

THE POSITION OF ETHNIC CHINESE IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, the ethnic Chinese people played a significant role in the economic structure since independence. However, in the socio-political arena, they are a minority group. The economic dominance of the ethnic Chinese led to racial animosities between the ethnic Chinese and the 'pribumis' or native Indonesians. From the colonial period, the 'pribumis' felt insecure about the competition from the Chinese entrepreneurs, and this insecurity is still having an effect on the 'pribumis'. This article mainly tries to focus on the position of the ethnic Chinese people in Indonesian society with special reference to their relationship with the native Indonesians. It also tries to highlight the political instability as well as ethnic conflict mainly during the New Order era of President Suharto.

KEYWORDS: *Ethnic Chinese, Ethnic Conflict, Indonesia, New Order and Pribumi*

INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asian region has more than twenty million overseas Chinese (Bhattacharya 2009:119). This region witnessed the flow of Chinese emigration throughout its history and Indonesia was no exception.

Indonesia consists of distinct ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. There are at least three hundred ethnic groups in Indonesia with six major religions. In such a country ethnic or religious rivalries are very common, though the tension between the native Indonesians and the ethnic Chinese always needs a special mention. Although the ethnic Chinese comprise less than five per cent of the population (Ray 2011), they control the major portion of the Indonesian economy. Consequently, there has been a widespread discontent among the native Indonesians towards the ethnic Chinese community. In this paper, I will try to explore the reasons behind such hostility between the 'pribumi' or indigenous people and the ethnic Chinese population. This paper will primarily focus on the position of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesian society.

BACKGROUND STUDY

Indonesian Chinese or ethnic Chinese can be broadly divided under two groups- 'Peranakan Chinese' and 'Cina Totok'. The former came to Indonesia in between early fifteenth century and mid-nineteenth century. They mingled in the Indonesian society by marriage and assimilation. The later consisted of more recent Chinese immigrants who are still culturally Chinese (Dawis 2009:77).

During the colonial period, there was a demand for cheap labor, hence the Dutch rulers encouraged Chinese immigration to Indonesia. Since then, the Chinese were exploited. The Dutch introduced three racial groups, namely, Europeans (particularly Dutch), Foreign Orientals (particularly Chinese), and indigenous people (Focus 2006; Lembong

2008:49). Thus they deterred the interactions between the Chinese and the indigenous population. The colonial rulers used the Chinese as middlemen between the Dutch and the pribumi. (Lembong 2008:49). They always kept the Chinese as a distinct ethnic group. Moreover, they employed the Chinese in various economic activities, without giving much opportunity to the pribumi, with the intention to avert the emergence of the native Indonesians as a merchant class, which could challenge their position (Reid 1992:497). Thus the economic disparities had been widened between the ethnic Chinese and the indigenous people. Since then competition, rivalry and a relation of hatred developed between the pribumi and the ethnic Chinese, which still continuing even today. Even during the short period of Japanese occupation (from 1942 to 1945), the Chinese were suppressed and their political organizations were banned in Indonesia, and it became difficult for them to be absorbed into the mainstream.

SUKARNO ERA

Since independence, the ethnic Chinese played a significant role in the economic structure of the nation, which led to racial animosities between the ethnic Chinese and the pribumi. Although there were many reasons for the adverse socio-economic and political scenario, due to natural human psychology the pribumi considered the success of the ethnic Chinese in the economic field as the main obstacle in their way of success. This was primarily because economic disparities cut across ethnic lines.

Indonesia's first President Sukarno was a pro-Communist and he always tried to maintain a healthy relationship with the PRC, but the adverse domestic situation did not allow him to provide a favorable condition for the ethnic Chinese. The Sukarno government passed some anti-Chinese laws and measures under domestic pressure. However, the Chinese were allowed to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity and could participate in politics at that time.

In 1950, the Sukarno Government introduced the Benteng Programme with the intention to promote an indigenous business class. Through this programme, special economic privileges were given to the native Indonesian businessmen to encourage their participation in the national economy. This programme however, failed and 'gave rise to the "Ali Baba" practice where business licenses issued to indigenous Indonesians were channeled into companies financed and managed by the ethnic Chinese. Pribumi license holders would receive remuneration as directors of the company with little or no participation in the business' (Chang Yau 2014:113). So, therefore, the goal of the Benteng Programme failed.

During this period, a new Citizenship Act (1958) was passed by which "Indonesian Citizens of Chinese descent would lose their citizenship if they failed to make an official declaration to reject Chinese citizenship" (Chang Yau 2014:112). In 1960, this Act was comprehensively implemented and that led to mainly two categories of Chinese, namely, Warga Negara Indonesia or Indonesian citizens and Warga Negara Asing (WNA) or foreign citizens. The former mainly included the peranakan Chinese and the later were mainly totok. However, most of the native Indonesians considered them alike (Chang Yau 2014:112). In November 1959, through a Presidential Regulation (Presidential Decree No. 10 or PP-10), the ethnic Chinese were restricted from doing business outside of urban areas. Consequently, more than a hundred thousand Chinese, who were mostly WNA, fled to China (Chang Yau 2014:113).

SUHARTO ERA

The condition of the ethnic Chinese was most vulnerable under the Suharto regime. Following the 1965 upheaval, General Suharto came into power. He put his blame on the Communists for this coup. From 1965 to 1968, a strong

anti-Chinese sentiment took place. Many Chinese in Indonesia were accused of being Communists and hence many of them were imprisoned or killed. Following the 1965 coup, Indonesia's relation with Beijing was marked by hostility and since then their relations were frozen for more than 20 years (Napier 1999). A pro-Western and anti-Communist Suharto had driven his foreign policy seemed to have become pro-Western.

During this time, several anti-Chinese laws were passed as a strong anti-Chinese sentiment was brewing in the Indonesian society. In 1966, a law (127/U/Kep/12/1966 law) was passed, which compelled the ethnic Chinese to use an Indonesian name instead of Chinese. In 1967, a regulation ("Basic Policy for the Solution of the Chinese Problem") was enacted by which 629 Chinese schools were closed (Susanti 2014:139) and their beliefs and religions (like Buddhism and Confucianism) were confined to their family and homes (Schwarz 1994:106; Davis 2009:100). All the Chinese language newspapers were prohibited, except one, i.e. 'Harian Indonesia', which was under strict government supervision (Davis 2009:102).

In order to take better control of the Chinese, the Suharto Government issued some regulations and decrees, which were very abusive in nature. For example, "a particular code was attached to the national identity cards and passports of Indonesians of Chinese origin" (Ling 2016:102) which "exposed them to discrimination and exploitation by the bureaucracy, police and military" (Ling 2016:102). The ethnic Chinese "also had to produce a Citizenship Letter (SBKRI-Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia) to obtain documents such as birth certificates, passports or marriage certificates" (Ling 2016:102).

When President Suharto came into power Indonesia was passing through a severe economic crisis. He took some bold steps for the economic development of the country. The Suharto government gave privileges to the wealthy Chinese business community in an effort to expand the national economy. Thus a substantial number of Cuckong or ethnic Chinese capitalists "collaborated with members of the Indonesian power elite" (Ling 2016:102). The later mainly consisted of the members from President's family and the army.

The privileged class of ethnic Chinese people enjoyed several facilities, like easy access to licenses and contracts. As a response, they incorporated the power elites in their business. Here we should keep in mind that this wealthy Chinese class did not represent the entire ethnic Chinese community in Indonesia. In practice, most of the ethnic Chinese people belonged to the middle class and did not enjoy any of these facilities (Ling 2016:102). As a result, they were easily targeted by the pribumi during any crisis.

Thus, in Indonesia, the role of the ethnic Chinese people in the arena of politics, academics and administration as impeded due to political pressure from above. Consequently, they became unable to protect their own interests through their participation in mainstream society or politics. Several anti-Chinese riots occurred, especially in the final years of this regime. When Suharto's fall was impending and popular discontent against him was increasing, the indigenous people targeted the ethnic Chinese, primarily because they controlled the major portion of the economy and blamed them to a great extent for their own deprived condition. The business establishment of the ethnic Chinese was burned and looted and thousands of Chinese left the country due to insecure conditions and Chinese women were raped elsewhere (Franciska 2014).

The state apparatus was overtly involved in the anti-Chinese activities. Whenever any problematic situation emerged it was the ethnic Chinese who were made into scapegoats, as they were “dependent, politically powerless and easily controllable” (Yau 2014:119).

So, it has been clear that the ethnic Chinese community did not hold a strong position in Indonesian society since the colonial period. Their activities were mainly confined to the economic sphere. Their participation in the socio-political sphere was always deterred from the above. They were not allowed to participate in mainstream politics. As a result, they failed to protect their own interests and their destiny was always determined by the trends of domestic politics, which was as mentioned unfavorable to them. Although their position was very weak in the socio-political arena of the nation since the Dutch rule, it became most vulnerable during the Suharto regime.

POST-SUHARTO ERA

After the fall of President Suharto in May 1998, the negative approach toward the ethnic Chinese was somewhat reduced. “Since 1998 there has been an increased official and general acknowledgement within Indonesia that the ethnic Chinese community received gross injustices during the period of riots” (Turner 2003:347). The successors of President Suharto took initiatives to improve the condition of the ethnic Chinese in a more democratic atmosphere. The restrictions over the Chinese community were relaxed and the new laws motivated them to participate in the political activity. I have discussed about those relaxations and new laws in the following paragraphs.

The ethnic Chinese community was keen to take the opportunity of the liberal political atmosphere of post – Suharto era and tried to establish political organizations for attaining their rights and protecting their interests. Suharto’s New Order period deliberately suppressed the political activities of the Indonesians as a whole, including the ethnic Chinese. His resignation from the power paved the way for the entire nation to freely participate in politics and to enjoy their legal rights without the fear of being targeted by the government. After the fall of President Suharto initially, three Chinese political organizations were formed, namely, the Partai Reformasi Tionghoa Indonesia or the Chinese Indonesian Reform Party, Partai Bhinneka Tunggal Ika Indonesia or Unity in Diversity Party and the Partai Pembauran Indonesia or Parpindo or the Assimilation Party (Tanasaldy 2015). The later was transformed into a social organization due to lack of interest and support from the Chinese community (Suryadinata 2002:129). This party’s main objective was- the assimilation, which became unpopular among the Chinese after the fall of President Suharto (Suryadinata 2002:129). In the post-Suharto era, several socio-political organizations of the ethnic Chinese have emerged. Giblin (2003) mentioned mainly four types of Chinese organization in her article “Overcoming Stereo types? Chinese Indonesian Civil Society Groups in Post-Suharto Indonesia”. They are as follows:

- Social Cultural Groups, for example, PSMTI, INTI;
- Political Parties, for example, PARTI, PBI, PWBI;
- Anti-Discrimination Groups, for example, GANDI, SNB, SIMPATIK; and
- Religious Associations (Giblin 2003: 353-368)

During the first elections of a post-Suharto era in June 1999, only one Chinese dominated political party got the chance to participate (Freedman 2003:445). It was a multi-ethnic political party, but eighty-five per cent of its committee

members were Chinese (Ling 2014:214). This party was formed by Nurdin Purnomo, a totok Chinese (Suryadinata 2002:134). PBI did well in Kalimantan, but its result was not good in the urban areas like Jakarta (Freedman 2003:444). L.T. Susanto from PBI achieved a seat on the national legislative council (Tansaldy 2015:11). Thus a new journey of the ethnic Chinese was started with great enthusiasm. It can be said that such constructive and pragmatic atmosphere was “a combination of reasons including the promotion of multiculturalism, the government’s decision to abolish discriminatory laws and regulations, and efforts made by Chinese Indonesians to improve their image and position in Indonesian society” (Herlijanto 2016:3).

These changes were pioneered by President B.J. Habibie and maintained by Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo. The successors of President Suharto made some significant changes in favor of the ethnic Chinese community in Indonesia. Here we will discuss some of these changes. The first president of the Reformation era, B.J. Habibie took an initiative to abolish the “use of pribumi (indigenous people) and non-pribumi (non-indigenous people) terminology” (Lembong 2008:52). He also revoked some other discriminatory laws, like “a ban on the use of the Chinese language” (Rosa 1999) His initiative to make a liberal political system helped to the emergence of Chinese political parties in Indonesia (Rosa 1999). On 20 October 1999, Abdurrahman Wahid replaced President Habibie. He lifted the ban on “the practice of Chinese religions and customs in public places” (Lembong 2008:52). Wahid also “lifted the ban on the use of Chinese characters and names, as well as on the import of publications in Chinese letters” (Schaublin 2014:92). In 2000, he declared the Lunar New Year an officially recognized optional holiday (Lembong 2008:52). After coming into power, on 23 July 2001, President Megawati Sukarnoputri went a step ahead and declared Chinese New Year a national public holiday (Lembong 2008:53). Megawati’s successor President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had enforced the New Citizenship Law in 2006, with this law “asli [original] Indonesian” included all citizens who had never assumed foreign citizenship of their free will. With regard to citizenship, all distinction according to origin, race, or religion was thereby officially lifted” (Schaublin 2014:92). In 2014, he reintroduced the terms ‘Tionghoa’ and ‘Tiongkok’ instead of ‘Chinese’ and ‘China’ (Hariyandi 2014). Prior to President Suharto these words were used in Indonesia, but in 1967 he declared through a Presidential Letter that anything related to Chinese should be called ‘Cina’ instead of ‘Tionghoa’ (Anggraeni 2014). The use of this term had a negative implication on the ethnic Chinese as it led to a “connection with an alien state and fundamental linkage with another polity” (Aguilar 2001:511). The present President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo has a positive approach towards the ethnic Chinese. Immediately after coming into power he introduced an ethnic Chinese politician, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama as Jakarta’s Governor (Kwok 2014).

In spite of such efforts, an anti-Chinese feeling resurfaced in the Indonesian society, especially among the pribumi elite. In late 2015, China’s Vice Premier, Madam Liu Yandong visited Jakarta and during this visit, she emphasized on ‘people-to-people exchanges’ for further promotion of China’s relations with Indonesia. This declaration led to widespread ‘fear of domination by the Chinese’ in Indonesia (Herlijanto 2016:3-6). On the other hand, it was also believed that the growing participation of the ethnic Chinese in politics would benefit the Chinese businessmen in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

So, therefore, it has been clear that, though modern Indonesia has accepted the ethnic Chinese as a part of the nation, till date, any little provocation is capable of generating insecurity and suspicion regarding the role of ethnic Chinese in the socio-political and economic arena of Indonesia. Thus it has been clear that the position of the ethnic Chinese is determined by the internal and external forces. The colonial policy of 'divide and rule' tried to maintain a line of difference between the ethnic Chinese and the indigenous people for the sake of their own interest to rule the country without any obstruction. The pro-Communist first President of Indonesia, Sukarno, maintained a good relation with China, but, due to the anti-Chinese sentiment in the domestic front, he had failed to provide a favorable condition for the ethnic Chinese. The pro-Western and anti-Communist dictator, President Suharto introduced several anti-Chinese laws and measures. During his rule, Indonesian foreign policy towards the PRC was marked by hostility and the foreign relations between these two were frozen for a long period. The position of the ethnic Chinese community was most vulnerable under the Suharto regime. In a post-Suharto era, the open-minded liberal political leaders of the country tried to improve the condition of the ethnic Chinese people and rejuvenate the relations with the PRC.

However, even in recent time, anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia has resurfaced. Now it has to be observed that, whether the present President Joko Widodo can handle this domestic pressure and maintain a good relationship with the economically powerful PRC and sustain the national stability.

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