

Ambon communal violence flares up amid Indonesian presidential poll

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Communal violence in Ambon, the capital of Indonesia's Maluku province (previously known as Molucca), over the past month has sparked fears of a return to fighting between Christian and Muslim militias that claimed up to 6,000 lives before a peace deal in February 2002.

The violence erupted on April 25 following a provocative incident involving the separatist Front for Moluccan Sovereignty (FKM), about which many questions remain unanswered. Over the ensuing fortnight at least 38 people were killed—more than half as a result by gunfire from as yet unidentified snipers. As the unrest spread, hundreds of homes and other buildings were torched leaving as many as 10,000 people homeless.

Hundreds of additional police and troops have been sent to the city. In late May, however, two bombs exploded in Ambon, killing at least one person and injuring others. The discovery of further explosive devices has kept communal tensions in the city high. To date, no one has been charged over the attacks.

The violence took place in the lead up to the July 5 presidential election, raising further questions about possible political motives. Under conditions where no candidate has any solution to the social crisis confronting the masses, a number of them have a motive for exploiting, and possibly even instigating, the sectarian clashes, to poison the political atmosphere surrounding the campaign.

That includes incumbent President Megawati Sukarnoputri. Far from calming the volatile situation, she sought to blame the Christian-based FKM for the death and destruction. The FKM, however, is a tiny organisation with only several hundred active members among the province's population of about two million. It is a remnant of the movement for an independent Republic of the South Moluccas (RMS) promoted by the Dutch to undermine opposition to its colonial rule immediately after World War II.

On May 22, Megawati flew into Ambon for a two-hour visit under heavy security. She used her meeting with the province's religious leaders to declare that the RMS

movement had to be crushed. "All forms of separatism should be wiped out because they threaten the Unitary Republic of Indonesia," she said. Her comments amount to a rather crude attempt to appeal to nationalism and anti-Christian sentiment among the country's Muslim majority. The security forces have set out to arrest all FKM members.

Megawati's trip may also have been aimed at undermining the leading contender in the presidential poll, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a retired general and her former chief security minister. Currently she is trailing in opinion polls at 11 percent to more than 40 percent for Yudhoyono. Both Yudhoyono and his vice-presidential running mate, Jusuf Kalla were directly involved in drawing up the 2002 peace deal. If the agreement collapsed it would tend to undermine Yudhoyono and benefit Megawati and the other main contender retired general Wiranto, who is standing for Golkar—the party of the Suharto junta.

The political context has led to widespread media conjecture over who instigated the violence in the Malukus. Java University of Airlangga political analyst Daniel Sparringa told Al Jazeera: "It's clear that those in competition with SBY [Yudhoyono] will benefit because Maluku is a big success story for SBY and Kalla." While there is no hard evidence that either Wiranto or Megawati were directly involved, both have connections to the military, which is notorious for communal provocations.

The circumstances surrounding the outbreak of violence on April 25 have only added to the speculation. A report in mid-May by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), "Indonesia: Violence Erupts Again In Ambon", provides a detailed account of the events. It makes clear that the least likely explanation is the one provided by Megawati and her administration—that the FKM are to blame.

The trouble began when about 75 FKM supporters held a meeting at the house of exiled FKM leader Alex Manuputty, to commemorate the 1950 declaration of the Republic of the South Moluccas. As the ICG report comments, these banned annual memorials "are as predictable as the rain, and well within the capacity of local security forces to handle".

The police allowed the ceremony to proceed for an hour, then moved in. They marched the FKM members, with their RMS flags flying, three kilometres through the city, past hostile Muslim neighbourhoods, to the police station. FKM leader Moses Tuanakotta and 20 others were detained.

The rest of the group was told to leave, returning along the same route without a police presence. They met a group of Muslim youth with an Indonesian flag and a brawl ensued. At that point, however, snipers opened fire, killing six people and wounding two, all of whom were Muslim opponents of the FKM. Since then others—both Muslim and Christian—have been killed in a similar fashion.

None of the snipers have been identified or caught. Police have told the media that they have shot several snipers but their bodies were carried away. The marksmen have shown signs of professional training, being able to repeatedly deliver accurate fatal shots at a distance and to avoid the substantial police and military presence in the city.

The FKM, as the government has been forced to acknowledge, has no history of using such methods and has no links to the Indonesian military. Government spokesmen have attempted to explain the discrepancy by claiming the FKM might have received assistance from outside the country. No evidence has been provided to support the allegation, which given the size of the organisation, is improbable. Its exile organisation is based in the Netherlands.

The military, by contrast, does have both the expertise and the record. In the dying days of the Suharto dictatorship, for instance, army snipers opened fire on students at Trisakti University in Jakarta on 12 May 1998. Four students were killed and a score wounded in a calculated act by a desperate regime aimed at intimidating mounting anti-Suharto protests.

Several leading figures in Ambon have pointed out that the recent killings appear to be deliberately aimed at fomenting communal tensions. Nasir Rahawarin, secretary of the Muslim Clerics Council of Indonesia told Al Jazeera that the snipers were targeting both Muslims and Christians. “If all the snipers are arrested,” he said, “then the normal community will not be involved in the conflict anymore.”

In comments to the *Jakarta Post* in early May, armed forces chief General Endriartono Sutarto denied any military involvement in the April 25 incidents and threatened to sue those making accusations against the military. But the military top brass is clearly sensitive about the issue. Sutarto felt the need to declare to the newspaper that the armed forces had “no political agenda” in Maluku in connection with the presidential election.

Wiranto, who is facing charges in East Timor over his role in organising militia attacks on pro-independence supporters in 1999, has issued a similar denial. When the bishop of

Ambon accused an unnamed candidate of using the violence to increase his popularity, Wiranto insisted that he was not involved, saying no one with a conscience would seek to destroy the Ambon peace.

The military, however, was definitely involved in the violence that spiralled out of control in Ambon and the Maluku between 1999 and 2002. Several of the Islamic fundamentalist militia that dispatched fighters to the Maluku had close connections to sections of the military, which has been accused of helping to arm and train them. At the very least, the armed forces turned a blind eye and allowed the militia fighters to enter the province.

At the time, the military hierarchy exploited the communal violence in the Maluku, and later the Sulawesi, to put pressure on President Abdurrahman Wahid. The armed forces were increasingly critical of Wahid’s moves to negotiate with separatist rebels in Papua and Aceh, and sided with Megawati in the protracted process that led to his impeachment in July 2001.

While the perpetrators of the sudden flare-up of violence in Ambon are yet to be uncovered, it certainly cannot be ruled out that the military, or a section of it, has instigated it for its own political purposes. There may be a number of local motives, including the military’s extensive economic interests or its known rivalry with the police in the Maluku. But coming in the midst of a presidential election campaign, it may also be connected with one or other of the candidates.



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