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GERBEN NOOTEBOOM

‘Migration, provocateurs and communal conflict’ reads the title of the ninth chapter of Charles Coppel’s edited volume on violence in Indonesia. Although this chapter by Loveband and Young is not the most convincing one in the book, its title summarizes the core topics of the volume. This book deals with violence, which was mainly communal, with provocateurs who were probably never there, and with migration as an underlying process which has largely made possible the development of the negative inter-ethnic sentiments. This volume – dedicated to Herbert Feith (1931-2001) – brings together academics, journalists and professionals with an analytical and practical perspective on violence in Indonesia.

Coppel has edited a highly readable book with interesting chapters on Aceh, East Timor, Maluku, Jakarta, East Java, West Kalimantan and West Papua. It describes and analyses different forms of violence which have occurred mostly during the turbulent years near the end of the New Order regime and the early years of reform. Interestingly, the book also explores forms of representation of violence and the role of the media. The last sections deal with victims and with possibilities for resolving or preventing violent conflicts. The book is a welcome addition to existing volumes on Indonesian violence (Bertrand 2004; Bouvier et al. 2006; Colombijn and Lindblad 2002; Hüsken and De Jonge 2002; Wessel and Wimhöfer 2001). Its main strengths are its rather complete and multidimensional analyses, which expose the deeper reasons for and wider causes of violence in Indonesia (including the often ambivalent and paradoxical influence of the state); and its integrated attempt to deconstruct and demystify the discourses of conspiracy and provocation which are always so prevalent in Indonesia. Therefore, this book is recommended for academics, students and practitioners interested in the sociopolitical, cultural and human background of violent conflicts in Indonesia.
Charles Coppel is an expert on the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, and this is clearly reflected in the first part of the book, where four out of five chapters deal with violence against the Chinese minority. There is ample justification for this emphasis, since Chinese Indonesians have repeatedly been subject to violence in Indonesia throughout postcolonial history as well as during the latest violent period at the turn of the century. After Coppel’s introduction, Lindsey offers a fundamental chapter which – rather narrowly – deals with legal and political explanations for many forms of violence which have taken place since independence. In his view, violence in Indonesian history can be characterized as a long sequence of violent acts by Indonesians against Indonesians, usually accompanied by some form of state involvement (p. 19). Lindsey speaks of a preman state in which the state uses criminals, bandits and militias to do those things which cannot be carried out directly by state institutions. This results in an internally divided state apparatus which, both due to legal shortcomings and because it frequently foments violence itself, is unable to resolve violent communal conflicts taking place on its territory. As Lindsey (2000:281) has written elsewhere, ‘the New Order state consciously created a parallel "secret" state to ensure its access to illegal or extra-legal rents’. Among the population at large, consequently, trust in state justice and state policies in Indonesia is extremely low.

This lack of trust is reflected in the numerous conspiracy theories always circulating in Indonesia. Several authors in the book deal systematically with conspiracy and provocation, and for the most part succeed in deconstructing and demystifying these phenomena. Examples of demystification can be found in the excellent chapters by Herriman, Peluso, Van Klinken and Drexler. In her chapter on Solo, Purdey, while providing some thin evidence for the existence of provocateurs, simultaneously deconstructs conspiracy theories by identifying the social construction and reproduction of dominant discourses on provocateurs and the nature of the violence. The chapter by Siew Min on the May 1998 rapes in Jakarta forms a kind of theoretical justification for this approach as she shows how discourses on violence are themselves shaped by conflict and power differences.

Editing and streamlining contributions by different authors into a coherent edited volume is a difficult task. Although this book is well edited and relatively coherent in its approach, some analytical controversies and tensions between chapters remain. One example can be found in the chapters on the Moluccas by Van Klinken on the one hand, and Loveband and Young on the other. In these two chapters, the explanations of the causes of the conflict seem to contradict each other. Van Klinken maintains that laskar militias from Java were relatively unimportant, emphasizing instead the role of local ethnic constellations and regional elites; Loveband and Young identify migration, outside forces and Jakartan influences as the crucial factors. Of
course it may be possible to reconcile these explanations as complementary ways of unravelling the complexity of the conflict. More worrying are factual contradictions in the numbers of victims of violence. Whereas Van Klinken mentions three to four thousand deaths during the whole conflict, Loveband and Young quote a report by the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights which gives a death toll of at least five thousand (p. 146). Moreover, unlike other contributors, Loveband and Young stick to somewhat ‘populist’ explanations such as the massive population movements under the New Order (which in the Moluccas were predominantly ‘spontaneous’ rather than state-organized), the lack of ethnic integration, and the importance of provocateurs. They fail to explain why the conflict exploded and spread so easily, why it appeared at that particular moment in time, and why stories of provocateurs fell on such fertile ground. It is precisely for insights into such questions, together with sound academic inquiry and a healthy distrust of conspiracy theories, that the book as a whole is valuable.

The second section of the book, on victims, justice and conflict resolution, also stands in some tension with the general approach of the volume. It is definitely tempting to combine any study of conflict with a look at possible ways out of violence, as studying violence in its everyday reality is simply too painful and the suffering of thousands of victims calls for immediate action. To attempt to combine these two perspectives in one book is an honourable undertaking. It remains questionable, however, whether this approach has been fruitful here, as the two parts remain rather separate entities without much cross-fertilization. The case studies show such a tremendous variety in forms of violence that no coherent procedure emerges for analysing them all, let alone for putting an end to them. Thus the mention of resolution in the book’s title proves overambitious. All in all, nevertheless, Coppel’s work stands out as an inspiring contribution to the study of violence in Indonesia.

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