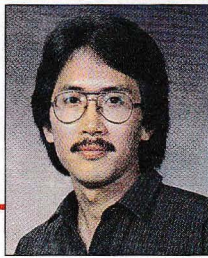


# THE 5TH COLUMN



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## A Class Act

By Ariel Heryanto

**T**he violent labour unrest that racked the north Sumatran city of Medan in mid-April may have been the biggest in New Order Indonesia. But to stress its size alone is to miss the larger point. For the incident may have signalled a major turning point in the history of contemporary Indonesia, namely the dynamics of class formation and struggle.

Thus far Indonesia's mass media has depicted the Medan incident largely within the familiar and still dominant framework, taking its lead from the military leadership. According to this line of thinking, what happened in Medan was that certain individual activists manipulated the poor and innocent masses to disrupt the peace using characteristically communist tactics. Another way of viewing the incident that occasionally finds its way in the dominant narrative is to see it as a recurrence of the old anti-Chinese riots with which Indonesia has had long experience. And dissidents for their part charge that all they wanted was better wages for their workers; the destruction was instigated, they say, by state agents provocateur.

Yet any serious reading of the event and assessment of its potential consequences for post-Suharto Indonesia needs to take into account at least three new phenomena that separate April's riots from those in the past. First, while Indonesian-Chinese business communities have always been economically powerful, in the past they have more often than not been politically and culturally deprived. For the first time in three decades, however, today's Chinese minority enjoys a relatively friendly atmosphere without any corresponding drop in its economic fortunes. Indeed, over the past four years or so, prominent Indonesian-Chinese have taken an increasingly high profile in public life, from parliament and talk shows to poetry reading and fashion.

The Indonesian-Chinese have managed to establish a mutually beneficial partnership not only with the exclusively indigenous state officials and military officers but with the newly rising group of "indigenous" tycoons and professionals. A multi-ethnic capitalist class is thus in active formation, economically and politically. Although this class remains far from any-

thing near hegemony over Indonesian life, its very formation has helped soften old racial antagonisms.

Certainly the Medan riots targeted ethnic Chinese. But to explain them exclusively in terms of race is to miss the fact that in sharp contrast to most anti-Chinese riots of the past, these targeted only businessmen and their property. Other ethnic Chinese appear to have been left alone.

The second relevant phenomenon here is that this consolidation of a capitalist class has inevitably helped spawn a counter-class. With the end of the Cold War the situation is more favourable to those struggling on behalf of human and labour rights. Back in the 1980s, labour strikes were few and scattered. Today it is becoming next to impossible to keep track of

groups have mushroomed. Poetry readings and art exhibitions have become platforms for raising consciousness about labour, not to mention the proliferation of related jokes, anecdotes and gossip. Economic disparity and industrial antagonism now find visible expression in class ideology.

**T**he last new factor here is that as these classes continue to form and the conflict between them increases, there exists no clear and effective institution for free and peaceful mediation or arbitration between them. This is largely a function of Indonesia's political history. Quite simply the state has been too dominant for too long, with President Suharto alone at the centre. Today, the only thing everyone feels certain about is that this is Suharto's last term.

The result of this lack of an effective mechanism is that most conflicts in Indonesia have been resolved either through token "consensus" or violence. Part of the problem, to be sure, is the judiciary, which enjoys almost no credibility. In the first few months of this year, for example, two legal cases have dominated the front pages of the major Indonesian newspapers. It is significant that the cases involve the murder of a female labour activist, Marsinah, and the student protests calling for more accountability from the president.

Unfortunately, Indonesia's debate remains trapped by the language of the past. Most analysts, for example, confine themselves to only two forces, both emanating from Jakarta: the inner circles around the president and sections of the military elite. Scant attention has been paid to the growth of heterogeneous and conflicting urban middle classes, the working classes, and the dynamic alliance among some of them *vis-à-vis* the state.

What all this suggests is that to view what happened in Medan primarily as a local variant of traditional anti-Chinese feeling, a revival of communism or a cheap trick by the military-cum-government to discredit and dissolve once and for all the potential threat of the urban poor requires either complete naivete or an equally strong inability to sense the changing dynamics now at work in Indonesian life. ■

**To explain the Medan riots exclusively in terms of race is to miss its sharp differences with anti-Chinese riots of the past**

them. Rarely does a week go by without a strike, many involving thousands or tens of thousands of workers. In 1992 a new labour union — the Indonesian Prosperity Trade Union — was established nationwide, seriously challenging the one and only officially recognised and government-sponsored union, the All Indonesian Workers Party.

To put it another way, while the newly rich have been consolidating their power beyond economic structures, the urban poor have done likewise. Facilitated by middle-class urban activists, labour theatre