

Gerry van Klinken. *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars*. London and New York, NY: Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series, 2007. 208 pp.

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The literature on communal violence in Indonesia has burgeoned in recent years, with analyses of the various outbreaks of ethnic, religious, and separatist violence that occurred at the turn of the twenty-first century. Although most authors focus on a particular incident of violence, as exemplified by the numerous articles that have appeared in this journal, a few scholars have attempted to come up with broad, theoretical frameworks to explain violence (in general) across Indonesia in the post-Suharto years.¹ One of the more focused attempts is Gerry van Klinken's book on the various outbreaks of communal violence that took place after the fall of Suharto. Rather than attempt to explain all the incidences of violence across Indonesia (e.g., communal violence, separatist violence, anti-Chinese violence), van Klinken limits his analysis to what he calls "post-authoritarian communal violence" in Indonesia. Examples include the events in Maluku, North Maluku, Poso (Central Sulawesi), West Kalimantan, and Central Kalimantan. His primary interest is in looking at outbreaks in these five locations as a "single phenomenon" and presenting a theoretical explanation about why violence occurred in those particular locales rather than in others. By limiting his analysis to those five examples, he is able to avoid criticisms about selective inclusion or the omission of incidents that do not fit his theoretical model; this approach significantly strengthens his argument.

Van Klinken's goal is not to provide detailed accounts of each outbreak of communal violence, but rather to "understand the dynamics of the biggest events in a class of conflicts that have not been seen in Indonesia for several decades" (p. 11). His primary interest lies in questions of collective action, and he turns to social-movements theory to explain why the violence took place, since, as he argues, the violence was "part of normal politics" (p. 7). In particular, he calls upon the work of Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly on contentious politics.² These authors have argued that there are five main processes involved in contentious politics: identity formation, escalation, polarization, mobilization, and actor constitution. Van Klinken pairs each one of these processes with one of the five provinces where communal violence took place.

The critical component of van Klinken's writing is in his attempt to explain why the five incidences of post-authoritarian outbreaks of communal violence occurred when they did and, most importantly for his argument, *where* they did. While Jacques Bertrand's and John Sidel's work on collective violence in Indonesia both attempt to explain the former, neither attempts to explain the latter.³ In Chapter 2, van Klinken

¹ See Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and John Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

² Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³ See Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*; and Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad*.

provides an explanation of why the violence happened when it did, noting several factors, the most important of which was the process of decentralization that began after the fall of Suharto and the contests for control over resources at the provincial level that accompanied it. In Chapter 3, the most crucial for van Klinken's argument, he lays out why the violence happened where it did. For example, why didn't the Dayak-Madurese violence in Central Kalimantan spread into South Kalimantan where, one could argue, the animosity against the Madurese was just as profound among the majority Banjar? Instead, it largely stopped in Kuala Kapuas, on the border between the two provinces. Why was North Sulawesi able to avoid the religious violence that plagued Poso and North Maluku, despite being home to tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) from those regions? Van Klinken argues that "we need only two factors to identify those places prone to communal violence" (p. 12). Those two factors are the process of deagrarianization (an increase in the number of workers in nonagricultural sectors of the economy) and a high dependence on the state sector to absorb these nonagricultural workers into civil-servant positions. Since the state is the major employer for nonagricultural (salaried) workers in many parts of the outer islands, the correlation of these two factors provides the clue to why violence happened where it did. Van Klinken uses these two indicators to create what he calls a "vulnerability index" (the increase in nonagricultural workers multiplied by the percentage of nonagricultural workers who are civil servants; p. 44). The provinces with the highest vulnerability index largely correlate with the five provinces that experienced communal conflict in the post-Suharto period, along with the Bengkulu, East Nusa Tenggara, and Southeast Sulawesi.

Van Klinken argues that these outbursts of communal violence can be largely attributed to machinations of regional urban elite in their efforts to control state resources, and to control the newly created bureaucratic positions and associated patronage networks as decentralization changed administrative boundaries throughout Indonesia. As van Klinken's main interest is in understanding the collective action involved in these episodes of communal violence, this elite-focused explanation serves his purpose well. He argues that these regional elites were able to organize along religious and ethnic lines in the outer islands, as these same religious and ethnic cleavages shaped their own patronage networks. The struggles among district- and provincial-level elites over who would be appointed as new district heads, arguably the most lucrative position in decentralized Indonesia, or who would control local bureaucracies and the related income (both official and unofficial), led to the outbreaks of violence.

The remaining chapters nicely pair one of the five processes of contentious politics respectively with one of the five exemplary sites of communal violence in post-Suharto Indonesia. Van Klinken explores the role of identity formation among Malays and Dayaks in the conflict in West Kalimantan and how this shaped the violence. He looks at the process of escalation in Poso by exploring how neighborhood riots in a small provincial town eventually came to include the Java-based Laskar Jihad militia, and some would even argue elements of Al-Qaeda, to become an "international issue" (p. 72). He examines the process of mobilization in Ambon, exploring how both Christian and Muslim elite mobilized their respective communities to take up arms again and again over the course of the conflict in Maluku. He uses the violence in North Maluku to explore the process of polarization, explaining how the political elite in Ternate,

after decades of working together, began to compete over the spoils of a new province, which had disastrous results. Finally, he looks at actor constitution in Central Kalimantan, investigating how the Dayaks in that province became a collective actor that could wreak havoc in the region.

My two criticisms of van Klinken's approach stem largely from a difference of disciplinary interests (van Klinken is a political scientist and I am an anthropologist), and serve more as a challenge to van Klinken's theory than anything else. My main criticism of the book (and of most political science work on communal violence in Indonesia, for that matter) is van Klinken's elite-focused instrumentalist explanation. Very few of the political elites that van Klinken discusses, at least in the North Maluku case, actually took up arms during the conflict. For example, his discussion of the violence in North Maluku does not explore how people outside of Ternate, as well as outside of the political and intellectual elite, perceived the conflict and how these communities were polarized into opposing sides based on ethnic or religious differences. As I have argued elsewhere in the pages of this journal, an elite focus has to take into account how and why local communities took up arms against their neighbors.⁴ Explaining communal violence as simply the result of elite manipulation precludes consideration of the possibility that any other social dynamic was present to incite those acts. The participants simply become the dupes of the provincial elite, lacking any true understanding of what they are involved in, or lacking any of their own motivations for taking part. What led these non-elite citizens to commit acts of violence that would have been abhorrent in other times? What made the religious or ethnic explanation of the violence plausible to local communities whose members took up arms? These questions remain largely unanswered in van Klinken's work (as they do, too, in Sidel's and Bertrand's research), but admittedly these are not the questions that van Klinken set out to answer.

The other shortcoming I identified is the urban bias of van Klinken's approach, which, in fairness, he also notes (p. 34). Due to his elite-focus and concerns with collective action, he is more interested in the organizers and instigators of the violence than he is in the perpetrators and victims. However, it is important to note that, as the violence spread across the various provinces, it was reshaped by local political, social, and cultural tensions, as well as by rumors, notions of revenge, and narratives of forced migration (among other influences). Members of the urban elite were not able to control these local understandings and how they played out on the ground. There was no single master narrative of the violence that accompanied it to rural regions, where much of the violence occurred. For example, the bulk of the violence in North Maluku took place in rural regions often far from Ternate, in places where the political machinations of the provincial elite had little, if any, importance to the people on the ground directly involved in the attacks. In such places, people had a variety of reasons for taking part in the fighting—reasons that varied from person to person and from community to community, and which often changed over time.

As this review was going to press, Routledge published an affordable paperback version of van Klinken's book, which is fortunate, since the cost of the hardback version, at US\$160, was prohibitive. The publication of an affordable paperback edition

⁴ Christopher R. Duncan, "The Other Maluku: Chronologies of Conflict in North Maluku, Eastern Indonesia," *Indonesia* 80 (October 2005): 56.

means that the text can be used in university courses. I found that van Klinken's book works very well when teaching undergraduates. I used it in an undergraduate course on communal violence in Indonesia, and my students enjoyed the book, easily understood van Klinken's arguments, and found the text to be informative. It would also work well in graduate courses. The book has been translated into Indonesian and could be used in Indonesian universities as well.⁵

My small criticisms and differences of opinion aside, van Klinken's book is a welcome addition to the expanding corpus of work on violence in Indonesia and should be required reading for anyone interested in the topic of communal violence in Southeast Asia. On a final note, one helpful aspect of van Klinken's book is that, in the course of presenting his own argument, he raises almost as many questions as he answers. He insightfully points out the numerous gaps in the literature on communal violence in Indonesia, many of which would be interesting avenues for other scholars to pursue. A graduate student looking for a project related to communal violence would be well served reading Klinken's text for this aspect of it alone.

⁵ Gerry van Klinken, *Perang Kota Kecil: Kekerasan Komunal dan Demokratisasi di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor/KITLV, 2007).