
MASS MEDIA FRAGMENTATION AND NARRATIVES OF VIOLENT ACTION IN SULAWESI'S POSO CONFLICT

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Post-Suharto Media and Coverage of Conflicting "Masses"

Most observers agree that media coverage of Indonesia's violence in the post-Suharto era has been inadequate at best, egregious at worst. The critiques often meld with broader complaints about contemporary mass media both in Indonesia and abroad.² But interesting questions and narrative visions may be lost if we dismiss Indonesian conflict portrayals as partisan or simplistic dreck too hastily. The media narratives advance oddly competing minimalist sociologies, which parse and caricature some segments of contested communities while they erase others. Only a few investigators have examined the rhetorical and physical techniques by which heterogeneous media have imagined and articulated individuals, collectivities, and events throughout the conflicts.³ Fewer have considered variations across media

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² Some recent Indonesian media problems and issues are summarized in Michael Nieto García, "The Indonesian Free Book Press," *Indonesia* 78 (October 2004): 121-145, pp. 124-126; See also James T. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit To Sell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³ The exceptions, which all focus on the Ambon conflict, include Richard Fox, "Conflict@Ambon.Net," posted at www.berubah.org; Birgit Bräuchler, "Cyberidentities at War: Religion, Identity, and the Internet in the Moluccan Conflict," *Indonesia* 75 (April 2003): 121-151; Merlyna Lim, "Bundling Meta-Narratives on the Internet: Conflict in Maluku," in *Media and Conflict in Asia*, ed. Shyam Tekwani (London: Routledge, forthcoming); Patricia Spyer, "Fire Without Smoke and Other Phantoms of Ambon's Violence: Media

formats, audience reception, or how reporters and mass communications might be integral to collective violence processes.⁴ Nevertheless, two mass-media transitions that occurred nearly simultaneously at the Indonesian national and transnational levels influenced public bases of knowledge and communication practices during all the post-Suharto conflicts.

At the national level, the Habibie-era Media Bill (UU No.40, 1999) superseded prior press censorship regulations and blacklisting practices, which already were unraveling in the 1990s. The resulting changes in Indonesian media outputs, which became more independent and freely critical, can be contrasted internationally with those of Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia that continue regimes of censorship.⁵ News of sporadic attacks on churches in northern Malaysia, roughly contemporaneous with late 1990s attacks in Indonesia, was suppressed and never appeared in Malaysia's government-controlled news media. Without widespread knowledge of these events, there could be no public response from citizens in other parts of the country to either the attacks or the government's handling of them.

At the global level, the now-familiar 1990s transformations in satellite transmissions and digital technologies, including desktop publishing, faxes, the internet, video compact disks, and cell phone transmissions, altered the distances and spheres through which different kinds of citizens could connect. Such novelties provided unprecedented opportunities for urban middle-class Indonesians to network, evade censorship, and ultimately demand new government regimes and mass-media freedoms.⁶ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson argued that such new media formats expanded public sphere discourses in Muslim majority nations, thereby reducing the monopolies of traditionally powerful clerics and the authority of state agents.⁷

Yet we should not confuse the absence of formal press censorship or new media technology possibilities with the uniform creation of a broadly based journalistic

Effects, Agency, and the Work of the Imagination," *Indonesia* 74 (October 2002): 21-36; "Media and Violence in an Age of Transparency: Journalistic Writing on War-Torn Maluku," in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (forthcoming); and "Why Can't We Be Like Storybook Children?" in *Texts of the Cleveringa Lecture*, (Jakarta: KITLV, January 10, 2004), pp. 10-22. On meaningful distortions in war reporting more generally, see Tim Allen and Jean Seaton, *The Media of Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

⁴ Ever since criticism of Albert Bandura's 1970s experiments showing that children who watched violent television hit punching bag "bobo dolls" with mallets provided by the researchers, "media effects" studies have been controversial. Despite widespread convictions that news, like all information, can influence human action, media effects are considered difficult to distinguish for overdetermined social events such as violent conflict. See Andy Ruddock, *Understanding Audiences: Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2001).

⁵ I thank Sumit Mandal for inspiring the comparison to Malaysia. See also Kean Wong, "Malaysia: In the Grip of Government," in *Losing Control: Freedom of the Press in Asia*, ed. Louise Williams and Roland Rich (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2000), pp. 115-137.

⁶ Krishna Sen and David Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 194.

⁷ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, "Redefining Muslim Publics," in *New Media in the Muslim World*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 1-18.

“Fourth Estate” promoting egalitarian or democratic values.⁸ That ideal—and even more its practice—is recent, localized, and institutionally tenuous. Eickelman and Anderson’s optimistic analysis suggested that Muslim consumers could now choose widely and wisely from a “free market” in burgeoning media discourses. In the second edition of their volume, however, Hefner shows how Laskar Jihad’s parent organization developed desktop publishing and web sites to a level far beyond its more numerous and moderate competitors, thereby widely distributing hate-filled discourses that fell short of the ideals of democratic pluralism.⁹ Few academics or human rights advocates would advocate a roll-back to the censored conditions still observable in Malaysia, but Indonesian victims of violence angry at perceived media effects might. What do we make of that contradiction?

The institutional logics of the news industry, its statist reliance on government sources, bribe-taking routines, and inherited code terms for unruly events faced unexpected post-1998 occurrences under revised legal rules and novel trends of media distribution.¹⁰ Can we locate the pressure points where old media platitudes and journalistic habits were retained, disrupted, or intentionally discarded?

Old habits and political institutions die hard. Indonesian journalists and foreign observers have described how the Suharto regime regulated reporting such that journalists feared press bans, repeated government officials’ words as “news,” and employed facile euphemisms such as “a certain group” (*kelompok tertentu*) to avoid giving anything away.¹¹ We can see echoes of such self-censorship, erasure, and bureaucratic misdirection in many strands of post-Suharto conflict coverage, particularly by mainstream newspapers anchored to government sources. The exciting possibilities of a liberalized free press and the potential of new media to enliven public spheres, innovations that penetrated Indonesian provinces unevenly, did not erase the imprint of old journalistic habits in mediated narratives about Indonesia’s post-Suharto violence.

Instead, the violent conflicts of the post-Suharto era were handled in a fragmented and often partisan way by media outlets that were controlled by politically or religiously positioned publishers who sought to communicate with audiences similar to themselves. What is worth noting on a broader geographic scale, however, is how disparate media with audiences of different sizes and constituencies often were talking past each other, whereas within religious or ethnopolitical groups but across regions they tended to coopt each other’s messages for new purposes and audiences. Media

⁸ Paul Tickell, “Free from What? Responsible To Whom? The Problem of Democracy and the Indonesian Press,” in *Democracy in Indonesia: 1950s and 1990s*, ed. David Bourchier and John Legge (Monash: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1994), pp. 182-189.

⁹ Robert W. Hefner, “Civic Pluralism Denied? The New Media and *Jihadi* Violence in Indonesia,” in *New Media in the Muslim World*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, 2nd edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 158-179.

¹⁰ An interesting assessment of recent “bribe-taking” policies of different news organizations and the interpretation of these rules by reporters can be found in Eriyanto, “Buruk Amplop, Fasilitas Diubah,” *Pantau* 24 (April 2002): 38-43.

¹¹ Seno Gumira Ajidarma, *Eyewitness*, trans. Jan Lingard (Sydney: Imprint, 1995); Dave McRae, “A Discourse on Separatists,” *Indonesia* 74 (October 2002): 37-58; Janet Steele, “Representatives of ‘The Nation’ in TEMPO Magazine,” *Indonesia* 76 (October 2003): 127-145; P. Bambang Wisudo, “Struggle between War and Peace Journalism: A Lesson from Maluku,” Presented at the workshop for Peace Education and Conflict Resolution in Indonesia, Manila, Philippines, August 27-30, 2003.

frontiers were being encountered, ignored, and sometimes notably transformed. As a result, wealthier audiences in provincial capitals or in Jakarta were receiving somewhat different news portrayals of regional conflicts, and imagining a different set of villains than were either some local citizens or overseas audiences. Reading different media reports of the same violent events often was a Rashomon experience, but one that Indonesian or foreign readers, following any particular news source or likely combination of sources, might well have been spared. For our purposes here, then, the “truth” of any particular media claim is of less immediate concern than the semantic framing, or “little tacit theories,” of identity, agency, and culpability presented in the name of particular sources.¹²

Complicating all the considerations above is the question of how different audiences—provincial, national, and international—differently interpreted or used the news that reached their milieus. As Anna Tsing elaborates, the early national horizontal consciousness promoted by print media is challenged by provincial readers (or non-readers) whose responses to both the content and packaging of their news differs greatly from responses of the educated elite in Jakarta or abroad.¹³ Local leaders may read newspapers mainly to keep up with the latest wave of bureaucratic acronyms, or to decipher what distant ruler *today* holds power over their constituencies. By contrast, ordinary villagers may use the news only as a backdrop for their discussions about the invincibility talismans of “provocateurs” wanted by the police. Of course, people whose houses suddenly were burned, or who were attacked on the street when a marauding group inferred their ethnicity or religion, did not need to read a newspaper to learn about violence in their neighborhood. So it bears asking: what aspects of news interested particular groups, when, and why? Evidence here suggests that some media brokered new horizontal identity alignments, often focused on transnational religion, even as other bridges of local and national citizenship were burned, sometimes literally.

Questioning the Media Coverage on Poso

The post-Suharto conflict for which I have the broadest range of media data is the one centered in Poso, Central Sulawesi. The questions I explore here are, first, how are events, participants, and their actions framed by different sources over time? In particular, what tacit sociological theories of collective action are advanced through the semantic parsing of Indonesian collectivities? Second, how was the varied media coverage about the Poso violence made available or attractive to different types of audiences at different locations? Third, how did various audiences interpret, use, or discount available media in expected or unanticipated ways? Fourth, to what extent does evidence indicate that certain types of media presentations—the information provided, its public authorization, or its narrative framing—were an integral part of the cascading violence?

¹² The phrase “little tacit theories” is from Todd Gitlin’s discussion of media framing in *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 6-7.

¹³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “The News in the Provinces, in *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. Renato Rosaldo (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 192-222.

In hindsight, analysts can see that the Poso conflict escalated because entrenched district executives, who faced newly competitive elections, tried to protect their candidates and business profiteering through slanderous fliers and the mobilization of voters by religion.¹⁴ It is also clear that rural residents of the Poso District were concerned about migrant infringements on their ancestral land and autonomy, whereas key district politicians framed both urban business and rural political economy divisions in terms of religious identities.¹⁵ Both the resource-depleting businesses enabled by legal and illegal government concessions, and the scramble for unplanted forests among recent (mostly) Muslim migrants and native (mostly) Protestant farmers, were based in much larger transnational trends of boom-and-bust resource extraction as a “national development” strategy of the global south. Finally, it is certain that the street fights among young males, land disputes, and political contests could not have morphed into civil war if local government and security forces had been competent, neutral, and professional. This was impossible, however, because their personal interests and uncertain incomes were dependent upon the same decentralizing government-business scramble that was rocking the Sulawesi frontier. The influx of humanitarian aid money and security forces in fact combined with acts of profiteering, vengefulness, and religious radicalism to create a well-funded industry of continuing sporadic violence, which largely deprives the injured and displaced of funds and institutional support needed to rebuild their communities.

The religious identity schism that characterizes populations involved in the Poso violence is anchored to distinct public and legal identities, political economy divisions, and settlement segregation that began during the Dutch colonial period and continued through the Suharto regime. Before 1998, however, religion was just one among many factors defining local identities and political economy interests. It did not yet index sides in a battle or suggest, for most residents, an ideological platform for contemporary violence.¹⁶

I approach communications data from the Poso conflict following critical studies of media, collective violence, religious resurgence in the public sphere, and master narratives of conflict.¹⁷ Because the Poso case involves both demographic migration

¹⁴ See Lorraine V. Aragon, “Communal Violence in Poso, Central Sulawesi: Where People Eat Fish and Fish Eat People,” *Indonesia* 72 (October 2001): 45-79; Gerry Van Klinken, “New Actors, New Identities: Post-Suharto Ethnic Violence in Indonesia,” in *Violent Internal Conflicts in Asia Pacific: Histories, Political Economies, and Policies*, ed. Dewi Fortuna Anwar, Hélène Bouvier, Glenn Smith, and Roger Tol (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, LIPI, Lasema-CNRS, and KITLV, 2005), pp. 79-100.

¹⁵ George Junus Aditjondro, “Kerusuhan Poso dan Morowali, Akar Permasalahan dan Jalan Keluarnya,” Paper presented at Propatria symposium, Jakarta, January 7, 2004; also, Lorraine V. Aragon, “Migrasi, Komoditas Ekspor, dan Sejarah Perubahan Hak Pemakaian Tanah di Sulawesi Tengah,” in *Berebut Tanah: Beberapa Kajian Berspektif Kampus dan Kampung*, ed. Anu Lounela and R. Yando Zakaria (Yogyakarta: InsistPress, 2002), pp. 271-282.

¹⁶ Both the Permesta and Kahar Muzakkar rebellions, however, passed through the Central Sulawesi region between 1952-1965, etching an experiential memory of long-term religious schism for some. See C. van Dijk, *Rebellion under the Banner of Islam: The Darul Islam in Indonesia* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); and Barbara S. Harvey, *Permesta: Half a Rebellion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, 1974).

¹⁷ Paul R. Brass, “Introduction: Discourses of Ethnicity, Communalism, and Violence,” in *Riots and Pogroms*, ed. Paul R. Brass (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 1-55; José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Hent De Vries, “In Media Res: Global Religion, Public

shifts and religious polarization, the points about media narratives made here seem most comparable to the Ambon and North Maluku conflict cases. By contrast, media efforts to press the 1999 West Kalimantan conflict into the mold of “religiously polarized violence” were repudiated more effectively.¹⁸ Yet, for all examples of conflict reporting, there are broader comparisons to be made concerning how Jakarta and provincial Indonesians of various social classes currently portray their fellow citizens in contention. These characterizations include mobs or “masses” (*massa*), or more positively cast, “the people” (*rakyat*), “citizens” (*warga*), native “sons of the soil” (*pribumi*), and its various lesser antonyms, including “migrants” (*pendatang*) or “Chinese descent” (*keterunan Cina*).¹⁹ Such groups sometimes are described as moving acephalously, driven by emotion, but otherwise they are represented as subjects shepherded by uncannily persuasive leaders, frequently designated as “criminal” (*kriminal*). What logic drives the creative details of the flattened sociologies constructed with such semantic categories?

Below, I will discuss examples from 1998-2005 provincial newspapers, graffiti, fliers, religious organization bulletins and reports, national newspapers, magazines, international news, video compact disks, and internet sites. Although radio and television coverage will be discussed, I do not have enough recorded samples or audience data to focus systematically on these media. Also, my discussion of web site, national, and international news coverage is necessarily partial and geared towards sources that demonstrated more interest in the Poso conflict. Whereas national mainstream media were less overtly partisan, they often drew from roughly the same sources as local journalists. For most large and distant publications, the problems of Poso, understandably, were worth few words. Except for events involving numerous casualties or significant military deployments, the subject generally was dwarfed by political problems bearing more directly on Jakarta, including the capriciousness of President Wahid (a.k.a. Gus Dur) and the potentially separatist conflicts in East Timor, Aceh, Papua (formerly Irian), and Ambon.

The media portraying Poso’s violent events and people have been fractured according to the type and location of the audiences reached. Thus, for heuristic purposes, I sometimes follow John Keane and divide them by scale into media spheres accessed by “micropublics,” “mesopublics,” and “macropublics.” Micropublics involve dozens, hundreds, or thousands of individuals participating mainly at a sub-state level.²⁰ Mesopublics are constituted by millions of people involved primarily at the nation-state level. Macropublic spheres can encompass millions or billions of people involved at the transnational level. I would add the caveat that within or beyond Indonesia, the actual participants of any transnational or macropublic sphere—say the viewers of a particular website or VCD—may themselves constitute only a numerically

Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Religious Studies,” in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 3-42.

¹⁸ Some West Kalimantan leaders even claimed that it was exactly *the lack* of thorough Christian education and identities among Dayak that allowed them to fall back on ancestral patterns of warfare to address their societal grievances. See Anne Schiller and Bambang Garang, “Religion and Inter-ethnic Violence in Indonesia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32,2 (2002): 244-254.

¹⁹ On the native “sons of the soil” versus Chinese, see James T. Siegel, “Early Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998, in Jakarta,” *Indonesia* 66 (October 1998): 75-108.

²⁰ John Keane, *Reflections on Violence* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 169.

small group. The constraints that influence consumption of media within these different spheres include consumers' residence, access to technology related to wealth, religious affiliations and related knowledge, and language competence in Indonesian/Malay, English, or Arabic.

Given the Poso conflict's humble beginnings, and the differences in communication habits between rural Poso villagers and wealthier urban residents, I cannot neglect evidence on non-market based media such as rumors, signs, fliers, and graffiti. Religiously focused interpretations created locally during the escalation of the Poso conflict became significant frames for different groups' comprehension of seemingly incomprehensible events.²¹ Clerics speaking directly to congregations offered one form of early guidance in developing those interpretations. Portions of their interpretive narratives were reproduced in print media, amplifying them and mixing them with regional government officials' statements to set basic agendas for public understandings of the unfolding events. While these media narratives legitimized the claims of some "opinion leaders," they also overshadowed the diverse and complicated views of most ordinary Muslim and Christian residents who had little prior interest in collective violence. Following Paul Brass's argument that causal theories of communal violence are never "neutral to the interests of those seeking to capture [their] meaning," it is relevant to ask who stood to benefit from the publicized narratives and, also, why many others came to adopt them.²²

If reporting on regional conflicts was caught in a limited set of journalistic codes of behavior and a simplified semantics of Indonesian motivations, it is of interest to notice what else was *not* discussed in public news. Following good New Order protocol, virtually no reports addressed issues of social class or gender. None discussed the significance of rising cacao prices or cacao ecology, which depends heavily upon migrant labor and available rain forests. Few news reports on Poso raised the subject of local customs (*adat*) or their violation, except when describing early top-down, empty-handed, and futile efforts to halt fighting with neo-traditional peace ceremonies. Even fewer discussed the complicated ethnic constellations involved in the fighting, mainly "native" highland Pamona, Mori, and Lore along with Minahasa and Toraja migrants versus mainly coastal migrant Bugis, Gorontalo, Kaili, and Arabs along with "native" Tojo residents.²³ Mention of ethnic Chinese was rare, even at the start of the conflict when their liquor-selling businesses were targeted. The effort of Balinese migrant villages to remain neutral and the difficult positions of many in mixed-religion families were never publicized. Rather, early mass-media reports followed New Order injunctions to obscure ethnic and religious political issues by assigning culpability to criminals, often left unnamed. Such portrayals dismissed the violence as pedestrian crime, thereby authorizing current or planned government security efforts. This statist framing contrasts sharply with international reporting on Indonesian or other overseas

²¹ Lorraine V. Aragon, "Communal Violence in Poso, Central Sulawesi," pp. 73-75.

²² Brass, "Introduction: Discourses of Ethnicity," p. 2.

²³ I use the terms "native" or "indigenous" recognizing that they are constructed, flexible, and political categories. Both connote a range of ideas such as "original people" (*orang asli*), "sons of the soil" (*pribumi*), current residents of a place, newly contacted isolated groups, and descendants of people with no other known origins who are described in the first European colonial records.

collective violence, which relies on references to ethnicity and “ethnic hatreds” as a means to systematize and explain distant and little understood events.²⁴

Based on the media narratives exemplified below, I will advance several general arguments. First, most media portrayals of the Poso violence are constructed from a few familiar skeletal sociologies of Indonesian human action, which involve inchoate “corporal” masses (*massa*) and “brainy,” sometimes deviant, leaders.²⁵ Mainstream news reports invariably follow the post-1970s imperative to declare whether or not the violence of the masses is based on problems of ethnicity, religion, race, or class—the issue known as SARA (*suku, agama, ras, dan antar golongan*). The litmus test specified is often as simplistic and materially symbolic as whether or not any churches or mosques were destroyed. Depending on the media source, mass violence driven by religious sentiment may be excused or denounced. The default alternative theory to destruction motivated by ethnoreligious sentiments is to call the attack “purely criminal” (*kriminal murni*) and attribute responsibility for it to a mastermind or provocateur who (mis)leads the masses. In the mainstream media, this is the preferred sociology of violence. It places Indonesian government agents as external to the conflict framework. In this responsible role, their ongoing security interventions appear more competent, normative, and warranted. Only in religious niche media and NGO-generated editorials do direct criticisms of government agents emerge and increase during the course of the conflict.

A differently inflected sociological vision of human action appears in the religious niche outlets, especially after mid-2000. Religious conspiracy theories arise in both Muslim and Christian niche publications. These reports initially foreground issues of national citizenship, but then place their concerns in broader transnational frameworks. Micro, meso, and macro media sphere presentations draw directly from each other’s sources and increasingly share a repertoire of rhetorical devices about global religious wars, even as they wield the same clunky sociological categories as the mainstream publications.

Both the mainstream statist and religious niche portrayals of Poso become highly theatrical in the face of escalated violence, creating dramas of dastardly puppeteers on the loose. Scholars of conflict recognize drama and performance as fundamental to what has been termed a “triangle of violence,” encompassing strategic viewpoints of performer, victim, and witness, with the human referents that make up these categories not necessarily mutually exclusive.²⁶ If political violence is itself statement making, then the portrayals investigated here are hyper-dramatic media statements on embodied action statements. Such dramas attract audiences and increase sales.

²⁴ See Allen and Seaton, *The Media of Conflict*.

²⁵ For Ben Anderson’s historical exposition of how a positive 1920s Marxist vision of Indonesia’s “masses” gave way in the 1970s to Benny Murdani’s idea of the unorganized “floating masses” (*massa mengambang*) and then to a vision of threatening “mobs,” see James T. Siegel, “Suharto, Witches,” *Indonesia* 71 (April 2001): 27-78, pp. 45-46. I have used the term “masses” here most often to emphasize its unstable range of connotations, but sometimes vary the term with “mobs,” especially where sentence context or grammar warrant the shift.

²⁶ See David Riches, ed., *The Anthropology of Violence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); also, Ariel Heryanto, “Rape, Race, and Reporting,” in *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia*, ed. Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley, and Damien Kingsbury (Clayton, Australia: Monash Asia Institute 1999), pp. 299-334.

Second, although non-market media in the form of rumors, graffiti, banners, and fliers were key sources of information for local Poso residents approaching the 1998 violence, mass media initially were not. Rather, mass media produced in Palu and nationally were more relevant to *distant* audiences' understandings and potential engagement with early events in Poso. After 2000, mass media on Poso had an even greater circulation presence among national audiences. Muslim and Christian networks circulated religious niche media locally, nationally, and transnationally, citing universalist causes to explain localized Poso events.

Third, just as some of Poso's urban male politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen (in league with various groups of under-employed young men) advanced the violence itself, news media production and consumption also catered to this lofty clientele on a geographically larger scale. Rural and urban underclass workers, along with women of most statuses, generally had little direct use for news media products, except as wrapping paper or temporary distractions. Yet, the jargon of collective human action presented by government and mass media, such as the ubiquitous appearance of "provocateurs" and "mobs," also clutters the vernacular tool kit of popular discourse, even as particular government or media claims may be discounted. Universalist claims about how Poso events fit with long-term transnational religious dynamics such as aggressive proselytizing, holy wars, persecution, and martyrdom gradually offered resonant explanatory visions to many among the injured and pious.

Fourth, religiously polarized news coverage distributed to diverse but overlapping micro, meso, and macro spheres seemingly resulted in a form of mediated brokerage.²⁷ Those reports linked some injured groups in Poso with distant religious networks looking for aggrieved co-religionists to accept their translocal religious agenda and exclusivist perspective. These religious niche "one-day best-sellers" presented narratives of a simultaneously shared world that was anchored less to the heterogeneous local or Indonesian national communities than to felicitously imagined transnational religious constellations.²⁸

Although this article focuses primarily on the discursive or rhetorical frameworks of media practices and processes, I wish to raise questions about how chronological changes in media presentations about Poso matched the escalation of the conflict itself. My inferences on this topic will concern strategic conjunctures of information transfer or the public legitimization of that information more than framing "biases."²⁹ For example, when did media coverage attract (or not attract) outside attention to the conflict? How were documents understood to "incite" violence? And finally, how were supporters or funds collected for militias via internet pleas, a form of media brokerage

²⁷ Brokerage is defined as "the linking of two or more previously unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relations with one another and/or with yet other sites" by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 26. Although the concept is widely used in the network and collective violence analyses of political scientists, the idea that media reports—rather than face-to-face individuals or groups—might act as brokers has remained largely unexplored. See also Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*.

²⁸ This is a geographical expansion from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 35. Internet postings, generally, lasted longer than a day although some religious sites, such as that of Laskar Jihad, and their messages about Poso have been removed from cyberspace.

²⁹ See Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

between mobilized locals and distant religious networks who could provide material and labor support?

The 1998 Poso Media Scene and First Phase Events Linked to Non-Market Media

When the Poso violence began in December 1998, the district had no locally originating newspapers or television journalism. Mass media had far less purchase on most local audiences than did personal reports, rumors, newsletters, and graffiti. In many rural villages, even routine spoken and written use of the Indonesian language was limited to some adult men and older schoolchildren. There were not yet cell phone satellite links to the Poso District, although walkie talkies (*handi talki*) were used to coordinate groups of fighters from the conflict's first week, already suggesting some categorical problems with mass media's depictions of savage masses. Some regional militias clearly were familiar with military officials' or frontier businessmen's communication tools. To enter broader media circulation, however, news needed to reach the provincial capital of Palu before it could be transmitted over greater distances quickly.

Some Poso citizens relied on newspapers published in Palu, about 225 kilometers and six hours away by car. Newspapers from Palu and more distant sources arrived in Poso at least a day late. Although radio long has been an affordable news media outlet in Indonesia's rural areas, radio broadcasts in Poso City ran for only a limited time each day and were filled mostly by music, with daily readings of excerpts from national newspapers such as *Kompas* and *Republika*, as well as *Surya* from Surabaya.³⁰ The rural highlands south of Poso City and the coast, with its more Protestant population centered in the colonial lakeside mission town of Tentena, had even less access to mass media; this region produced no newspapers or radio programs of its own. Thus, the most "local" journalism produced at the start of Poso's conflict was written in the provincial capital of Palu, primarily for mostly Muslim audiences based there.

National television (TVRI) also had a relay station in Palu, with programs being sent from Manado, North Sulawesi, but the station produced no local news. Two other stations (RCTI and SCTV) were often available by 1998, but gave little coverage to the Poso conflict. When they did occasionally send news teams to Poso City, the usual strategy of these outlets was to mirror the most sanitized print news coverage and show footage of army spokesmen saying that everything was now fine and under control—even during weeks of extreme displacement after violent attacks.³¹

The first physical assault occurred in Poso City late during the night before Christmas between a Protestant and a Muslim youth. The Muslim's arm was cut. News

³⁰ Even these basic radio broadcasts ended in mid-2000 when the Poso violence became severe. On radio's spread in New Order Indonesia, see Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics*, and Astrid Susanto, "The Mass Communications System in Indonesia," in *Political Power and Communications in Indonesia*, ed. Karl D. Jackson and Lucian W. Pye (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 229-258.

³¹ Despite the meta-messages provided by visual footage and institutional preferences dictating that today's news should be "telegenic," it is widely claimed that TV content largely rehashes print journalism because local TV news "begins with what TV journalists read in their morning newspapers." Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, p. 7.

of the knifing traveled quickly through adjacent neighborhoods by word of mouth and mosque loudspeakers. During the next few days, the story's various versions were relayed by drivers and acquaintances traveling west, east, and south from Poso City, and, soon, by the tales of injured or displaced persons fleeing the troubles. Reporters amplified some of these narratives in provincial and national media during the following week.

The names of the two young men involved in the knifing were publicized, and everyone agreed that at least a few of Protestants involved had been drinking alcohol. Some Protestant personal reports claimed the fight concerned borrowed auto repair shop tools, and the Muslim youth fled to a nearby mosque for safety after he was injured.³² By contrast, Muslim news reports claimed the Muslim youth was in a sound sleep on the mosque floor when the drunken Protestant attacked him without provocation. The Muslim's kin and friends sought revenge. An agreement by city leaders to ban the sale of alcohol during the fasting month then led to vandalism of Chinese businesses by Muslim groups and retaliatory skirmishes by Protestant groups.

In the following days, truckloads of Muslim defenders arrived from coastal villages east and west of Poso City while truckloads of Protestants arrived from southern highland villages around Tentena. Members of these groups, both carrying homemade weapons, attacked each other and local civilians identified as members of the other religion. One Protestant bystander was stoned and set on fire after being doused with gasoline. Fighters burned the neighborhood where the knifing occurred and those adjacent. Police did not assert control, claiming they were intimidated by the weapon-toting gangs from other towns. Muslim leaders quickly blamed a Protestant elder, Herman Parimo, for leading truckloads of highland youth to wreak widespread violence. Protestants countered the accusation by claiming Parimo always came with youth to Poso City for a Christmas parade. They pointed to their greater neighborhood losses, and asked why only Protestant fighters were arrested.

Residents in Poso City and Palu encountered a flier, banners (*spanduk*), and companion graffiti that tied the week's violent events to a plot by Parimo against the district head. The first fighting began less than two weeks after the lame duck district head (*bupati*) announced he would step down. The campaign then pitted his regional secretary (*sekwilda*), a Protestant Golkar candidate, against the district head's preferred successor, a Muslim party (PPP, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, United Development Party) candidate. The slanderous leaflet distributed was titled "List of Group Disturbing Poso District Security 24-28 December 1998" (*Daftar Gerombolan Pengacau Keamanan Kabupaten Poso 24 s/d 28 Desember 1998*). The flier stated that the regional secretary, his Protestant sponsor Parimo, and eight others in the Poso District bureaucracy were plotting to kill the incumbent district head. The ten Protestants named in the flier apparently matched the membership list of the Ecumenical Christmas Committee of Poso District (*Susunan Panitia Natal Oikumene Kabupaten Poso*). Many graffiti and banners plastered around Poso City simply said, "Parimo must be hanged" (*Parimo harus digantung*).

The accused Parimo was a competitor in the ebony business and an old political rival of several of the district head's supporters. On some banners, the Protestant youth

³² Rinaldy Damanik, *Tragedi Kemanusiaan Poso* (Palu: PBHI & LPS-HAM Sulteng, 2003), p. 15.

who knifed the Muslim also was named, and the banners were posted outside key government offices in Palu. The handwriting on the leaflet, whose message evoked demands for the hanging of Parimo and the district secretary, later was traced to the district head's younger brother. This brother, also an appointed civil servant, seemingly wrote the flier to arouse Muslims, who then could be expected to defend his older brother's chosen candidate in the upcoming elections.³³ According to one investigation, the basic idea for the flier was planned at a December 22 meeting of Muslim leaders convened by the district head's brother, which included his key business associates and a Poso Department of Religion official named Adnan Aرسال.³⁴

Following the December 1998 violence and initial accusations concerning his involvement, the district head's brother was transferred to a provincial government job in Palu where his supporters lobbied vocally for his case's dismissal. He was, however, ultimately prosecuted and convicted by the Poso police under slander laws (Law No.1, 1946 and article 160 of the Criminal Code). He then served a six-month jail sentence, generally considered too light by Protestants and too severe by Muslims. By contrast, the sixty-four-year-old Herman Parimo was arrested quickly and sentenced to fourteen years in jail. He died of illness in 2000 while his case was on appeal.

First Phase Provincial News Media Coverage: *Mercusuar* and *MAL*

In the absence of local Poso newspaper sources, the most widely read—and only—daily newspaper was Palu-based *Mercusuar* (now renamed *Radar Sulteng*). *Mercusuar* is Palu's oldest newspaper, originally begun by Mohammadiyah, but later bought by the Jawa Pos News Network in their post-1987 effort to take over regional papers throughout the archipelago. By 2000, the editors produced between eight and twelve thousand copies every day except Sunday, but estimated twenty times that number of readers because the papers are shared widely and resold both locally and to outlying districts such as Poso. The total population of the Poso District before the collective violence began (and before the district was subdivided) was nearly 350,000 people, although only a small literate subset, mainly in urban areas, would have been regular readers of *Mercusuar*. Nevertheless, it was the "paper of record" for Central Sulawesi, much as *Kompas* or *Republika* might aspire to be for the nation as a whole.

Like most New Order news outlets, *Mercusuar* depended heavily for its information on government office sources, in this case the governor of Central Sulawesi, the Poso district head (*bupati*), and the regional police. In fact, throughout the Poso conflict, field reporters always stayed with police or army troops for protection. This "embedding" affected their product. Community sources on either side were rarely tapped, and the paper's Muslim reporters said they felt unsafe venturing into Christian neighborhoods to seek an unfamiliar perspective. As a rule, only male government officials were interviewed, and they initially denied that there was any

³³ For more on the local politics and corruption involved, see Lorraine V. Aragon, "Elite Family Governance, Unequal Buying, and Redistricting in Poso," in *Renegotiating Boundaries: Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt and Gerry Van Klinken (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005), in press.

³⁴ Aditjondro, "Kerusuhan Poso dan Morowali." Adnan Aرسال later was instrumental in supporting the entrance of outside Muslim militias into Poso. See International Crisis Group, "Jihad in Central Sulawesi," Indonesia Backgrounder Report, February 4, 2004. Aرسال still maintains that Poso City Muslims were peacefully fasting in December 1998 when they were attacked by Protestant militias without provocation.

religious, economic, or sociological origin to the conflict. Rather, they spoke vaguely of a fight involving youths, the drinking of alcohol, and a criminal (Protestant) leader of the “masses” named Herman Parimo.

In 1998, Palu also was the publication center for an influential weekly tabloid called *MAL* or *Mingguan Al-Chairaat*. The Muslim organization Al-Chairaat (also transcribed Al-Khaira’at or Al-Khaerat) was founded in 1930 by a mixed Hadrami and Bugis settler named Al-Habib Sayyid Idrus Ibn Salim Al-Juffrie, who claimed descent from the prophet.³⁵ This founder, whose photograph is displayed in many Central Sulawesi Muslims’ parlors, taught and preached a form of traditionalist Islam among coastal merchants and indigenous animist groups such as the Kaili, who had long traded with outsiders without undergoing religious conversion. Al-Chairaat’s membership, and the number of its schools, remained small until the end of the colonial period, but there are now over 1,200 branches in nearly a dozen provinces of eastern Indonesia. The Palu branch remains the central headquarters, directed by the original founder’s son, H. S. Saggaf Aldjufrie. All of the *MAL* tabloid’s reporters and most of its readers are Muslims, including a variety of Indonesian Hadrami Arabs, Bugis migrants, and Kaili with ties to the Al-Chairaat organization.

In covering the first Poso violence, *MAL* followed its customary format of interspersing interview dialogue pieces with a few reporter-authored stories based on the same interviews. The words and photo portraits of Muslim religious and political leaders were featured. Some issues added an interview with a Christian leader whose words were used to support, or at least not challenge, the statements made by other interviewees. The first January 1999 issue of *MAL* gave primary coverage to the “Poso Tragedy” (*Trajadi Poso*), and all interviews emphasized roughly the same framing. A Poso Muslim community leader said the fighting was not an ethnoreligious case (*bukan kasus SARA*), but rather a matter of malfeasance or evil (*kejahatan*). It was really a failed rebellion (*pemberontakan yang gagal*) by Herman Parimo and his Central Sulawesi Youth Movement (*Gerakan Pemuda Sulawesi Tengah*).³⁶ The governor’s interview responses also emphasized that this was not a case of SARA, but just pure criminality (*kriminal murni*). He cited evidence that churches went unharmed because Muslim guards protected them, and that the banners (*spanduk*) only blamed Parimo, rather than calling for a war with Protestants.³⁷ One synthetic reporter’s story characterized the drunken youth who knifed the sleeping Muslim in the mosque as one of Herman Parimo’s cronies (*kroni*), saying this was why the angry Muslims destroyed the liquor-selling businesses.³⁸

In stories throughout the *MAL* issue, both sides are described as masses (*massa*), but such inchoate entities apparently bear no responsibility for this violence. The Muslim masses who purge immoral businesses are politely understood. Only (Protestant) mob leaders, or brains (*otak*), such as Parimo, figure as responsible agents. Masses apparently can speak only via graffiti or banners, which have been

³⁵ See Azyumardi Azra, “Hadrami as Educators: Al-Habib Sayyid Idrus Ibn Salim Al-Juffrie (1889-1969) and Al-Khairat,” Paper presented at the KITLV International Workshop on “Arabs in South-East Asia (1870-c.1990),” Leiden, December 8-12, 1997.

³⁶ Yus Mangun, “Pemberontakan yang Gagal,” *MAL* no. 21, Week 1, January 1999, p. 6.

³⁷ H. Bandjela Paliudju, “Kuncinya Herman Parimo,” *MAL* no. 21, Week 1, January 1999, p. 7.

³⁸ “Tragedi Poso, Skenario Ketapang yang Gagal,” *MAL* no. 21, Week 1, January 1999, pp. 6-7.

conveniently positioned in front of government offices and newspaper photographers. The governor then claims these banners represent the desires and motives of all the people. Initial provincial representations of the Poso conflict therefore hew closely to a preferred statist model of criminality, although the “masses” of the two religions already are conceived somewhat differently from each other. Officially, however, there is no religious aspect to the conflict. It just involves some hapless masses, including one led by an already identified and promptly arrested criminal and his accomplices. Case dismissed.

National Newspaper Coverage of Phase One: *Kompas* and *Republika*

National news coverage about the initial 1998 events of violence in Poso was smaller in scope although, following the framing of the provincial papers’ coverage, it suggested which Protestants were to blame with some alacrity.³⁹ When the first reports were issued, there had been no deaths, no one imagined the conflict’s future escalation, and Jakarta newspapers had been positively emphasizing the heretofore harmonious calendrical coincidence of Ramadan and Christmas, which editorials noted followed an otherwise “horrible year” of violence and political uncertainty in Indonesia.⁴⁰

The first back-page news report about Poso in *Kompas* vaguely described, in a technical way, a clash between residents of different neighborhoods, the burning of one of them, and the spreading of rumors about burned mosques and churches. As in much mainstream reporting, technical details concerning the destruction were offered as news rather than analyses of the violence’s specific form or local significance. The only interpretation provided was in the conclusion, which quoted the police head of Central Sulawesi. He announced, “... the fight between youth that triggered mobs to run amok contained absolutely no elements of SARA [ethnic, religious, racial, or class animosities], but rather was purely criminal” (*Perkelahian antarpemuda yang memicu amuk massa itu sama sekali tidak mengandung unsur SARA, melainkan murni kriminal*).⁴¹ Here an official spokesperson presents as normative and comprehensible the fact that a “criminal” fight between two youths could immediately launch a destructive and rage-filled street action among hundreds of “massa” carrying sharp weapons and Molotov cocktails in five neighborhoods in a district capital.

While the intent of the police chief’s words, along with similar statements made by police and army officials in most mainstream news outlets, may have been to calm readers’ concerns and avoid ethnoreligious retaliation, the persuasiveness of such statements to many readers is questionable. As a critical Sulawesi newspaper reader once said to me, “when the government states in the press that SARA is not involved, we know precisely that it is. Otherwise, they would not need to tell us that this is not a case of SARA.”

Two days later, *Kompas* devoted a longer lower-front-page story to Poso. This story emphasized police and army responses, and described meetings with Poso District and

³⁹ The comments in this section are based on an analysis of all late-December 1998–January 1999 issues of *Kompas* and *Republika*, as well as selected issues from other national publications.

⁴⁰ On national ambivalence over the events of 1998, see “Mana Lebih Tepat: Tahun 1998 ‘Anus Horibilis’ atau Tahun Reformasi?” *Kompas*, December 31, 1998, p. 4.

⁴¹ “Bentrok Antarwarga di Poso,” *Kompas*, December 28, 1998, p. 8.

Central Sulawesi government officials and society leaders (*tokoh masyarakat*). The narrative suggests that the civil people of Poso are now being guided by rational leaders, unlike yesterday's masses, who were driven wild by youth fights or gang leaders arriving in trucks from other towns. The governor explains that each citizen (*warga*) should control himself (*menahan diri*) and be aware that some people were intentionally trying to turn the problem into a religious conflict. Citizens, unlike the "mobs," control themselves, cooperate with government officials, and agree that Poso is not afflicted by religious conflict.

According to the report, the legitimate citizens (*warga*) attending the meetings put pressure on security forces to arrest Herman Parimo, whom they consider to be the puppeteer or mastermind of the violence (*dalang kerusahan*). As legitimate citizens attending government meetings, these Muslim people could now speak the name of the mastermind directing the mobs. The *MAL* and *Kompas* reports both noted that Parimo was a leader or "figure" (*tokoh*) in the Central Sulawesi Youth Movement (Gerakkan Pemuda Sulawesi Tengah). GPST was an historical group, however, that worked with Indonesian Republic army officers in the 1950s and 60s to mobilize Central Sulawesi residents against the Christian-led Permesta revolt from North Sulawesi. While Parimo seemingly became involved in the street violence and still was tied economically to his old GPST cohort, it is unlikely that his Christmas time arrival from Tentena signified either a revived rebellion or a failed coup d'état, as claimed in newspaper reports.

Kompas also reported that Poso City was still controlled by the masses (*masih dikuasai massa*), especially those thousands who had arrived from east and west (coastal Muslim towns), whereas those from (highland Protestant) Tentena who had "triggered" the prior day's disturbance had been pressed to retreat. All groups who took part in the rioting, Muslim and Protestant, were equally assigned the underclass status of "massa," so only those readers who knew Poso's religious geography or who searched for other clues might be able to determine clearly which group was to blame and which group was winning the battle for Poso City. Police reportedly told the "masses" who had traveled from elsewhere, who were sleeping in the city's mosques, to return home, and said they were monitoring all roads into Poso City to prevent more outside agitators" or "rioters" (*perusuh*) from entering the area. The report claimed that on the previous day about eight thousand people (*massa*) had been fighting in the streets, resulting in the large number of wounded and destroyed buildings. To reemphasize the "this does not involve SARA" claims, *Kompas* noted that not a single church or mosque was harmed, which was slightly incorrect, given that one church had been partially damaged.

A final "back page" report on December 31 spoke of the improved security conditions under army supervision, the material damage estimated at six billion rupiah, and the district head's promise to provide aid to victims of the riots. Such promises, as they became duplicated over the years, with each one specifying the exact amount of aid to be distributed, became familiar to ordinary citizens, especially by the majority who claimed they never saw their rightful share. Publicized by the media complete with relevant acronyms and numerical subtotals, these pledges were memorized, revised, and replayed, often in joking word-play variations, as accusations of pervasive district-level corruption.

A *Kompas Online* story explained that officials could not check the rage of the masses because their total number did not equal the numbers of the masses (*pihak petugas tidak mampu membendung amukan massa karena jumlah personil tidak sebanding dengan jumlah massa*). The statement evokes an image of responsible government bodies forming a human dam to block the natural movement of the flowing masses and suggests they could manage it if only their numbers were equal. The report concludes by mentioning the governor's and police's meeting with society and religious leaders (*tokoh masyarakat dan agama*) to solve the problem of selecting the next district head, a matter said to be problematic for local society (*masyarakat*) and to have triggered the disturbances.⁴²

Here a critical link between the district head campaign and the violence was at least mentioned, although a possible semantic confusion concerning the populace is introduced. According to this narrative, youth fights and a mastermind from (Protestant) Tentena triggered the masses. Legitimate citizens and government officials seemingly were outnumbered and therefore unable to hold back the masses' rage. Yet, the government and police were looking for a solution to the election campaign for district head, which "society" (as opposed to the masses?) considered the cause of the disturbances. Were these various triggers, perpetrators, citizens, and authorities now confused, or just confusing?

The reporting agenda set by *Republika* differed noticeably from that set by *Kompas*. *Republika's* initial coverage focused on the number of injured and the fact that police needed to protect the houses of both Poso's district head and district secretary from stoning by rioters (*perusuh*).⁴³ Unlike *Kompas*, *Mercusuar*, and *MAL*, however, the *Republika* report openly describes the clash in Poso as an ethnoreligious conflict (*konflik SARA*). It tells the story of how a group of drunken youths attacked and knifed a boy who was fast asleep in a mosque. In doing so, the newspaper adopts one Muslim faction theory about who was responsible for starting the violence. They describe how a friend of the injured youth immediately sent out a call for help over the mosque's loudspeakers, thereby attracting a rapid response from armed "masses," who became angry when they could not locate the reported attacker. The ensuing two-day "frenzied rage of the masses" (*amukan massa*), it is said, resulted in the burning of houses, hotels, restaurants, a billiard parlor, and two massage parlors. From there the issue or rumors of SARA "blew" or "inflated," seemingly naturally like the wind (*Dari sinilah isu SARA bertiup*).

With the details of this story, which most closely parallel the tolerance towards the "masses" seen in the tabloid *MAL's* coverage, *Republika* suggests that it was only non-Muslim houses and morally questionable businesses that were destroyed. The Poso masses thereby become the avatars of Muslim community righteousness, perhaps elevating their impoverished status through attacks on the ill-gotten property of the less worthy, such as licentious Chinese and other "non-Muslims," who are defined by the religion they lack. In other *Republika* reports, it is specified explicitly that establishments selling alcohol were attacked because Protestants who injured the Muslim youth were observed to be drinking. These establishments happened to be owned by ethnic Chinese, thereby making their material destruction more attractive to

⁴² "Petugas Keamanan Tutup Semua Pintu Masuk ke Poso," *Kompas*, December 29, 1998.

⁴³ "Kerusuhan Meletus di Poso, 50 Luka-luka," December 29, 1998, p. 3.

the Muslim masses.⁴⁴ Putting two and two together, *Republika* alone among mass-media outlets concludes that this is ethnoreligious violence.

Despite their different positions on whether the Poso violence was an ethnoreligious (SARA-related) dispute, *Kompas* and *Republika*, like the provincial papers, used the religiously neutral term “masses,” while implicitly focusing on religion as their key identity boundary. The common image of ordinary Poso citizens as mobs directed by criminal mountebanks or moved to violence by recriminating sentiment was patronizing, but not in any way atypical for this genre of reports about “riots in the provinces.” In both national newspapers, the reports of police or army personnel formed the basis for the media stories. These sources provided the only specific information given about the groups and individuals involved in the violence. *Kompas* chose to focus on the Protestant masses misdirected by Parimo, while *Republika* focused on the seemingly more legitimate actions of the Muslim masses redressing an undeserved attack and purging immoral capitalism. Yet both sets of narratives alternated oddly between visions of masses who might or might not also be legitimate citizens, and district leaders who might or might not also be criminal provocateurs.

National Internet News during Phase One: Detik.com

Daily Indonesian language reports about the first events of violence in Poso were posted at the internet site Detik.com starting on December 28, 1998.⁴⁵ Detik.com’s initial reports on Poso also quote the statements of police and army spokesmen who, as in *Mercusuar*, *MAL*, and *Kompas*, take pains to paper over the religious polarization (SARA) issue suggested in the details provided, thereby perhaps spreading suspicions that these factors were involved. A police spokesman lists the number of injured, names the drunken “non-Muslim” who allegedly knifed a mosque patron, and describes how angry “masses” attacked businesses selling liquor. The arrival of outsiders in trucks is noted, as well as Herman Parimo’s responsibility as the Protestant leader of “masses” who attacked particular neighborhoods.⁴⁶ As in *Republika* and *MAL*, (Muslim) “masses” that revenge the knife attack or burn establishments selling liquor seem to have no identifiable leader, whereas (Protestant) “masses” do.

After reporting many details that suggested fighting factions had been divided by religious affiliation, the December 30 report airs Major General Marasabessy’s announcement, based on his meeting with district officials. He concludes, contrary to the evidence presented, that the disturbances were caused neither by SARA nor by district election politics, but rather by eight arrested provocateurs or perpetrators (*oknum*) who “ignited the emotions of the masses” (*membakar emosi massa*). He adds, “We have captured eight of the provocateurs, they goaded the masses to carry out the riots” (*Provokator yang kami tangkap ada 8 orang, mereka menghasut massa untuk melakukan kerusuhan*). Here the religious identities of the masses blamed are not clear, but mob violence—somewhat like the concept of “terrorism” current in the US—is portrayed as

⁴⁴ On the dynamic at work here between class and race, see Siegel, “Early Thoughts,” pp. 80-107.

⁴⁵ Although the licenses of *Detik* and *Editor* had been withdrawn along with *Tempo*’s in 1994, new permits under new rules were granted in 1998.

⁴⁶ “Kerusuhan di Poso, 79 Orang Luka,” Detik.com, December 28, 1998; “Hujan Deras, Kerusuhan Poso Reda,” Detik.com, December 29, 1998; “Kerusuhan Poso Akibat Provokasi 8 Oknum,” Detik.com, December 30, 1998.

a constant threat against which only the most proactive government watchmen can successfully guard. Although the detik.com report said the Major General did not identify those arrested, the general would announce those names a few days later in a January 2, 1999 television interview, broadcast in Sulawesi, during which he described all eight people arrested as Protestants. Whether he meant that these Protestant “provocateurs” provoked Muslim masses, Protestant masses, or both to engage in rioting remains unclear from the Detik.com article.

First Phase Protestant Email List Reports

Protestant views of the 1998 events did not appear in any mainstream mass media format. But some messages circulated to Christian “micropublics” via personal email lists, often relayed again via Indonesian-language internet groups such as FICA (Fellowship of Indonesian Christians in America; www.fica.org) or Eskol-Net (eskol@mitra.net.id). By December 1998, middle-class Indonesian Protestants with religious network connections and internet access were able to follow religiously polarized conflicts through situation reports posted on the listserves of Eskol-Net, which even had a twenty-four-hour telephone hotline based in Java. One personal email list posting relayed the story of some Protestant professionals, originally from Palu, who were traveling through Poso during the Christmas holidays and who coincidentally became eyewitnesses to the violence and its results. Another posting included reports sent from Palu by a Protestant resident who was receiving land-line telephone messages from anxious Protestants in Poso City.

Unlike the mass-media reports, a Protestant email message dated December 28 explicitly claimed that churches, Protestant schools, and homes were being burned. The writer also claims that the “masses are butchering each other in the streets” (*massa sudah saling bantai di jalan*). The writer describes the situation as turning into a “war between Protestant and Muslim congregations” (*perang antara umat K dengan umat I*). He asserts that he is not repeating rumor or gossip, but is describing actual events in Poso City. In the narrative of this middle-class email writer, both Protestant and Muslim fighting factions are “masses,” but significantly only those outsiders who come down from the (Protestant majority) mountains in response to attacks on Protestants and their property are distinguished with the term “Poso people” (*orang-orang Poso*). The status of the violence is elevated with the term “war,” a word that does not generally appear in any official reports.

Later mailings by the same author say explicitly that there have been “quarrels among youth groups that led to ethnoreligious problems” (*kerusuhan antar kelompok pemuda yang kemudian menjurus ke isu SARA*). The writer mentions efforts by local government authorities and religious leaders to secure peace, but states that these were followed quickly by Muslims’ attacks on a church (*belum lama setelah perdamaian itu, terjadi lagi pelemparan oleh kaum Muslim yang sasarannya sebuah gereja*). He writes that the wife of a Protestant leader describes the attacks on their neighborhoods as a great indignity (*penghinaan besar*). Because Poso Protestants have been repeatedly stepped on (*diinjak-injak*), she fears they will lose all patience. This woman’s statement evinces memories of inequities and aggravating experiences that might prime her cohorts for social reaction. The email author adds the caution that Protestants should not let

themselves be trapped into reactive violence by provocateurs who arrive from outside Central Sulawesi. The implication seems to be that recent migrants from other areas, such as Bugis from South Sulawesi, intentionally start fights to intimidate local Christians who are never properly supported and protected by Indonesia's majority Muslim government.

An early January message by this same author refers to the rape of Chinese women during Jakarta's May 1998 riots and the fact that no police arrived to help until after the damage was complete. There is no hint here that professional military agents might be complicit in Poso's problem as they were in May 1998. But to prevent a recurrence of such official neglect, the writer advises all recipients of the email who have access to Indonesian human rights organizations, or even the United Nations, to contact those authorities immediately if they hope to stanch the violence and violation of human rights in Poso City. The writer says, "... if the United States can pressure Serbia in the case of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, maybe something similar can be applied in Indonesia, even though the problem is not the same" (*kalau AS bisa menekan Serbia atas kasus pembersihan etnis Bosnia, mungkin hal yang sama bisa diterapkan di Indonesia, walaupun masalahnya tidak sama*).

These messages by Protestants contrast sharply with those in national and provincial newspaper reports, not only concerning assertions of culpability, but also with respect to the logical grounds and framework undergirding their arguments. Rather than focus on the initial youth fight or allegedly criminal leaders, they envision a "big picture" national history of Protestant repression (albeit, in fact, a recent one) and the possibility that it might be adjudicated by international authorities of justice as a case of "ethnic cleansing." This represents a broader human-rights discourse that was utterly absent from initial Muslim and statist narratives, although it appeared occasionally in an alternate form in Muslim niche media after mid-2000 along with Muslim factions' contextualization of Poso events in a global religious framework (see below).

On February 9, 1999, an Indonesian Protestant was able to present a briefing to the US Congress that alleged an anti-Christian political agenda behind the 1998 violence.⁴⁷ Such messages regarding religious discrimination and alarm by Protestants apparently were not taken very seriously beyond church networks, nor were they acted upon, until late 2001, after the September 11 attacks on the United States. It is noteworthy, though, that the idea for such international lobbying was circulating via the internet among Protestant elites in Indonesia and transnationally on a small scale within a week of the first Poso violence, and that a more systematic narrative reached the US Congress in less than two months. Perhaps these responses are not so much an indication of full confidence in, or identification with, overseas authorities than evidence of a seasoned recognition that Indonesian government officials cannot be trusted to protect victims of collective violence.

Despite Protestants' claims that district officials were religiously prejudiced, legally partisan, and corrupt in their use of aid monies, most Christians displaced by arson or attacks in December 1998 gradually returned to Poso City during 1999 and rebuilt their

⁴⁷ Kie-Eng Go, "Political Agenda behind the Riot in Poso." Presentation in the Briefing on Human Rights Issues in Indonesia with the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus, February 9, 1999.

houses, using their own personal and community funds. Muslims whose property was damaged did the same, and many of them continued to rally around the former district head's preferred successor, as well as the former district head's brother, who was still under police investigation for the slanderous flier. Both men were supported by those who benefited from the prior Poso district regime's corrupt business practices. In November 1999, however, a different district head was selected and installed by the governor. The successful candidate was a native Muslim from the distant Bungku region, who was favored by neither of Poso City's religiously polarized factions.

Provincial News Coverage during Phase Two in April 2000

Palu's provincial daily paper, *Mercusuar*, played an odd role in the second phase of Poso's violence when its April 15, 2000 headline foretold, only a day before street fighting began anew, that another round of even more severe riots was coming.⁴⁸ The author of the article was subsequently taken into police custody, although his arrest and interrogation were strongly contested by the chairman of the *Reformasi* era organization, Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) who noted that the 1999 Media Bill allowed reporters to keep their sources confidential. In any case, complained the AJI chairman, it was the politician who predicted the resumption of violence during the interview who ought to be arrested, not the reporter, an obvious point that he said Indonesian police routinely overlook when they are incapable of locating the real culprits.

The *Mercusuar* article in question quoted Haelani Umar, a member of the Central Sulawesi district assembly (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah Satu, or DPRD I), who reportedly based his prediction on knowledge that Poso Muslims would be angered if the candidate they had favored to become district head was not now given the district secretary position. The representative claimed that more collective violence with ethnoreligious overtones (*bernuansa SARA*) would be the result if the governor ignored the aspirations of the people (*aspirasi masyarakat*). These same people demanded that investigations of the former district head's brother and of fraudulence in Poso's farmer credit program (*kredit usaha tani* or KUT) both be dropped. The narrative implied that if the will of some legitimate (Muslim) citizens was denied by the (Muslim) governor, these citizens (or their affiliated masses) would take out their frustration upon (less legitimate non-Muslim) residents of Poso City.

When the governor announced his choice for district secretary the next day, disappointing this vocal Poso faction by rejecting their favored candidate, a *déjà vu* type of street fight began in the Poso terminal market. The fight concluded with what Muslims in the area reported as the knifing of a Muslim youth by a Protestant. Protestant leaders later would claim that the former district head's cronies in fact planned the resumption of religious violence in Poso.⁴⁹ Both Protestant authorities and some independent Muslim investigators would conclude that the Muslim youth who had allegedly been knifed faked the injury by wrapping his hand in a bandage after he

⁴⁸ Andono Wibisono, "Poso Bakal Rusuh Kembali," *Mercusuar*, April 15, 2000, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Damanik, *Tragedi Kemanusiaan Poso*, pp. 22-29.

and his friends goaded the Protestant youths involved.⁵⁰ In any case, the mobilized Muslim groups now clarified the ethnoreligious nature of the conflict by destroying churches, burning Protestant neighborhoods, and sending most of Poso City's Christian inhabitants fleeing into the mountains. Security forces watched passively, even though temporarily reinforced from Palu, without taking effective action for over two weeks. Many displaced Protestants fled to the highland village of Tagolu, about seven kilometers south of the city, from where some refugees, under the leadership of a Protestant civil servant named Ir. A. L. Lateka began to plan their response. Lateka had written a letter to the governor in May 1999 arguing that the lame-duck district head ought to be held responsible for inciting the violence, but his accusation was largely ignored. Tagolu was also the village where Lateka, who was an in-law of Parimo, met the Catholic ex-convict named Tibo who would become his ally in later retaliations against Muslims.

National Newspapers on Phase Two

Kompas's report on April 19, 2000 described the destruction and plunder of Poso City by the "savage masses" (*massa beringas*).⁵¹ These wild (Muslim) people, whose religion was not noted, were described as seemingly possessed by the devil (*seperti kesetanan*). Yet, they also were shown to act systematically. The report said the mobs were expanding the scope of destruction by moving beyond the original sites of rioting, plunder, and arson to new sources of goods, burning these buildings only after they had been stripped of valuables. Wild and possessed masses could still appreciate fine consumer goods, it seems. The houses the masses targeted stood empty because roughly three thousand displaced persons from the attacked (middle-class, mostly Protestant) neighborhoods had fled the city.

By now the army was on call, and Makassar's Wirabuana Command spokesman explained that the 1998 disturbance had demonstrated that people from the neighboring provinces of North and South Sulawesi entered Central Sulawesi to provoke violence. So, he explained, the army's plan was simply to block those two borders to prevent any further problems. The plan seemingly ignored that truckloads of both factions' supporters had come from *within* the Poso District, and that destruction was ongoing *within* Poso City. It also expressed a familiar perspective that framed a hapless Central Sulawesi as a volatile region still marked by the legacy of Permesta and Darul Islam operations of the 1950s and early 1960s. The imagery of provocateurs and provincial turf wars omitted key issues of Central Sulawesi's present-day situation, that is the impressive rates of voluntary migration that, along with government "conservation zones," transmigration settlements, and new roads, rapidly had transformed the region's ethnoreligious demography as well as intensifying its land use.

The *Kompas* report ended with a section about how touched (*terharu*) the Muslim Kaili governor was to see the suffering of the Poso City's displaced citizens. He appealed to them not to take revenge against the perpetrators because that would only

⁵⁰ S. Sinasari ecip, Darwis Waru, and Alip Yog Kunandar, *Rusuh Poso, Rujuk Malino* (Jakarta: Cahaya Timur, 2002), pp. 12-13.

⁵¹ "Rumah Penduduk Mulai Dijarah," *Kompas*, April 19, 2000.

worsen the situation. "Let it be God alone who avenges their actions," the governor was quoted as saying. Even Protestant ministers who personally rejected violence as a solution were angered by this statement's implications that God oversaw the violence against them, and that no response in the form of legal justice need be forthcoming from the government.⁵²

National Internet News on Phase Two: Detik.com

Detik.com's April 18-May 3, 2000 coverage of Poso's Phase Two focuses on technical details of police and army information about residents wounded and killed, the three churches attacked, and the 267 houses destroyed.⁵³ An April 20 report notes that the governor and army spokesmen informed President Wahid that they were fully able to handle the situation despite what others might claim.⁵⁴ No mention is made of either "masses" run amok or the issue of SARA. The "trigger" for the disturbance is described neutrally as a quarrel among youth (*pertikaian antar pemuda*) at the bus terminal. Just the names of the (Protestant and Muslim) neighborhoods affected are mentioned, and it is noted that drunken youth were spotted at the terminal. Overall, the problems are minimized in the reports, which offer mechanical imagery and a fund of minutia rather than risk a more human analysis.

Detik.com did provide clear coverage about how the Palu police were interrogating the *Mercusuar* reporter, and why the Alliance of Independent Journalists objected to the investigation.⁵⁵ Overall, Detik.com's descriptions included no flagrantly partisan narratives about who was to blame or how the fighting factions split clearly along religious lines. Yet they also provided no clear information that might explain the reasons for Poso's return to collective violence. Instead they followed a neutrally statist pattern, suggesting that the military had already found the proper suspects, and claiming that the recently displaced residents now were resuming their normal lives in Poso City, as if nothing much had happened.

Protestant Network Email List Reports Concerning Phase Two

One of Eskol-Net's April 18, 2000 postings about Poso's relapse into violence mentions the pending nomination for district secretary and its significance as an incitement, but also says that fighting was triggered by a youth fight (*perkelahian pemuda*). Another longer report focuses on the burning and looting of Protestant homes, churches, and schools, ending with a precise list of buildings damaged in the past twenty-four hours. The reporter describes how the exact same Protestant neighborhoods are being destroyed as in December 1998, and adds that the security forces cannot do much because, using the same phrase as *Kompas*, the "savagely masses" (*massa yang beringas*) are so numerous. Throughout the report it is the "Protestant citizens" (*warga Kristen*) whose homes and places of worship are being plundered and

⁵² Crisis Center Gereja Kristen Sulawesi Tengah, "Pernyataan Crisis Center GKST Mengenai Peristiwa Kerusuhan Poso," Report dated June 18, 2000, section 3.4.

⁵³ "Pertikaian Antarwarga: 3 Orang Tewas, Poso Masih Tegang" and "Kodam Kirim 2 SSK Tentara ke Poso," Detik.com, April 18, 2000.

⁵⁴ "Pangdam VII/Wirabuana: Di Poso Nggak Ada Penjaraan," Detik.com, April 20, 2000.

⁵⁵ "Buntut Kerusuhan Poso: Wartawan Menara Calon Tersangka," Detik.com, April 28, 2000.

burned by the “masses.” The marauding mob’s religion is never identified but it is made clear by their targets and, for readers familiar with the local geography, their (Muslim) villages of origin.

The report (with the identity of its author obscured by the organizational presentation) notes that displaced Protestant citizens of different social classes were subject to different refugee routes. Those with vehicles could escape to other towns by road. Those who lacked vehicles, estimated at 60-70 percent of the more than two thousand people displaced that day, were forced to escape up the mountains on foot. The anonymous reporter explains that, according to a “trusted source,” Protestants did not fight back because they were still traumatized (*masih trauma*) from the riots of 1998, when many souls and possessions “flew away in vain” (*melayang sia-sia*).

Much was lost in vain, the author says, because the security forces and legal system did not function, yet his report expresses no open anger against these officials. Rather, it is the wild (Muslim) masses that are said to be causing the situation. Those mobs are said to remain triumphant, even after three participants are shot by *mobil* police (Brimob) from Palu who were threatened by the crowds. Like some stoic and pragmatic Chinese merchants attacked during the May 1998 riots in Jakarta, middle-class Poso Protestants apparently think that the police and government try to protect them, and hopefully will protect them again in the future.⁵⁶

National News Coverage of the Peak Violence during Phase Three, May 2000

The third and most deadly phase of Poso’s collective violence began on May 23, 2000, with a revenge attack planned by Parimo’s in-law, Lateka, and others who decided they needed to take justice into their own hands. A search for Poso City Muslims believed responsible for the April attacks on Protestants was carried out by about a dozen masked individuals. The search for the Muslim targets was bungled, and three Muslims who were not meant to be targets were killed before the vigilante group hid in an outlying Catholic Church they reportedly intended to protect. By that point, the posse was joined by the Catholic Flores migrant ex-con, Tibo, who said he had been told the church was under siege. Ironically, the church was burned as soon as the “ninja” posse escaped from their frustrated Muslim pursuers who did not trust the town police to prosecute the Christian murderers and their accomplices.

The killings and church burning set off mobilizations and offensives by both Muslim and Christian militias, but now native Protestants and their Catholic migrant allies carried out extensive and sometimes grisly killings with homemade weapons to avenge their recent experiences of loss and displacement. Hundreds of otherwise ordinary rural Protestant men joined these vigilante brigades and committed unspeakable acts, especially against residents of a Javanese transmigration village known as Kilo 9, and a nearby Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). The ensuing civil war, tardily contained by the arrival of army forces, dragged on for over two months until after Lateka was killed and more elusive militia leaders such as Tibo were arrested.

⁵⁶ On Jakarta Chinese responses after May 1998, see Siegel, “Early Thoughts,” pp. 88-91, 107-108.

The mid-2000 Christian militias seem to have been primarily locally organized and funded, although some ex-military officers, such as a former Assistant First Lieutenant (*Pembantu Letnan Satu*) named Tungkunan, also became involved. Right after the May 23 raid on Poso City, where three Muslims were killed, Lateka contacted the Central Sulawesi police to make a statement. He admitted that he was the leader of what the mass media were calling the “ninja” or “bat force” (*pasukan kelelawar*), which he said was organized simply because the government authorities had taken no action against those who had devastated Protestant communities in April. Lateka also wrote a letter to KOMNAS HAM (Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia, National Human Rights Commission) in Jakarta, which said his group’s actions were justified and their goals did not diverge from security aims of the central government.⁵⁷ The letter was read publicly to Poso police after his death, but government officials were not swayed by his arguments.

Kompas made a brief statement on May 23, 2000, noting the new disturbances and three deaths that had resulted from attacks with sharp weapons on “Muslim pockets” (*kantong Muslim*) in the city. The reporter states that hundreds of women and children from certain named (Muslim) neighborhoods of Poso City had fled to a police post seeking protection. The reporter adds that additional police from Palu had been sent to help control “the mass disturbances with an ethnoreligious flavor in the tourist city located at the heart of the Trans-Sulawesi highway” (*kerusuhan massal bernuansa SARA di kota wisata yang terletak di jantung Trans-Sulawesi itu*).⁵⁸ By now the ethnoreligious nature of the Poso violence is no longer disputed. This conclusion is paired with an overly idealistic vision of Poso City as a tourist attraction and mention of its strategic location on the main north-south vehicular road connecting provinces of Sulawesi.

During the next several days, updates relayed by telephone from Poso City Muslims to reporters based in Makassar, South Sulawesi, describe in neutral terms a “clash between citizens” (*bentrok antarwarga*). They also mention a gubernatorial appeal to Poso citizens via an Indonesian Republic Radio (RRI) broadcast from Palu in which the governor asked citizens to aid the reconciliation process by “jointly creating a conducive atmosphere” (*bersama-sama menciptakan iklim yang kondusif*).⁵⁹ *Kompas* was slower than other newspapers, such as *Suara Pembaruan*, to give details about the serious violence occurring in Poso. As late as May 31, *Kompas* reports only that Central Sulawesi is now formally requesting army assistance from Makassar because the situation in Poso is becoming “increasingly complicated” (*makin ruwet*).⁶⁰

Kompas reportage was based in Makassar, from where its journalists report the violent responses of Indonesian Muslim University (UMI) students who seemingly are privy to information about events that the newspaper has not yet publicized. According to these reports, the students are demonstrating at the Wirabuana Military Command headquarters and stopping passersby to check their identity cards (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk*, KTP). They then block the passage of, or sometimes beat, those “who are known to originate from particular ethnic and religious groups” (*yang ketahuan*

⁵⁷ The full text of Lateka’s letter is published in Damanik, *Tragedi Kemanusiaan Poso*, pp. 31-32.

⁵⁸ “Situasi Kota Poso Semakin Mencekam,” *Kompas*, May 23, 2000.

⁵⁹ “Kota Poso Tenang,” *Kompas*, May 26, 2000.

⁶⁰ “1500 Tentara Siap Dikirim ke Poso,” *Kompas*, May 31, 2000; compared to “1,000 Warga Poso Dievakuasi ke Parigi,” *Suara Pembaruan*, May 30, 2000

berasal dari suku dan agama tertentu).⁶¹ The students seemingly are imitating the actions and authority of security forces, as they use the personal information on citizens' official documents to determine who they will punish or allow to pass freely.

On June 5, over a week after the siege on Muslim migrants nine kilometers south of Poso City began, *Kompas* began to release details about wounded and bound corpses that were floating down the Poso River. Their sources of information are refugees taking shelter with the Muslim Students' Association (Himpunan Mahasiswa Indonesia) in Palu, and the Central Sulawesi police chief who confirms that "provocateurs" (*provakator*) entered Poso via "rat trails that were hard for security forces to reach" (*jalan-jalan tikus hingga sulit dijangkau aparat*).⁶² Those who could commit such heinous crimes beyond the reaches of the cities where authorities rule, are no longer "masses," and certainly not "citizens." They are small and sinister rodents, alien to civilized urban society and capable of ruining it.

In contrast to *Kompas*, *Republika* provides more timely information about the violent events, which they frame as a case of "Red Group masses" (*massa Kelompok Merah*) attacking and burning (*menyerang, membakar*) villages and mosques of Muslim communities (*kaum Muslim*).⁶³ Drawing on provincial police sources, *Republika* reports quickly name Tibo and his accomplices as the perpetrators. Also featured in this publication are dozens of Muslim groups' allegations about how the Red Group forces burned Muslim settlements and committed horrible, indiscriminate murders. These sources challenge an apologia by Protestant church leaders claiming that the Christian factions, acting in self-defense, were forbidden to harm innocents.⁶⁴ Overall, national mainstream news coverage of Poso's Phase Three fully embraced and acknowledged the SARA framework while concentrating on the mechanical details that gave evidence of continuing destruction, elusive Red Group leaders, and increasing army deployments.

National Internet News on Phase Three: Detik.com and the KOMPAK Connection

While *Kompas* reports in early June 2000 offered brief and confident updates on Poso from army spokesmen who listed low casualty numbers (about one hundred), the internet site Detik.com was reporting five times that number of deaths with logistical details on villages attacked and eyewitness accounts of the violence. No derogatory terms were used to describe the perpetrators, who are not mentioned in the report, and the religion of victims is never specified except for mention of a floating corpse identified by name as the former head of an attacked Muslim boarding school (*pesantren*). Detik.com's journalist was obtaining more detailed conflict information and casualty figures from an inside source: Agus Dwikarna, head of the Central and

⁶¹ "Gagal Bertemu Pagdam, Mahasiswa Razia KTP," *Kompas*, June 2, 2000.

⁶² "Sembilan Mayat Ditemukan di Sungai Poso," *Kompas*, June 5, 2000. Forest footpaths, often called "rat roads" by locals, are routine trails for many rural highland farmers who cannot afford motor travel.

⁶³ "Kerusuhan di Poso Meluas, Aparat Keamanan Dihimbau untuk Bertindak Tegas," *Republika*, May 29, 2000.

⁶⁴ "Jumlah Korban Tewas di Poso Simpang-Siur, Polisi Amankan Tiga 'Ninja,'" *Republika*, June 6, 2000; "36 Ormas Islam Bantah Hasil Investigasi CC GKST Soal Kerusuhan Poso," *Republika*, June 26, 2000.

South Sulawesi branch of the “Crisis Prevention Committee” (Komite Penanggulangan Krisis, KOMPAK).⁶⁵

Agus Dwikarna, it was later revealed, had already been involved in the logistical support of Muslim militias for Ambon, and he was now turning his attention to Poso. The original Solo branch of KOMPAK was founded in 1998 as an Indonesian organization to provide humanitarian aid to needy Muslims under the aegis of the proselytizing Islam Propagation Council of Indonesia (Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia, DDII). DDII had ties to Jema’ah Islamiyah through JI’s founder, Abdullah Sungkar, while Agus Dwikarna was head of both KOMPAK and Laskar Jundullah, an organization that spawned a key militia mobilizing in Poso during 2000.⁶⁶ Jema’ah Islamiyah’s internal documents and reports date their founding and some leaders’ intent to expand jihadist activities into Indonesia to the early 1990s. Yet, the choice of Sulawesi as a focus of field operations likely was based to a significant degree on publicity concerning Poso in mid-to-late 2000, which identified the region as a center of “Muslim slaughter.” The jihad militias’ subsequent presence introduced not only increasingly lethal weaponry to the region, but also additional rhetorical pressures on local citizens to see this complicated socioeconomic and politically local conflict in outsiders’ “religious war” terms.

Agus Dwikarna and KOMPAK had ties to respectable charity work, national politicians, and high-technology mass media outlets, as well as links to illegal arms supplies and jihad militia volunteers, first for Ambon, and then for Poso. Until his March 2002 arrest in Manila for carrying C4 explosives in his suitcase, Agus Dwikarna was routinely quoted by various media outlets as a news source; he offered much detailed and apparently accurate data, without any hint of his simultaneous role as a Muslim militia commander and fund-raiser. What is distinctive about his comments, compared with a sea of statist newspaper reports, are his complaints about how the “security forces are not courageous enough to guarantee the safety of humanitarian aid teams” such as his own (*aparat tidak berani menjamin keselamatan tim kemanusiaan*). Such self-evident claims noting the rank incapacity of police or army forces to protect civilians under attack provided a widespread, secular legitimization for guerrilla violence. Complaints about a lack of security were advanced by both Muslim and Protestant factions in 2000 to justify their paramilitary offensives.

Mainstream Provincial Newspaper Coverage of Phase Three

Immediately after the first Poso City killings in late May 2000, *Mercusuar* reports, too, declared the disturbances in Poso to be ethnoreligious (*bernuansa SARA*). Reporters, however, initially tried to follow New Order censorship protocols by avoiding the use of direct religious labels. The groups described as attacking (Muslim) neighborhoods were referred to just as the “group of attackers” or “mob of attackers” (*kelompok penyerang* or *massa penyerang*). Local readers could easily distinguish which side’s actions were being described as criminal, and there was a subtle form of bias built into the studiously technical format of most reports. For example, five hundred armed individuals being sent to Poso in ten trucks directed by clearly (Muslim)

⁶⁵ A. Era, “Rusuh Poso, 5000 Orang Ngungsi,” *Detik.com*, June 5, 2000.

⁶⁶ International Crisis Group, “Jihad in Central Sulawesi.”

“religious leaders” (*tokoh agama*) from a distant coastal town were described as “missionaries of peace” (*misi perdamaian*) who were going to aid and obey “security forces” (*pihak keamanan*). The article reported that the armed group was motivated by concern for their “brothers who were suspected of being cut down by irresponsible people” (*saudara-saudara mereka yang diduga dibabat orang-orang yang tidak bertanggung jawab*).⁶⁷ The Muslim-Protestant battle was presented as a conflict between missionaries of peace—including security forces—and irresponsible people.

Despite its frequent reliance on government spokesmen, *Mercusuar*’s coverage of the violence in Poso in late May 2000, when chaos was at its peak, does sometimes indirectly criticize the Poso District government and security forces. On May 26 the paper notes that the entire executive staff of the district had “disappeared” (*menghilang*) just when they were most needed to find a solution to the trouble.⁶⁸ In the following days, reporters frequently voiced Muslim student leaders’ criticism of the ineffective security forces, and their articles recount in agonizing detail how the governor said the army could not send additional troops until the head of police formally requested their transfer.⁶⁹

In the final days of May 2000, *Mercusuar* reported on the governor’s meetings with Muslim student lobbies, and his decision to reveal the name and police pursuit of a “mastermind-intellectual actor” (*dalang-aktor intelektual*) behind the disturbances.⁷⁰ Through telephone calls and a letter to the governor, the Protestant Pamona leader Lateka reportedly admitted his involvement, and acknowledged a personal contribution of Rp. 30 million to support fighting Christian militias. Although a May 30 report briefly mentions Tibo as “leader of the bat ninja militia” (*pemimpin pasukan kelelawar ninja*), most stories focus on Lateka until after he was killed during a Brimob maneuver on June 2.⁷¹ Other stories describe the plight of displaced citizens, allegations of imported automatic weapons, and Muslim student groups’ anger at the district head’s inability to safeguard Poso’s Muslim community.

By mid-June 2000, *Mercusuar* reporters, clearly reiterating army commanders’ usage, start routinely labeling the fighting groups (*kelompok*) as “red” (Protestant) versus “white” (Muslim). Some of their stories accuse army and police personnel of providing at least “logistical support” (*bantuan logistik*), and cite as evidence better-documented appearances of “wild” organic weapons.⁷² Throughout July, reports and photos of mass graves are published almost daily, along with other news of security forces moving through the district on their “Love Peace Operation” (*Operasi Cinta Damai*). The corpses unearthed and graphically photographed are said to be the result of “butchery” (*pembantaian*) by Tibo’s red group, although no alleged perpetrators had

⁶⁷ “Penjabat Pemda Poso ‘Menghilang,’” *Mercusuar*, May 26, 2000. This section is based on examination of all relevant articles in *Mercusuar* issues from late May through July 2000.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ In fact, *Mercusuar*’s editor in mid-2000 said that, despite the staff’s best efforts, their articles evoked criticisms and pressure from all sides, including religious organizations, government officials, and military personnel.

⁷⁰ “AL Lateka Akui Biyai Kasus Poso,” *Mercusuar*, May 30, 2000.

⁷¹ “Poso Rusuh Akibat Politik dan Sosial,” *Mercusuar*, May 30, 2000; “Ir Lateka Tewas Saat Bentrok di Kayamanya?” *Mercusuar*, June 3, 2000.

⁷² “Danrem: Kelompok Merah Aktif Menyerang,” *Mercusuar*, June 7, 2000; “Puluhan Oknum TNI-Polri ‘Terlibat’ Kerusuhan Poso,” *Mercusuar*, June 26, 2000.

yet been caught or tried.⁷³ *Mercusuar* reports that the Love Peace forces have amassed proof of the “slaughter of white group citizens” (*bantaian terhadap warga sipil dari kelompok putih*).⁷⁴ After Tibo is captured on July 27, he continues to be referred to daily in *Mercusuar* as the “human butcher” (*Si jagal manusia*) and “war leader” (*panglima perang*), despite his lawyer’s protest that there are several other (Christian faction) leaders more important than Tibo.⁷⁵

Indonesian Media Watch studies by Muslim journalists who later analyzed sample *Mercusuar* issues published in mid-2000 concluded that the newspaper consistently used unfavorable labels for Christian leaders and groups, while only favorable or neutral labels were used for Muslim leaders and groups.⁷⁶ This stigmatization of Christian fighters was amplified by the types of photos attached to the articles, including images of mass graves and piles of skulls juxtaposed with portrait photographs of the alleged Christian ringleaders. Love Peace personnel are photographed posing with the bones and pointing at them in a way that now looks inappropriately intimate. Perhaps the posing troops were just trying to insert life and action into still photographs that otherwise illustrated only death, and so might imply their own absence of earlier life-saving efforts.

Some Provincial Readers in mid-2000 and the Magic in These Stories

I read *Mercusuar* newspapers in Central Sulawesi with a few dozen residents in the weeks between the late May 2000 killings of Muslims at Kilo 9 and the July capture of the accused “butcher” Tibo. I noted that these readers, both Protestants and Muslims, accepted the suggestion promoted by the media that the violence was being orchestrated by heinous villains who could control large numbers of regional fighters. By then, Tibo was the third “criminal” mastermind regularly featured as leader of the Protestant factions, since Parimo and Lateka already were dead.⁷⁷ During public minibus rides in and beyond Palu, Muslim and Protestant riders would establish their common repudiation of Poso’s ongoing violence by discussing the headlines and jointly castigating Tibo. Perhaps his Catholic religious status made this scapegoating more palatable to both Muslims and Protestants. Some of the latter, who felt rather detached from the fighting in Poso, said Tibo couldn’t be a true Christian if he had committed such horrible crimes.⁷⁸ In public places, readers naturally were most focused on the front-page photographs: the skull piles and a frequently published portrait of Tibo wearing a dark jacket, his eyes cast down as if to evade any direct gaze.

⁷³ “Lagi, Ditemukan 33 Mayat Korban Pembantaian,” *Mercusuar*, July 2, 2000, pp. 1, 11; “Lagi-lagi, Ditemukan Korban Pembantaian Perusuh,” *Mercusuar*, July 18, 2000, pp. 1, 11.

⁷⁴ “Cinta Damai Targetkan Ringkus Tibo Cs,” *Mercusuar*, July 24, 2000, pp. 1, 11.

⁷⁵ “Tibo Ungkap Lima Jenderal Tertingalnya,” *Mercusuar*, July 29, 2000, pp. 1, 11.

⁷⁶ See Alip Kunandar, “‘Jagal Manusia’ dari Poso,” *Media Watch: Jurnal Kajian Media* 7 (2001): 27-32; also, Darwis Waru, “Posisi Media Lokal dalam Konflik Poso.” Unpublished paper, prepared March 2003.

⁷⁷ No Muslim counterparts were identified in this kind of criminal leadership role by any mass media outlet.

⁷⁸ Most Palu Christians remained detached from the Poso violence because they had no relatives there, and there are sectarian boundaries between Poso’s Dutch mission-founded churches and western Central Sulawesi’s British-founded Salvation Army networks. By contrast, Poso’s Muslim migrants had many more concerned relatives and co-religionists based in Palu.

That jacket piqued the interest of some of my female Protestant acquaintances because they were certain it was his source of invulnerability and that it had insured his repeated escapes from police capture over a two-month period. They watched eagerly for the photograph in each new issue of the newspaper. They concluded that if he was still wearing that jacket, no man could subdue him; that he would be vulnerable to capture only by women. When I jokingly challenged them to make good on their claims, my friends were quick to demur, adding that women were afraid of him.

The lively talk about Tibo's jacket and his invulnerability to men versus women ended abruptly with his capture by male police. In political terms, the playful narrative sought a special reason to explain why the "butcher" Tibo was evading capture by the state's security forces, arms of the government that most citizens still feared to criticize directly. In this one example among many that I heard, usually from women, potential solutions to violence were envisioned as hinging upon women's actions, perhaps because solutions patently were not forthcoming from local or national male leaders. The woman who first told me the narrative about Tibo's invulnerability charm perceived the jacket's strength to be located within the realm of many powerful natural and social forces—including bus bombs, soldiers, and militias—that she did not fully comprehend.



Mercusuar, July 28, 2000, front page, featuring Tibo in dark jacket

I provide the tale above not to suggest that content analyses of official media narratives are useless, but as a reminder that certain members of any news audience are also spinning their own stories, sometimes based on what the authors would consider a peripheral detail. The idea of Tibo's invulnerability jacket also suggests the significance of a magical or at least creative theatricality to the entire series of media stories about Poso's conflict. A devious "puppeteer" or "mastermind" or "human butcher" had to be imagined to explain the killings and hand-to-hand combat that had occurred between factions of the normally docile provincial masses. Such stories were required not only to thrill the readership, but also to make the extensive and long fruitless army and police chase fittingly heroic. The magic, then, is not just in the minds of some superstitious members of the commoner "masses." No, it is right at the heart of all these news outfits' Cowboy and Indian stories.

Provincial Tabloid Coverage of Phase Three and Resonant Pro-jihad National Media

Mercusuar's coverage of violence in late 2000 is still far less inflammatory and more locally framed than that presented by Palu's two weekly tabloid papers. In addition to *MAL (Mingguan Al-Chairaat)*, published for over thirty years, a new paper named *Formasi* entered Palu's media arena in 1999. Headed by a Muslim Bugis businessman, *Formasi* began with a political focus aimed to attract Palu's educated middle class, but the editors focused every issue between May and December 2000 on the Poso violence. Mid-2000 issues of *MAL* and *Formasi* not only feature photo montage covers showing portraits and bones, suggesting which Christians performed the sadistic violence, but also frame the Poso conflict as a broader Muslim-versus-Christian holy war being fought on local Indonesian soil.

July 2000 issues of *MAL* concentrate on the Catholic ringleaders and the ever-present threat that there are even more dastardly puppeteers at work behind them. One article argues that those currently captured must suffer the death penalty immediately because when Parimo was sentenced to only fourteen years, he reportedly died—despite reports that he (like Elvis) continues to be sighted. A quick execution, the article declares, is the only way to avoid nefarious tricks, such as Parimo's allegedly faked death.⁷⁹

One *MAL* interview features H. Sofyan Lembah, a Muhammadiyah leader, Tadulako University law instructor, and Poso militia mobilizer who—after a quick hat change—later would become a signatory of the Malino ceasefire agreement in December 2001. Lembah refers to Tibo as just a "puppet" (*wayang*) who nevertheless must be prosecuted immediately, while investigations of Muslim suspects from earlier rounds of violence should be put on hold, lest Muslims again resort to more "emotional" steps. He concludes that "what is fitting to remember is what happened in Poso: the Muslim community was attacked, not attacking. Those killed were of the Muslim community mostly, not them" (*yang patut diingat adalah yang terjadi di Poso: Umat Islam diserang, bukan menyerang. Yang jadi korban itu umat Islam yang paling banyak,*

⁷⁹ "Menanti 'Nyanyian' Tibo Cs," *MAL*, Week 4, July 2000, p. 5. The cover of the issue was captioned, "Tibo, Dominggus, Rinus...Siapa Lagi?" (Tibo, Dominggus, Rinus ... Who Else?)

bukan mereka).⁸⁰ He adds that, according to his estimate based on census data, the Poso death toll has reached into the thousands.⁸¹ Lembah's confident conclusion declares a high number of Muslim deaths and irreproachable Muslim innocence.



Cover of *MAL* issue 29, number 1 (July 2000, Week 4)

In August 2000, *MAL* claims there had been a secret meeting held by Christians at a university housing complex in Bandung to plan the Poso conflict.⁸² The reporter says, “news indicates that a scenario for the Phase Three attacks on Muslims was planned at that meeting. This is because not long afterwards Phase Three broke out” and killed thousands. (*Kabarinya, dari pertemuan Bandung (Bandung Meeting) itulah, skenario kerusuhan Poso Jilid III disusun. Karena, tak lama berselang sesudahnya, pecahlah kerusuhan Poso ...*” Other *MAL* segments in the same issue support their argument about a broader Christian conspiracy by citing colonial-era Dutch missionary writings that reveal how Western Christians always have planned to keep Central Sulawesi as a “Christian block.”

⁸⁰ H. Sofyan Faried Lembah, Koordinator Front Solidaritas Islam Revolusioner Palu, “Tibo Hanya Wayang yang Dikorbankan,” *MAL*, Week 4, July 2000, p. 6.

⁸¹ If census data based on evidence from now-raized villages were used to determine death totals, that method would be unlikely to discriminate between those who died and those who fled.

⁸² “Skenario Poso Dirancang di Bandung,” *MAL*, Week 2, August 2000; see also Waru, “Posisi Media Lokal.”

A June issue of Palu's other tabloid, *Formasi*, argues that there is a distinct difference between Poso's "white" (Muslim) fighters, who are clearly not professional and not guided by any leader, versus "red" (Christian) fighters who walk like robots (*jalannya seperti robot*) and present the appearance of elite forces (*pasukan elit*). To support their contrast of ordinary Muslim civilians with military-led Christian troops, the report notes that an "army rogue" (*oknum TNI*) was observed in the battlefield. An entire August 2000 issue of *Formasi* then parallels the *MAL* coverage to frame Poso's violence as a "scenario of religious coercion" (*skenario pemaksaan agama*), where Protestant executioners (*algojo*) and local missionaries are forcing members of the Muslim population to convert, using terror tactics where necessary.⁸³ In the same issue, a local Muslim cleric states he is certain that Christians from abroad have provided weapons and other supplies to the factions attacking Poso Muslims. He adds that Tentena is the missionary center for all of eastern Indonesia and that the slaughter of Muslims he witnessed on television in Bosnia now has exploded in Maluku and Poso.⁸⁴

These kinds of globalized claims, making timeless assertions about Christian crusades reaching Poso, are matched during the same period by national print and online magazines such as *Majalah Suara Hidayatullah* and *Sabili*, as well as comparable web sites such as Salafy-net, al-Bunyan, and Media.isnet.⁸⁵ Where did these claims originate, and how did local and translocal media narratives influence one another? The conspiracy framing appears earlier nationally, but it seems likely that Sulawesi constituencies contributed new information about their enemies' dastardly deeds to bolster the theory already circulating in Java that framed these events inside a timeless religious conspiracy.⁸⁶ But these various media outlets, as well as individual spokesmen, appear to act as brokers among segments of local micropublics, national mesopublics, and transnational megapublics to purvey a common master narrative of clashing religious civilizations.

Sabili begins discussing the Poso cause regularly in June 2000. Articles describe Muslim communities (*kaum Muslim*) being slaughtered and raped by red militias (*pasukan merah*). *Sabili's* spokesman, as in the provincial tabloid *MAL*, is H. Sofyan Lembah of Central Sulawesi's Revolutionary Front for Islamic Solidarity, who advises Muslims to reject any efforts at peace-making. These initiatives, he warns, are

⁸³ "Djamaluddin Hadi, "Pemaksaan Agama Adalah Kejahatan HAM," *Formasi* no. 50, August 2000, p. 4; "Bayang-bayang Missionaris dalam Poso Berdarah," *Formasi* no. 50, August 2000, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁴ Habib Saleh Al Idrus, Pemimpin Majelis Zikir Nurkhaerat Poso, "Benteng Muslim Sudah Saya Dirikan" and "Bayang-bayang Missionaris," pp. 4-6.

⁸⁵ See more extended discussion in Aragon, "Communal Violence."

⁸⁶ An earlier narrative about Jewish-Christian-Indonesian Chinese-US Capitalist conspiracies was deployed by Suharto's son-in-law, Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, and his colleague Ahmad Sumargono, head of the Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the Muslim World (Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas dengan Dunia Islam, KISDI). The booklet they circulated, which claimed that a non-Muslim religious and economic cabal was conspiring to overthrow Suharto, sought to rally Muslims around a president who at that time was being challenged by modernist Muslim factions as well as other anti-corruption, pro-democracy activists. The booklet was published in November 1997, but its general thesis continued to reverberate on the KISDI website and elsewhere in many Indonesian Muslim circles. See Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 201-207. A spate of *Republika* reports steeped in global conspiracism is analyzed in Greg Fealy, "Tall Tales: Conspiracy Theories in Post-bomb Indonesia," *Inside Indonesia* 74 (April-June 2003): 6-8.

composed of promises that will be broken, and are motivated by a desire to negotiate exactly when the Muslim community is seriously weakened from slaughter.⁸⁷ In a July *Sabili* article, Lembah explains that Poso's conflict is caused by Christian engineering (*rekayasa Kaum Salibis*) in the form of a treasonous plan to create an independent nation-state called "Greater Toraja" (*Toraja Raya*).⁸⁸ "Greater Toraja" was in fact a 1950s regional autonomy movement, one in a long line of thus far unsuccessful efforts by Sa'dan Toraja and/or Luwu residents to pull away from South Sulawesi. What was an historical movement for regional autonomy is recast by Lembah as a contemporary secessionist movement.

This author rejects the idea that the Poso conflict is rooted in elite politics or other social issues. He says it is clearly a religious war, as evidenced by Christians destroying Muslims' mosques and boarding schools. The article also includes Lembah's direct, and notably atypical, criticism of Poso Muslims, who he says acted weakly—lacking both a sense of fraternal community (*ukhuwahnya*) and proper militancy (*militansinya*)—when they fled Poso. He concludes by saying all lands seized must be returned to their rightful Muslim owners before there can be any successful peace efforts. His call for Muslim militia consolidation and renewed revenge is clear. He demands that ordinary Poso Muslims join to become a more cohesive fighting force, seemingly to mimic the reported qualities of Christian enemies.

Unlike mainstream media, publications such as *Sabili* largely eschew statements by government officials in favor of those by the most uncompromising Muslim leaders. Although *Sabili* loses direct interest in Poso by the end of 2001, when it shifts discussions to 9/11 and champions Osama bin Laden's actions, the magazine's general claim is that Indonesia's governments under Gus Dur and Megawati discriminates against Muslim factions in all conflict areas.⁸⁹

In mid-2000, the internet site Salafy-net suggests that there is an international, particularly American, effort to eliminate the Muslim community from the Poso area.⁹⁰ Salafy-net was developed from the desk-top published newsletters first issued in 1995 at the school in Central Java started by Jafar Umar Thalib. Thalib later established The Communication Forum of the Followers of the Sunna and the Community of the Prophet (Forum Komunikasi Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jama'ah, FKAWJ) and its better known paramilitary wing, Laskar Jihad.⁹¹ When Laskar Jihad became actively involved in the Maluku conflict in 2000, they created a separate web-site, which then later produced newsletters specifically about the Poso conflict that could be downloaded and printed for regional distribution.

⁸⁷ "Poso, Ribuan Muslim Meregang Nyawa," *Sabili* no.1, June 28, 2000, pp. 14-15.

⁸⁸ "Muslim Poso Bersatulah," *Sabili*, no.2 July 12, 2000, p.14. On this history, see Dik Roth, "'Many Governors, No Province' The Struggle for Luwu (Raya) Province in South Sulawesi," in *Renegotiating Boundaries: Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia*, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Gerry Van Klinken, ed. (Leiden: KITLV, 2005), in press.

⁸⁹ "Poso, Ambon, Aceh: Mega Diskriminatif?" *Sabili*, no. 13, December 2001, pp. 62-63.

⁹⁰ "Laporan Telpon Poso, Sulteng," Media.isnet.org from Atsari.virtualave.net/Salafy-net, June 6, 2000.

⁹¹ Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 73 (April 2002): 145-169; Robert W. Hefner, "Civic Pluralism Denied? The New Media and Jihadi Violence in Indonesia."

In July 2001, a few weeks after some horrific killings of Muslims in rural areas south of Poso City, Laskar Jihad began moving about three thousand troops into Central Sulawesi. Having received a well-publicized welcome by provincial university professors, the governor, and Poso's district head, Laskar Jihad maintained a high-profile deployment, supported by prominent media exposure. Laskar Jihad newsletters from this period, available both in print and online, describe the Poso Christians as dangerous primitives and infidels (*kafirs*). As in *Formasi* and *MAL* articles, Protestants are accused of plots against Muslims that will conclude only with separatism, as in East Timor. Christians' nationalist credentials are portrayed as suspect, always a matter of dire concern in Jakarta. Laskar Jihad newsletter accusations parallel other contemporaneous pro-jihad discourses that draw on transnational events, referring, as *MAL* reports do, to religious warfare in Bosnia. But the Poso bulletins also circulate a localized derogatory term, characterizing Poso Protestants as *Kongkoli*.⁹² This word, as the newsletter explains, names a tree in local vernacular, but Laskar Jihad associates it with the Indonesian word, *kongkol* or "scheme," designating the untrustworthy nature of Poso Protestants. The phrase "the schemers" (*para kongkoli*) thus replaces the "masses" or "red force" in many of their narratives.

The KOMPAK VCD, Internet Fundraising, and the DPR Report in Phase Four

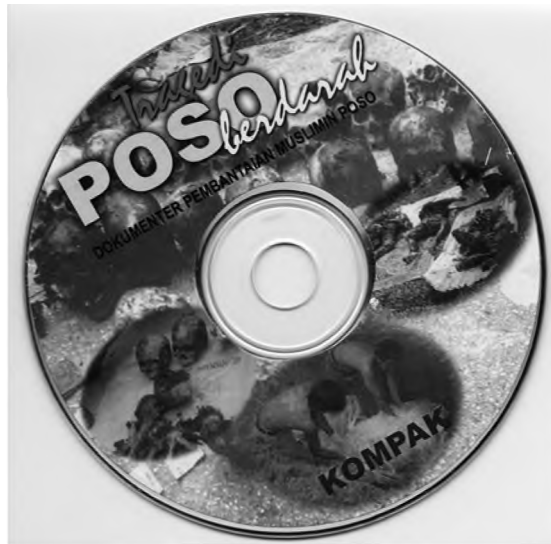
The killing of fourteen Muslims, mostly Bugis women and children at Buyung Katedo, Sepe village on July 3, 2001, became enshrined in video footage of shredded corpses. The resulting video compact disk (VCD), titled "The Bloody Poso Tragedy: A Documentary Film about the Slaughter of Poso Muslims" (*Tragedi Poso Berdarah: Film Dokumenter Pembantaian Muslim Poso*), was produced by KOMPAK. KOMPAK's media productions in Makassar were financed through the activities of Laskar Jundullah founder Agus Dwikarna, who would be arrested the following year in Manila. Such videos were used to seek sympathy and aid for Muslim fighters in Poso and Maluku. The case of the Buyung Katedo killings has never been solved, and there are conflicting allegations about the likely perpetrators.

The source of Muslims' anguish over the attack, however, will be apparent to anyone who watches this video. The footage consists of about twenty-five horrifying minutes of shaky still shots (*sans* tripod) and slow pans over fourteen bleeding and bloated corpses. The only living subjects are the flies buzzing around the corpses. This scene is followed by about twenty minutes of burial and mourning activities, which culminate in a sermon calling for jihad against the infidels responsible for this crime. The video compact disk about Poso, like other pro-jihad niche media productions, appeals to distant publics, although instead of tapping government concerns about sedition, like Laskar Jihad does, it promotes fears of an ongoing religious war, potentially a global and apocalyptic one.

Graphic depictions of violence attributed to Christian factions were also key elements of related internet-chat or news-group campaigns seeking to raise funds for "the Muslim side." Sometimes portrayed as charity donations to aid victims, the cash

⁹² "Kongkalikong Para Kongkoli," *Berita Laskar Jihad* no. 8, September 22, 2001; and "Kongkoli is Kurang Ajar," *Berita Laskar Jihad* no.3, November 3, 2001. Note Laskar Jihad's cocky declarative use of the English "is."

sent to the bank accounts advertised in these campaigns also went to arm and train both imported and local jihad fighters.⁹³ On August 23, 2001, the first of a four-part English message about Poso and the Buyung Katedo killings was introduced in Indonesian at an Isnet group internet site that linked Muslim advocates in Jakarta and London. The Indonesian sender says that those helping Palestine should also remember “our brothers in a nearby house” (*saudara-saudara kita yang di sebelah rumah*). The host then asks that the appended English reports be relayed around the world to collect funds for the bank account of H. Adnan Arsal, the Poso ministry of religion official, described here only as the religious leader (*imam*) for one of eight local Poso *mujahidin* groups. Separate account numbers are posted for both dollar and rupiah donations to the upcoming “Poso Jihad campaign” (*kampanye Jihad Poso*).



KOMPAK VCD titled “*Tragedi Poso Berdarah*” (The bloody Poso tragedy)

The first English report that follows, written by a reporter named Ummu Muthmainnah for Ummahnews.com, describes the gruesome Buyung Katedo killings and says that all phases of the Poso conflict were made up of similar unilateral attacks on Muslims by the “Red Force.” The reporter speaks positively of the Muslim fighters who are now retaliating by “sterilizing” twenty-two coastal settlements that had previously included Christian residents. Reverend Rinaldy Damanik of the Central Sulawesi Protestant Church Crisis Center is said to be “most responsible” for the violence, and it is claimed that foreign missions have sent Poso Christians “sophisticated weapons” and other supplies by small planes landing on mission

⁹³ See also International Crisis Group, “Jihad in Central Sulawesi,” and Dan Murphy, “How Al Qaeda Lit the Bali Fuse,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 17-19, 2003.

airfields in Poso. The violence is described as a "Christianizing campaign gone bad," and the writer concludes, "If Poso ever fell into their [Christians'] hands, Sulawesi would become another East Timor. Another arena for Western and Christian powers to wrestle for power." Separatism again is portrayed as a cause invariably spurred by foreign Christian intervention.

The third segment adds to the claims that Christians have been fomenting separatism by asserting that the United States is interested in Poso's resources, including untapped oil deposits in Tomini Bay. "If Poso ever fell into the hands of the Red Force, foreign elements (including US) could easily enter the region on the pretext of humanitarian missions." Local Christians, it is suggested, threaten Indonesian sovereignty, which, it appears, is hanging by a slim thread. It might seem surprising that a narrative aimed at transnational Muslim audiences is so focused on Indonesian sovereignty, but this angle seems based on a naturalized vision of "the Indonesian state" as an integral block on a global Muslim map, rather than a postcolonial construction.

With great journalistic sophistication, the final segment provides engaging vignettes of the lives of Poso *mujahidin*, including several youths who assembled homemade guns and a dedicated grandmother who smuggled a gun and ammunition past the five troopers she feeds every day. The reporter notes triumphantly that *mujahidin* easily can buy automatic weapons from unscrupulous security agents, even SS1s made by the government factory, P. T. Pindad. All those fighting jihad in Poso, the report suggests, are becoming better Muslims by reading the Qur'an, purifying themselves before the "wedding party" of battle, and preparing to die as religious martyrs (*syuhada*). With these various media offerings, the digital violence shopping network is complete: a horror movie could be watched, heroic mujahidin stories could be read, and one could take empathetic action at a distance through the electronic transfer of deposits.

A formal version of the globalized Christian conspiracy theory, just described from so many media outlets, was presented in Jakarta on September 18, 2001 before the Indonesian head of police (*kepala polisi Republik Indonesia*, or KAPOLRI) by Abdul Qadir Djaelani, a member of a fact-finding commission of the Indonesian Legislative Assembly (Komisi I DPR-RI). To insure that his elaborate conclusions were widely circulated, Djaelani privately funded the publication of his findings on both Maluku and Poso.⁹⁴ The resulting book is well illustrated with grisly photos of Muslim corpses, and written in a pseudo-erudite style that ranges from damning quotations drawn from nineteenth-century missionary writings to citations from Paul Tillich and *Robinson Crusoe*.

In a single jam-packed paragraph introducing his explanation of Poso's religious violence, Djaelani makes reference to Benny Murdani, President Habibie, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Omar Khaddafi, Samuel Huntington, and John Naisbett's theory that Indonesia will break into twenty-eight small countries. He therewith concludes that the violent conflict in Poso is "something engineered by Western Protestants to destroy Indonesia's Islamic community ... meaning the

⁹⁴ Abdul Qadir Djaelani, *Agama dan Separatisme Menjadi Landasan Konflik Maluku dan Poso* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pengkajian Islam Madinah Al-Munawwarah, October 2001).

destruction/annihilation of the United Indonesian Republic" (*suatu rekayasa Barat-Kristen untuk menghancurkan ummat Islam Indonesia ... berarti kehancuran/kemusnahan Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*).⁹⁵ The grandiose claims by Djaelani are quite familiar, reminiscent of retired Brigadier General Rustam Kastor's book about alleged Ambon-Maluku separatism.⁹⁶

In addition to his theoretical assertions, Djaelani presents a list of detailed accusations claiming that the Central Sulawesi Christian Church, especially its recently detained Crisis Center director, Rinaldy Damanik, is responsible for all of the major sadistic violence against Poso Muslims. The book is replete with peculiar chronological and substantive errors, which would be apparent to anyone familiar with either religious faction's versions of Poso events. But the purpose of the book, like many of the media reports described here, was to embed ancillary data about events in a religiously polarized narrative of persuasion, which in this case was oriented to a Jakarta audience controlling the apparatus of the state. After his August 2001 interrogation in Jakarta, Reverend Damanik was charged with carrying weapons in his vehicle, sentenced to three years, and held in the Central Sulawesi prison until his release on November 9, 2004. With Parimo and Lateka dead, and Tibo awaiting execution, Damanik—the main source of Protestant versions of the Poso conflict and a vocal critic of the government security apparatus—was now publicized as the new Christian mastermind of violence.

Christian Media after 2000, and the Geographical Boundaries of Languages

Christians had their own accusatory narratives to tell, but locally and nationally they had few media outlets through which to tell them. As a media assessment team put it, "Tentena exists in a virtual media blackout."⁹⁷ The only significant source of local media information on the Poso conflict from a Christian perspective was the Crisis Center of the Central Sulawesi Protestant Church led by Rinaldy Damanik. The Crisis Center issued brief statements and written reports, some of which were posted for a time on their own website, gkst.org. As internet connections to the Poso District did not yet exist during the periods of major violence, printed reports created by the Crisis Center in Tentena were faxed to the South Sulawesi capital of Makassar, then internet-posted from there.⁹⁸

By June 2000, Central Sulawesi Protestant Church ministers found themselves between a rock and a hard place, morally speaking. After witnessing Protestant losses in December 1998 and April 2000, they saw their role to be demanding justice for their congregations from government authorities. The hundreds of killings in May 2000 then threw them for a loop. One senior minister privately was furious with those who followed the vengeful "pagan" war rituals of Catholic Tibo instead of merciful church

⁹⁵ Djaelani, *Agama dan Separatisme*, p. 100.

⁹⁶ Rustam Kastor, *Konspirasi Politik RMS dan Kristen Menghancurkan Ummat Islam di Ambon-Maluku* (Yogyakarta: Wihdah, 2000). Mention of Djaelani's equally hostile views toward ethnic Chinese are noted in Ariel Heryanto, "Race, Rape, and Reporting," p. 318.

⁹⁷ Kathleen, J. Reen, Lance Alloway, Oren A. Murphy, and Yon Thayrun, "Crisis in Poso." Unpublished report prepared by *Internews Indonesia*, June 28, 2000.

⁹⁸ Internet and cell phone infrastructures were being installed in the Poso District during late 2003, functioned irregularly in 2004, but began to operate more reliably by 2005.

teachings. Other ministers assigned to Poso understood that their all-too-human congregations could no longer just “turn the other cheek.” One young minister said he could not, and so did not attempt to prevent the mobilization of young Protestants “for defense,” although he told the groups he knew were departing to fight that he did not condone aggression against civilians. The GKST synod in Tentena also was undergoing turmoil in clerical leadership because of illnesses, deaths, brain drain, and scandals. Thus, a unified voice emerged publicly only through statements issued by the Crisis Center, led by Damanik.

A widely circulated Crisis Center report from June 2000 reacts to Muslim media accusations that Christians have been slaughtering Muslims by claiming that a small group of Christians took up arms in self-defense after their community was attacked first.⁹⁹ The report complains of one-sided treatment by authorities scapegoating (*mengkamphitamkan*) Christian leaders and congregations (*anggota*). Unlike contemporaneous Muslim media on Poso, Crisis Center reports officially reject a religious (SARA) framing of the conflict, proclaiming that the “human tragedy” of Poso is not fundamentally a religious problem. They also advocate “peace” (*perdamaian*) and “reconciliation” (*rekonsiliasi*), terms that Muslim faction leaders and media reject as camouflage for treacherous plots. Crisis Center reports are filled with precise and systematically presented data on violent attacks, the tone of which would strike any Western-educated reader as less prejudiced than Muslim reports such as Djaelani’s. Therein, however, resides some interpretive danger because the Christian texts’ biases are less blatant.

Crisis Center reports invariably include quiet or vague passages when describing alleged Christian atrocities. In contrast to sections with explicit descriptions of attacks on Christians, those passages describing events surrounding the Walisongo *pesantren* (a.k.a. Kilo 9) killings are referred to only as efforts by a small subgroup of Christians, who had been angered by attacks on their kin that had gone unpunished, to “uphold justice” (*menegakkan keadilan*).¹⁰⁰ The killings of hundreds of individuals are presented as justifiable vigilantism in the absence of the rule of law. Similarly, the Buyung Katedo atrocities are described briefly as a village attack where fourteen Muslim residents were “slain” (*tewas*). The section notes that even this information was taken from the Palu newspaper *Mercusuar*.¹⁰¹ The Crisis Center reports naturally are not interested in incriminating members of their own church, either leaders or particular groups of congregants. Lateka is described positively as uniquely “honest and responsible” (*jujur dan bertanggung jawab*) in his leadership of native Poso people struggling for justice.¹⁰²

Crisis Center reports also include negative labeling of Muslims, who sometimes are referred to as “rioters” or “terrorists” (*perusuh* or *teroris*), “attackers” (*penyerang*), as well as just “the masses” (*massa*).¹⁰³ In the 2001 report, each of these unfavorable labels is followed by the clarification “Muslim” in parentheses. In a manner that mirrors and

⁹⁹ Crisis Center, “Pernyataan Crisis Center GKST.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Center Gereja Kristen Sulawesi Tengah, “Informasi dan Harapan dalam Menyikapi Situasi Terakhir Tragedi Kemanusiaan di Wilayah Kabupaten Poso dan Morowali.” Report dated December 3, 2001, Section 2, point 5.

¹⁰² Crisis Center, “Pernyataan Crisis Center GKST.”

¹⁰³ The term “*teroris*” used as a replacement for “*perusuh*” to describe fighters appears with increasing frequency in both Christian and Muslim media after September 11, 2001.

reverses the biased reporting of the Muslim media, the Center's Protestant focus leads to reports about the violent events, locations, and refugee havens that omit most data pertaining specifically to injured Muslim communities.

While humble in origin, Crisis Center reports began to take on new meaning in faraway places. They were relayed first to Indonesian Christian internet sites such as those run by the Fellowship of Indonesian Christians in America (Fica.org) and Eskolnet.¹⁰⁴ These "mediator" sites included not only pro-Christian narratives about the Poso conflict, but also photos depicting injured Christians and burned church structures. For example, there were no recorded deaths during the conflict's first phase in December 1998, but a grisly photo posted on the FICA web site showed a young Protestant man whose entire body was burned during the fighting.

The Crisis Center's Protestant-sided narration was repackaged for new macropublics when it was translated and amplified on internet sites of Western Protestant organizations that collect persecution data from Christian communities worldwide. A key example is the web site of the Jubilee Campaign (jubileecampaign.org). Based in London and Fairfax, Virginia, the Jubilee Campaign defines itself as a non-profit organization that "promotes the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and religious minorities in countries which imprison, terrorize, or otherwise oppress them." The secular humanitarian self-description sits oddly beside passages detailing their almost exclusively Christian concerns, as well as their Catholic Church and British Government connections.

Although Jubilee Campaign writers have produced serious research reports on the Poso conflict, their humanitarian focus is aimed at exposing anti-Christian oppression.¹⁰⁵ Almost all the minorities investigated and aided by the organization are Christian. For a "suggested donation," site users can buy videotapes or DVDs of their fourteen-part television series, "Passion and Pain: The Suffering Church Today." The series documents cases of "Christian persecution" worldwide, including in Poso and Maluku, and advises prayer and political lobbying at home for viewers who wish to help "today's martyrs." Somehow people who happened to be Christians, killed in collective violence related to such matters as the ecological economics of cacao fields, ebony concessions, and cut-throat regional politics, have become "martyrs" for a distantly conceived cause.

The Jubilee Campaign is only one of approximately one hundred mostly foreign Christian organization web sites that repeat or translate items from Central Sulawesi Protestant Church Crisis Center reports. These media presentations selectively provide information about Poso's conflict to fit within their own meta-narrative frame of "Christians oppressed by Muslim states or rogue militias," just as the Muslim sites described selectively cull Poso conflict data to demonstrate "Muslim oppression by Christians." With these nested communications, the Poso conflict again becomes constructed as something new and more grand than it was to most who lived through the confusing assaults that originally seemed more messy than Messianic.

¹⁰⁴ FICA is discussed for its role in bringing the most "local detail" from the October 1996 riots in Situbondo, East Java to a national and global audience, in Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics*, pp. 207-210.

¹⁰⁵ Go, "Political Agenda," and Ann Buwalda and Kie Eng Go, "Indonesia: Poso and Maluku Fear for Life's Safety Overcomes the Urgency of Humanitarian Needs," in January 2002 Jubilee Campaign Report.

The potential circulation radius of the Christian-authored versus the Muslim-authored media has depended on the languages of their presentation. Using mainly Bahasa Indonesia, the pro-Muslim media potentially could circulate throughout Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, southern Thailand, and the southern Philippines, as well as among Indonesian and Malay diaspora communities overseas. Presentations in English posted on religious organization or internet group sites further expanded its reach, enabling writers to make contact with the English-speaking Muslim diaspora audience. The fact that Saudi charities such as al-Haramain contributed donations to KOMPAK through Agus Dwikarna, who was based in Makassar prior to his Manila arrest, indicates that reports about Poso likely were translated into Arabic for select audiences in the Middle East. Reportedly, video footage of the Poso conflict also was circulated in Arabic VCDs.

By contrast, Christian authors who wrote about Poso had a much smaller Indonesian-language audience for their electronic reports. This potentially could amount to the entire population of Christians within Indonesia – amounting to roughly 9 percent of Indonesia’s 215 million people – but, given the large number of those without access to the internet, the actual number would be much smaller.¹⁰⁶ The imprisoned Crisis Center director, Rinaldy Damanik, wrote a compelling and locally popular Indonesian book, but it has not been widely available.¹⁰⁷



Cover of Rinaldy Damanik’s book (2003),
Tragedi Kemanusiaan Poso (Poso’s humanitarian tragedy)

¹⁰⁶ Krishna Sen and David Hill estimated that only 50-100,000 Indonesian citizens had access to the internet by the end of the Suharto regime, while Bräuchler cites a figure that estimates internet users constituted 2 percent of the Indonesian population in January 2002. See Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics*; Bräuchler, “Cyberidentities at War,” p. 150. The totals increase as more urban offices seek hook-ups and middle-class youth use internet cafes for recreation. Also, a single downloaded internet article can be photocopied cheaply for distribution to many more local readers.

¹⁰⁷ Damanik, *Tragedi Kemanusiaan Poso*.

Probably the largest and most influential audience for pro-Christian news about Poso were overseas English speakers tapped through the “Christianity under threat” networks. These networks of English-speaking Christians in the United States, Europe, and Australia—exactly the locations from which most evangelical missionaries who recently entered the archipelago originated—provided a highly attuned audience for messages about oppression of Indonesian Christians. From the perspective of Poso Protestants whose initial reports of destruction and neglectful law “non-enforcement” from December 1998 to April 2000 went unheeded within Indonesia, English-language messages circulated abroad made sense as a plea of last resort, even as a proposed non-violent alternative to local vigilantism. In fact, the Crisis Center’s faxed message to Jakarta and the United Nations, dispatched after several villages were stormed by outsider Muslim militias in November 2001, was one of the combined pressures on President Megawati’s government that preceded organization of the December 2001 Malino negotiations and ceasefire accord.

International English-Language Media Coverage of Peak Violence in Poso

Compared to the Christian web sites that showed such passionate interest in Poso, mainstream English-language media barely registered news from the region until extensive casualties and possible Al-Qaeda links began to attract a few moments of attention. The *New York Times* ran a tiny piece on the December 1998 violence, portraying it as a battle between “rival gangs of youth,” an image any big city American could comprehend.¹⁰⁸ Citing information relayed by telephone by a local Haj, the report said the brawls turned into “attacks by townspeople on the homes of migrants” from Java. Police and army were now protecting government buildings, mosques, and churches, the report concluded. The *Times* wrote nothing more about Poso until exactly two years later, when violence between Muslims and Christians in Sulawesi and Maluku were referred to obliquely in a longer post-9/11 story about how militant Muslim groups were agitating among Indonesia’s moderate majority.¹⁰⁹ Another passing reference to Poso appears in an early 2002 *New York Times Magazine* article focused on the leader of Laskar Jihad.¹¹⁰ The author writes that “according to persistent reports, hundreds of non-Indonesian Muslims—including it is believed Al Qaeda operatives—have trained at camps run by Laskar Jihad in the jungles of Sulawesi, and American officials are convinced that Al Qaeda ‘ sleeper cells’ still exist there.” Such passages, which cast the Poso conflict as nothing more than a previously empty Al Qaeda campground, would frame the post-9/11 journalistic agenda on Indonesian conflicts, and run roughshod over the philosophical and operational differences among varied pro-jihad groups.

Initial international English reports of the peak violence in May-June 2000, such as those by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), were merely summary translations from Indonesian news outlets such as *Antara*, *Media Indonesia*, and *Republika*. When foreign reporters did begin to reach Poso, the stories they sent out were grim and based on their own foreign theories of Indonesia’s collapse and its

¹⁰⁸ “22 Hurt in Rioting Indonesian Town,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1998, p. A8.

¹⁰⁹ Seth Mydans, “In Indonesia, Once Tolerant Islam Grows Rigid,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2001, p. A3.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Marshall, “The Threat of Jaffar,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 10, 2002.

underlying primitivism. A *Sydney Morning Herald* report judiciously quotes both Muslim and Protestant leaders, as well as displaced citizens. The journalist uses their information to link the violence accurately to the 1998 district political struggle. Yet his narrative also leads inexorably towards the imagined beastly disintegration of the civilized Indonesian state in the absence of Suharto's "order":

Bodies are rotting by the road or floating down rivers. Nearly all have had their heads cut off, their hands tied behind their backs. Mosques and churches are destroyed. Houses and shops are burnt to the ground. Entire villages are packing up or have already left for makeshift refugee camps, the future unknown.

This is the ugly new Indonesia, where Muslims and Christians who have lived in peace for decades are locked in a vicious war that shows no sign of ending.

In Jakarta, the enfeebled Government fears similar conflicts could erupt across the vast archipelago as the demoralised armed forces either refuse or cannot maintain the same level of order it did during the 32-year Soeharto dictatorship.¹¹¹

Distinctly less nostalgic and more comprehensive pieces were published in early July by *The Toronto Star* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Both clarified how the disturbances in Poso compared to other regional conflicts such as those in Maluku, and noted the national political scandals and friction that distracted the central government of Gus Dur from effective action. *The Toronto Star* report, weaving a narrative sprinkled with references to "savage reprisals" and local Christians' reliance on "traditional sorcerers and magicians," quoted a Muslim cleric's claim that ten thousand Muslim men had signed up for jihad with the intention "to eradicate the 136,000 Christians" in Poso.¹¹² The news might have been alarming, although it apparently garnered little action from authorities anywhere. At that point, well before September 11, 2001, it was just gripping news from afar.

The *FEER* article included interviews with two survivors of the killings at the transmigration area known as Kilo 9.¹¹³ While one survivor was intent on vengeance, the other had already had enough "trauma" and was anxious to see perpetrators prosecuted legally. Both local anger over the lack of arrests during Poso's earlier conflict phases and police fears that mass arrests would provoke further violence were well drawn by the article, which emphasized governmental incapacity and neglect in the face of a confluence of military and religious interests.

About a year later in mid-2001, a longer, generally well-rounded and probing report on Poso's violence was published in *Foreign Affairs*.¹¹⁴ Its main weakness was its metaphorical portrayal of ethnic and religious violence as a disease spreading nationally across Indonesia, and globally beyond. The sad, and seemingly incurable, "epidemic" imagery stymied the author's attempt to conceptualize the conflict in terms of the regional political and economic friction discussed in the article. Yet, at least these authors were trying to identify the Poso conflict partly on its own local, national, and

¹¹¹ Lindsay Murdoch, "Religious Killing Fields Spread across the Ugly New Indonesia," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 29, 2000.

¹¹² Paul Dillon, "Holy War Massacre," *The Toronto Star*, July 1, 2000.

¹¹³ John McBeth and Oren Murphy, "Bloodbath," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 6, 2000.

¹¹⁴ David Rohde, "Indonesia Unraveling?," *Foreign Affairs* 80,4 (July/August 2001): 110-124.

transnational terms, a vantage point that would disappear in reports by English-speaking reporters after September 11, 2001. From then on, Sulawesi and its actors only would be examined from a US intelligence perspective in terms of possible connections to Al-Qaeda.¹¹⁵ Poso in effect would become a minor backwater in what *The Economist* termed "South-East Asia's Terror Geography."¹¹⁶

Coverage of the 2001 Malino Accord and Some Effects of Media Misdirection

Most local and national media coverage of Poso in 2001 presented fairly pedestrian accounts of recurrent violence by "certain groups" (*kelompok tertentu*), the trial and death sentences of Tibo and accomplices, and the continued displacement of tens of thousands of former Poso residents.¹¹⁷ After the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the US, however, there were new international pressures and preoccupations regarding "terrorist infiltration" in Southeast Asia. Over the initial objections of Central Sulawesi police, Indonesian Intelligence director Hendropriyono accepted Spanish intelligence reports of Al-Qaeda camps in Poso and agreed vaguely that there was some kind of international terrorist link to local Poso "radicals."¹¹⁸ President Megawati's government then finally responded to the diverse internal and external demands for mediation and action in Poso.

Both the Malino Accord negotiations in South Sulawesi and the accompanying security and aid plans were given front-page coverage in Indonesia's local and mainstream media.¹¹⁹ The front page photographs showed mediator Jusuf Kalla and others smiling as they watched a triumphant "high-five" handshake between Muslim militia advocate H. Sofyan Lembah and Rinaldy Damanik, coordinator of the Central Sulawesi Protestant Church Crisis Center. Given the concerted efforts government mediator Jusuf Kalla and security plan architect Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono made to involve militia leaders and negotiate a ceasefire, there was strong pressure on the mass media, both in Indonesia and abroad, to prop up the Accord's success. Indeed, the Malino Accord and its companion police-army security operation virtually ended collective violence among Poso civilians, most of whom were exhausted by warfare and eager for effective government action.

Yet bureaucratic corruption combined with the continued desire for personal revenge or retaliatory maneuvers, mostly among some Muslim militia members, meant that violence did not so much end as evolve into what later became referred to as a campaign of "mysterious" shootings and bombings. This small-scale violence was downplayed outside the region, and most subsequent coverage of these Malino Accord violations returned quietly to the "purely criminal" or outside "provocateur" explanations that characterized pre-2000 media coverage of the Poso conflict. Reporters

¹¹⁵ For example, Romesh Ratnesar, "Confessions of an Al-Qaeda Terrorist," *Time*, September 23, 2003, pp. 35-41.

¹¹⁶ "The Geography of Terror," *The Economist*, August 23, 2003, pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁷ By contrast, an exceptional piece of investigative journalism on the burgeoning economy of bomb-making and the shift in targets from reef fish to humans is found in Arif Zulkifli, Dedy Kurniawan, and Darlis Muhammed, "Bombs from a Faraway Island," *Tempo Interaktif*, August 21-27, 2001.

¹¹⁸ "Keterlibatan Teroris Internasional di Poso: Bukti Intelijen Bukan Bukti Hukum," *Kompas*, December 18, 2001, p. 6.

¹¹⁹ "Deklarasi Malino: Kedua Pihak Sepakat Hentikan Konflik," *Kompas*, December 21, 2001, pp. 1, 6.

wrote whitewashing reports that might be characterized as “media misdirection” by consequence rather than intent.

Media misdirection occurred throughout the Poso conflict when characterizations of the violence were taken directly from military officials. For example, the Muslim Major General who had been called from South Sulawesi to restore order in December 1998 announced on local television that the eight Protestant rogues (*oknum*) he had just arrested were responsible for the disturbance, and that the conflict was therefore over. The one-sided arrests and pronouncements dismissing SARA as a factor contradicted evidence of regional tensions among religious and ethnic communities. The same Muslim Ambonese Wirabuana commander, Suaidy Marasabessy, eventually became involved with the organization KOMPAK, which financed *mujahidin* in Poso. As noted above, KOMPAK and its Makassar director, Agus Dwikarna, appeared frequently in reports by various media outlets in 2000, but the organization was generally presented as a “Crisis Prevention Committee” seeking to fulfill humanitarian aims, for instance by providing rice and medical supplies to victims.¹²⁰

The benign portrayals of KOMPAK and non-existent portrayals of Jema’ah Islamiyah kept these key players in the Poso conflict during 2000-2003 largely hidden and shielded from public suspicion. The International Crisis Group notes how Jema’ah Islamiyah and Mujahidin KOMPAK, organizations that were both active in military training and bombings in Poso throughout this period, remained unidentified.¹²¹ Their report explains that Jema’ah Islamiyah’s and Mujahidin KOMPAK’s numbers were very small compared to Laskar Jihad’s, and they were secretive and comparatively less noticeable since they lacked the turbans and South Asian-style white dress worn by Laskar Jihad men. But another reason for the disproportionate coverage simply has to do with these organizations’ own media activities. Laskar Jihad ran its own newspapers, electronic newsletters, and web site. It held publicly announced forums covered by mainstream media and circulated audio cassettes of speeches by its theatrical leader, Jafar Umar Thalib. Jema’ah Islamiyah members eventually became incensed with Laskar Jihad’s self-publicity in Poso, calling their method “spray paint jihad” because they simply followed along and spray painted the name “Laskar Jihad” in villages that Mujahidin KOMPAK and other associated jihad militias had just attacked.¹²²

The weight of these facts becomes more apparent when reading the 2001 Central Sulawesi Crisis Center report addressed to twenty-three illustrious recipients from President Megawati to army generals to overseas media and “friendly embassies.”¹²³ This report, which seeks to list all cases of violence in Poso from May to December 2001, repeatedly points to Laskar Jihad as the group responsible for the continued violence. In other words, the only organization publicly representing Poso Christians both at home and abroad was inaccurately naming Laskar Jihad militias as the perpetrators of the violent strikes against them. Therefore, Christians’ media efforts,

¹²⁰ A. Era, Fitri Wulandari, and Lyndal Meehan, “Poso Riots Continue: 5000 Seek Refuge,” *Detikworld*, June 6, 2000; also Al-Bunyan, “KOMPAK Gelar Aksi Kemanusiaan di Poso,” www.al-bunyan.net, September 25, 2000.

¹²¹ International Crisis Group, “Jihad in Central Sulawesi.”

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Crisis Center, “Informasi dan Harapan.”

just like most mainstream and niche Muslim reports, were inadvertently misleading observers concerning who was performing the post-Malino Accord “mysterious” shootings, bombings, and masked assaults. Local and outside observers recognized the existence of inaccuracies, bias, and gaps in media reports, but available information veiled these lapses, because the area was sealed off from routine direct observation through bus bombings, shootings, military roadblocks, and government travel permit regulations.

Although they did not provide immediate or complete answers, it was the persistent local reports of Central Sulawesi human rights NGOs that documented the cumulative cases of continued Poso violence, and tried to correlate their incidence with planned military withdrawals and other possibly unethical business interests in the region.¹²⁴ Unlike government officials and most mass media, they were bold enough to write that something was still amiss in Poso even after others were reporting that the region had been pacified.

Graffiti’s Subaltern Messages

Throughout the Poso conflict, graffiti appeared as a genre of independent low-tech media, asserting anonymous claims that implied fighting factions and meeker, more peaceful residents shared general attitudes and even homogeneous group identities.¹²⁵ Many Protestants and Muslims cast the Poso City graffiti as evidence of hostile and potentially criminal actions, which “naturally” provoke violent defensive responses rather than appreciation of these messages as examples of democratic “free speech.” Allegations that these messages were effectively “criminal” were based less on the perception that the graffiti desecrated private or public property—Poso graffiti frequently are found on ruins of buildings already destroyed by violence—than on the perception that they acted as incitements, so that the authors may be considered responsible for subsequent violence. For example, on the morning of December 28, 1998, Protestants arriving at a main intersection in Poso City reportedly encountered the graffiti, “Jesus is a pig” (*Yesus babi*), and then began brawling with a group of Muslims gathered there.¹²⁶ Muslims encountered proprietary graffiti such as, “Poso land belongs to Protestants” (*Tanah Poso milik orang Kristen*). Such messages, while foregrounding Protestants’ grievances about land alienation, heightened Muslims’ awareness of the need for territorial defense and provided evidence of Protestants’ exclusivity.

¹²⁴ See, for example, LPS-HAM Sulteng, “Merentang Damai Dalam Tawanan Militer Sesat dan Pemerintahan Korup di Kabupaten Poso,” December 30, 2002, Palu; Kelompok Kerja Resolusi Konflik Poso (Pokja-RKP), “Laporan Akhir Tahun 2003,” Palu; and Yayasan Tanah Merdeka, *Seputar Rakyat*, Dec 2003-Jan 2004, Palu.

¹²⁵ Brief comments on graffiti’s place in the Ambon and Maluku conflicts appear in Nils Bubandt, “Malukan Apocalypse: Themes in the Dynamics of Violence in Eastern Indonesia,” in *Violence in Indonesia*, ed. Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer (Hamburg: Abera, 2001), pp. 228-253; and Spyer, “Fire Without Smoke.”

¹²⁶ Damanik, *Tragedi Kemanusiaan Poso*, p. 16.

In discussing Ambon's climate of anticipatory fear, Patricia Spyer cites Appadurai's ideas about the suspicions of betrayal held against "intimate enemies."¹²⁷ Yet only a small percent of the Muslim or Protestant Poso refugees I spoke with described being attacked by those who were familiar to them. More often it was the Protestant or Muslim they didn't know, the "provocateur" who seemingly arrived from some other place, whom they suspected. Most Poso Protestants and Muslims had lived segregated residential lives that, apart from occasions involving mixed families or market settings, provided few opportunities for them to become well acquainted. They generally knew each other mainly through visual observations and stereotypes of "the other" religion or ethnic group. Thus they were less inclined to fear betrayal by the intimate enemy than the unexpected arrival of violent allies of their poorly known neighbor.

In many villages during fighting in mid-2000, simple crosses were drawn to identify and defend Christian properties in Protestant-majority areas, while the words "Allah" and "Mohammed" were written in Arabic on Muslim properties in Muslim-majority areas. Like the red and white headbands that came to designate Christian and Muslim militia members—while illustrating the Republic's flag torn asunder—these symbols polarized allegiances and aided recognition during battle.

A cross was painted on a Tentena mosque in mid-2000 to mark a Protestant faction's conquest when resident Muslims were chased out of town.¹²⁸ Replications of such graffiti or banners in newspaper photographs or on internet sites allowed these "insults" to be relayed to large and distant audiences, inviting a participatory response. A graffiti published in 2000 by the Palu tabloid *MAL* said, "Freedom for Protestants. Muslims Must Leave the Land of Poso" (*Merdeka Kristen. Muslim Harus Tinggalkan Tana [sic] Poso*). Such audacious inscriptions, again enveloping Protestants' concerns over their recent land loss to migrants, fed Muslim claims that Christians advocated separatism and were guilty of treason.

When I went to Poso City in May 2003, a time when politicians and media reports spoke optimistically of the region's post-Malino Accord improvement, I was startled by the remaining devastation festooned with hostile graffiti. I noticed that no one but me seemed to think that the ongoing "reconciliation process" might include an effort by Muslim and Christian communities to confront these writings together, and perhaps agree to repudiate or erase them after documentation. Large residential sections of Poso City remained in ruin, and graffiti marked these "ghost towns" as war zone sites, occupied only intermittently by Muslim squatters.

The Poso City graffiti I saw included polarizing identity markers and inspirational ideological claims. One said, "Poso is the Field of Jihad" (*Poso Medan Jihad*); the phrase was underscored with a drawing of crossed swords, typically a Laskar Jihad emblem, but without the usual open Qur'an above the swords. Other war slogans said, "Life is Struggle" (*Hidup Ada Perjuangan*), clearly referring to the struggle of jihad, "We are willing to die for Islam" (*Kami rela mati [sic] demi Islam*), and "Reconciliation is a tool of evil" (*Rekonsiliasi alat kejahatan*). Reading these messages as a passerby, one would never know "the war was over," sealed by a bilateral commitment, albeit one cooked

¹²⁷ Spyer, "Fire Without Smoke," p. 35; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 154-155.

¹²⁸ *Formasi*, "Bayang-bayang Missionaris," p. 4.

under considerable pressure from Jakarta. The written words confirmed that the self-congratulatory world of Malino, located outside Makassar, indeed was far away in another province.

Several of the pro-jihad graffiti included English words. One was written out in varied scripts as:

Fadil dan Nandar
Muslim
King of War
FadilAH [*sic*]

This inscription may refer to Haris Fadilah (a.k.a. Abu Dzar), the arms-supplier and coordinator of *mujahidin* fighters in Maluku who married his daughter to Omar al-Faruq, the Kuwaiti Jema'ah Islamiyah operative with alleged Al-Qaeda ties. It seems also to refer to Arismunandar, the Javanese director of the Solo branch of KOMPAK, whose Sulawesi militia allegedly bears responsibility for most acts of post-Malino violence.¹²⁹

Another graffiti was more whimsical: "I Love Osama ... bin Laden?" Although the handwriting is similar on both sides of the ellipsis, there could be two separate writers, the second providing a little-needed clarification (or possibly a shift in the writer's intended romantic interest).

One more mixed Indonesian and English graffiti said simply, "Mujahidin Is Not Teroris." Although most graffiti in Poso are in Indonesian, the use of English in many pro-jihad graffiti raises several not necessarily mutually exclusive possibilities. One is to demonstrate that Muslims also can claim education in the "international language" and "worldliness." The use of English marks the writers as modernist Muslims possibly educated in *madrrasah* or newer style *pesantren moderen* that teach English, rather than in traditional kinds of *pesantren*, which teach some Arabic but not English. Perhaps these writers imagined that messages in English would be read around the world, via mediated images—as is happening now—by non-Muslims as well as by Muslim faction sympathizers. A more simple observation is just to note the ubiquitous Indonesian fashion for mixing bits of English amusingly in public vernacular and media, as in advertisements, such as "Enjoy Aja" for LA-brand cigarettes.

Whether in Indonesian, English, or both, post-2000 Poso City graffiti theatrically pursue a dual-edged ideological incitement in a monumental battle zone setting. By emplacing graffiti as territorial conquest markers proclaiming a commitment to warfare, the writers of these inscriptions can hope to inspire other Muslims, as well as challenge any Christians who dare enter the formerly Protestant and mixed Poso City neighborhoods now inhabited solely by Muslims.

Messages of Reconciliation for Tough Audiences

Just one graffiti I found directly confronted the other inscriptions and called for an end to violence. It read, "Stop the Conflict/Quarrel" (*Hentikanlah Pertikayan [sic]*). Although I have no way to identify whether the writer was a Muslim or Christian,

¹²⁹ International Crisis Group, "Jihad in Central Sulawesi."

male or female, it is interesting to notice the polite suffix “-lah,” as well as the technically incorrect but phonetically reasonable spelling of “*pertikaian*.” It also appears that this is a “counter-graffito,” that the writer first erased a no-longer-legible, and likely pro-war, inscription just below it.



Sample of graffiti reading “*Hentikanlah Pertikayan*” (Stop the conflict please)

Pro-peace messages have a troubled history in Poso. Right after the December 20, 2001 Malino Accord, many government-sponsored banners were hung that read, “It Turns Out Peace is Beautiful” (*Ternyata Damai Itu Indah*). A Protestant woman whose family member was killed in a post-Malino attack spoke out at a visit by Malino’s government mediator, Jusuf Kalla, protesting “Father Minister! It Turns Out Peace is Evil” (*Pak Menteri! Ternyata Damai Itu Jahat!*).¹³⁰ This comment reflected growing cynicism with government claims that the Malino Accord would terminate Poso’s problems and that harmonious co-residence was close at hand.

Efforts continued, however, with outside NGO and grassroots community endeavors to make and display pro-peace messages. There were stickers and banners saying, “We are all Brothers and Sisters [Siblings]” (*Kita Bersaudara*), produced and distributed by Nurani Dunia, a Muslim humanitarian NGO based in Jakarta. There were roadside signs reading “Banish revenge among us” (*Hilangkan Dendam di antara Kita*) made by the local Inter-Religious Communication Forum (Forum Komunikasi Antar Umat Beragama). There was even a T-shirt distributed by an international NGO to school pupils in Tentena that said, simply and in English, “Peace Indonesia.”

¹³⁰ Damanik, *Tragedi Kemanusiaan*, pp. 98-99.



Roadside sign reading “*Hilangkan Dendam di antara Kita*” (Banish revenge among us)

Spyer critiques the simplified reduction, typification, and sentimentalization of post-conflict media messages in Ambon. She concludes that such messages, especially those involving figures of and by children, “hardly do justice—indeed do a kind of violence—to the peace and reconciliation they allegedly portray.¹³¹ Reconciliation images that with a simple pairing of handshaking Muslim and Christian clerics, mosques and churches, mixed friendships, or even the red and white halves of the flag certainly reiterate the religiously polarized protagonists of the media’s earlier war coverage. And, like all media propaganda, their messages are simplistic in a way that workable solutions for these conflicts on the ground can never be. Yet perhaps the capacity of these images to shift residents’ attention towards possible futures in lieu of the more certain troubled past should not be dismissed too quickly or harshly. Such messages and imaginary projects, even when subtly tutored from outside, also allow many children, women, and non-combatants a public space to express some comfortingly uncomplicated hopes, and remind those still promoting or hiding violence that “this situation is not all about you.”

In contrast to the authors of male-dominated media that describe acts of mostly male aggression, women in Poso have taken a more prominent role in the village-based, often NGO-supported, discussions and media campaigns to facilitate

¹³¹ Spyer, “Why Can’t We Be Like Storybook Children?,” p. 21.

reconciliation or non-violence. While larger humanitarian NGOs in Central Sulawesi, like the government offices, are run by Muslim men, with women working mainly in the back rooms, a few have taken initiatives to hire both men and women, Muslim and Christian, field staff. Mixing these categories of people now in Central Sulawesi is a bold act. Integrated groups must proceed with discretion, given the prominence of local groups that promote strict social segregation by religion and sex.

Of course, media campaigns alone, however well conceived, will not rid Poso of all its problems. A more basic challenge to long-term reconciliation among Poso's religious communities is the unending campaign of assassinations and church bombings. In October 2003, there were nearly simultaneous attacks on Protestant villagers by Mujahidin KOMPAK groups in Poso City and Bethelme, Morowali District. In March 2004, assassins on motorcycles shot and killed a male minister and a female law professor in Poso City. In May 2004, the target area shifted to the provincial capital of Palu, where a lawyer prosecuting various "terror" cases was shot and killed, apparently by a local Poso City mujahidin group. In July 2004, another female minister in Palu was shot dead while delivering her sermon. This case is memorialized in a graphic two-video compact disk set titled, "The Tragic Shooting Event of Reverend Susianty Tinulele" (*Peristiwa Tragedi Penembakan Pdt. Susianty Tinulele*). In November 2004, a rural Poso village head who refused to accept fraudulently reduced aid allotments was beheaded, and the Poso central market was bombed, killing six people. In December 2004, there were two nearly simultaneous shooting attacks on Central Sulawesi Protestant churches in Palu. Three days later, a surviving minister at the church spoke of leaving the blood of injured worshippers in place as a "witness to the struggles of Indonesian Protestants" (*kesaksian perjuangan orang Kristen Indonesia*). The semantics of struggle, persecution, martyrdom, and exile or exodus still are pervasive in both religious communities.

Among the varied stories about Poso's violence recounted in so many formats, it is remarkable how self-consciously Muslim, Christian, and officially neutral NGO authors from Sulawesi all have taken up the term "tragedy" (*tragedi*) for titles of their treatises about Poso. The term replaces words such as conflict (*konflik*) or disturbance (*kerusuhan; pertikaian*). Does the term's appeal reside in its parallel use to describe natural disasters, reports of which attract empathy and aid and are less likely to raise suspicions about politically biased analysis? A quick glance at other Indonesian events labeled as tragedies by newspapers such as *Republika*, including the Bali bombings and the US war on Iraq, makes it clear that the erasure of blame, agency, or politics per se is not driving the term's ubiquitous use. Rather, this term may eliminate culpability strategically for those who suffer from the "tragedy," thereby providing a space of "victimhood" where at least some people are sheltered from castigation, and perhaps mutual recrimination.¹³² Interestingly, government spokesmen were least likely to characterize Poso as a "tragedy," perhaps again illustrating how many in Jakarta see collective violence in the provinces as only a minor and generally annoying problem. Tragedies are not as easy to deny or ignore as mundane criminal events.

To this day, both Muslims and Christians in Poso claim that "the other side attacked us," and both sides argue that they "suffered more." Christians usually point

¹³² Unlike the original Greek meaning of the word, *tragedi* in Indonesian does not seem to imply that any error or fault lies with the bearer of the misfortune.

to their more numerous burned neighborhoods and the fact that they have been all but evicted from the district capital and lost their voice in its political decisions. Indeed, from a national political vantage point, Protestants have been the losers. By contrast, Muslims usually claim more deaths. Muslims say their fighting methods were less murderous, while some Protestants simply say, "Those who stayed and fought died; those who fled [like us] lived." Irrespective of the imagined "final" numbers, neither group's losses are insignificant. Total death toll estimates for Poso range from 800-3,000, but no figures can be considered reliable, in part because none were systematically collected. Christians dispute the 1:3 ratio proposed by some Muslims, and even certain Muslim investigators say the total number of deaths was less than a thousand. Roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims were among the estimated 150,000 persons displaced, although there likely were more Muslims killed. Yet even if casualty subtotals by religion could be collected accurately, they might not be dramatically far apart nor would they justify the continued violence sought by some who perceive the losses of the two sides to be unbalanced. In any case, the corrupt politics of aid requests and distribution has strategically inflated displaced-person and casualty lists in Poso, making future investigations of the casualties more difficult, as well as generally unwelcome.¹³³

Overall, media narratives blaming wayward ethnoreligious "masses" and their aberrant criminal leaders benefit Indonesian government and military authorities by absolving them of structural complicity in the political-economy conditions precipitating violence, and warranting increased military intervention with its potentially lucrative territorial deployments. By contrast, NGOs seeking to reduce violence in the region and foster reconciliation between largely unrepentant Muslim and Christian communities offer narratives that blame corrupt government and military authorities, narratives that can supersede the mutual-blame game typically played by many regional Muslim and Protestant leaders. Virtually all stakeholders are relieved of responsibility through the "outside provocateur" scenario, perhaps explaining its widespread and recurrent popularity.

Indeed, the goal of *conflict resolution* between religious communities motivates NGO groups to formulate and present *conflict analyses* that redirect blame and responsibility to agents ostensibly beyond those communities, such as outside militias, government, or military institutions. Additionally, the repeated characterization by so many Muslim and Christian authors of the Poso events, like the Bali bombings or the Tsunami, as a "tragedy" (*tragedi*) invokes its qualities as an unmerited disaster that should foreclose political debate because tragedies require uncritical sympathy and aid from all able witnesses.

¹³³ On the problems of obtaining and asserting particular death estimates for episodes of Indonesian violence, see Robert Cribb, "How Many Deaths? Problems in the Statistics of Massacre in Indonesia (1965-1966) and East Timor (1975-1980)," in *Violence in Indonesia*, ed. Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer (Hamburg: Abera, 2001), pp. 82-98; See also Tim Allen, "Perceiving Contemporary Wars," in *The Media of Conflict*, pp.11-42, especially pp. 20-22.

“Peace Journalism” and Policy Issues for Indonesian Media Coverage of Violence

In June and July 2000, the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and Internews Indonesia conducted a rapid assessment of Poso’s local mass media.¹³⁴ The team strongly recommended increased professional training and institutional support for newspapers, radio, and local TV bureaus in both Palu and Poso. In November 2000, a group of reporters and trainers met in Palu for a “Peace Journalism” workshop sponsored by the British Council.¹³⁵ The training encouraged increased media coverage of problems shared among members of both belligerent communities. The trainers reportedly advised participating journalists to provide stories of hope, while being frank about conflict issues.

The Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) next conducted a post-assessment training session for Maluku journalists in Bogor in early 2001. Some of the reporters invited originally refused to share rooms with journalists of other faiths. The training ended, however, with a statement of ethical intent to end “war journalism” and replace it with “humanitarian journalism.” Participating journalists chose the latter term because, “Muslims in Maluku could not accept the word ‘peace.’”¹³⁶ Twenty-six of the Bogor participants joined twelve others in Palu and Poso for another training program in late May 2001. This was designed to show Maluku and Poso journalists the similarities in the two regions’ conflicts and allow them to share their reporting problems and strategies. Indeed, some former tabloid reporters from Palu have become effective pro-peace advocates. In April 2002, a new Poso Media Center was formed by a coalition of NGO directors and religious leaders with the aim to coordinate public responses and thereby avoid the kind of one-sided partisan allegations routinely published prior to the Malino ceasefire Accord. Most impressive of all, several Palu and Poso NGOs have undertaken daring investigations of aid embezzlement, insisted on corruption’s role in prolonging the violence, and achieved both local and national press coverage of Poso’s ongoing bureaucratic corruption scandals.¹³⁷

All of these kinds of efforts are warranted and laudable, especially as many have inspired young journalists to see themselves as independent pro-reform activists. As far as I can determine, however, none yet addresses the blinding semantic categories of Indonesian bureaucratic-speak and mediated sociologies of the “masses.” Moving from discussions among small groups of workshop participants to the institutionalization of new practices is a slow process. As an example, the former army officer named Tungkanan, who some say assumed increased leadership of Protestant militias after Tibo’s incarceration, was finally arrested in May 2004 for automatic weapons

¹³⁴ Reen, Alloway, and Murphy, “Crisis in Poso.”

¹³⁵ Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, “Peace Journalism in Poso, *Inside Indonesia* (April-June 2001): 24-25.

¹³⁶ Wisudo, “Struggle Between War and Peace Journalism.”

¹³⁷ Reinhard Nainggolan, “Masyarakat Sudah Lelah, Namun Pemerintah Seperti Tak Serious,” *Kompas*, January 12, 2005; Jafar Bua, “Anwar Beberkan Pejabat Poso Terlibat Korupsi Dana Pengungsi,” *Detik.com*, January 17, 2005; “YTM Palu: Dana Kemanusiaan Poso Dikorupsi,” *Suara Pembaruan*, January 17, 2005. See also Aragon, “Elite Family Governance.”

possession. In both national and provincial media coverage, he now assumes the long revolving title as criminal “mastermind” (*biang*) or “brains” (*otak*) of Poso’s violence.¹³⁸

Assessing the Mediated Chronology and Sociologies of Poso Violence

Let us reconsider some chronological aspects of the media coverage of the Poso violence. National market-based media had relatively less consequence for participants in 1998, except to the extent that Muslim versions of events were publicized and the minimalist coverage supported Jakarta’s ability to ignore the region’s structural problems. By contrast, non-market based communications, such as politically motivated fliers about opposition leaders’ alleged crimes, religiously hostile graffiti, banners, and rumors about violent events, were instrumental to the early mobilization of group hostilities. Provincial newspapers elevated narrative explanations conceived by incumbent Muslim district executives, and these accounts were repeated in outline form by less overtly partisan national coverage. In 1998, all newspapers except *Republika* cited sources who portrayed the violence as not religious (not a case of SARA), even as they provided tidbits of data to indicate that it was.

After the death toll among Muslims rose dramatically during retaliatory Protestant maneuvers in mid-2000, inflammatory anti-Christian media coverage widely authorized Muslim provincial leaders’ perspectives on the conflict’s perpetrators and significance. These publicized perceptions preceded ambivalent troop deployments and permissive acceptance of the arrival of Laskar Jihad and other less-well-advertised *mujahidin* groups. Once Poso was identified by better organized and well-funded outsider Muslim groups as a site where jihad should be waged in Indonesia, newsletters, video CDs, and internet sites were used to solicit additional support, including electronic fund transfers for publicized bank accounts.

Early counter-narratives by Poso Protestants received little attention from Indonesian mass media, but Protestant Church reports circulated widely on the internet. Their perspectives quickly reached the attention of overseas pro-Christian organizations willing to lobby the US government and international human rights agencies although there was scant initial response. After September 11, 2001, though, these groups gained the now receptive ear of the US government and the United Nations, whose attention to Muslim-Christian violence in Indonesia put increased pressure on the Indonesian government to broker a ceasefire accord and make some overtures to “deal with terrorists.” The concern of pro-Christian and US government organizations, however, was less with the Poso predicament itself than with possible Muslim persecution of Christians or Al Qaeda-linked terrorism.

Several of these influential conjunctures of media distributions and political action could not have occurred in the absence of the mass-media transitions noted at the outset of this article: new digital media and the relaxation of censorship in Indonesia. Removing the armature of press censorship did little to deconstruct New Order categories of citizenship and agency. Unfettered campaigns fostering religious

¹³⁸ “Otak Kerusuhan Poso Ditahan,” *Detik.com*, May 14, 2004; “3 Tersangka Kepemilikan Senjata Api Ditahan,” *Detik.com*, May 15, 2004; “Martinus: Tungkunan Itu Biang Kerusuhan Poso,” *Nuansa Pos*, May 26, 2004.

paranoia developed through the meeting of unaddressed local injuries and translocal co-religionists peddling an exclusivist agenda.

My aim in exemplifying the semantic assumptions built into media writings about the Poso violence has been to make more sense of the sociologies of this “tragedy” as presented by technically different sources to heterogeneous audiences of different scales and cultural sensibilities. This focus not only manifests some confusingly truncated views of Indonesian citizens’ actions, but also hints at how history, politics of scale, and local economics of violence can be overshadowed by more gripping dramas of malfeasance. That virtually all media reports include an explicit judgment about whether or not each event of violence was caused by ethnoreligious emotions or SARA demonstrates how mired post-*Reformasi* Indonesia still is in an obsessive New Order intellectual framework. In this system, the strange antipode of violence caused by religious emotion is “criminality.” Yet Indonesian criminals are not apt to be secularists or atheists. So why the strange opposition?

The preference in all mainstream or statist reports for classifying collective violence as “purely criminal” rather than “ethnoreligious” represents an effort to minimize the significance of the events and cast them in terms that security forces, rather than political negotiators or civil organizations, can deal with. Categories such as “criminality” or “riot” accord the events a far lower level of political or national significance than categories such as “civil war” or “conflict” do, hence they are preferred among any state officials trying to maintain a public sense of control. With burned towns, destroyed houses of worship, full hospitals, tens of thousands of refugees, and bodies floating down rivers, however, Poso’s religiously polarized events became hard to deny. Statist efforts then aimed to explain the potentially embarrassing group actions of citizenship in the most familiar and manageable way.

Indonesian collective violence was billed as the province of *massa*, that unstable Indonesian category that wavers between older images of revolutionary citizen masses, depoliticized floating masses, and, more recently, menacing mobs. In coverage of Poso events, that older connotation only appeared in religiously positioned pieces where violence by groups sharing the author’s religious affiliation was legitimized as an appropriate response to immorality or prior violence. In most reports, however, *massa* were negatively portrayed as amorphous clumps of people whose actions were propelled by the instructions of “masterminds” or “provocateurs.” But reports never dwell on the means by which alleged provocateurs provoked. Through hate speech or misinformation? By the provision of money, weapons, or fighters? The reports never say. They are less interested in probing investigations than in narratives that make sense of apparent chaos and offer a prospect of closure.

Given that most media on the Poso violence is Muslim-authored, Christians exclusively are named to fill the malevolent posts. As each publicly named puppeteer is killed or jailed, a new one springs forth like a hydra head to take his place in media headlines. Following this logic, the different social strands among groups of fighters are never disarticulated, much less systematically associated with more long-standing grievance issues or illegal activities by particular state and non-state agents.

Whereas mainstream national and provincial media constrain their discussions of Poso events to the here-and-now of Sulawesi, provincial tabloid and religious niche

media place Poso within a global geography and political history that includes the Netherlands, United States, Bosnia, Palestine, and Israel. The digital age reverberation of holy war rhetoric among micro- and macropublic niche media temporally and spatially unite transnational communities of believers to assume they live on common ground. The idea of Poso Christians' and Muslims' national allegiances become unstable as the opposing factions ally with overseas co-conspirators while simultaneously questioning each other's right to occupy local land. Persecution and martyrdom concepts seemingly make faith live, even as brethren die. These globalized and grander visions of Poso at the millennium perhaps gained appeal not only from their intriguing logic of unseen power and heroic action, but also because they take local suffering seriously in a way that trivializing mainstream media reports did not.

Despite the stunning variety of identities assigned by the heterogeneous media to Muslim and Christian belligerent factions, some overarching similarities do emerge. Whether the fighting is said to involve manipulated masses, savage tribes no longer restrained by authoritarian dictators, Muslim persecution, international Christian conspiracies, or a small corner of the post-9/11 "war on terror," most ordinary Poso citizens—whether law-abiding or colluding in violence—largely disappear. Just as most of them needed to be removed from the "empty" land to advance the province's "economic development" for the nation-state, so they maintain limited political visibility in the post-Suharto "provincial riots." In their place we are offered theatrical dramas involving evil criminality, secessionist rebellions, global religious conspiracy, and damaged victims, genres that sell media products and are better suited to the usual mindset and budget planning of state authorities, the military, and international agencies. Although religious niche media are most jarring for their extreme claims, it is perhaps the stale categories of Indonesian collectivities, leadership, and motivation still appearing in almost all Indonesian mass media that should most shake our confidence in the nation's ability to address and redress regional conflicts of the future.