

Religious rioting leaves 14 dead in Jakarta

Peter Symonds
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The death toll in religious rioting that broke out in Jakarta on Sunday has risen to 14. Rescue workers yesterday pulled another eight bodies from the burnt remains of a gambling hall used by migrants from the largely Christian Indonesian island of Ambon. Dozens of people were injured, at least three seriously.

Seven Christian churches were set alight and six others were damaged as Muslim gangs armed with knives, swords and sharpened bamboo stakes rampaged for hours through the central business district and clashed with police and soldiers. The rioters, numbering in the thousands, also damaged three banks, a hotel and two Christian schools as well as cars and motorcycles. Six men were brutally bashed and hacked to death.

The violence erupted after an early morning clash between Muslim and Christian gangs in a dispute over the gambling hall operating close to a mosque. Local residents accuse members of the Ambonese community of running gambling and protection rackets, with the backing of elements of the military, in the largely ethnic Chinese district.

But what began as a minor brawl rapidly escalated after rumours spread, including on the state-owned Televisi Republik Indonesia, that Christian gangs had attacked and damaged a mosque. By the early afternoon thousands had gathered in Gajah Mada, one of Jakarta's main streets. Muslim leaders told the crowds that they were 'defenders of Islam' and would not allow the desecration of 'the house of God'.

Indonesian President B.J. Habibie appealed for calm, warning that social unrest was damaging Indonesia's economy. On Monday, heavily armed troops and police patrolled the streets and guarded shopping centres and other buildings in the riot-torn Chinatown area just north of central Jakarta. Less than a kilometre away, tanks and thousands of troops formed a cordon around the presidential palace.

Two opposition figures--Megawati Sukarnoputri and Abdurrahman Wahid, head of the Islamic Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)--issued a joint statement on Monday calling for peace and blaming the violence on provocateurs. 'The violence was not spontaneous. There were certain groups of people who purposely led the mobs to destroy churches,' they said.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Tuesday reported: 'Large groups of young men carrying pointed bamboo sticks and traditional daggers and shouting 'Allahu Akbar' (God is great) were seen being trucked into the area from as far away as West Java, suggesting the violence was well organised.'

A number of Indonesian political commentators and church leaders have also warned that groups, including sections of the armed forces (ABRI), are seeking to exploit the tense situation in Jakarta. Precisely who instigated the riots and how it was done remain unclear but it is the government and the military who stand to benefit the most.

The riots occurred barely a week after soldiers shot and killed demonstrators who were part of huge student-organised protests demanding Habibie's resignation and an end to the army's political role. Habibie has ordered ABRI to crackdown on 'subversive groups' that he claims organised the widespread protests with the aim of overthrowing the government.

The eruption of racial rioting provides the military with a pretext to maintain large numbers of heavily armed troops and police in the capital and to suppress any protests in the name of preserving public order. Furthermore, the injection of divisive racial and religious sentiments into an already highly-charged political situation is calculated to divert attention from the Habibie regime's repression and cuts to living standards.

Anti-Chinese rioting was also an element of the social unrest that erupted in May just prior to the resignation

of former president Suharto. An official investigation concluded in early November that there was evidence that the military had been involved. 'Some of the masses were provoked into rioting by provocateurs, including members of the security apparatus,' Marzuki Darusman, head of the investigating team, stated.

Even Defence Minister and ABRI head General Wiranto acknowledged in August that soldiers had been involved in the May violence. A number of human rights groups go much further in blaming sections of the military for organising the anti-Chinese riots and targeting particular individuals and businesses.

Throughout the last year, there have been outbreaks of racially motivated violence, directed in particular against ethnic Chinese who are largely Christian or Buddhist. Right wing Muslim groups, Islamic newspapers and leaders have used the Chinese community as a convenient scapegoat for the economic collapse in Indonesia which has led to skyrocketing inflation, unemployment and poverty. But while these groups target prominent Chinese entrepreneurs and big businessmen, the majority of ethnic Chinese are small shopkeepers and storeowners, and workers.

Since attaining formal independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1948, the Indonesian capitalist class and its representatives have repeatedly resorted to anti-Chinese racism to divide working people against one another. Both Suharto and his predecessor Sukarno imposed a series of discriminatory laws reducing ethnic Chinese to second class citizens. Access to jobs in the army and state bureaucracy was restricted. The use of the Chinese language has been severely limited.

The latest rioting in Jakarta underscores the necessity for Indonesian workers, students and intellectuals to oppose all forms of racism and religious bigotry. The source of the social crisis sweeping Indonesia does not lie with ethnic Chinese but rather in the workings of the profit system. Regardless of race, religion or ethnic background, workers face the same class exploitation, which will only be overcome through a unified struggle against capitalism.

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