
THE ETHNIC ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN NORTH MALUKU PROVINCE, INDONESIA, 1999–2000

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Introduction

On August 18, 1999, violence broke out on the large island of Halmahera in the Indonesian district of North Maluku, at that time still part of Maluku Province. This violence triggered large-scale conflict throughout North Maluku, which became a new province in October. The violence led to the deaths of around three thousand people,² the internal displacement of 250,000 people,³ and the destruction of approximately twenty thousand houses, places of worship, and other buildings.⁴

The violence in North Maluku took place against the background of the ongoing conflict in Ambon and elsewhere in southern Maluku. When it began on January 19, 1999, the conflict in Ambon was due to tensions between local Ambonese and migrants

¹ I would like to thank Professor Harold Crouch, Professor Don Emmerson, Dave McRae, Elly Lawson, Michael Wakoff, and an anonymous reviewer for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

² The official statistics distributed in March 2000 by the Governor's Office state that 2,083 people died during the North Maluku conflict. That figure appears low, even for that early stage in the conflict. By July 2000, it seems likely that the total number of deaths from the conflict was between 3,000 and 3,500. Judging by the large number of missing people cited in March 2000 (2,315), the figure is possibly much larger.

³ The official statistic for the number of refugees is 247,620 people: 199,605 within North Maluku and 48,015 outside North Maluku (largely North Sulawesi).

⁴ The official Governor's office statistics for the number of buildings destroyed state that 18,022 houses, ninety-seven mosques, 106 churches, and 110 schools were destroyed.

from South Sulawesi. However, the conflict quickly became religious in character, as local and migrant Muslims fought together against Ambonese Christians. This religious conflict rapidly spread to the Kei Islands in southeast Maluku and the large island of Seram.⁵

When violence subsequently broke out between Christian and Muslim communities in North Maluku, it was widely seen as a consequence of the ongoing conflict in Ambon. Most analyses, while often detailing some of the local context of the conflict, considered it to be an extension of the conflict in the southern part of the province.⁶ Analyses often discussed the conflict in “the Maluku Islands” and used statements such as “the violence then spread to North Maluku.” This analysis of the North Maluku conflict is understandable, given the fact that by November the violence in the north had assumed a religious character, with the formation of Islamic and Christian militia and the destruction of numerous churches and mosques.

The two communities in the initial clash in North Maluku were predominantly Christian on one side and entirely Muslim on the other. However, my fieldwork in North Maluku suggests that neither the underlying nor proximate causes of the violence were religious in character. Although the conflict in Ambon may have emotionally influenced some actors in this clash, the primary issues that caused the initial violence in North Maluku were highly local to that district and are best understood as such rather than an extension of the Ambon conflict. The initial dispute arose from the creation of a new political and administrative subdistrict (*kecamatan*) in the area of Malifut.⁷

⁵ See International Crisis Group, “Indonesia’s Maluku Crisis: The Issues,” *Indonesia Briefing*, July 19, 2000; International Crisis Group, *Indonesia: The Search for Peace in Maluku*, Asia Report 31, February 8, 2002 (Jakarta: International Crisis Group, 2002).

⁶ Jacques Bertrand, “Legacies of the Authoritarian Past: Religious Violence in Indonesia’s Moluccan Islands,” *Pacific Affairs* 75,1 (2002): 57-85; J. Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); International Crisis Group, *Indonesia: The Search for Peace in Maluku*. Several analyses by Indonesians focused specifically on the local context of the conflict in North Maluku; see Smith Alhadar, “The Forgotten War in North Maluku,” *Inside Indonesia* 63 (July–September 2000); J. Nanere, *Halmahera Berdarah* [Bloody Halmahera] (Ambon: Yayasan Bina Masyarakat Sejahtera dan Pelestarian Alam [BIMASPELA], 2000); K. H. Ahmad and H. Oesman, *Damai Yang Terkoyak: Catatan Kelam dari Bumi Halmahera* [Torn Peace: Dark Notes from the Land of Halmahera] (Ternate: Madani Press, 2000); Thamrin A Tomagola, “The Bleeding Halmahera of North Moluccas,” *Jurnal Studi Indonesia* 10,2 (2000): 1-14. Many discussions of the conflict continue to talk about the conflict in Maluku or the Moluccas/Malukus as encompassing both provinces.

⁷ This paper will focus solely on the first two riots of the North Maluku conflict, but it is worthwhile to place these riots in the wider context of the violence that would follow. As this paper will show, the conflict in Malifut was due largely to factors related to ethnic identity and competition. Following a large attack in October 1999, the Kao expelled the entire Makian community to the small neighboring islands of Ternate (the capital of North Maluku District and the temporary provincial capital) and Tidore (the capital of Central Halmahera District). There, two weeks later, members of the Makian elite initiated riots that were targeted at Christians in general, eventually expelling all Christians from the two islands. The subsequent conflict, as it spread through almost all of North Maluku, was highly religious in character. In late December, the violence reached a peak in the subdistricts of Tobelo and Galela in northern Halmahera, when members of the two local ethnic groups divided along religious lines. The conflict halted in late June 2000, following the fall of the Christian village of Duma in Galela to an attack by the local Islamic militia (Pasukan Jihad or Jihad Force), although sporadic incidents continued, notably on the island of Morotai.

This paper will examine how and why the formation of this new subdistrict set up the conditions for the massive destruction and loss of life that followed.⁸ This question is crucial in Indonesia's era of *pemekaran* (literally "blossoming," but more appropriately "division").⁹ It is no coincidence that competition for formal control of the territory in question in North Maluku sharpened not long after the discovery and exploitation of a large gold deposit in the area. At least one party to the conflict (the Makian) was highly motivated by the lucrative natural resources in the area.

However the following discussion will demonstrate that other issues connected to *pemekaran* in the Malifut area lent the dispute an emotive character and heightened the prospect of violence. These included: perceived threats to the integrity of the indigenous ethnic community; ownership of traditional land and the centrality of that land to the group's identity; opposing conceptions of the social and economic rights of migrant communities; and partiality on the part of the local government.¹⁰

Background

Kao is a large subdistrict in the southeastern part of the district (*kabupaten*) of North Halmahera located on the northern peninsula of Halmahera.¹¹ The subdistrict is largely an alluvial plain with a heavily forested and mountainous interior. The capital of Kao is a large village of the same name, where the office of the subdistrict head (*Camat*) and schools are located. In 1999 the official population of Kao subdistrict was 26,704 and was, and still is, concentrated along the coast, although there are also many villages in the more remote interior of West Kao.¹²

The majority of the population is from the Kao ethnic group, which itself is comprised of four sub-ethnic groups, the Kao, Modole, Pagu, and Boeng. The vast majority of the Kao are Protestant Christian, although there is a small Muslim Kao minority based mainly in the capital.¹³ A small number of Ambonese also live in Kao. Several transmigration settlements containing primarily Javanese transmigrants are

⁸ The paper is based on information I gathered during fieldwork in North Maluku Province in 2003 and 2004.

⁹ In *pemekaran*, existing provinces, districts, and subdistricts have been divided to create new units.

¹⁰ On the question of land, Monica Toft writes that materially based explanations of ethnic conflict cannot fully explain the outbreak of ethnic violence because they miss the importance of territory to the very identity of ethnic groups. A long-standing occupation, a history of struggle, and a name reflecting ownership of the land by that group are all likely to increase ties to territory. Monica D. Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 1-6.

¹¹ Until October 1999, the area of North Maluku was not yet a province but comprised two districts (North Maluku and Central Halmahera) and one city (Ternate). The area that is now the district of North Halmahera was, at that time, several subdistricts within North Maluku District.

¹² This statistic is from Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Maluku Utara, Ternate (Central Bureau for Statistics for North Maluku District), "Maluku Utara Dalam Angka, 1999."

¹³ There are no official statistics for the number of Muslims in Kao. Abdurrahman Hongi, a Kao Muslim community leader, stated that over one thousand Muslims live in Kao (interview in Kao, February 2004). The very small number of Catholics living in Kao originates mostly from elsewhere in the Maluku or North Maluku Provinces.

located in the interior.¹⁴ The population of Kao is mainly involved in subsistence farming and fishing, and most paid employment is in the large copra industry.

In 1975, the government of North Maluku District, based in Ternate, began a local transmigration program from Makian Island, located to the west of the large island of Halmahera. The program was officially initiated due to an anticipated volcanic eruption on the island.¹⁵ The government moved the majority of the population of Makian, a population that in many cases moved unwillingly, to the area of Malifut on Halmahera, about fifteen kilometers south of the capital of Kao Subdistrict.¹⁶ The location of the resettlement site is a subject of some controversy today, with people on both sides of the conflict suggesting that the district government chose this site to either halt the southward spread of the Christian community of North Halmahera, and/or to place a more progressive community in the area to stimulate development.¹⁷

The Makian community began to arrive in the area of the Pagu villages of Malifut, Wangeotak, and Balisosang in 1975. The local Pagu and wider Kao population welcomed the Makian, offering them food and existing banana, cassava, and coconut gardens, as well as land for building houses and cultivating gardens.¹⁸ From 1975 until 1980, approximately six thousand Makian were moved to Malifut, located in the center of Kao Subdistrict. In 1999, the local government calculated that there were approximately sixteen thousand Makian living in sixteen villages in Malifut, plus a population of 26,704, predominantly from the Kao ethnic group, living in Kao Subdistrict.¹⁹ As I will discuss further below, while sometimes referred to as an independent subdistrict, Malifut legally remained part of Kao Subdistrict.

¹⁴ These settlements are largely in West Kao but are also situated at Waringinlamo, located fifteen kilometers from the capital, and near Pediwang in the northeast of the subdistrict. The inhabitants of these settlements are generally Muslim Javanese. However, the composition of many of these villages has changed substantially following the conflict, as almost all Muslim Javanese returned to Java, and their houses and land were often bought (cheaply) by Christian refugees from elsewhere on Halmahera.

¹⁵ However, Ronald Lucardie states that the local government also intended to alleviate overcrowding on the island and improve the economic position of the Makian community. R. Lucardie, "Spontaneous and Planned Movement among the Makianese of Eastern Indonesia," *Pacific Viewpoint* 26,1 (April 1985): 63-78.

¹⁶ Many Makian state that the government forced them to depart from their villages.

¹⁷ Interviews in North Maluku, 2003–2004.

¹⁸ Most Kao I spoke to stated that their culture ensured that they would welcome fellow North Maluku people, especially following a natural disaster. Both Makian living in Malifut and Kao testify to the welcoming attitude of the Kao in 1975 and the existence of close relations between the two communities. For example, Fahri Yamin, a Makian staff member for the Malifut office of PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia–Perjuangan, or Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), interviewed in Malifut on November 3, 2003, and Nathaniel Bitjara, a Kao community leader interviewed in Kao on December 29, 2003.

¹⁹ The official statistic for Makian Subdistrict in 1999 was 21,867. Source: "Maluku Utara Dalam Angka, 1999." However, it appears that this figure includes the population still living on Makian Island. In the three districts that would comprise the province of North Maluku, Makian officially number approximately 61,000. The majority of Malifut villages are contiguous, that is, more like *kampung* of one very large *desa*. In 1999, approximately 75 percent of the Malifut population was successfully engaged in farming clove, cocoa, and coconut (for copra), most of which was sold to Kao villages and Tobelo for export (interview with the subdistrict head and head of agriculture in the subdistrict government office, Malifut, on January 20, 2004). The Makian are widely considered by most ethnic groups in North Maluku to be highly successful farmers.

Prior to the conflict, the Kao–Makian relationship lacked any meaningful integration. There were no cases of intermarriage, even between Muslim Kao and Makian. By 1999, the Makian villages of Tahane and Ngofagita were immediately contiguous with the Pagu villages of Sosol and Wangeotak but remained exclusively Makian.²⁰ The relationship between the two communities was also fundamentally unequal in terms of status and access to resources. In 1999, the Kao ethnic community of 27,000 had only one member in the North Maluku District parliament. Kao representation in the district bureaucracy was, and continues to be, almost nonexistent. Few Kao study in the provincial universities in Ternate and do not usually hold positions in the educational sector.

Conversely, Makian enjoyed political representation and social influence well beyond what their proportion of the provincial population (9 percent) would suggest.²¹ Makian are the most successful ethnic group in North Maluku. They are highly represented in the local government and dominate the local bureaucracy and educational sector.²² Prior to the 2004 election, Makian constituted 17 percent of the provincial parliament.²³ The ethnic group's representation in the bureaucracy appears to be even greater, and in 1999 the head of the bureaucracy for Maluku province was a Makian, Thaib Armain.²⁴ Both the current and former Rectors of Khairun University, Rivai Umar and Yusuf Abdurrahman, are Makian. In 1999, Yusuf Abdurrahman was also the chairman of the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars for North Maluku (Majelis Ulama Indonesia Maluku Utara or MUI)²⁵ and, although he had retired as rector, he still resided on the campus and held substantial influence in the university and in Ternate.

Strong mutual stereotypes also characterized the Kao–Makian relationship. The Kao consider the Makian to be greedy and accuse them of constantly extending the territory allocated to them in Malifut.²⁶ They believe that the Makian dominate the government and strongly favor Makian over members of other groups for employment in the bureaucracy and as recipients of government funding. In 1999, the Kao also

²⁰ These Kao (Pagu) villages are in some cases (for example, Sosol and Wangeotak) located so close to Tahane, Ngofagita, and other Makian villages that the borders of Kao and Makian villages are indistinguishable. However, Makian do not live in Sosol, and Kao do not live in Tahane or the other Makian villages.

²¹ Statistic from "Maluku Utara Dalam Angka, 1999," Badan Pusat Statistik (Central Bureau of Statistics), Ternate. There are, according to several sources, many more people in North Maluku who have one Makian parent but who do not identify themselves as Makian in censuses. There has traditionally been a great deal of intermarriage between Makian and several other ethnic groups such as Tidore, Sanana, and Kayoa.

²² The *perception* of this dominance held by other ethnic groups, especially those from Halmahera, is probably even greater than the reality.

²³ This statistic was obtained from the parliamentary secretariat in 2003 before the elections in June 2004.

²⁴ Thaib Armain is currently (July 2004) the governor of North Maluku Province.

²⁵ Interview with Yusuf Abdurrahman, Unkhair campus, Ternate, January 12, 2004.

²⁶ Members of the Kao and Tobelo communities regularly conveyed this stereotype to me.

believed that Malifut villages received a much higher level of funding than adjacent Kao villages.²⁷ Many Makian stereotype the Kao as lazy and backward.²⁸

The Kao and Makian also held fundamentally different perceptions of the status of the land on which the Makian community settled from 1975. As I will discuss further below, the Kao understood the area of Malifut to be Kao traditional land on which they permitted the Makian to reside as victims of a natural disaster. The Makian, however, considered the area of Malifut, where they had been resettled through a local transmigration program, to be government land and did not recognize traditional Kao ownership.²⁹

Prior to 1999, there were several violent incidents between the Malifut and Kao communities, although none presaged the extent of destruction that would occur in 1999. In 1982, a fight broke out between Makian and Kao youths, in which a Christian Kao was killed.³⁰ In 1989, community leaders and police prevented a potential riot following a "mysterious death." Most Kao and Makian state, however, that these incidents were not connected with religion and that relations between the two communities were generally "good enough."³¹

One Christian leader stated that, before the conflict, Kao Christians had better relations concerning religion with Muslim Makian than with Muslims from their own ethnic group, whom the respondent considered to be more "fanatic."³² According to this respondent, there were more often fights between Kao Christians and Muslims than between Kao and Makian, although these generally concerned football, girlfriends, and other non-political issues.

In June 1999, PT Nusa Halmahera Mineral (NHM), a joint venture between the Australian company Newcrest Mining Ltd. and the Indonesian company PT Aneka Tambang, commenced an opencut gold-mining operation at Gosowong, about forty kilometers to the southwest of Malifut.³³ Nusa Halmahera Mineral paid a number of

²⁷ Interviews with large numbers of Kao. It is difficult to obtain statistics indicating inequality in funding, although the perception is widespread and deeply held among Kao. The ex-Camat of Tobelo and Malifut argued that the only difference between Malifut and Kao is that the former has a PLN (Pusat Listrik Nasional, National Bureau of Electricity) electricity supply branch. Interview in Ternate on February 7, 2004. Many Makian agree that Malifut was far more developed than Kao, but argue that this was due to the diligence of the Makian and the laziness of the Kao.

²⁸ Several Makian, including members of the Makian elite in Ternate, conveyed this stereotype to me.

²⁹ One Makian complained to me that the Kao "constantly said we lived on their land, but they did not realize it was government land and had been given to us by the Department of Transmigration."

³⁰ The riot started when a Kao Christian youth was beaten by a group of Makian men while attending the evening meal held by a Muslim Makian family during the month of Ramadhan at the invitation of a daughter. I heard this story on December 27, 2003 from Pendeta Rein Salakparang, the chairman of Kao Subdistrict for the Protestant Church on Halmahera (GMIH, Gereja Masehi Injili Halmahera, The Evangelical Christian Church in Halmahera) at the time of this riot, as well as from several other sources, Kao as well as Makian.

³¹ I heard this from several sources, including Mohtar Adam, a Makian on the academic staff at Universitas Khairun (Unkhair), interviewed in Ternate on February 17, 2004.

³² Confidential interview in North Maluku, 2003. By 1999, Kao ethnic solidarity became far stronger in the face of ethnic antagonism with the Makian.

³³ Newcrest Mining Ltd. website, <http://www.newcrest.com.au>. PT Nusa Halmahera Mineral is 82.5 percent owned by Newcrest and 17.5 percent owned by Aneka Tambang.

“honorariums” to local officials on Halmahera and elsewhere, including the subdistrict heads of Malifut and Kao.³⁴ The company also constructed several schools in Malifut and Kao villages. With 350 local employees, Nusa Halmahera Mineral was the largest single employer in the immediate area.

By mid-1999, the composition of the workforce at the Gosowong gold mine had become a contentious issue. The Australian managers of the mine attempted a policy of employing 50 percent from each community, but by August 1999, within two months of operation, 90 percent of employees were Makian and 10 percent were Kao, largely due to the higher levels of education and better organizational skills of the Makian.³⁵ Several small fights occurred between Kao and Makian mine staff before larger riots erupted in August.³⁶

A Formal Subdistrict in Malifut

The wider Kao–Makian relationship also began to deteriorate in 1999. This increase in tension centered on efforts by Makian in Malifut and Ternate to have the Makian Subdistrict in Malifut legally recognized. In hindsight, the uncertain status of the community in Malifut was a source of potential conflict. From 1975, the infrastructure and a large portion of the population of the island subdistrict of Makian to the west of Halmahera had been moved to Malifut. The subdistrict government office and entire villages were moved, the latter retaining their Makian names (e.g., Tahane, Ngofagita). The village leaders were also retained.³⁷ Subsequently, in official government documents, the community was often referred to as Malifut/Makian Subdistrict.

However, the subdistrict was never legally recognized as existing in its new location, a process requiring both the consent of the district-level parliament and legal recognition by the Department of Home Affairs in Jakarta. The community of Malifut had therefore enjoyed the infrastructure of the subdistrict of Makian without the subdistrict’s having any legal status and with no official recognition of Makian land-ownership or formal institutions of self-government. The government had also never formally established the border of the Malifut/Makian Subdistrict, an issue that gained significance after gold mining began in the area.

For many Makian in Ternate and Malifut, the uncertain status of the subdistrict in Malifut was a major source of frustration. Many Makian had been forced by the government to leave Makian Island and resettle in North Halmahera and had been told that the resettlement program was permanent and not a temporary emergency relocation. In addition, the district government closed the subdistrict of Makian on

³⁴ Interview with an Australian employee of Newcrest in Gosowong, 2003.

³⁵ Interview with several Australian employees of Newcrest (NHM), Gosowong mine, 2003.

³⁶ H. Muksin Abdullah, “Kerusuhan Maluku Utara Dalam Perspektif Sosial Budaya” [The North Maluku Riots in a Socio-cultural Perspective], in *Memikirkan Kembali: Maluku dan Maluku Utara* [Rethinking: Maluku and North Maluku], ed. I. Hasan (Makassar: Lembaga Penerbitan Universitas Hasanuddin [LEPHAS], 2003) p. 132.

³⁷ Interview with Pak Ahdan Abdul Gani, Kepala Desa Samsuma village, Malifut, February 2, 2003.

Makian Island in 1995 due to continued volcanic activity, precluding any return there by those Makian who wished to leave Halmahera.³⁸

With the start of gold-mining operations at Gosowong in June 1999, it became apparent that the Malifut area was a particularly resource-rich area. The employment opportunities offered by Nusa Halmahera Mineral would be incredibly beneficial to a community the size of Malifut. Nusa Halmahera Mineral also offered regular funding to both the local Kao and Malifut communities for the building of schools and health facilities such as local clinics.

Many Makian saw the era of *reformasi* in late 1998 and early 1999 as an opportunity to formalize the status of the subdistrict of Malifut. Makian in the government, the bureaucracy, and the educational sector, along with Makian students studying in Ternate, Ambon, and elsewhere launched a powerful political initiative to achieve this goal. While the Makian elite outside Malifut led this political impetus, Makian community members within Malifut also pressed to have their subdistrict formally recognized. In December 1998, community leaders from Malifut and Kao met to discuss the possibility of formally dividing Malifut Subdistrict from Kao. Several Makian claim that community leaders from the Kao villages immediately adjacent to Malifut (i.e., Sosol and Wangeotak) agreed to the plan.³⁹ However, all the Kao I interviewed denied having ever agreed to the establishment of a new subdistrict.

In December 1998, Makian students studying at Pattimura University in Ambon pressed the provincial parliament to legalize the status of Makian Subdistrict in Malifut. In January, a team of six Makian university students from Ternate and Ambon traveled to Jakarta to pressure the Department of Home Affairs to issue a government regulation (*Peraturan Pemerintah, PP*) creating Malifut as a formal subdistrict.⁴⁰ The mobilization of these students appears to have been facilitated by the Makian elite in Ternate.

Also, the North Maluku elite paid for a group of students to travel to Jakarta to request the creation of a new province: North Maluku Province. A part of this student group also demanded the formalization of Malifut Subdistrict. These students requested that this new subdistrict be called Kecamatan Makian Daratan di Malifut (The Subdistrict of Mainland Makian in Malifut). This student group subsequently became known as the Makayoa, after the islands of Makian and Kayoa (a neighboring island with strong ethnic connections to Makian). The group, including those who had been studying in Ambon but could not return after rioting broke out in that city on January 19, 1999, then returned to Ternate. In early 1999, the former rector of Khairun University, Yusuf Abdurrahman, contacted Makian students in Ujung Pandang and

³⁸ Interview with Suratman in Ternate on January 13, 2004. Suratman was involved in the push for legalized status for Malifut. North Maluku District Head Instruction (Instruksi Bupati KDH Tk. II Maluku Utara) No. 09/8/MU/1995 closed the island to reoccupation. See H. H. Sitohang, Nafi Hidayaturohman, M. D. Ramdhan, and S. Subekti, *Menuju Rekonsiliasi Di Halmahera* [Toward Reconciliation on Halmahera] (Jakarta: Pusat Pemberdayaan untuk Rekonsiliasi dan Perdamaian, 2003), p. 76.

³⁹ Interviews with several Makian, including Suratman, January 13, 2004.

⁴⁰ Interview with Suratman, January 13, 2004.

requested they return to North Maluku to pressure first the government, and then as will be seen, the Kao community to this end.⁴¹

There was also strong momentum toward the recognition of Malifut Subdistrict among the political elite in Ternate. In early 1999, the chairman of the district parliament, Suleiman Adam, presented a letter to the district head of North Maluku, Abdullah Assagaf, stating the consensus of the parliamentary assembly to formalize the subdistrict in Malifut.⁴² In addition to facing political pressure to press for a government regulation, Assagaf himself agreed with creating a new political unit in Malifut, as it would increase administrative efficiency.⁴³ Assagaf subsequently traveled to Jakarta to request that officials of the Department of Home Affairs issue a government regulation giving the subdistrict legal status.

To a large extent, this drive by Makian students and members of the Makian elite to have Malifut formally recognized as an autonomous subdistrict can be explained by ethnic solidarity. Many, although living in Ternate, had been born and raised in Malifut where, in many cases, their families continued to live. Most felt little affinity with the Kao. Following the closure of the island of Makian, Malifut was the one area in North Maluku that remained strongly Makian. Malifut's legal status as merely a part of Kao Subdistrict had long been a source of discontent among those with connections to the Malifut area.

Legal recognition of the subdistrict of Malifut would also legitimate the Malifut community's control over the area's valuable economic resources. Prior to the formalization of Malifut, the community was required to share the benefits of the Nusa Halmahera Mineral gold mine with the larger Kao community. Particularly important in this regard were the hundreds of employment positions at the mine, but also important was the assistance paid by the company to the community for the construction of schools and other infrastructure and mining revenue returned to the local community by the district-level government. If Nusa Halmahera Mineral were to be located within a newly independent Malifut Subdistrict, the Malifut community would monopolize these benefits.

However these material and legal benefits from creating a new subdistrict were probably insufficient to mobilize such political momentum among the elite. Many people in North Maluku suggest that the recognition of Malifut as an autonomous subdistrict was only a first step toward achieving a long-held goal for many connected with Malifut: establishing the town as the capital of a district.⁴⁴

⁴¹ The names of these informants are confidential due to the sensitivity of the information. The student leader based in Ujung Pandang who was reportedly contacted by Yusuf Abdurrahman was a Makian from Malifut who now holds a senior position in a research center in Unkhair. Most members of the Makayoa group, or individuals associated with it, now hold positions in the local bureaucracy. Yusuf Abdurrahman told me it was "stupid" that the Kao in villages such as Sosol wanted to remain part of Kao Subdistrict—the location of infrastructure clearly determined that they should be within Malifut. Interview with Yusuf Abdurrahman, Unkhair campus, Ternate, January 12, 2004.

⁴² Interview with Lt. Col. (Ret.) Abdullah Assagaf, Bandung, February 28, 2004.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interviews in North Maluku 2003–2004. Several respondents also stated that some Makian elite held the goal of making Malifut the provincial capital. In the early 1980s, there were plans among the North

In 1998, the district head, Ret. Lt. Col. Abdullah Assagaf, had advocated the creation of a new North Halmahera District covering the whole northern peninsula of Halmahera.⁴⁵ As it became increasingly likely through 1999 that North Maluku would become a province in its own right, it became clear that that province would be divided into more than the existing three districts.⁴⁶ As a successful, relatively affluent town with an increasingly developed infrastructure, Malifut was an ideal candidate for being designated as the capital of a new district.⁴⁷

Following the new national laws on regional financial autonomy, the benefits for Malifut of becoming the capital of a district were obvious.⁴⁸ Under Law 25/1999 on Fiscal Balance Between the Center and the Regions, 80 percent of the royalties from mining were to be returned to the region in which the mine was located, 20 percent held by the central government. The government of the district in which the mine was located would receive approximately 32 percent of the production revenue.⁴⁹ As the capital of a district, the community of Malifut, along with members of the government and bureaucracy located there, would receive considerable financial benefit.⁵⁰ As a subdistrict however, Malifut would not necessarily receive any of the royalties of the Nusa Halmahera Mineral gold mine, a factor that the large numbers of well-informed and intelligent Makian elite would clearly have been aware of.⁵¹

Maluku elite to create an independent North Maluku Province. At that time, there was discussion of making Malifut the capital of the new province. The vice president, Adam Malik, visited Malifut in 1982. According to one respondent, this visit was widely seen as intended to assess the area as a potential provincial capital. Interview with Tobelo community leader, Urubungus Djawa, in Tomahalu village, January 24, 2004.

⁴⁵ Interview with Abdullah Assagaf, district head of North Maluku July 1994–July 1999, in Bandung, February 28, 2004. The eventual North Halmahera District now covers only the eastern side of the peninsula.

⁴⁶ Interviews in North Maluku, 2003–2004, including some with members of the North Maluku District parliament.

⁴⁷ Even if the structure of two districts and one municipality had remained after the new province had been established, it was likely North Maluku District would require a new capital. If, as seemed likely in early 1999, Ternate was to become the provincial capital, it was likely that it would be considered unwieldy for that city to fulfill a role as the capital of both the province and a district.

⁴⁸ In May 1999, one month prior to the start of production at Gosowong, Law 22/1999 on Regional Governance and Law 25/1999 on Fiscal Balance Between the Centre and the Regions were signed by President Habibie and thereby passed into law. Thanks to Professor Harold Crouch for information regarding the timing of these laws. The decentralization process began in January 2001.

⁴⁹ This proportion is specified in one of the implementing regulations following that law. According to Regulation (PP) 104/2001, Section 10, this royalty is divided into Land Rent (*Iuran Tetap*) and (the much smaller) Exploration and Exploitation Rent (*Iuran Eksplorasi dan Eksploitasi*), 80 percent of each going to the region. Of the 80 percent of Land Rent, 16 percent is paid to the province and 64 percent is paid to the producing district or city (*Kabupaten/Kota Penghasil*). Of the 80 percent of Exploitation Rent, 16 percent is paid to the province, 32 percent is paid to the producing *Kabupaten/Kota*, and 32 percent is paid to the remaining *Kabupaten/Kota* in the province.

⁵⁰ As was the case with North Maluku District, a large proportion of the staff of both the bureaucracy and government would be likely to be Makian.

⁵¹ Law 25/1999 provided no guidelines as to what portion of mining revenue must be passed down to the subdistrict-level government, leaving a “producing” subdistrict dependent on the goodwill of the district government.

In 2001, Nusa Halmahera Mineral paid to the central government US\$2,064,594 in Exploitation Rent and in 2002, US\$911,715.⁵² Of that figure, the central government was required by Law 25/1999 and Government Regulation 104/2000 to return to the North Maluku District (within which the mine was located until the recent creation of North Halmahera District) government approximately US\$700,000 and US\$315,000 for 2001 and 2002 respectively. The economic benefits of having the local government located in Malifut would also be great in terms of employment, infrastructure construction, and development.

Malifut stood little chance of becoming a district capital because it was not even the capital of the Kao subdistrict in which it was located. Most respondents suggested that if it were eventually to become the capital of a district, Malifut first had to become the capital of a subdistrict. The desire of many Makian to achieve this goal quickly may be attributed either to their concern that it be accomplished before the district-level elections held in July 1999, coinciding with the national election, or to the need to formalize the status of the subdistrict before North Maluku was inaugurated as a province in October 1999. It is possible that many Makian were concerned that a new district government might overturn the support shown for the creation of a new subdistrict by the current government.⁵³

Therefore, Makian in Malifut, Ternate, and elsewhere pressed for the legal recognition of Malifut Subdistrict for several reasons. Makian outside Malifut, including students studying in Ambon and elsewhere, felt a strong sense of ethnic solidarity with the Malifut community since many had originated from or had family living there. Other Makian, for reasons of ethnic solidarity, wished to see the creation of a successful Makian "homeland" within North Maluku following the closure of Makian Island. Most of those involved sought to afford Malifut exclusive access to the employment and other benefits presented by Nusa Halmahera Mineral. According to some among the North Maluku elite, many in the Makian elite also sought to establish Malifut as a subdistrict as a step toward installing it as the capital of a planned new district after the separation of North Maluku from Maluku Province. The Makian students who actively advocated the creation of a Malifut Subdistrict were influenced and assisted in their efforts by members of the Makian elite in Ternate, who covered the students' travel costs to and from Jakarta, Ujung Pandang, and elsewhere.

⁵² Information obtained from the provincial mining department in Ternate in the form of statements of royalty payments by Nusa Halmahera Mineral to the Department of Finance in Jakarta. I was unable to obtain figures for 1999 or 2000, but I assume the mine at that early stage of exploitation, despite the conflict, was producing at a rate closer to the 2001 rate. Land Rent is obviously far smaller than Exploitation Rent. In the first quarter of 2002, Nusa Halmahera Mineral paid US\$5,354.47 in Land Rent as opposed to US\$465,407 in Exploitation Rent.

⁵³ Ex-district head Abdullah Assagaf stated to me there was a consensus among the district parliament in the early part of 1999 to form the subdistrict. Interview in Bandung, February 28, 2004.

The Creation of the Subdistrict and Kao Opposition

On May 26, 1999, following the visit of Abdullah Assagaf, the Department of Home Affairs in Jakarta released Government Regulation No. 42 (PP42),⁵⁴ thereby legally recognizing the subdistrict of Makian Daratan di Malifut. Several people involved in pushing for PP42 suggested that officials in central government departments in 1999 were very keen to support local programs seen or portrayed as being in the spirit of *reformasi*.⁵⁵ However, the Kao community had not been consulted since December 1998 about the creation of this new subdistrict within Kao.

The Kao objected strongly when they first heard of the release of PP42 in May 1999. Their objections intensified when Kao community leaders became aware of the new subdistrict's borders and the implications of the creation of the subdistrict.⁵⁶ Their objections were based on a number of factors, both identity related and resource related.

The Kao argued that the Makian had moved to the area due to a natural disaster, not through an official transmigration program. They were welcome as long as they recognized Kao tradition (*adat*).⁵⁷ To the Kao, this entailed the Makian recognizing that they lived on Kao (especially Pagu) land. The Kao argued that Makian who had moved to other areas on Halmahera, such as Central Halmahera District and Ibu in northern Halmahera, had not established new Makian subdistricts.⁵⁸ They also argued that Javanese transmigrants relocated to Kao had not established new subdistricts.⁵⁹

Kao objections to the name "Makian Daratan" (Mainland Makian) were strongly connected to this issue of land ownership. To the Kao, the suggested name was a violation of their traditional ownership of Kao territory. Many Kao did not object to the creation of a new subdistrict in the area, as long as it was a division (*pemekaran*) of Kao Subdistrict, with its name reflecting this. Therefore, many Kao community leaders told Makian leaders and government officials that they held no objections to the creation of a new subdistrict with the name "Kao Selatan" (South Kao) or "Pagu."⁶⁰ Makian leaders agreed to compromise by changing the name to "Makian di Malifut" but refused to drop the word "Makian" from the name because, according to one respondent, to do so would mean the Makian had been effectively assimilated into an alien culture.⁶¹

Perhaps the most strongly articulated Kao objection to PP42 was that Makian di Malifut Subdistrict would divide the Kao population. The boundary of the subdistrict

⁵⁴ The full name of this law is Peraturan Pemerintah No. 42/1999 tentang Pembentukan dan Penataan Beberapa Kecamatan di Wilayah Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II Maluku Utara (Government Law No. 42/1999 about the Formation and Organization of Several subdistricts in North Maluku District).

⁵⁵ The use of student groups to lobby the central government may have been intended to have this effect.

⁵⁶ It is possible that the wider Kao community influenced the communities of those villages set to be included in Malifut, making them subsequently reject the subdistrict.

⁵⁷ Interviews with numerous Kao.

⁵⁸ Sitohang, et al., *Menuju Rekonsiliasi Di Halmahera*, pp. 78-79.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interviews with Kao community leaders in Kao, 2003-2004.

⁶¹ Interview with a member of the Makayoa student group.

created by PP42 incorporated five Kao villages: Sosol, Wangeotak, Balisosang, Gayok, and Tabobo, meaning that a portion of the Kao community would be separated from the majority in Kao Subdistrict.⁶² The Kao are very proud of the integrity of the four subgroups of their community and point to a long history of these groups living and fighting together for the past one hundred years. A strong feeling of ethnic solidarity prevailed among both Christian and Muslim Kao. This feeling of solidarity was symbolized by a well-maintained grave in the center of Kao village containing both Christian and Muslim Kao, and also by the principle "*hidup bersama, mati sekubur*" (live together, dead in one grave).⁶³ Several Kao community leaders said the cultural differences between the Kao and the Makian were so strong that it was not feasible for any Kao to live in Makian di Malifut Subdistrict.⁶⁴ As well as fearing that the Kao community would be divided, many Kao held concerns about being "controlled" by a Makian-dominated subdistrict government. Villagers from Sosol and Wangeotak often described the tensions surrounding PP42 by stating that the Makian "wanted to control us, but we are the indigenous people of this land."⁶⁵ Therefore, both the Kao and the Makian held similar concerns about being assimilated into another more dominant ethnic group.

A further issue that prompted objections by the Kao to the creation of Makian di Malifut Subdistrict was that it included the entire area covered under the Contract of Work (COW) held by Nusa Halmahera Mineral for mining on Halmahera. Many Makian state that Kao officials, such as the subdistrict head, Mohtar Sangaji, provoked ordinary Kao into opposing PP42 because these officials did not want to lose Nusa Halmahera Mineral funding.⁶⁶ Kao denied this, as did one Australian employee of Nusa Halmahera Mineral.⁶⁷ In fact, the Kao deny the mine was important in their objections. However this denial is most likely due to a desire to emphasize cultural over economic factors, which are seen in less sympathetic terms by the wider North Maluku community. As the primary employer in the area, the mine was an important source of livelihood for many ordinary Kao, and it is reasonable to assume that many

⁶² Several Jailolo villages were also included in the new subdistrict.

⁶³ According to local oral history, in 1904 the Kao moved from Gosowong to the area of present-day Kao village to attack a Dutch military base. In the clash between the Kao and the Dutch army, seven Kao—four Christians and three Muslims—were killed. Following a consultation between the community leaders of the various subethnic groups and religious leaders, the decision was made to bury the seven casualties in one grave. The importance of the grave to ethnic solidarity is, not surprisingly (given their minority status), more evident among the Muslim minority. I was told of the symbolism of the grave by, among others, Haji Ahmad and Abdurrahman Hongi, two Kao Muslim community leaders, in an interview in Kao on January 19, 2004, and by Imam Langar, a Kao Muslim religious leader, in Kao on October 1, 2003. A Kao community leader stated to me the principle of "*hidup bersama mati sekubur*" (Ternate, confidential source).

⁶⁴ Interviews in Kao 2003–2004.

⁶⁵ Interviews in Sosol and Wangeotak in 2003.

⁶⁶ Interview with Suratman, a member of the Makayoa student group, in Ternate, on January 13, 2004.

⁶⁷ Interview in Gosowong, October 2003.

Kao would have seen the creation of a new Makian Subdistrict as exacerbating the unequal distribution of employment between Kao and Makian.⁶⁸

There were two major Kao protests against the creation of Makian di Malifut Subdistrict. The Kao protested outside the Kao and Malifut subdistrict government offices in May after hearing of the release of PP42, and a delegation visited the district head, Abdullah Assagaf, in the same month. The primary objection put to the district head was that the inhabitants of some villages included in the new subdistrict were Kao and that this would break local tradition (*adat*).⁶⁹ Assagaf told the Kao that the creation of the subdistrict was an administrative issue, not an emotional one.

As Kao protests mounted, Makian pressure also grew. The Makayoa student group held demonstrations in Ternate to pressure the district parliament not to accede to the Kao protests and to inaugurate the new subdistrict. On August 13, several dozen members of the Makayoa organization traveled to Malifut to maintain support among the Malifut community for PP42 and to pressure those Kao villages located within the new subdistrict to accept the regulation. When the Kao voiced their objections, the Makayoa stated that a government regulation had been released and that to change it the Kao would have to go to Jakarta, a task beyond most Kao.⁷⁰ When Kao leaders protested about PP42 to the government in Ternate, Yunus Abbas (a Makian), the first assistant to the head of the bureaucracy (*sekwilda*), also stated that it was already law and too late to change.⁷¹

As the Kao continued to refuse to accept PP42, the Makian assumed a more belligerent and confrontational approach towards the Kao. Many Makian, particularly the Makayoa student group, were angered that the Kao were attempting to prevent the Makian from being officially recognized as the permanent residents of what was, to their minds, government-owned land. By this time, many Makian were convinced that it was the inhabitants of Sosol, in particular, who were resisting inclusion in Makian di Malifut Subdistrict.⁷² Kao state that in August, the new subdistrict head of Makian di Malifut, Husen Kuda, gave an ultimatum to the Kao, stating that if they did not want to join "please raise your feet and get out of this new subdistrict" and that "the houses of those who do not wish to join will need to be burned."⁷³

Government officials from the district-level government in Ternate, including Abdullah Assagaf, asked Kao leaders to convince the Kao community to accept PP42. Those approached included the local Protestant minister, Pendeta Salamena, who refused to cooperate.⁷⁴ When, due to continued Kao opposition, Assagaf began to

⁶⁸ For example, Arnol Nanlohy, a Kao Christian, interviewed on January 10, 2003, and Pak Moumou, a Kao Christian and village head of Sosol in 1999, both argued that the loss of the mine was not a primary source of opposition to PP42.

⁶⁹ Interview with Abdullah Assagaf in Bandung, February 28, 2004.

⁷⁰ Interviews with members of the Makayoa group.

⁷¹ Confidential interview with a Kao community leader, North Maluku, January 19, 2004.

⁷² Interview with Pak Ahdan Abdul Gani, village head Samsoma village, Malifut, October 2, 2003.

⁷³ Confidential interviews with several Kao in North Maluku 2003–2004. The date for this speech is uncertain, but some Kao state that Koda made the speech on August 18, the day the violence occurred.

⁷⁴ Several respondents stated that around this time the district head Abdullah Assagaf recognized the volatility of the situation in Malifut and urged the district-level parliament to delay signing PP42 into law.

express doubts that the situation in Malifut and Kao was conducive to the inauguration of the new subdistrict, the position of the Makayoa student group in Malifut became more antagonistic.⁷⁵

The August Riot

At around nine p.m. on August 18, 1999 stones were thrown at houses in the Pagu (Kao) village of Sosol, by some accounts, following a dispute at a party. Ten minutes later, violence broke out between residents of Sosol and the neighboring Makian village of Tahane. A major attack was subsequently launched from Malifut as shouts of "Allahu Akbar" were heard from the Tahane mosque.⁷⁶ In the initial attack from Tahane, the father of the village head of Sosol, Yordan Moumou, was killed. The attack appears to have largely stopped overnight and restarted the following morning. At six a.m., both communities regathered, and at eight a.m. there was a further Sosol casualty, Erasmus Dodowol. The community of Sosol was able to resist the attack until three p.m. on the afternoon of August 19, when the entire community fled to the beach and was evacuated by boat to the capital, Kao. The entire village of Sosol was destroyed, including the church and school. The Makayoa students were still present and were involved in the attack. The leader of the group was killed in Sosol.⁷⁷

On the morning of August 19, Makian from Tahane, Ngofagita, and other villages attacked the neighboring Pagu village of Wangeotak.⁷⁸ One man was killed in Wangeotak, and the village resisted the attack for only a few hours, after which the community was evacuated to Kao with the help of local military personnel and reinforcements from the military company based in Tobelo. As with Sosol, every house and the church in Wangeotak were destroyed. The isolation of Sosol and Wangeotak (the two villages at the center of opposition to being included in Malifut) from other Kao villages meant there was little chance of either village repelling the attacks.

The five security personnel present in Malifut until reinforcements arrived from Tobelo were completely overwhelmed. The commander of the unit stated that given there were over one thousand Kao and Makian fighting, it was not a "good idea" for his personnel to shoot at the crowds.⁷⁹ The military merely shot in the air, to little effect. Reinforcements did not arrive from Tobelo until eleven a.m. that morning and were only able to assist in the evacuation of Wangeotak. The Kao, including villagers from the northern part of the subdistrict, attempted several counterattacks on August 20 and 21. They destroyed the infrastructure in the eastern part of Malifut, including

⁷⁵ Confidential interview with a Makian community leader, Ternate, January 2004.

⁷⁶ The Imam of Tahane mosque confirmed to me that "Allahu Akbar" was shouted from the mosque, although he said he was not present for the riot.

⁷⁷ Confidential interview with a Makian community leader in Ternate.

⁷⁸ Wangeotak is almost adjacent to Sosol, although the two villages are separated by only one to two hundred meters of Makian houses.

⁷⁹ Interview with Commander Franciscus Arisusetio, in Tobelo, September 29, 2003. Arisusetio is now the commander of the military company (Kompi Senayan C) for North Halmahera District.

the large Malifut market and bus terminal. However, military personnel from Tobelo repelled these attacks.

The violence in Malifut can be seen as the result of months of tension arising from the creation of the new subdistrict of Malifut. There is little doubt that, for some among the Makayoa, the experience of religious conflict in Ambon increased their antagonism toward the predominantly Christian Kao. For the Kao community too, stories of the conflict in the south of the province likely increased their animosity toward the Makian throughout this period. Interreligious tension was perhaps increased by the presence of a small number of Ambonese refugees in Kao.⁸⁰ The existence of religious tension in the outbreak of violence was evidenced by the shouts of “Allahu Akbar” from the mosque and the destruction of the churches in Sosol and Wangeotak.

However, the evidence strongly suggests that religious sentiment or tension was not the primary cause of the outbreak of violence and motivated only a minority of the individuals involved. The violence was caused primarily by those factors I have addressed above: ethnic solidarity and competition; the importance of traditional land to the Kao; and Makian frustration at the refusal of the Kao to recognize what they saw as their rights. Kao Muslims and Christians maintained ethnic solidarity in the face of what was ultimately ethnic antagonism, Kao Muslims joining in retaliatory attacks against the Muslim Makian. Further, the Kao response in late October, which will be discussed below, was largely free of religious symbolism. No other Muslim or Christian ethnic groups assisted the Makian or Kao until members of the Makian elite subsequently reframed the conflict in terms of religion.⁸¹ Kao relations with other Islamic communities in the area, including Javanese transmigrants, remained civil throughout 1999 until this reframing took place.⁸²

The Ternate Delegation and Kao Diplomatic Efforts

On Saturday August 21, the new district head of North Maluku, Rusli Andiaco, the district head of police (*Kapolres*), Lt. Col. Didik Prijandono, and the sultan of Ternate, Mudaffar Syah, arrived from the district capital, Ternate, to pacify the situation. The

⁸⁰ One Makian community leader told me that, two weeks before the riot, he had met with the village head of Sosol, Pak Moumou, the head of police (*Kapolsek*) of Kao, and the secretary of the subdistrict (*Sekcam*). All had agreed that violence would not occur in Kao/Malifut.⁸⁰ However, according to this Makian source, two weeks later, just prior to the riot, some Ambonese had entered Kao, including four people who had gone to Wangeotak. This changed the atmosphere in the area.⁸⁰ The Imam of Mesjid Raya, Ngofagita village, in Malifut told me there had been Christian Ambonese in Kao who had been provoking local people.⁸⁰ One Makian told a story of how an Ambonese refugee in Wangeotak had shouted, “*Yesus menang!*” (Jesus wins!) following a “spike” during a volleyball game.

⁸¹ As I will describe in my forthcoming PhD dissertation, this required a great amount of effort as most Muslims in Ternate continued to view the Malifut conflict as ethnic and not religious in character for some time.

⁸² The Kao maintained civil relations with Javanese transmigrants even as conflict broke out between Muslims and Christians in the neighboring subdistrict of Tobelo in December 1999. Many Javanese transmigrants fled North Maluku during the conflict, but this was not due to attacks from Christian militia but due to pressure from Indonesian military personnel. This issue is beyond the scope of this current paper.

sultan, at that time the chairman of the North Maluku District parliament, was highly respected by the Kao as a traditional leader.⁸³ The delegation met with community leaders from both Kao and Malifut. Kao leaders say they demanded two things: that the government rebuild Sosol and Wangeotak and that PP42 be cancelled. However, several other community leaders also pressed a further demand, that the entire Makian community leave Malifut.⁸⁴

The sultan of Ternate managed to pacify the Kao. The sultan agreed with the Kao that the Makian had violated local traditions (*adat*) and that the four subethnic groups of the Kao should not be separated. But he also stated the problem had to be resolved through traditional forms of resolution, including meetings between community leaders, and not through violence.⁸⁵ Different perceptions of the response of the sultan to the demands of the Kao and to the riot of August 18 can be considered central to the development of the violence later in 1999. Many members of the Makian elite believe that the sultan told the Kao that PP42 would be cancelled and that he at least indirectly supported retaliatory action. They believe the Kao understood this supposed statement as permission to carry out further attacks against Malifut.

Yet the Kao initially attempted diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, suggesting that the sultan did not recommend retaliation. Kao community leaders formed a team called the Team of Nine to make representations to the government in Ternate.⁸⁶ The Team of Nine made two trips to Ternate, the first to meet with the sultan of Ternate, the second to meet with members of the North Maluku parliament. The delegation told the sultan that since the Makian had violated *hak adat* (traditional rights) and destroyed the houses and churches of the indigenous population, they had to leave Malifut.⁸⁷ The sultan again ordered the Kao not to break tradition (*adat*) and told them they were forbidden to expel the Makian.⁸⁸

The Team of Nine's second visit to Ternate in late September was to the district parliament. The Kao demanded the cancellation of PP42 and the rehabilitation of Sosol and Wangeotak. According to one member of the Team of Nine, there was already a feeling among some members of the district parliament that the rioting was about religious issues, a claim the Kao strongly denied.⁸⁹ The members of the Team of Nine

⁸³ The Kao community traditionally served as important members of the sultan's military forces.

⁸⁴ Confidential interviews in Kao in 2003. This is also reported by the Protestant Church for Halmahera (Gereja Masehi Injili Di Halmahera), released in December 1999.

⁸⁵ Interview with the sultan in Ternate, February 2004.

⁸⁶ Interviews with members of the Team of Nine such as Pendeta Salamena, Pak Bitjara, and Haji Muksin. The Team of Nine was comprised of nine Kao community leaders (five Protestants, three Muslims, and one Catholic). The chairman (*Ketua*) was Pendeta Salamena, the secretary, Herma Darwis, and the rest of the team consisted of Haji Muksin, Nathaniel Bitjara, Josep Jabermase, Abdullah Salampe, Jou Jinny, and Silas Rahayam.

⁸⁷ Confidential interview in Kao with a member of the Team of Nine.

⁸⁸ Interview with the sultan of Ternate, Mudaffar Syah, in Ternate on February 17, 2004. Members of the Team of Nine have also told me the sultan was sympathetic to their demands, but that he told them it was difficult to circumvent a government law. This is an important point as the sultan is considered by many Makian to have provoked the Kao.

⁸⁹ Confidential interview in Kao with a member of the Team of Nine.

also refuted an accusation from a member of the assembly that it was Kao Muslims who had destroyed churches in Sosol and Wangeotak, not the Makian.⁹⁰

Following the return of the Team of Nine in late August, the Kao waited for funding to reconstruct the two destroyed villages, while refugees from those villages lived in temporary accommodations in the capital. There was little response from the district-level government, and neither the communities of Sosol and Wangeotak nor the subdistrict government received any funding for the reconstruction of the villages.

There are several explanations for this lack of response from the local government. It is likely that many officials were busy with preparations for the inauguration of the province, to take place on October 12. In addition, the Team of Nine was not particularly influential in Ternate, partly because there was only one Kao in the district parliament. When compared to the political influence enjoyed by the Makian in North Maluku, this weakness was all the more apparent. The sultan and the several Christian members of parliament from Halmahera were in a substantial minority in the parliament and unable successfully to represent the Kao.

More importantly, many members of the parliament, especially Makian members, believed that since PP42 was already authorized by the Department of Home Affairs, the Kao community would therefore be forced to accept it. It appears that they also felt that the Kao were not in a position either to have PP42 cancelled or to retaliate for the destruction of Sosol and Wangeotak.⁹¹ It appears likely that the Makian in Ternate considered the military unit stationed on the northeastern border of Malifut adequate to resist small attacks like those that had come from Kao after the destruction of the two villages.

The October Riot

After the Kao had received no response from the local government throughout October, the perception held by the Kao of receiving unjust treatment at the hands of a Makian-dominated government increased. Kao anger at the Makian for destroying Sosol and Wangeotak was compounded by this perceived bias of the government, a government that had failed to provide funds for the villages' rehabilitation or prosecute anyone involved in the incident. For this reason, the Kao focus shifted from diplomatic efforts to preparations for physical retaliation, led by a highly respected Kao, Bernard Bitjara.⁹² The Kao made a large number of traditional weapons such as bows, spears, and machetes. The Kao also made a powerful variant of the Molotov

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ The stereotype held by many Makian in Ternate, Tidore, and elsewhere that the Kao are lazy and disorganized partly explains this perception.

⁹² Before the initial incident, Benny Bitjara was living in Kupa Kupa village, Tobelo Subdistrict, but subsequently he spent a great deal of time in Kao, overseeing Kao military preparations. Benny Bitjara would also come to be known as Benny Doro, "Doro" being the name of his village in Kao. Prior to the conflict, Benny Bitjara was in charge of security at the Pertamina installation at Kupa Kupa. The military preparation had been carried out in addition to the Kao diplomatic efforts, but it accelerated over time as the Kao waited for but received no response from the government.

cocktail from sulfur extracted from bombs found on the several Japanese WWII battleships sunk off the coast of Kao.

On the morning of Sunday, October 24, a clash occurred between Kao Muslims and Makian in the coconut fields in Kalijodo, the area bordering the two subdistricts. Kao men guarded the boundary line, which was also near the location of gardens owned by Makian farmers. Versions of this incident from the two sides differ sharply.⁹³ What is clear is that a large group of Makian requested permission from the military officer in charge of guarding the eastern edge of Malifut to enter their coconut gardens, which were located in a no man's land between that military post and the border of Kao, which at that time was guarded by approximately twelve Kao Muslims.⁹⁴ After two months of tension and restricted movement, the Malifut community was very short of food.⁹⁵ Because of the dangers of working so close to Kao, large numbers of Makian men armed with machetes entered the field. When the Makian entered the field at Kalijodo, clashes broke out with the Kao guarding the border.⁹⁶ The Kao argue that the men guarding the border, believing the Makian to be attacking, held them back using bows until more Kao arrived following church service.

Following the initial fight in the coconut field, during which around five Makian were killed (and no Kao), the Makian were driven back to Malifut, and the Kao reassembled in the capital along with Kao from the large northern villages of Pediwang and Gamlaha. Reportedly notified by messengers traveling in cars, Kao from West Kao had also traveled to Kao village.⁹⁷ In the early morning of October 25, Benny Bitjara led approximately fifteen thousand Kao troops (*pasukan*) in a massive attack on Malifut.⁹⁸ The massive and rapid mobilization of a huge militia and the substantial

⁹³ Unsurprisingly, each side believes the other intended to attack that day.

⁹⁴ There is disagreement on the number of Makian involved, however. Makian I interviewed suggest there were anywhere from forty to over one hundred Makian, the large number due to the dangers of approaching the border area. Kao I interviewed, however, state that there were as many as six hundred Makian, although one Kao man who had been present guarding the border suggested there were two hundred. Interview with Kao Muslim, Mohtar Ismael, in Kao on January 19, 2004.

⁹⁵ Large numbers of Makian I interviewed stated that the community was short of food. Interviews in Malifut and Ternate, 2003–2004, including an interview with Ipor, a man from the Malifut village of Tahane. Interview, Ternate, January 15, 2004.

⁹⁶ Separate interviews with Mohtar Ismael and Darwan, Kao, January 19, 2004. Darwan was a Muslim Kao who had been guarding Kalijodo on Sunday, October 24, 1999. The Kao believe that the Makian timed the attack to occur during the church service (*ibadah*) on Sunday morning, when most Christians would be occupied and the small numbers of Muslim Kao on guard could be easily overrun or convinced to join the Makian. A senior military officer present at the time of the clash stated that the Makian were merely gathering coconuts and were then attacked by a large number of Kao (confidential interviews, North Maluku, 2003–2004).

⁹⁷ Most Kao (and Tobelo) consider the communities of West Kao, often called *orang pedalaman* (interior people) to be more "warlike" and animist than other Kao communities. Numerous interviews on Halmahera, 2003–2004.

⁹⁸ Interview with Benny Bitjara, Kupa Kupa village, September 18, 2003. As is almost always the case in such events, the exact number of Kao troops is difficult to obtain. Makian have suggested there were as many as twenty thousand. Although the fact that the total population of Kao Subdistrict was only twenty-seven thousand suggests that the figure given by Bitjara may be exaggerated, I have accepted this figure, as at least some women and children were involved. This is also the figure that most Kao who were present appear to agree upon. No members of the Tobelo ethnic group assisted in the attack.

preparation demonstrated by the subsequent Kao attack suggest that at least some Kao had planned a large-scale assault on Malifut even before the clash in the coconut field.

In the attack, the Kao used sulfur bombs, a small number of homemade firearms, bows and arrows, and spears. Almost all men carried machetes (*parang*). Given that the Makian attempted to defend their villages with only stones, they were completely overwhelmed. Because of the rising tensions associated with PP42 and the initial riots, the majority of the Malifut population had already fled over the preceding weeks, leaving only approximately five thousand (mostly men) in Malifut.⁹⁹ The military unit guarding the border abandoned any attempt to prevent the two sides from clashing since the number of Kao attacking Malifut was far too large.

Among the Makian there were hasty deliberations over the best possible response. The village head of Tahane argued for attempting to hold out and guard Malifut. However the majority of community leaders decided the Kao force was too great and opted to evacuate the population to the subdistrict military command (*Koramil*) in Malifut.¹⁰⁰ The Makian had resisted the attack for less than one hour.

The speed with which the Makian were driven from Malifut meant that only three people were killed.¹⁰¹ Several Kao leaders stated that their goal was to drive the Malifut community from the area, not to kill large numbers. However, the scale of destruction that took place as the Makian were evacuated was massive. Every house in all sixteen villages was either bombed or burned. The entire infrastructure of the subdistrict was destroyed, including the subdistrict government office, although several schools were left untouched.¹⁰²

Before the attack, Benny Bitjara and other Kao leaders ordered militia members not to destroy mosques. Following the expulsion of the Makian, Benny Bitjara took a military officer to each mosque in order to confirm that they had not been destroyed.¹⁰³ The Kao also raised an Indonesian flag in front of each. Bitjara gave the order to protect the mosques because, first, the Kao Muslim community was involved in the attack and, second, he sought to demonstrate that this conflict was not "about religion."¹⁰⁴

Representatives of the district government arrived in Malifut to assess the situation, meeting the Makian in the military base and also calling the Team of Nine

⁹⁹ Interview with Pak Satta Sabar, Ternate, January 4, 2004. Pak Satta Sabar was a community leader in Malifut at the time of the conflict and now is a staff member in the North Maluku District Department of Agriculture (Kantor Petanian) in Ternate. Apparently Makian from Ternate and elsewhere had attempted to reach Malifut from Ternate but had been blocked by Indonesian security forces at Sidangoli, the port village on the western side of Halmahera.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Pak Satta Sabar, January 4, 2004.

¹⁰¹ Interviews with Benny Bitjara, Kupa Kupa village, September 18, 2003 and Pak Satta Sabar, Ternate, January 4, 2004.

¹⁰² It seems likely that the schools were not destroyed because they were built with funds from Nusa Halmahera Mineral.

¹⁰³ The mosques in Malifut were subsequently destroyed during the wider conflict on Halmahera.

¹⁰⁴ As Christians are a 20 percent minority in North Maluku, it is obvious why the largely Christian Kao would not want the wider population to see the conflict as religious. The issue of the destruction of mosques in Malifut would nevertheless become a central issue in the development of the conflict in North Maluku.

from Kao. The members of the Team of Nine demanded the Makian be evacuated, and Makian community leaders stated their unwillingness to return to their villages. The remaining Malifut population was evacuated by truck to Sidangoli and from there by speedboat to Ternate.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that the North Maluku conflict, undoubtedly highly religious in character for the vast majority of its duration, did not begin as such. The initial conflict was primarily local in character. The Ambon conflict may have partly exacerbated tensions between the predominantly Christian Kao and the Muslim Makian (particularly the Makayoa student group), but far more important were issues of territory, natural resources, and ethnic solidarity. For the Kao in particular, the dispute was ethnic in character, a fact demonstrated by the involvement of Muslim Kao in clashes with the Makian and the attack on Malifut. Muslim and Christian Kao continued to demonstrate ethnic solidarity throughout the subsequent interreligious North Maluku conflict.¹⁰⁵

We can also see that, at least in this case, contrary to many accounts of violence in Indonesia, this conflict was not caused by the military or old "New Order elements."¹⁰⁶ I have argued that the conflict in North Maluku was caused by localized ethnic competition, not instigated by individuals or groups seeking to disrupt the process of *reformasi*. There is no evidence of instigation by the security forces, which, indeed, appear to have been surprised by the initial attack and then frightened and overwhelmed in October by the thousands of Kao men attacking Malifut under the leadership of Benny Bitjara.

However, although the causes of the conflict were primarily local, it is also helpful to see the conflict in Malifut as connected to both the residual political and administrative structure of the New Order and changes in that structure. The devolution of local revenues to the district level through Law 25/1999 greatly increased the financial benefits of controlling the governments and bureaucracies at the district level. This development sharpened political competition for control of the district level of government in many areas of Indonesia. As did individuals and groups in other areas of Indonesia, many Makian attempted to exploit more fully this opportunity. Many in the Makian elite attempted to establish Malifut as a subdistrict

¹⁰⁵ There was no violence between Muslim and Christian Kao even during the religious conflict in late December between Muslims and Christians from the Tobelo ethnic group in Tobelo, one hundred kilometers to the north.

¹⁰⁶ Analysts often suggest that a great deal of the violence in *reformasi*-period Indonesia was instigated in a covert fashion by external actors, most notably senior TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Armed Forces) officers and ex-New Order officials, in an effort to retain power lost through democratization. See for example George Aditjondro, "Guns, Pamphlets and Handy-Talkies: How the Military Exploited Local Ethno-religious Tensions in Maluku to Preserve their Political and Economic Privileges," in *Violence in Indonesia*, ed. I. Wessel and G. Wimhofer (Hamburg: Abera Verlag Markus Voss, 2001). See also Kevin O'Rourke, *The Struggle for Power in Post-Soeharto Indonesia* (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2002).

quickly, before the division of new districts occurred in the new province of North Maluku.

These developments interacted with other national structures that remained from the New Order. Widespread ethnic nepotism in the bureaucracy and the unresponsiveness of the government to community concerns played a role in causing the conflict. The influence of the Makian in the bureaucracy and government, as well as in other institutions such as universities, enabled the Makian to create a new subdistrict with little or no consultation with the Kao. Likewise, the influence of the Makian in those institutions allowed these institutions to ignore subsequent Kao opposition.

Therefore, the conflict in Malifut can be partly understood as stemming from a “rational” competition for resources taking place within the changing (although not completely altered) national structure of Indonesia. The high importance the Makian placed on the creation of a new subdistrict can be largely explained by the presence of a sizable gold deposit in the proposed subdistrict. The gold mine was quite significant in an area of such low economic development. The importance many Makian placed upon the creation of a legally recognized “Makian” subdistrict partly explains the belligerent and unilateral manner in which many (especially the Makayoa student group) pushed for its creation and dealt with Kao opposition.

The objections of the Kao may partly be seen in terms of resource competition or as driven by a sense of deprivation stemming from both their lack of access to resources and their lower level of status compared to the Makian. The loss of the gold mine from Kao territory sparked concerns about the community’s loss of employment and other revenue. Their conviction that they were being deprived of resources that traditionally had belonged to them must surely have increased a feeling of frustration among many members of the community.

However, concerns about the material resources of the territory do not fully explain the emotional character of the dispute and, therefore, the outbreak of violence. The conflict escalated into violence because of the emotional stake both parties had in the creation of the subdistrict. As the indigenous inhabitants, the Kao held strong affective ties to the territory and were particularly concerned to prevent the division of their ethnic community into two subdistricts. The Makian felt that the Kao were hindering their attempts to gain recognition as the legal owners of the land after two decades of residence.¹⁰⁷

The Kao felt that the creation of a separate subdistrict of Makian in Malifut violated their status as the indigenous community of the area by reassigning ownership of their land without their agreement, separating members of the Kao community, and using a Makian name for the new subdistrict. This violation of their status was more important to the Kao than the loss of the mine’s economic benefits. In other words, it is likely that the Kao would still have resisted the creation of a new subdistrict, controlled by and

¹⁰⁷ A series of national laws, from the Basic Agrarian Law No. 5 1960 to the Basic Forestry Law 1967 and the Mining Law 1968, state that customary title is recognized only so long as it does not interfere with national and state interests. For a discussion of these laws, see International Crisis Group, *Communal Violence in Indonesia: Lessons from Kalimantan*, Asia Report No. 18, June 27, 2001 (Jakarta: International Crisis Group, 2001), pp. 15–16.

named for the Makian, even if there had there been no gold mine located within it. However, as in most, if not all, cases of communal conflict, the interaction of both material and non-material factors increased the likelihood of violence.

In August, the Makian in Malifut became more belligerent as the Kao continued to refuse to accept PP42. Many Makian, particularly the Makayoa student group, were angered that the Kao were attempting to prevent what was to them a long-overdue process: the recognition of the Malifut community as the official owners of the territory on which they had resided for twenty-five years. Their anger was complicated by their perception that the Kao might prevent them from profiting from the lucrative gold mine. This anger resulted in the destruction of the two Kao villages that were central to the Kao refusal to accept this process. Kao retaliation was delayed for almost two months while the Kao waited for funding for the reconstruction of the two villages. However, the failure of the district government to rehabilitate the destroyed villages led to massive Kao retaliation. This ethnic clash between the Christian Kao and Muslim Makian would subsequently instigate religious war throughout almost all areas of North Maluku.