

The Mass Rape of the ethnic Chinese in May 1998 and the War on Terror

Soe Tjen Marching

Several harrowing stories from the mass rape of hundreds of Chinese Indonesian women in Jakarta on 13-14 May 1998 circulated in June – July 1998, a few weeks after the mass rape happened. Before then, there was a long silence perhaps because people were too traumatic of the incident, or because no one dared to tell what really happened. The volunteer team for humanity (*Tim Sukarelawan untuk Kemannisiaan*) led by the Catholic Priest SANDYAWAN, identified that there were 168 women as young as ten years old who were raped or sexually abused, several of them by 3 to 7 men. Many of these women also suffered from massive tortures and object penetrations – several reports have stated that harmful objects such as broken bottles or razor blades were used to damage their reproductive organs. Some of them died during the incident or were killed by the attackers, some committed suicide later. Most of the survivors suffer from serious psychological traumas.

However, the rapists have not been identified until now, and the victims have not received any compensation or proper help by the government either. Different opinions regarding the mass rape have posited the incident into a religious, race, economic and gender issues, and the rape has also been used to justify if not aggravate the war between the West and Islam. In this paper, I will discuss how several news articles have often made the victims disappeared and forgotten in their reports of the mass rape.

Islam and the rape: The Beginning.

On 12 May 1998, four students at Trisakti University in Jakarta were shot dead by the army because of demonstrating against the New Order President SOEHARTO. On the same day, the University students were also harassed by the crowd for not

demonstrating outside of the University area. The students at that time, were not allowed to get out of the University by law. Some people from the angry crowd started throwing stones at the students for not being brave enough to get out of the gate. Trisakti University is well-known as an upper middle class University which students comprised of many Indonesians of Chinese descent.

The day after, the mass-rape and looting of the houses of several Chinese Indonesians happened. The simultaneity of this incident on 13-14 May 1998 over a large area did raise doubts as to whether this extremely dreadful act was spontaneous and done merely by the mobs. Some eyewitnesses also noticed how several very short-haired men were loaded off a truck before the looting happened.

Soon after the riot spread, several residents in Jakarta put up signs such as “Milik orang Islam” (Muslim-own), “Milik Pribumi” (Indigenous own) or “Pribumi Muslim” (Muslim indigenous). These signs signify several meanings as well as interpretations in relation to the rape. The people who put up the signs may have assumed that declaring their faith and race (Islam, indigenous), would have saved them from the attackers. The signs became a kind of a fortress for the residents. Nonetheless, it is also not clear whether those signs could indeed function as a fortress for the residents because some eyewitnesses also stated how the residences of Chinese descents were marked by red dots or stripes. This means that those signs declaring that they were Muslims or indigenous may not have been of any use, because the houses of ethnic Chinese had already been marked before hand. This is an indication that the rape was planned and was conducted by a certain group. Several newspaper articles report the

link between Islam and the rape. KEITH B. RICHBURG, for instance, writes in *The Washington Post*:

[] *The collapse of the old order has exposed the many raw divides in this far-flung archipelago of 202 million people. Muslims have attacked Christians. The poor have begun confiscating the properties of the rich. And the so-called “indigenous” Indonesians, or pribumis, have attacked ethnic Chinese, who many see as beneficiaries of the old corrupt system.*

The rape is thus portrayed as part of ethnic and religious violence as well racism. Although the article states that the rapes were “premeditated and systematic”, it also insinuates that the incident is a religious issue rather than a political issue.

Similarly, discussing the rape, CNN reported: “Indonesians of Chinese descent are widely resented by the country’s Muslim majority for their wealth, their business acumen and their Buddhist and Christian religions” (*The Washington Post*, 10 October 1998). Once again, the article implies that the rape happened because of resentment against Chinese by the Muslim majority. However, while resentment between the Chinese and *pribumi* (indigenous) Moslems did exist before the mass rape happened, to put the blame on that kind of resentment for the mass rape is misleading. As mentioned previously, there were indications that the mass rape was organised. There are also similarities between the mass rape of ethnic Chinese with the mass rape which happened in Aceh, East Timor and West Papua. In addition, on 13-14 May, the security forces disappeared suddenly, while a few days before, there were still many police in the streets of Jakarta. The fire brigade also did not appear on the scene when several areas of Jakarta were in flame. This further demonstrates that there was an authority behind the mass rape which deliberately wanted to spread a certain “message”.

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In June 1998, I received several e-mails depicting the rapes. Some of the eyewitnesses told how they tried to contact the police and fire brigade during the incident, but to no avail. As stated on the emails, several eye-witnesses described how the rapists shouted “Alla Hu-Ak-bar” as well as racial comments against the ethnic Chinese. Such comments from the attackers thus incited people to separate themselves from the identity of the victims in order to protect themselves. Indeed, in such a chaos, it would have been very difficult for people to withdraw a conclusion who the target of the rioters was, without any “hint” from the rioters. The putting up of the sign thus does not simply signify the racism of the public but how the public had been made aware of the racist element of the riot. Indeed, as ARIEL HERYANTO argues, this mass rape is “political” (HERYANTO, 1999; 316-317). The resentment which had existed before had been politicised by the mass rape rather than the cause of it.

How about the victims?: The War on Terror is more important.

Years after the mass rape happened, several news articles represent violence as a kind of Muslim traditions in Indonesia. Focusing on how the *pribumi* (indigenous) Muslims attacked the Chinese descents, stories of *pribumi* Muslims who helped and sympathised with the Chinese descents during the May’98-riot, were often not mentioned or discussed. One of my respondents who is a Chinese Indonesian, told me that she and her family experienced “minor” attacks by a group of men. Several men aged between 14 and 20 started throwing stones at the window of their house and asked them to get out. My respondent told me that she recognised one of them as a local inhabitant. These men carried huge poles and threatened to ransack their house if they did not give them money. One of the young boys tried to touch her breasts as well, but nothing further happened. A couple of *pribumi* who owned a tiny shop in front, however, started screaming and

cursing at these men. Although the *pribumi* couple also looked scared because these men carried weapons, my respondent said, their cursing seemed to have influenced these group of men. They left and never came back. Several eyewitnesses also told how *pribumi* people tried to protect the people of ethnic Chinese by hiding them in their cars, houses or shops, risking their own safety.

However, this riot has been used to argue that Muslims are violent and that Islamic culture is to be despised. An article by SHARON LAPKIN entitled “The Epidemic of Ethnic Race”, for instance, describes how there is “a distinct race-based crime in which Islamic men are raping Western women for ethnic reasons” in Australia, Norway and Sweden (LAPKIN; 27 December 2005).

The article continues with how several Islamic leaders often blame the victims of rape for not covering their bodies properly. Furthermore, LAPKIN mentions the mass rape of Indonesians ethnic Chinese in 1998:

Unfortunately, Western women are not the only victims in this epidemic. In Indonesia, in 1998, human rights groups documented the testimony of over 100 Chinese women who were gang raped during the riots that preceded the fall of President Suharto. Many of them were told: "You must be raped because you are Chinese and non-Muslim" (Lapkin; 27 December 2005).

This article tries to convince the reader, that in relation to the violence of Muslim men, journalists, academics and politicians have been "ignoring it, rationalising it or ostracising those who dare to discuss it" (LAPKIN; 27 December 2005). As such, this article becomes a kind of a celebration of Muslim violence rather than scrutinising why such violence happened. LAPKIN, for instance, takes for granted that it was Muslims who raped the ethnic Chinese.

In this article, LAPKIN separates Muslims and the Western people, adding that the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia could also be included in the victims of Muslim men. Islam is thus represented by the rapists and the aggressors, the men. On the other hand, the West is represented by its women, the victims of rape. Included in this category is the Indonesian women of ethnic Chinese.

In addition, LAPKIN states how the politicians, the court and the press have been hesitant in acknowledging the reference to ethnicity, as she proposes one example:

So, when Judge Megan Latham declared that "There is no evidence before me of any racial element in the commission of these offences", everybody believed her. And the court, the politicians and most of the press, may as well have raped the girls again (Lapkin; 27 December 2005).

When she mentions the word "the girls" in the last sentence of the quote, the reader would automatically relate this to the Western girls. This article thus implies the victimisation of the Western girls by not only Muslim rapists, but also the court system which does not acknowledge any racial element of the case. LAPKIN also describes how the journalist PAUL SHEEHAN, who mentioned the Islamic elements of the gang rape in Sydney, has been called "racist and accused of stirring up anti-Muslim hatred". The article suggests how

the Western girls have been doubly victimised, by their gender as well as race. While this claim has often been made to women of postcolonial countries, LAPKIN seems to subvert such a claim by applying it to the Western women.

Similarly, another article by J. GRANT SWANK JR. states: "Islam is hell for women". Mentioning the mass rape in Indonesia in 1998, the article argues that Muslim males do not only rape Westerners and concludes: "the Muslim male definition for a rape victim is not nationality but religion. If one is not Muslim, one is rape bait" (SWANK, 20 March 2006). SWANK in this case goes further than LAPKIN in stating generalising the enemy of Islam. While LAPKIN merely states that the enemy of Islam is the West and in some case, ethnic Chinese; SWANK concludes that all non-Muslims could be potentially victimised by Muslims. SWANK transforms the war between "Islam and the West" into "Islam and the Rest", implying the oddity of Muslims and the normality of the West. It is the Islamic values which are attacked as it makes "the rest" potential victims of rape.

Indeed, ARMSTRONG states: "The Western media often give the impression that the embattled and occasionally violent form of religiosity known as 'fundamentalism' is a purely Islamic phenomenon" (ARMSTRONG, 2002; 11). In some ways, the victims themselves have been used in the attacking discourse against Muslim and Islam without scrutinising the backgrounds behind their crimes or even the fate of the victims.

Another example is an article "God v God in the New Global War" by PAUL SHEEHAN. He writes:

While the population of Western Europe is expected to be 3.5 per cent lower in 10 years, the Muslim population is on course to double to 30 million. In the engine room of Europe - Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Holland - the Muslim population has exploded from 6 million to 14 million in the past 25 years. By the end of the decade, it will be larger than the population of Australia (Sheehan, 12 March 2006).

Mentioning the decreasing population of

Western Europe while stating that Muslim population is due to be double, the article implies the "expansion" of Muslims in the world. At the same time, by comparing those two as though they are different entities, SHEEHAN separates the Western Europeans from the Muslims. Stating that it is in "the engine room" of Europe that the Muslim population has exploded, SHEEHAN seems to emphasise the possibility of Muslims expanding in "western" countries. In addition, writing that the population of Muslims will be larger than the population of Australia, Sheehan further emphasises the vastness of Muslim growth. His estimation of Muslim growth however is based merely on the presumptions of what is going to happen in the future without considering the wars by American, which has bombed millions of Muslims.

Such expansion is also related to the male activities rather than the female, as he mentions:

This global *intifada* is part of a hot war driven by medievalism and resentment. Al-Qaeda has evolved from a terrorist group into an ideology, a death cult. In Sudan, the Muslim north has waged a campaign of genocide and mass rape against the animist and Christian south for 20 years (SHEEHAN, 12 March 2006).

It is thus not the female procreation which is raised in this article and related to the vast growth of Muslim population but the considered masculine and more aggressive activities such as mass rape and murder. In PAUL SHEEHAN's discourse, LAPKIN's discussion of the rape of the Indonesians of ethnic Chinese can be thus classified into Muslims' efforts of expansion and dominating the world.

In this case, the mass rape in May 1998 has been used to fit in the discourse of war between Islam and the West, or Islam and the Rest in different ways. The three articles by LAPKIN, SWANK and SHEEHAN make both Islam and the victims of rape become the colonised other. In other words, they use the victims to make the reader be aware of the danger of Islam and thus induce negative sentiments against Islam.

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Soe Tjen Marching

[smarching@yahoo.com]

completed her PhD in Indonesian Women's Autobiographies and Diaries at Monash University in Australia. She is now teaching at the SOAS in London.

Soe Tjen is also a composer. One of her compositions has been released in the CD *Asia Piano Avantgarde*, played by the German pianist Steffen Schleiernmacher.

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