

# From Official to Grassroots Racism: Transformation of Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia

TAUFIQ TANASALDY 

## Abstract

Indonesia has a long history of racism towards its Chinese population dating back to colonial times. Its population has suffered through discriminatory policies and a series of racist riots, some sponsored by the state. This article examines the transformation of racism towards the Indonesian Chinese by summarising the past, before investigating recent developments. While the Chinese have enjoyed unprecedented political freedom since the fall of the racist New Order regime, they have been witnessing worrying developments, including: continuing racist attitudes of some officials and political elites; a proliferation of Shariah-inspired bylaws in the regions; and lastly, unresolved grassroots racism. Grassroots racism has become more difficult to tackle as it has intertwined with religious issues, making being anti-Chinese justifiable. This article suggests that a counter-narrative from Islamic moderate civil organisations would be needed to redress the religious sentiment in native Chinese relations.

**Keywords:** racism, discrimination, Indonesian Chinese, political Islam, conservative Islam, anti-racism

## Introduction

INDONESIA HAS a long history of racism towards the Chinese dating back to colonial times. The Chinese community experienced widespread and institutionalised racism from the 1960s to the end of the 1990s before seeing dramatic policy changes that reversed official discriminatory policies against them. The central arguments of this article are that while positive changes have been clearly evident, the Chinese still face racism in their daily lives. Grassroots racism has become a major concern and more difficult to solve as it has increasingly taken a religious path.

Racism is an evolving concept and, as alluded to in the introduction of this special issue, contextual. This article refers to racism as any discriminatory treatment against individuals owing to their belonging to certain ethnic or descent groups, committed by the state, institutions or individuals, which could take place in a formal or informal situation. Embedded sectarian values in regulations, while not intended to exclude, could disadvantage individuals who have a different set of values

and, therefore, are also considered discriminatory and/or racist. Unless specified, the Chinese in this article refer to the Indonesian Chinese.

## The background

Racism towards the Chinese in Indonesia is not a recent phenomenon. Various policies and regulations from the colonial era to after Indonesia gained independence have provided ample evidence.<sup>1</sup> One most cited root of racism against the Chinese is the racial groupings introduced during the latter part of the Dutch colonial government. The communities in the Netherlands East Indies (which later became Indonesia) were placed into three groupings: the European, the Far East, and the indigenous. While it was initially introduced

<sup>1</sup>T. Lindsey, 'Reconstituting the ethnic Chinese in post-Soeharto Indonesia: law, racial discrimination and reform', in T. Lindsey and H. Pausacker, eds., *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*, Singapore, ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, 2005, pp. 41–76.

for administrative purposes, the grouping system was discriminatory as often each group accessed different social and educational facilities and was subjected to different legal systems. The Chinese, particularly those in Java, were restricted in where they could settle and travel—rules which were enforceable until the 1910s. There were two major incidents targeting the Chinese during this period: the Batavian Massacre by the Dutch in 1740, which claimed more than 10,000 Chinese lives, and a series of anti-Chinese riots in Java at the turn of the twentieth century coordinated by the Islamic trading network.<sup>2</sup>

During the formative years of the republic under President Soekarno (1945–1966), the Chinese experienced various forms of discrimination and racism. They were targeted by revolutionaries and vigilantes in several parts of Indonesia at the start and end of the Second World War, when authority and rule of law were less certain. Once order was restored, the postcolonial government started tightening up regulations, significantly affecting the Chinese in the economy, as well as in education, publication and citizenship. To curb Chinese domination in the economy, the government restricted import licences to indigenous Indonesians and introduced regulations to indigenise rice mills and harbour facilities. The most damaging regulation from this era was Government Regulation Number 10, known as PP10, which banned foreign citizens (intended primarily for the Chinese who did not possess Indonesian citizenship) from retailing businesses in areas below the level of the district capital. Often no differentiation was made in implementing PP10 for the Indonesian Chinese (hereafter Chinese) who were Indonesian citizens, owing to the absence of citizenship papers, as well as a lack of understanding among officials at the regional level. When the law came into effect in January 1960, significant numbers of Chinese moved to the bigger cities selling or leaving behind their property and business, with many returning to China. The excess of this and other discriminatory regulations had drawn criticism—not only from those associated with Chinese

organisations, but also some indigenous politicians, as well as from China.<sup>3</sup> Nearing the end of his power, Soekarno witnessed a serious anti-Chinese riot in West Java in May 1963.

The highly racist regime of the New Order (1966–1998) succeeded the Soekarno era. As soon as it came to power, it issued a policy to change the term *Tionghoa* into the derogatory *Cina* to refer to the Chinese. The regime believed the term *Tionghoa*, which implied cultural superiority of the Chinese, had a negative psychological impact on the indigenous Indonesian. For the Indonesian Chinese, *Tionghoa*, which had been widely used since the 1920s, is a preferred term to *Cina* because the latter has often been used to insult or denigrate the Chinese.

A series of discriminatory policies ensued. New Order banned the use of Chinese characters and language, encouraged active assimilation of the Chinese and pushed them to change their typical Chinese names into Indonesian-sounding names. It forbade cultural and religious Chinese celebrations in public and all Chinese schools were shut down and their students transferred to public schools or out of education. The entire organisational structure of *Baperki*, the largest and most influential Chinese organisation at that time, was disbanded and many of its leaders were arrested. Almost all Chinese social and cultural associations disappeared. Those surviving had to undergo name changes and repurposing. All Chinese media ceased their publication—except one that was owned by the military. Access to enter the civil service, public universities, the military and politics were highly restricted. There were also efforts to curb the Chinese domination of the country's economy, but they were less successful, because Chinese economic networks were strong and the regime was less eager to disrupt the beneficial business environment. The regime needed and enjoyed the collaboration and financial backing of the Chinese.

The New Order did not just restrict what the Chinese could do or excel at; it also discriminated against them in regulations, practices

<sup>2</sup>For details of conflicts and incidents involving the Chinese from the Dutch until after the fall of the New Order, see B. Setiono, *Tionghoa dalam Pusaran Politik*, Jakarta, TransMedia Pustaka, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>For a list and details of such policies during the Soekarno era, see L. Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority and China: A Study of Perceptions and Policies*, Singapore, Marshall Cavendish International, 2005, pp. 118–125.

and discursively. One type of discrimination that stood out was the citizenship paper known as SBKRI (*Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia*), which in effect was only required of the Chinese. This important document was difficult and expensive to obtain, but was required for many civic, social and financial purposes, including school admission, securing a loan, and so on. There have been several cases of famous Chinese badminton players who had played for Indonesia and won internationally, but who had difficulties obtaining citizenship papers. A few of them only got the document after raising the issues themselves with the president.<sup>4</sup> In short, while demanding that the Chinese assimilate, the regime continued to emphasise their ‘foreignness’ by its policies. Other significant foreign groups, such as the Arabs, have never encountered such an issue.

Those discriminatory policies were accepted with almost no opposition because they were seen as necessary steps to maintain national integrity and security. The media, NGOs and political parties, which commonly acted as agents to limit government excess, offered almost no dissenting voices, because that could amount to an act which could be met with persecution. Worse still, some media supported ‘othering’ the Chinese. One common practice by the media was to reveal the Chinese names of criminals, despite those individuals—following directions from the government—having officially changed their names to Indonesian-sounding names. This hostile environment had fostered racism at the grassroots level and had never been properly addressed, though under the watchful eye of the authoritarian regime, serious anti-Chinese riots were rare. The most severe and widespread anti-Chinese riots took place in mid-May 1998 when the regime was no longer able to control the growing mass discontent toward the government. Not only was there a high cost in terms of human casualties (the majority were the looters from the surrounding areas who were trapped in the burning shopping complexes) and properties destroyed, but the riots also saw numerous rape cases of Chinese women.

The resignation of President Soeharto on 21 May 1998 marked the end of the New Order era and the start of dismantling the racist policies against the Chinese. His immediate successor, President Habibie, issued two important regulations as first steps to reverse the policies. The first was to ban the use of the discriminatory terms *pribumi* (indigenous Indonesians) and *non-pribumi* (that is, Chinese) in all government policies and practices. All existing discriminatory regulations were required to be reassessed and adjusted to be non-discriminatory. The second was to end the official requirements of the unpopular citizenship paper. He also initiated reform policies that provided the Chinese with opportunities to take active political roles. Subsequent governments have gone further. President Abdurrahman Wahid (popularly known as Gus Dur) cancelled the 1967 regulation that restricted Chinese culture and religious celebration in public. Symbolically important during President Megawati’s government was the removal of a requirement of an Indonesian president to be a native Indonesian. With the removal of such a requirement in the country’s constitution, the Chinese can technically run for the presidential office. The next president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, officially reinstated Confucianism as one of the six official religions.

A fairer political process that followed democratisation after the fall of the New Order has seen the Chinese being appointed or elected to high offices and include ministers, governors, district heads and members of both national and regional parliaments.<sup>5</sup> However, while the Chinese have experienced progressive changes in all aspects of life and regained the opportunities previously not available to them, they continue to encounter racism and discrimination.

## No more official discrimination?

In the present day, all known racist policies are no longer in effect, even if not officially lifted, and discriminatory practices have been outlawed.

<sup>4</sup>See T. Tanasaldy, ‘Orientation and citizenship status of the Indonesian Chinese and political implications’, in S. Kukreja, ed., *State, Society, and Minorities in South and Southeast Asia*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 97–99.

<sup>5</sup>On their growing political role, see C. Setijadi, ‘Anti-Chinese sentiment and the “return” of the *pribumi* discourse’, in G. Fealy and R. Ricci, eds., *Contentious Belonging: The Place of Minorities in Indonesia*, Singapore, ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019, pp. 194–213.

This has not prevented officials and the political elite from voicing racist opinions. The proscribed term *pribumi* is still being used, particularly when alluding to the low economic attainment of the indigenous population or lamenting Chinese domination in the country's economy. Jusuf Kalla, a prominent businessman, politician and religious figure, is an avid user of it, including while still in the office of vice president. Minister Susi Pudjiastuti had used the term when formulating her ministerial strategic planning. A more recent controversy was in the inauguration speech of Jakarta's governor, Anies Baswedan, who proclaimed that it was the time for the *pribumi* to be the hosts in their land, and that they had worked hard to get rid of colonisation. His speech was perceived by many as being racist against the Indonesian Chinese and as an attack on his predecessor, the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, Ahok.

Political elites outside the executive circles who harboured anti-Chinese sentiments have more options. Members of parliaments use the term *pribumi* more freely. Others often use narrative and context to convey the same anti-Chinese sentiment, for example, by raising fears of the rise of China and its influence, and the resurgence of communism in Indonesia. The Chinese have been negatively associated with the two elements above (that is, China and communism) owing to their alleged involvement in the failed 1965 coup. Whenever there are campaigns on these two issues, particularly if they are from Islamists, the Indonesian Chinese have often been implicated or targeted. Since the demonstrators prefer to call China as *Cina* instead of *Tiongkok*, which has been the official name for China, they can attack China, Chinese and Indonesian Chinese in one stroke 'by being *Cina*'. Slogans such as 'infidel Chink', 'get rid of the Chink', or 'crush the Chink' can often be heard or read during the demonstrations.

Another racial slur that has gained popularity among the anti-Chinese political circle is *aseng*—a quite common nickname for a male Chinese. When it was first introduced in mid-2014, it referred to 'nine dragons'—nine Indonesian Chinese tycoons who are believed to have control of the government and policy making in Indonesia and supported Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi), one of the presidential candidates at that time. The term has also been used to target the business

interests and influence of China in Indonesia, but looking at the accompanying narrative, it has mainly been used to target the Indonesian Chinese. These anti-Chinese circles often portray the *aseng* as an economic threat, a trojan horse for the resurgence of communism in the country, henchmen of China, who have no loyalty to Indonesia and will take over the country if nothing is done to prevent it.

In relation to discriminatory regulations, some are still present at the regional level. The land ownership regulation in Yogyakarta issued in 1975 that bans Chinese ownership is still in place, despite several legal challenges, including at the supreme court. Also, there have been occasional incidents at the lower end of the bureaucracy, whereby policies were issued that were considered racist or discriminatory. However, they are usually quickly rectified once exposed. One example is a case of a discriminatory circular letter issued by the neighbourhood agency in Surabaya in January 2020. In the letter, only the non-*pribumi* were singled out to pay financial contributions for various activities, while such obligations were not requested from the *pribumi*. The letter was later recalled and the issuer made to apologise publicly. Above all, the systematic proliferation of Shariah-inspired bylaws in the region is very concerning for the Chinese.

These bylaws have been introduced to satisfy and guard the needs of Muslims. They mainly regulate social and moral issues, the religious obligation of the Muslims (such as knowing how to read the Holy Quran), and Islamic/religious symbolism (such as clothing requirements).<sup>6</sup> Of all regions, only Aceh has in place a more comprehensive Shariah law—which includes the punitive aspect of it, and is applicable to non-Muslims. The offenders of non-Muslim backgrounds in Aceh could be prosecuted if the alleged crime is not regulated under Indonesia's criminal code, for example, in the case of adultery.

Other regions have also produced many similar bylaws, but rules specific to Islam, such as wearing Islamic clothing, do not apply to

<sup>6</sup>A. Salim, 'Muslim politics in Indonesia's democratisations: the religious majority and the rights of minorities in the post-new order era', in R. H. McLeod and A. MacLntyre, eds., *Indonesia, Democracy, and the Promise of Good Governance*, Singapore, ISEAS, 2007, pp. 115–137.



non-Muslims. However, social pressure may still make the non-Muslims conform to the requirements in order to fit in. For example, in Padang (West Sumatra), the wearing of *jilbab* (headscarf for female Muslims) regulation had been in place in the school system for at least fifteen years. While it was intended for the Muslim students, in practice the non-Muslims also wore the headscarf. There were no reports of complaints for all those years until in early 2021, Jeni Cahyani Hia, a Chinese student, refused to wear it and went public to seek justice after being subjected to pressure from the school. When this issue surfaced, the remaining forty-five non-Muslims, who had been wearing the headscarf in the school, began to attend school without the headscarf when the central government threatened to impose sanctions against the school and the regional government if no adjustments were made to the policy. Besides this case, the central government on a few occasions has threatened to axe other discriminatory bylaws. Unfortunately, it is no longer a possibility after the constitutional court ruled in 2017 that the central government does not have such a power.

Those bylaws were not necessarily anti-Chinese when they were introduced, but since the majority of the Chinese are non-Muslim, they were affected. Based on the 2010 Indonesian population census, only fewer than 5 per cent of the Chinese are Muslim.<sup>7</sup> Shariah bylaws are intended to control the behaviour of Muslims but, on the one hand, they highlight the 'otherness' of the Chinese; on the other hand, they are accompanied by social pressures to conform to Muslim requirements. Either way, the Chinese are treated as second class citizens and so these bylaws can be considered to be a form of regulatory racism.

## Grassroot racism in religious framing

While Indonesian Chinese have regained full citizenship rights and official discrimination

against them—apart from a very few cases mentioned above—has long gone, past practices have left behind ramifications. The above has given some examples of persistent racist views of members of political elites and bureaucracy. Another is grassroots racism, which has continued to be problematic and could have a deadly consequence as it can turn otherwise trivial events into massive anti-Chinese riots—as seen throughout Indonesian history. The general public, following the racist campaigns of the New Order, has stigmatised the Chinese as disloyal owing to their siding with the Dutch during the colonial period and their association with China in the 1950s and 1960s. The leftist orientation of *Baperki* resulted in all Chinese suspected of being communist sympathisers or being communist themselves—a serious political sin during the New Order.

Adding to the stigmas are stereotypes that the Chinese are exclusive (that is, they refuse to assimilate and mingle with the indigenous) and economic brutes without any social sense. The public discontent has been the disproportionate economic wealth of the Chinese (a mere 1.2 per cent of the total Indonesian population—but there are areas with much higher concentration, such as in Singkawang of West Kalimantan which is close to 37 per cent of the municipal population) in comparison with the *pribumi*. The yearly lists of the richest individuals in Indonesia, which has always been dominated by the Chinese, is often used to confirm their conviction.

To make things worse, the *pribumi* is witnessing a growing presence of the Chinese beyond the economic realm. Chinese faces and influence are becoming common in the entertainment industry, social-cultural sectors, education and politics and the Chinese control several major television networks. Chinese culture, language, press and broadcasting are no longer restricted. Confucianism has been recognised as an official religion and the Chinese Lunar New Year has been made a statutory holiday. The reforms also allow them to assume some top political positions and technically, the country's president. This increased influence and proliferation of roles has heightened existing fear and discontent of Chinese dominance of some circles and communities—particularly those with connections to the conservative segment within Islam and the supporters of political Islam. The

<sup>7</sup>Data on the religions of the Chinese in this article is based on the Indonesian population census 2010, taken from A. Ananta, E. N. Arifin, M.S. Hasbullah, N. B. Handayani and A. Pramono, *Demography of Indonesia's Ethnicity*, Singapore, ISEAS, p. 273.

following examines these two groups and discusses their links with anti-Chinese sentiment at the grassroots level.

In its more than three decades in power, the New Order managed to shape the growth of Islam away from conservatism. At its height, the state monitored the content of religious sermons and their network, and co-opted discourses and actions of the Muslim scholars and intellectuals. Dissenters' views, including those who favoured an Islamic state, were sidelined if not punished. The regime managed to subdue Islamic parties which had been quite influential: they were induced to amalgamate into one party and then pressured to accept the state ideology *Pancasila* as the party's platform instead of Islam, severely weakening its claim as an Islamic party. In its later years, New Order relaxed its grip on Islam in its attempt to get support from the Muslim community, but it managed to keep the influence of conservatism and political Islam under control.

Conservatism in Islam can be restrictive and rigid in its interpretation of religious teaching. While it is difficult to demarcate clearly, those who preach *kaffah* Islam (that is, following Islam in full without compromise and basing all decisions on the Quran and Hadiths).<sup>8</sup> This approach is often associated with *Salafism* and is usually less tolerant towards the views of others, even of those belonging to other Islamic schools of thought. In its relation to the outside world, it rejects pluralism and diversity and tends to look at those outside the group and Islam as enemies.<sup>9</sup> Signs of growing conservatism among Muslims in Indonesia can be found in the increasing numbers of incidents of religious intolerance which are updated regularly on the Human Rights Watch website. Their target is anything that is perceived as harming or tainting Islam. Such elements could be from the government or its officials, other religions, or even within Islam. Followers of *Ahmadiyyah*

and *Syiah*, both sects within Islam which once co-existed peacefully, have been 'othered' by the dominant Sunni Muslims. The most recent incident was the mob attack on the *Ahmadiyyah* mosque in Sintang (West Kalimantan) which was followed by the local government forcefully converting the mosque into a residential building in February 2022.

The percentage of Protestants and Catholics in Indonesia is small, hovering at around 9–11 per cent. However, they have been seen as a threat since they (Protestants to be specific) are active in proselytising their religion. The majority of incidents related to obstruction and the seizing of houses of worship are Christian churches. The move of the conservative Muslims to harass Christian churches has been supported by the regulation that requires multiple permits to start constructing a house of worship. This is a highly subjective process that is dependent on the attitude of the surrounding community, as well as those manning the religious bodies, many of whom are discriminatory towards minority religions. Not only does it require recommendation and approval from at least three other government/religious agencies, it also needs written approval from sixty local households of a different faith, as well as the support of at least ninety local members from the religion that requires the house of worship. This is often an insurmountable challenge which results in house of worships being built without proper permits. This anti-Christianity sentiment affects the Chinese as about 43 per cent of them profess Christianity.

Other religions outside Christianity have experienced the same, although less prominently. Many Chinese temples have undergone expansion and restoration following the changes after the fall of the New Order, because during the New Order the local governments had been instructed not to give permits for restoration, extension or building of new Chinese temples. Two such projects had become problematic: the newly installed Buddha statue in Tanjung Balai (North Sumatera) was forced to be relocated in 2016 as its original location at the top of the building was deemed insulting, because Islam was the majority religion in the area. Similarly, the 30 metre-tall statue of the Chinese War God in the complex of a Chinese temple in Tuban (East Java), claimed to be the tallest in

<sup>8</sup>Based on Greg Fealy's observation on Islamic radicalism in Indonesia, see G. Fealy, 'Islamic radicalism in Indonesia: the faltering revival?', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, ISEAS—Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2004, pp. 104–21.

<sup>9</sup>On recent *Salafi* movements in Indonesia, see M. Woodward, 'Resisting Salafism and the Arabisation of Indonesian Islam: a contemporary Indonesian didactic tale by Komaruddin Hidayat', *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2017, pp. 237–258.

Southeast Asia, was deemed to be a problem and was temporarily covered by a cloth in 2017. The statue has since collapsed—allegedly owing to the poor quality of construction. About 52 per cent of Chinese profess Buddhism and Confucianism (this is a combined figure, as many Chinese practice elements of both religions simultaneously).

These trends have stronger religious concerns, however. Given the grassroots sentiment, anti-Chinese messages can be easily framed as religious (that is, Islamic) concerns, as evidenced in the case of Meiliana of Tanjung Balai in 2016. Meiliana, a Chinese Buddhist woman, purportedly requested her friend to ask the nearby mosque to lower the volume as it hurt her ears. This request resulted in social unrest in the region, with more than a dozen buildings, mostly Chinese temples, being damaged. Meiliana was sentenced to eighteen months in jail for blasphemy, while those involved in vandalism received much lighter sentences, mostly jail terms of under two months.

In tandem with the growth of conservatism is the rising support for political Islam. Political Islam sees religion also as a political tool and aims to create an Islamic state. This movement can trace its origin at least to the newly independent Indonesia. During its formative years, Indonesia experienced a serious effort to Islamise the state ideology, *Pancasila*. The main force behind it wanted to insert into *Pancasila* 'an obligation for Muslims to abide by Sharia law' (known as Jakarta Charter phrases). There were also several armed resistances in the 1950s and 1960s that aimed to establish an Islamic Indonesia. Both movements failed, but their aspirations continued to simmer before making an influential comeback after the fall of the New Order.

At the national level, the supporters of political Islam and its goals mainly come from conservative organisations, some officials of the Indonesian Ulema Council and members of Islamic political parties. Before the recent government crackdown on radicalism, some of these organisations and their leaders had openly expressed their goal to establish an Islamic caliphate and to implement Shariah law. Some instructed their followers to start implementing the plan by voting for legislature candidates who would support such a strategy; others tried to incite a more radical

change of government through a revolution, while others wanted to achieve it through the violence of terrorism.

The conservative elements and supporters of political Islam, in and out of parliament, have been working closely together to oppose policies and individuals who might harm their interests. They see the current government as anti-Islam and have been opposing it for almost a decade. It is clear that the current national government does not support religious conservatism or the aim of political Islam to establish an Islamic state, but has been slow to reduce their influence. The government has trodden carefully on this as it understands the sensitivity of religious issues and does not want to create problems with the majority Muslim community.

Political-religious campaigns against the government often carry anti-Chinese sentiment as they are seen as connected enemies. Considering the underlying anxiety among the indigenous, and the growing influence of religion among the population, any religious incidents involving Chinese can spark anti-Chinese riots. I mentioned above the localised case of Meiliana; below I show a nationwide political mobilisation in the election of Jakarta's governor in 2017 that brought down Governor Ahok.

As mentioned above, the Chinese had gained unprecedented political roles such as being elected as governors, mayors or district heads, but they had to face anti-Chinese campaigns during the elections, which could be relentless in ethnically/religiously divided regions such as West Kalimantan and parts of Sumatra. It was under this intensity that Ahok (official name, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) was elected the district head of Belitung Timur (Sumatera) in 2005, and then deputy governor of Jakarta (partnering with Jokowi as the governor) in 2012. When Jokowi won the presidential election in 2014, Ahok assumed the governorship. The possibility of the country's capital under Chinese leadership was well understood during the gubernatorial election in 2012, hence the election campaigns were highly racist. This was seen again when Ahok was preparing to win a second term in 2017.

While he was hugely popular and known for being very efficient and free of corruption, Ahok was hated among the conservative Muslims and those supporting political Islam, because some of his decisions were deemed

against or not accommodating the needs of Islam. For example, he refused to replace a female Christian regional head, despite strong opposition from the Islamic community. Another brush with this group was when he questioned some old religious practices, such as managing the way animals were slaughtered during the *Eid Al-Adha* celebration. His blunt approach to other religious issues made him appear insensitive to the needs of Islam. Unlike other leaders who try to avoid confronting the radical religious organisations, he took on the risk of challenging them, including actively seeking to prosecute members of a religious vigilante group.

Ahok appeared to be managing those controversial issues extremely well as his opponent was unable to dent his popularity, so approaching the gubernatorial election in 2017, another victory was almost certain. Unfortunately, a slip of the tongue when he cited a Quranic verse to support his conviction on election choices, turned the tide. His opponent seized the opportunity and accused him of blasphemy against Islam and mobilised wave after wave of massive demonstrations against him. At the peak, millions of people from all over Indonesia came to Jakarta demanding his arrest. Demonstrations also took place in many regions. The government caved in to the pressure, convicted Ahok, who was found guilty and jailed for two years. Ahok also lost the election to Anies Baswedan, the candidate supported by the Islamists. While it was a big win for conservative Islam, they had awakened the government to the threat they posed and, with the support of moderate religious organisations, the government has taken bolder steps. In July 2017, a few months after the jailing of Ahok, a radical Islamic organisation, HTI (*Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia*), was banned. Another organisation, FPI (*Forum Pembela Islam*—Islamic Defenders Front) met with the same fate in December 2020. The government also managed to prosecute some leaders of these groups and make arrests of suspected radical (terrorist) cells.

This strategy has worked to some extent to halt the advance of religious radicalism related directly to terrorism and the efforts of Islamists to overthrow the government. However, it has been ineffective in containing the growing anti-pluralist views within the Muslim community, since they are not necessarily unlawful.

Furthermore, the growing religious intolerance in the community is usually supported by the local religious leaders, sometimes with tacit approval from the officials and bureaucracy. Similarly, the government has been unable to dampen the growing religious influences in grassroots racism.

## Anti-racism movements

The brutal May 1998 anti-Chinese riots was a turning point for the Chinese. Traumatized by repeated persecutions and without political protections from the existing civil and political structure, as well as encouraged by the opportunities after the fall of the New Order, some Chinese have taken bold moves to safeguard their citizenship rights. Within months of the riots, three Chinese political parties were established, one of which managed to have a Chinese man elected as the district head—the first in modern Indonesian history. Almost at the same time, they formed several civil rights organisations to fight the discrimination, the two main ones being Solidarity for the Nation (*Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa*) and Indonesian Anti-Discrimination (*Gerakan Perjuangan Anti-Diskriminasi Indonesia*, better known as *Gandi*). Together with other similar organisations and supported by the new democratic government, they have succeeded in dismantling systemic racism. However, grassroots racism continues to be unresolved, as discussed above.

Following the rise of religious conservatism in the community, grassroots racism against the Chinese has increasingly been framed in a religious narrative, justifying racist sentiments. Finding solutions are trickier, as religious messages are usually not negotiable. One way to counter this is via religious narratives that preach tolerance and endorse pluralism. In this context, Indonesia has been lucky in having two large and influential moderate Islamic organisations: *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah*, which consistently preach moderate Islam to ensure a religious, but pluralistic, Indonesia.

Between these two organisations, NU has stronger relations with the Chinese owing to an affinity with its former chairman, Gus Dur, who was also Indonesia's fourth president. It was under him that the Chinese could openly celebrate their culture for the first time



after being repressed for more than thirty years. Gus Dur even claimed to have Chinese lineage in his efforts to further strengthen the claims of the Chinese as Indonesians. Thanks to him, NU and its members have been prominent in anti-discrimination movements, including those affecting the Chinese. Even when the majority of Islamic organisations were either silent or supportive of racist incidents against the Chinese, NU's voice of tolerance could be heard. Two prominent civil rights organisations associated with NU are *Jaringan Gusdurian* (Network of Followers of Gus Dur) and *Jaringan Islam Anti Diskriminasi* (Anti-Discrimination Muslim Network). The latter was initially set up in the mid-2000s to address anti-Chinese racism within the East Java bureaucracy. Having 'Islam' or other religious labels in the anti-discrimination movements and institutions is symbolically important in order to prevent 'Islam' being hijacked by the conservative forces which have been using religion to justify their racist actions. It will also change the perception of a binary opposition of Islam-Chinese, which has been the common message put forward by the conservatives.

Such initiatives from the moderate Islamic groups are important for being able to prevent continued blurring of the lines between racism and religion, but the role of the individual as well as other socio-cultural institutions are equally important in building trust among communities. The government will need to step up and be more serious in finding a solution to the economic grievances, that is, poverty and economic inequality—two issues often highlighted in the anti-government or anti-Chinese demonstrations. More generally, the government needs to uphold the principles of the rule of law and equality before the law, and not bow to the pressure of religious mobs which leave the minority vulnerable and suffering. Being impartial, regardless of the religious status or background

of the perpetrators, will send a clear message that using religious issues to commit crimes will not be condoned. The government needs to review regulations which have been used as stepping stones to launch sectarian persecutions. Revision and cancelling of blasphemy laws, regulation related to building a house of worship, and other discriminatory regulations, particularly at the regional level, will strengthen the government's overall position to build a fairer pluralistic society.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the Indonesian Chinese have enjoyed unprecedented freedom and opportunity following the removal of official discrimination against them by the Indonesian government. Official and institutionalised racism has long gone, but the impact remains. Segments of bureaucracy and political circles continue to hold racist views against the Chinese and the regional Shariah-inspired bylaws affect the Chinese, as the majority of them are non-Muslims. The main concern of racism against the Chinese, however, lies at the grassroots level, which has found a new pathway through a religious route. Involvement of conservative and political Islam has turned grassroots racism against the Chinese into a religious and, therefore, more socially powerful fight, making it even more tricky to address.

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*Taufiq Tanasaldy* is Senior Lecturer in Asian Studies and Indonesian, Head of Global Cultures and Languages in the School of Humanities, University of Tasmania.