

20 years ago

Indonesia: Lest we forget - May 1998, a human rights abuse case

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Maria Catarina Sumarsih holds an umbrella during the 536th kamisan, a weekly silent protest in front of the State Palace in Jakarta, on Thursday, April 26, 2018. The protests have been held since 2007 to urge the government to resolve human rights abuse cases, including the 1998 Semanggi shooting, which resulted in the death of Maria's son, Bernardus Realino Norma Irawan. (JP/Aditya Bhagas)

While we may feel saddened and angry over those who perished and were injured in the suicide bombings in Surabaya on Sunday and Monday, we must remember the grim memory of the riots in Jakarta and other cities 20 years ago.

On May 13 and 14, 1998, Jakarta was raging with lynch mobs and gang rapes targeting Chinese-Indonesians, as well as crowds of people looting grocery stores and shopping malls only to be burned alive, in a tragedy that preceded the historic regime change in the country. These acts of violence erupted a day after four Trisakti University students were shot dead during a campus rally demanding reform.

A joint fact-finding team sanctioned by then-president BJ Habibie reported 52 rape cases, more than 12 sexual violence cases and nearly 1,200 deaths, apart from the hundreds of buildings, shops and homes that were set ablaze during the chaos.

True, a number of Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) and police generals were replaced or dismissed and the government heeded some of the fact-finding team's recommendations, such as establishing a national commission on protecting women and an institute for protecting witnesses and victims, as well as enacting a law against racial discrimination.

But many questions remain unanswered today, even after five presidents pledged to settle the gross human rights violations that occurred during the May 1998 riots. Worse, there have been moves to spread fear over the recurrence of anti-Chinese ethnic violence ahead of the upcoming general election, against the relentless and as yet unmet demands for justice for the victims of May 1998.

It still remains unclear as to who ordered the security forces to shoot the students, and why they used live bullets. Equally strange is the fact that nobody has been held accountable for the large-scale unrest, despite findings that it was systematically planned and executed.

And 20 years on, the cries for justice have continued to fall on deaf ears, as is evident in the government's silent response to the weekly rallies held every Thursday outside the State Palace since Jan. 18, 2007. Dozens of the grieving families of the victims of past human rights violations, including the May 1998 tragedy, have donned black for the afternoon rallies.

President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo may opt to follow in his predecessors' footsteps, devoid of adequate and significant action. Such pragmatism appears the only choice available to him to retain power, just like the presidents before him.

The stakes today, however, are very high. Jokowi's inaction will justify acts that deny the historical fact of the May 1998 riots and, worse, perpetuate the impunity that continues to disrespect human rights and enables the recurrence of crimes against humanity.

The late Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, once expressed his curiosity as to why the louder that families called for justice over the atrocities their loved ones endured, the more society neglected them. The irony still rings true today, as we recall the moments during which our nation lost its sense of humanity.

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