom” they are now given? What forms of discourses and influences have contributed to their overall attitudes regarding race, democracy and identity? The focus is therefore on the ways in which these discourses have affected how Chinese Indonesians perceive *themselves* and manage their dual identities within this transition period to a democratic state.

In order to understand the continued presence of ethnic discrimination in the newly emerging democratic state of Indonesia, we must first examine the long history of discriminatory treatment towards the Chinese that has continually manifested itself in subsequent governmental regimes. The origins of these racist ideologies can be traced back to the treatment of the Chinese under colonial rule with the systematic differentiation of the Chinese from their Indonesian counterparts. Prior to the colonization of Indonesia by the Dutch, the Chinese have experienced a long history of peaceful relations with the *pribumi*, the indigenous Indonesians. The migration and presence of the Chinese in Indonesia began over 400 years ago, as groups of Chinese tradesmen and seamen started to settle in port cities in increasingly large numbers. Through intermarriage and adaptations to local customs and norms, Chinese migrants were well integrated and accepted by local populations. Many did not even speak any Chinese dialects at home (Freedman 2000). Not until Dutch colonizers enforced a formal system of rule to exert control over local populations, did the relationship between the *pribumi* and the Chinese become adversarial over political, social and economic reasons.

Dutch colonizers established a system of indirect rule using the “colonial caste structure” tactic, in which Chinese were used as middlemen to collect taxes and govern communities of local Indonesians (Mackie 1976). This tactic directed all local antagonism towards the Chinese

even though they were not directly benefiting from any of the tax collection or from the direct control over their governed communities. Dutch authorities were essentially creating a social hierarchy among the Indonesian populations, in which the Chinese were increasingly characterized as middle-class citizens who had a lower status than European colonizers but a higher status than indigenous Indonesians. Consequentially, as the Chinese started to fill more economic roles, in a political economy divided by race and class, indigenous working-class Indonesians became gradually more hostile towards the Chinese and resentful of their more “privileged” status under colonial rule (Freedman 2000).

The Dutch granted the Chinese a measure of local autonomy to govern themselves, which enabled them to solidify as an ethnic community through the establishment of Chinese schools and organizations. This also served to distance them from other Indonesians. As a result, the ethnic Chinese were perceived as a very homogenized community reflecting specific stereotypes and social roles. There was great diversity within this small minority group. The *totok* immigrants and Indies-born *peranakan* distinction is perhaps the most pertinent during this time. The *totok* immigrants were part of a second wave of Chinese immigrants into Indonesia in the early 1900's. They were unfamiliar with local customs and retained very distinct cultures and languages. These immigrants came mainly for economic reasons and occupied positions of skilled labor, such as businessmen or tradesmen (Mackie 1976). This population further exacerbated stereotypes of the rich Chinese businessmen. Thus, even within the Chinese community itself, there exists a cultural and linguistic chasm in which indigenous *peranakan* identified more with the Indonesian locals and customs than their *totok* Chinese counterparts (Freedman 2000).

The Chinese in Indonesia were progressively more exploited and rejected by both colonizers and locals. With the increased bitterness towards their economic prosperity and autonomy, local Indonesians treated the whole Chinese community as a distinctive group who threatened their status in Indonesia. They became the “ethnic other,” in which local Indonesians perceived the Chinese as economic and political competition and as an exclusive and pretentious social group that was loyal to the Dutch (Coppel 1983). Moreover, during this time, there was a rise in the mainland China nationalist movement. This movement beckoned the return of Chinese diasporas. Because the Dutch feared the local Chinese would decide to return to their homeland, the colonial power started to enforce tighter restrictions and formal control over the community. The Chinese were forced to declare their loyalties to the Dutch by applying only for Indonesian citizenship and were implicitly told to exhibit less cultural ties with China (Freedman 2000). As a result of feeble ties with both local Indonesians and colonial authorities, the Chinese were treated as scapegoats during the economic downturn that occurred alongside the fall of colonial power.

Dutch power came to an end in 1945. President Sukarno became the first publicly elected official under the new independent Indonesian state. Sukarno not only had the difficult task of establishing a new nation, but he also had to address the worldwide economic depression that plagued Indonesia at the time. As poverty became more widespread, all blame was shifted towards the Chinese. They were treated as the economic backbone under colonial rule and, thus, were believed to be the main contributor for the nation’s economic problems (Lindsey 2005). Consequentially, there was a surge of anti-Chinese violence and regulations with two of the most devastating events being the Chinese trade ban in 1959 and the May riots in 1963. The rising nationalistic sentiments and the outburst of anti-Chinese attitudes led to a state-wide ban of

“foreigner” businessmen, which included the Chinese. As a result, roughly 136,000 Chinese Indonesians immigrated to China because they no longer had any means of economic livelihood in Indonesia. In 1963, there was also a series of sporadic and violent attacks on small Chinese communities in West Java that mainly destroyed property with limited bloodshed (Mackie 1976).

President Sukarno tried to resolve the ethnic tensions by promoting his vision for a multiethnic, diverse and tolerant Indonesian nation state. Because of these open and dynamic discourses on national identity, proposals of the integration or assimilation of the Chinese began to emerge with the rise of two significant political organizations: Baperki and Lembaga Pengembangan Kehidupan Beragama (LBKP) (Freedman 2000). Baperki was committed to ending discrimination towards the Chinese and advocated for the integration of the group by recognizing them as an ethnic group of equal standing in Indonesian nationalism. LBKP, on the other hand, advocated for assimilation of the Chinese with the most extreme approaches being complete abandonment of all facets of Chinese identity and the embracing of local cultures. President Sukarno generally favored the Baperki integrationist approach, and because Sukarno’s policies generally leaned towards the political left, Baperki became increasingly associated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). This relationship would eventually contribute to increased stigmatization of the Chinese after the complete obliteration of the left under Suharto’s dictatorship (Purdey 2003). Both Sukarno’s attempts to include the Chinese into the national landscape and the increased protection offered by Baperki and LBKP resulted in the temporary decrease of violence and hostility towards Chinese Indonesians. Unfortunately, this progress came to an abrupt stop when Sukarno was ousted from power in 1965.

In 1965, an anti-communist faction led by Major General Suharto carried out a military take-over of the Indonesian government with the justification that they were stopping a

communist coup from taking control of the country. Suharto then became president of Indonesia. His presidency lasted for over 40 years and his regime was known for its support of a modern industrial economy, state-led massacres, abuses towards alleged communists, and a series of laws that furthered an inflexible concept of national identity to exert mass control. Suharto's political intolerance for identities and behaviors that deviated from his concept of nation-state prompted systematic techniques to ensure complete homogenization. This process effectively denied any notions of an ethnic Chinese identity (Coppel 1983).

In addition to dissolving the perceived leftist Baperki organization and the massacre of alleged Chinese communists, Suharto further targeted the Chinese by enforcing the Assimilationist Program. This program mandated identification with one of only five accepted national religions, the nationalization of private schools, the ban of ethnic materials or cultural activities, immigration restrictions, and active declaration of Indonesian citizenship or the Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia (SBKRI) system (Freedman 2000). Moreover, many Chinese were urged to limit the use of Chinese dialects and Chinese names in order to further national unity and progress (Suryadinata 1997). Thus, these laws can be construed as Suharto's adoption of the colonial control tactics, in which "systematic discrimination against the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia had become firmly fixed in a web of ambiguous relations and less ambiguous policies" (Lindsey et. al. 2005, 42).

Similarly to Suharto's continuation of ideologies from colonial rule, the reactions among the Chinese were also consistent with those exhibited under colonial times. During Dutch colonial rule, the Chinese generally established a strategic relationship with government officials in order to gain protection from local hostility. This resulted in the Chinese passively accepting political and economic forms of exploitation and abuse (Suryadinat 1997). During Suharto's rule,

he established close connections with Chinese economic advisors to further economic development. Though many Chinese businessmen profited during Suharto's reign, it led to many local Indonesians resenting the entire Chinese ethnic group (Coppel 1983). Around the time that Suharto began losing power, the economy also began to weaken. The Chinese once more became the economic scapegoats. Their communities were violently raided and attacked and there was a mass exodus of the Chinese from Indonesia. This further emphasizes the notion that the Chinese were consistently exploited economically and politically throughout Indonesian history (Freedman 2000).

Suharto lost power in 1998. Indonesia entered the reformation period. Its transition to a democratic government began under the popularly elected leadership of Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of former President Sukarno. The new government experienced a series of political reforms with the abolishment of suppressive laws and a surge of democratic processes such as elections. Notions of freedom and democracy permeated the national mindset as the current government was perceived as a complete break from the authoritarian abuses of past regimes. Issues, such as ethnic discrimination, were no longer perceived as problems and there was an understanding that a democratic society equated a post-racial society. Thus, issues such as racism and political intolerance were only part of the historical past, which can be safely avoided by furthering plans for democratic progress.

These changes have, however, been limited and superficial in ending discrimination towards the Chinese. Some indicators of the continued presence of racist sentiments was the outbreak of anti-Chinese violence in many large cities throughout Indonesia in 1998 and the reformed government's failure to identify these perpetrators and abolish legal mechanisms for anti-Chinese discrimination, such as the SBKRI system. These unaddressed issues along with the

routine level of local discrimination that Chinese Indonesians still experience allude to the questionable nature of “freedom” under the democratic state. This paper will now discuss a few consequences of democracy discourses that have politically silenced Chinese Indonesians and have effectively undermined any impression of ethnic discrimination. These discourses have been strategically utilized to facilitate skewed understandings of democracy, participation and national identity amongst Indonesian citizens. In particular, these discourses have impacted the older generation of Chinese Indonesians, who experienced overt forms of discrimination, and the younger generation in different ways.

One significant outcome of the transition to a democratic government is the social immobilization of local populations, as they do not demand governmental accountability or social and political change. Through systematic forms of propaganda that circulate definitions of democracy, citizens in transitioning governments, such as Indonesia, can be discouraged from challenging the new democratic government. Voicing discontent would potentially risk destabilizing the progress of democratic development. Julia Paley’s analysis of the democratic ideologies after the fall of Pinochet’s violent dictatorship in Chile supports the notion that officials can “convince popular sector organizations not to march by attributing to them the responsibility for upholding the national project of democracy” (2002, 116). Moreover, these governments can strategically manipulate the fears of a post-dictatorship society by depicting the lack of democratic progress as being equivalent to the return of an authoritarian government. Citizens would then feel “obligated to support the government and its actions because to do otherwise was to invite what was considered the only other alternative: authoritarian rule” (Paley 2002, 116). These understandings of democratic development and the pressure to accept any

flaws within the new system have legitimized irresponsible governments that do not address past or current social grievances.

The attitudes among the older Chinese generation in Indonesia largely reflect this passive acceptance of a superficial democratic government. As a result of Chinese Indonesians experiencing cycles of political exploitation and unaddressed abuse, the older Chinese generation has come to understand the concept of democracy as merely a process of popular interest enacted through systems of voting and elections and not an accountable institution that secures or protects their freedoms (Lloyd & Smith 2001). Through the various regimes, the Chinese have in some ways adapted a survival mentality and have a general tendency to avoid political troubles in order to guarantee the safety of their ethnic community. They have consistently adhered to an exploitive relationship with the government not only for monetary reasons, but also to sustain a level of autonomy and governmental protection from local hostility. Thus, this ethnic minority has over the years become increasingly exclusive due to social segregation and politically uninterested as their experiences have undermined any conception of an accountable government that protects and accepts their ethnic identity.

This lack of confidence in political participation is discussed in Arief Budimen's concluding remarks regarding the Chinese attitudes towards politics.

“Feeling that they were not fully Indonesian, they did not consider that they could legitimately become involved in politics. They were afraid that they would be called ‘intruders’. Many Chinese parents therefore advised their children not to join political rallies or student demonstrations against the government. They commented that the Chinese were simply immigrants, ‘guests’ in Indonesia, so they did not have the right to decide the future of Indonesia” (Lindsey 2005, 99).

As a result of Chinese Indonesians being treated as outsiders and often times a national enemy, they have accepted that they can never achieve political influence as an ethnic minority and will forever only be bystanders to social and political change and abuse.

The Chinese Indonesians from the older generation who were interviewed all reflected these socially immobile outlooks and advocated assimilation and “ethnic invisibility” for safety and convenience. Lucinda M. Lett, a professor at Atmajaya University, did not want to be associated with Chinese political or social organizations and is generally uninterested in politically advancing the Chinese community. She does, however, generally support the need for a supportive Chinese community and better education and familial support in order to counteract the “gap between the Chinese and non-Chinese, which stems from the spread of stereotypes from the colonial age” (Discussion August 1, 2009). While she recognizes the legacy of institutional abuse that has contributed to current forms of discrimination, she shifts her criticisms to local community groups instead of demanding state-level accountability which is an attitude that results from social immobilization.

Additionally, Budi Setiagraha, the head of PITI-Yogyakarta, a Moslem-Chinese organization, felt the “Chinese must convert to Islam and become integrated into the Indonesian majority in order to maintain good relations and a harmonious social life” (Discussion August 3, 2009). Thus, in order to incorporate themselves into the Indonesian national identity, Chinese Indonesians must actively undermine their right to embrace any cultural aspects that deviate from the social norm.

Because of the effects of social immobilization, many Chinese Indonesians do not demand government acknowledgment or effort to reconcile any of the instances of anti-Chinese violence or discriminatory government regulations. Chinese Indonesians are thus “engaged in a

process of reworking emotions and overcoming difficult memories for the purpose of national reconciliation” (Paley 2002, 128). This is a process of reconciliation that helps the group devalue the need for a truly representative government, an institution that they have already convinced themselves as unattainable. Mely G. Tan has observed this complicit attitude among her subjects as “almost all of them accepted the regulation of 1967 on restricting expressions of Chinese culture within the family environment or temple grounds” (In Surydinata 1997, 50). Chinese Indonesians were thus burying their past and denying the presence of ethnic discrimination in order to not challenge the current democratic system. Furthermore, they might even deny the presence of ethnic discrimination for the sake of contributing to a façade of national development.

Dr. Liem Sioe Siet, a member of the Atmajaya Yogyakarta Education Foundation, reflected this internalized understanding of a post-racial society under the new democratic government. He felt “racial discrimination does not exist in Indonesia now” and that it was merely a past “economic and political issue” that occurred because the Chinese had a weak position (Discussion July 20, 2009). Because the government has historically failed to address ethnic discrimination, Chinese Indonesians have consequentially denied their own unjust realities in order to cope with what seems to be an impossible endeavor to become accepted into the Indonesian nation state as an ethnic minority.

Many local Chinese Indonesians have thus become complicit and accepting of bureaucratic abuse and the hardships faced daily. Instead of trying to rally for change, they have systematically tried to become less ethnically conspicuous by limiting the use of any ethnic markers, such as Chinese dialects and Chinese names. One of the interviewees, Bimo Yuwono, secretary of the Chinese organization INTI-Yogyakarta, acknowledged that he had initially

legally changed his Chinese birth name to an accepted Indonesian name because of the bureaucratic issues . But after the formal legislations to change Chinese names was abolished, Bimo did not change his name back “out of practicality” (Discussion July 29, 2009). In reality, many Chinese Indonesians have decided to not use Chinese names to avoid exploitation under the current regime. The price for public school tuition is one such instance of apparent discrimination within public institutions that is recognized and unchallenged. Students who are identified as Chinese on their applications due to their Chinese names are charged more for public school tuition. As a result of this situation, Bimo, Lucinda, and Bernie all decided not to give their children Chinese names. These discriminatory practices also explain why many Chinese Indonesians do not speak any Chinese dialects in public. A twenty-nine-year-old Chinese man born in Semarang said “I can speak Chinese, but prefer to use Indonesian only with my wife and children, since I do not want my children to be disadvantaged at school” (Surydinata 1997, 48). From these interviews, it is possible to see the skewed logic behind understandings of democracy and participatory citizen, as citizens are “working together to solve their own problems and build their own future” (Paley 2002, 145). This reduces government obligation and provisions to address local needs. Chinese Indonesians are, thus, strategically concealing their own identities to avoid instances of ethnic discrimination instead of mandating change that would make it socially acceptable to exhibit ethnic culture.

While the older generation’s experiences have been explored, it is important to demonstrate that these democratic discourses impacted the younger generation in a different way. This generation did not suffer explicit forms of ethnic discrimination and were not consistently exploited by government authorities. They are mainly influenced by discourses on modern conceptions of the self that are less focused on the political past and issues of

discrimination. Furthermore, parents have encouraged assimilation and acceptance of instances of ethnic discrimination and thus have taught their children to implicitly deny their own ethnic identities by following Chinese rituals in an inconspicuous manner and denying the presence of racist ideologies with the justification that Indonesia is now a free democracy.

One negative consequence of these discourses is the creation of fractured identities among young Chinese Indonesians. They are unable to balance the realities of dual identity experiences. This fractured identity results from what philosopher Stefanie Pandolfo perceives as the effects of a global movement towards modernity that embraces concepts like democracy and rejects the traditional past. In other words, this process of modernization ignores the need to reconcile the past and only stresses the advancement of ambiguous standards of development without acknowledging the realistic ability to do so. The “modernist passion” is thus the “desire for a new self, and a sense of break from the past, from ‘culture,’ understood both as a mode of colonial subjection and as the source of an identity that is no longer one’s own. An identity that inhabits the present as phantasm” (Pandolfo 2000, 129). In terms of the process of transitioning to a democratic nation from an authoritarian past, these discourses of identity overlook any traces of social injustice, such as ethnic discrimination, that might have trickled down from colonial times to the current political situation. In reality, these discourses still exist in Indonesia because the Chinese continue to be treated as an ethnic other by their Indonesian counterparts.

Various interviews have emphasized that Chinese Indonesian youths are succumbing to pressures to deny ethnic discrimination with historical roots and to only embrace a futuristic, idealized Indonesian identity. Mely G. Tan interviewed a *peranakan* born in Bandung who felt “we are Indonesians first ... the trend in the cities is toward loss of Chinese identity” (Surydinata 1997, 46). Furthermore, all the young Chinese Indonesians interviewed in this study identified as

“purely Indonesians” and only recognized their Chinese identity as part of their family lineage. One of the interviewees, Agus Lie, had an even more extreme understanding of his Chinese identity. He sees no value in making his Chinese identity publicly explicit to others. He thinks issues of racial or ethnic discrimination are only applicable to his parent’s generation and is of no concern or relevance to his current status in Indonesia (Discussion July 29, 2009).

While all of the above interviewees shared sentiments that ethnic discrimination is not a large issue in Indonesia, they also told similar stories about the forms of discrimination they experienced as children. Many of them were teased and socially isolated because they “looked” Chinese and “practiced” Chinese by eating pork or speaking Chinese dialects. Many of them were initially confused by this unfair treatment as they saw themselves as equals with their classmates. They soon realized these instances were forms of social discrimination. As a result, many confused Chinese youths started to resent their Chinese identity. When ethnographer Donald M. Nonini asked Leni, a Chinese Indonesian woman who migrated to Australia, to recount her experiences with ethnic discrimination in Indonesia, she said:

The prejudice I faced everyday was very great ... my friend, in one school classroom repeatedly asked me ‘Are you Chinese?’ And then there were my feelings of embarrassment and anger with my mother for speaking ‘that language’ – Peranakan – when she visited my school, and I said, ‘Mummy, don’t speak that language, it can get me into trouble’” (Day 2007, 112-3).

The youth therefore directed their anger towards the Chinese community and the ethnic identity. They did not look for historical explanations to contextualize their experiences, but instead relied on their parents who told them to passively accept it and move on. The young Chinese Indonesians, who are disconnected or ignorant of their historical past as a targeted ethnic

minority, are thus thrust into a state of confusion because their realities do not reflect their ideologies. They are told to disavow racism and to perceive themselves as purely “Indonesia.” Yet, they are still experiencing the realities of ethnic discrimination on a regular basis. They are treated as inferior ethnic others.

From these ethnographic interviews and supplementary theories on the consequences of democratic discourses, it is possible to begin to understand how Chinese Indonesians and other victimized minorities in Indonesia have come to conceptualize their new democratic government and freedoms as participatory citizens. These findings support the notion that perhaps the currently perceived free democratic state is not completely disconnected from the oppressive systems of past regimes and more importantly, that Indonesia has not yet achieved a post-discriminatory society. With this in mind, minority groups need to be wary of their government’s democratic progress and to continually question and hold authorities accountable. Otherwise, overly eager acceptance of a successfully transitioned democratic society can potentially lead to social immobilization and individual denial of social inequalities. This is reflected in Chinese Indonesians’ perceptions of their ethnic status. Therefore, in order to truly achieve a democratic Indonesian nation state that is tolerant and accepting of minority groups, local populations need to dynamically interact with their government in hopes of developing a genuinely representative and accountable government.

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