Behind Indonesia's anti-Chinese riots

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In recent weeks riots have erupted across Indonesia in response to a sharp rise in prices produced by the collapse of the national currency, the rupiah, and the country's deepening economic crisis.

Rioting has erupted in at least 12 towns and cities in central and eastern Java, Sulawesi and other Indonesian islands. The chief targets have been the shops and stores of ethnic Chinese, who are being blamed for the rampant inflation.

On February 9 hundreds of ethnic Chinese on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores sought shelter in police and military facilities after angry mobs burnt shops and businesses in the city of Ende. The Dahlia department store, the city's largest, was looted and burned down.

The international media has largely portrayed the eruption of anti-Chinese racism as the spontaneous hostility of the urban and rural poor to the dominant role of Chinese businessmen in the Indonesian economy. But the attacks on ethnic Chinese are being deliberately fueled by right-wing Muslim groups, sections of the press and senior government and military figures.

While cracking down on anti-government demonstrations, the Suharto regime is trying to whip up hostility against the ethnic Chinese. On the same day as the Flores riots, Suharto told a meeting of Muslim leaders that the economic crisis was the result of unidentified forces within the country—"gamblers and speculators"—that he promised to "neutralize." No one at the gathering had any doubt as to whom he was referring.

In some cases, as media reports have revealed, government and military forces have directly organized anti-Chinese demonstrations. The human rights organization TAPOL recently reported the existence of a document written by Special Forces Commander Prabowo, Suharto's son-in-law, calling for a campaign to blame both the International Monetary Fund and Chinese businessmen for the financial crisis.

A bomb explosion in a central Jakarta apartment on January 18 has been used to intensify the campaign not only against supporters of opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri, but also against Chinese business leaders. In what has all the hallmarks of a state-organized dirty tricks operation, the police and military have blamed the Peoples Democratic Party (PRD), the National Committee for Democratic Struggle (KNPD) and a prominent pro-Chinese businessman, Sofyan Wanandi, for the explosion.

Wanandi owns the Gemala business empire and has connections to the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Catholic think tank linked to Chinese business. In late January a group of Muslim students, calling for the prosecution of Wanandi, demonstrated outside the CSIS headquarters in Jakarta carrying banners reading "Conspiracy Shakes Indonesian Society."

Opposition figures are also creating the climate for anti-Chinese sentiment. While Megawati has spoken against the anti-Chinese attacks, her political ally, Amien Rais, head of Muhamadiyah, an Islamic organization with over 20 million members, is well known for demanding an end to the influence of Chinese Christians in government circles.

In the January 23 edition of the Muslim newspaper *Republika*, Rais described the economic and political crisis as the work of a conspiracy organized by "traitors of the country" to destabilize the nation. Even though he has called for the removal of Suharto, he has held private discussions with senior military figures including Prabowo and Armed Forces Chief General Faisal Tanjung.

Rais is a leading figure in the powerful Muslim Intellectual Association (ICMI), established in 1990 by Research and Technology Minister Yusuf Habibie with

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the backing of Suharto. The ICMI has its own bank, owns *Republika*, and is a focus for non-Chinese or *pribumi* businessmen resentful of the wealth and influence of rich ethnic Chinese families.

Anti-Chinese racism has a long history in the Indonesian ruling elite reaching back to the country's formal independence in 1949. In every period of sharp social tension, resentment against ethnic Chinese has been encouraged as a means of dividing the working class and deflecting attention from the government. Ethnic Chinese make up about 3 percent of the population. Few are very wealthy; most are small traders or workers.

Anti-Chinese sentiment has long been a key ingredient of Indonesian nationalism. Since its founding the Indonesian state has refused to grant automatic citizenship rights to ethnic Chinese, even though some have family roots stretching back centuries. In the late 1950s, amid growing social turmoil, Megawati's father, President Sukarno, further restricted citizenship for Chinese Indonesians, and banned so-called aliens from conducting business in rural areas. The ban forced 130,000 Chinese to emigrate in 1960.

During the bloody military coup in 1965-66, in which Suharto seized power, ethnic Chinese were the target of mass killings, along with members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and militant workers. Having seized power, the Suharto regime froze diplomatic ties with China and its more rabid elements attacked ethnic Chinese as an unpatriotic "fifth column." In Aceh in 1966 and West Kalimantan in late 1967, tens of thousands of Chinese were driven from their homes.

In 1967 Suharto's junta set out its "Basic Policy for the Solution of the Chinese Problem." All Chinese newspapers except one were closed down. Chinese characters were outlawed in public places. Chinese language schools were phased out, the last closing its doors in 1974. Ethnic Chinese were encouraged to take on Indonesian names and to confine expressions of religious belief to their homes.

The "basic policy" largely applies to this day. Chinese Indonesians are second-class citizens. They have to carry special identity cards and are prohibited from entering certain careers and government positions.

The ruling class throughout the region has responded to the Asian economic crisis by attempting to inflame nationalist and racist sentiments. In Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea governments and the press have attacked immigrant workers, millions of whom now face deportation.

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