

# For Indonesia's Ethnic Chinese, A New Era Revives Old Hatreds

JAKARTA, Indonesia—Since the fall of President Suharto last month, many Indonesians have begun to dream of a brighter future for themselves and their families.

But not Chairul, 44, an ethnic Chinese shopkeeper. Chairul's wife and two teenage daughters—his only children—burned to death in the widespread rioting that swept through Jakarta after four student activists at Trisakti University were killed by government troops. The May 12 violence led to Suharto's resignation after 32 years in power.

"If the students of Trisakti were the heroes of reform, my family was the victim of reform," Chairul said from the apartment above his shop that he now shares with other members of his extended family.

Chairul was in another part of town when the small restaurant his wife ran and the apartment above it were set ablaze by rioters targeting the businesses of the ethnic Chinese minority. Initially, only the bodies of his wife and one daughter were found by authorities. Chairul returned to the charred neighbourhood the next day and discovered, against hope, the remains of his other daughter. He buried them all in a common grave.

Chairul and others of Chinese descent are widely resented by Indonesia's Muslim majority for their wealth, their business acumen and their religion. They are the country's most powerful economic group, controlling about 70 percent of Indonesia's private wealth and much of its retail and banking sectors.

But the role ethnic Chinese will play in the future is uncertain. Many say the trauma they suffered after Suharto's fall makes



Students at Trisakti in West Jakarta read the list of students still missing from the rioting. Indonesian police shot and killed six students at the school, triggering widespread rioting in Jakarta which left more than 500 dead.

courtesy of David Loh/Reuters

it unlikely they will rush back to help the nation pull itself out of its current economic crisis. They sense little prospect that the country's prejudiced attitudes will change any time soon. In fact, many fear the resentment will only deepen as Indonesians seek to dismantle the corrupt Suharto patronage system which benefited a select group of Chinese enterprises.

"I think the Chinese conglomerates have to realise that the change, this reformation, is not going to be the same again as the past, so I think they better prepare themselves to make clean business, with no collusion, and rely on their professionalism, not based on privilege and collusion," said Fadhli Zon, a Muslim intellectual. "Otherwise, they cannot do any business here.

Muslim advisers to the new president, B.J. Habibie, have expressed support for an affirmative action program similar to one

that was implemented in Malaysia after anti-Chinese riots there in 1969. The system required corporations to hire a quota of indigenous Malaysians and reduced the presence of Chinese students at Malaysian universities, where they had held a disproportionate number of seats.

But the much smaller Chinese community here fears that such a program would go well beyond affirmative action, institutionalising Indonesia's racism and aggravating ethnic tensions.

Over the years, the Chinese minority had already been forced to give up their Chinese names, their language, their schools and their traditions. While favouring a few Chinese friends and supporters, Suharto aggressively pursued a policy of forging a common national identity among his country's 200 million people—a policy that included a ban on Chinese-language books and reading material and public

celebration of the Chinese New Year.

People like Chairul and his brother, Thomas, are typical of the Chinese minority. After five generations of intermarriage, they have little Chinese blood, but what ancestry remains is enough for them to be considered Chinese. Religion also sets them apart: while most Chinese are Christians or Buddhists, 90 percent of Indonesians are Muslim.

"I married an Indonesian, but our kids are called Chinese," said Thomas, 37, who is Muslim. "Even on their identity cards it says they are Chinese. All of our documents say 'Chinese.' I feel discriminated against by the government and society as well."

Even before last May's rioting, most ethnic Chinese had moved their savings out of the country, according to Sofjan Wanandi, chairman of the Gemala Group conglomerate, one of Indonesia's largest, and a spokesman for the Chinese community. Wanandi also estimated that 60,000 Chinese fled the country and are not expected back any time soon.

"A lot of the Indonesian Chinese will go someplace else and have something outside of Indonesia," Wanandi said. "That will impact a lot of things. The economic normalisation will be much slower and the people will suffer more and more."

The violence last month claimed at least 500 lives and left thousands of buildings damaged or destroyed. The Chinese community is estimated to have suffered material losses of at least \$3 billion.

President Habibie toured the charred remains of Chinatown a few days after the rioting, the first visit by an official to a Chinese riot-struck area in decades. He pledged support for the community but stopped short of condemning the violence or

announcing plans for how to help local businesses recover.

"I cannot and will not make any promises," he said. "I am not able to do so because once I have made a promise I will have to fulfill it. One thing that I promise you is that I will take care of you all."



Grave diggers work on burying 96 bodies at a cemetery on the outskirts of Jakarta. Five hundred victims died in Jakarta last May in several shopping center fires in the Indonesian capital.

courtesy of Bulit Marquez/AP

Chairul and his brother were unimpressed. "We want to see proof that the government really cares about the situation and wants to change the situation and help the families who suffered," Thomas said.

Indonesia's chief economic minister, Ginandjar Kartasmita, put the burden on the Chinese to lift themselves out of trouble, urging them to draw on the tight sense of community that had caused them to be ostracised.

"We have had this kind of experience in the past and usually Indonesians of Chinese descent can overcome this problem for themselves," he told reporters. "They have networks. What they need is assurance that they will be guaranteed safety and security, that they will be treated as Indonesians. That is something we can assure them."

Chinese suffering persecution in their own country centuries ago fled to Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia and established a niche for themselves as shrewd traders. But their status changed once the Dutch arrived here 400 years ago and estab-

lished a semi-apartheid state that segregated the population into three groups: Europeans, foreign Orientals and indigenous.

The Dutch did, however, employ a few Chinese as trading partners, establishing the system of patronage that survives today.

The Chinese were allowed to grow and trade in opium and sugar cane and to run pawnshops in exchange for tax payments.

Suharto had a decidedly mixed record in his relationship with Indonesia's ethnic Chinese. Economically, he relied upon them to rebuild the country after he ousted President Sukarno in 1965. But during the unrest following the coup, there were many Chinese who were suspected of being linked to the government of China and fell victim to an

anti-communist purge that included a ban on the use of written Chinese characters or the involvement of ethnic Chinese in the political life of the country.

Suharto's policies reflected the widespread suspicion among Indonesians about the loyalties of the Chinese, who are often accused of using Indonesia to get rich while investing their capital abroad. These suspicions were reinforced by the activities of the few wealthy Chinese close to the Suharto government, who were widely suspected of obtaining government favours in return for financial favours to the Suharto family.

"The Chinese also have to change their attitude," said Wanandi. "In the past, it was always that you had to have protection whether being close to the president, the ministers or the generals. They monopolised the whole thing because they had to pay. The Chinese have been used by the authorities as well."

Copyright 1998 The Washington Post Company