

**Dave McRae. *A Few Poorly Organized Men: Interreligious Violence in Poso, Indonesia*. Leiden: Brill, 2013 ([brill.com/few-poorly-organized-men](http://brill.com/few-poorly-organized-men), pre-print version). 152 pp.**

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The result of a decade of research, Dave McRae's *A Few Poorly Organized Men* offers vivid accounts of and interesting insights about the Poso violence in post-New Order Indonesia.

By analyzing the organization of violence, the book is a valuable contribution to answering the fundamental question of how interreligious violence took place in Poso, a remote and relatively unknown town during the New Order era. McRae's analysis is built on the notion that behind the violent event was Poso's economic disparity as a result of the religious division between Muslims and Christians in the local government. However, after close examination of Poso's violent events, the book finds that focusing on the leaders' "goals, motivations, and actions" (p. 10) is more revealing than economic inequality to trace the contour of violence in Poso. The leaders of both rival religious groups were main actors behind the violence, which became an end in itself to preserve one's religious identity. The conflict in Poso had become spiritual in nature, a holy war.

What can be inferred from this book is McRae's effort to shape the body of knowledge regarding the Poso conflict. He seems neither to agree nor disagree with existing literature on Poso, although he claims that *A Few Poorly Organized Men* is "the first comprehensive history of the years of violent conflict in Poso" (p. 11). However, I believe *A Few Poorly Organized Men* is not the first of its kind, and I wonder why McRae didn't mention the other studies, albeit there are differences in the time frames of the studies, particularly the research reports published by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, LIPI).<sup>1</sup> In general, McRae applies a comparative approach eclectically to use relevant information and theoretical elaboration from other studies, as well as data triangulation with news-media accounts and in-depth interviews with key informants. Both McRae and researchers from LIPI treat the Poso violence as interreligious in nature and share similar details regarding the same violent episodes.

*A Few Poorly Organized Men* adds to the current—and immense—discussion on conflict in post-New Order Indonesia by taking into account the specificity of local conditions and local elites' ability to generate violence. It also considers the role of rising militant Islamist groups—which, after Suharto's resignation in May 1998, began openly to enter national politics—in accelerating the scope and pace of violence.

The Poso conflict, marked by horrendous violence, occurred over a period of nine years. Nonetheless, a majority of the Indonesian population were only made aware of

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<sup>1</sup> See M. Hamdan Basyar, ed., *Konflik Poso: Pemetaan dan Pencarian Pola-Pola Alternatif Penyelesaiannya* (Jakarta: LIPI, 2003); Bayu Setiawan, ed., *Konflik Poso: Perbedaan Intensitas Konflik dan Efektivitas Upaya Penyelesaiannya* (Jakarta: LIPI, 2004); and Sarah Nuraini Siregar, ed., *Pengelolaan Keamanan di Daerah Konflik: Studi Kasus Ambon dan Poso* (Jakarta: LIPI, 2008).

the conflict through the news. In general, Indonesians regard it as one of the “typical” conflicts that occurred during the early *Reformasi* period, a conflict with no distinctive feature whatsoever, compared to some other violence that occurred in Ambon and Sambas. Indeed, violence has marked many episodes of Indonesian history since 1945.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, the Poso conflict, regretfully, seems to be seen as just another episode of Indonesia’s violence historiography. However, through McRae’s study, we see the Poso conflict in a different way. Though Poso shared similar features with other violent conflict areas in Indonesia, e.g., religious strife and the rise of local elites, McRae argues that the Poso conflict should be seen as the manifestations of an “evolving ‘division of labor’ in perpetrating violence between leaders and core combatants on the one hand, and ordinary community members on the other” (p. 9). This stance, however, criticizes the view that socio-cultural anomie in societies as a result of disputes based on ethnic or religious identity, and over old territorial disputes, is the basic tool of analysis for explaining the dynamics of violence.

If there is such a socio-cultural factor inherently embedded within Poso that contributes to violence there, then we might want to ask why conflict only began to mount when it did and not sooner. Posing that question enables us to see the limitation of the view that considers the violent conflict as culturally and historically justified. It also shows the primacy of McRae’s comparative approach in understanding the occurrence of the interreligious conflict—and there is also a possibility of applying McRae’s approach in another context of conflict. The Poso conflict, according to McRae, happened because there was an enabling socio-political factor exploited by local leaders and core combatants, a factor compounded by deep grievances among the victims and general population.

McRae wrote that there are four phases to the Poso conflict, each characterized by different victims and forms of violence. He defined those phases based on the changing division of labor within the two conflicting parties, namely, the Islam and Christian groups, rather than by using a national event as the benchmark, e.g., the terms of office of Indonesian presidents in the *Reformasi* era (B. J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Soekarnoputri, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono). McRae’s categorization explains how local situations played a large role in shaping the dynamics of Poso’s violent conflicts—though, later, not in their resolutions.

The first phase began with urban riots in December 1998 and then again in April 2000. The riots involved youths from villages surrounding Poso, and resulted in the deaths of about seven people. What seemed at first as political violence, i.e., a violent act based on local elite competition to occupy strategic positions in the government, suddenly evolved into a deadlier form. In May 2000, violence spread to the south, southeast, and west of Poso, marking the beginning of a new phase of conflict with widespread killings, with a particular religious group (Christian) as the main perpetrator. Led by religious leaders and local politicians, crowds deliberately attacked villages, resulting in civilian casualties. The death toll reached 246.

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Frederick, “Shadows of an Unseen Hand: Some Patterns of Violence in the Indonesian Revolution, 1945–1949,” in *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective*, ed. Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (Leiden: KITLV, 2002), pp. 141–70.

The next phase was a protracted, two-sided fight, during which the Poso conflict arrived at its defining moment as interreligious violence. Mujahidin from outside regions supported Poso Muslim groups. Many of those mujahidin were veterans of the Maluku conflict and members of Sulawesi-based militant Islamist groups. They brought factory-standard firearms and explosives, military knowledge, and their ideological bias all in support of *jihad*. Meanwhile, Christian groups also strengthened their power by amassing weaponry to face possible retaliation from Muslims. Things simply grew worse for the people in general as tensions increased exponentially. At least one hundred people died during this phase of protracted violence.

During the third phase of conflict, regular people (civilians, non-combatants) often became involved—both directly and indirectly, voluntarily as well as involuntarily—because they had to protect their family and village from opponents' attacks. The group leader's ability to motivate the masses was significant in determining whether people would participate in the violence. By exploiting the sentiment of religious solidarity, local leaders not only encouraged some people to join the crowd in attacking the perceived enemy, but also intimidated others into doing the same. The leaders needed a huge crowd in order to gain and preserve their social legitimacy, as a large following might indicate that the people agreed with their action.

The conflicting parties formally agreed to halt the violence with the Malino Declaration in 2001, yet that peace did not last. The violence continued, even though the perpetrators realized that the law provided for harsh punishments if they got caught by the security apparatus while committing violence.

The fourth and last phase, the longest period of conflict, lingered for over five years, from 2002 until January 2007.<sup>3</sup> There were sporadic shootings, bombings, and murders. Ordinary people largely did not get involved anymore in the attacks; they saw no further advantage. The government—in the case of Poso, meaning mainly the central government rather than a provincial or district government—expanded the capacity of its security forces to halt the violence and restore public order. Some of the alleged main perpetrators were arrested and brought to court—but not without a controversy arising over government impartiality. It is not a secret that security forces took sides during the conflict. In McRae's words, the security forces had been contaminated by religious solidarity, as also happened in the Maluku conflict: "To Karnavian et al.'s long list might be added illicit motivations for security behaviour, whether for profit, to seek revenge, or to indulge religious solidarities" (p. 124).

At the end of McRae's analysis, it is hard not to see how the (tenuous) completion of sporadic violence in 2007 was the result of the coordinated work of the central government with local security forces, not to mention the role of citizens and former combatants in general who refused to participate in the violence. McRae wrote, "In January 2007, police launched two raids against Tanah Runtuh—the main remaining center of jihadist activity in Poso—thereby ending violence in the district" (p. 127). But, this does not mean the government had done everything it had to do in an appropriate

<sup>3</sup> It is important to bear in mind that, in fact, the violence did not end in January 2007. Even in 2013, Poso still experienced violent episodes via terrorist attacks. See Ruslan Sangadji, Yuliasri Perdani, and Bagus BT Saragih, "Suicide Bombing Hits Restive Poso," *The Jakarta Post*, June 4, 2013, p. 1. Though there is a peace agreement, the Malino Declaration, substantial conflict resolution at the grassroots level has not been achieved, and the presence of terrorist cells has increased the potential for violence in Poso.

way. First and foremost, the government's security actions were not adequately responsive—they were too late. Probably no one knows precisely why it took so long for the state's security apparatus to address and alter the deteriorating situation. In Poso, as McRae argued, as well as in other post-New Order conflict areas in Indonesia, one best explanation is to put blame on the unfinished—or, as several may argue, halfhearted—effort to reform Indonesia's security sector.<sup>4</sup> For some reason, it was true that the field officers were not equipped with the appropriate equipment, knowledge, and technical skills to prevent violence at such a high intensity, like that which happened in Poso. However, looking at Poso's size and total population, the problem was not with the number of personnel and their equipment, but in the timing of the action taken by the government.

Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning that, after the Malino Declaration, the government seemed not to show any urgency, or the need to act for securitization,<sup>5</sup> in Poso until 2007, by which time there were hundreds of victims, and international media began to cover news about the ongoing Poso conflict and connected that violence with the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and global terrorist networks in general. In this case, although the beginning of the conflict was not necessarily directly influenced by national politics (e.g., the instability of the newly born democracy), the eventual resolution was highly dependent on Jakarta's political decision to deploy additional force in Poso.

Nine years of violent conflict have, indeed, left deep wounds in Poso society. As McRae stated, "most community members were profoundly fatigued, unconvinced that they would gain anything by continuing to fight and hence unwilling to participate in [more] attacks" (p. 139).

However, it remains possible that the Poso conflict will resume in the future, because the ingredients to spark another episode are relatively easy to find. McRae concluded as much with this bold statement—which became part of his book title—"any future group of potential core perpetrators would likely remain just a few poorly organized men" (p. 139). Nine years of violence have laid the foundation for even amateur provocateurs to ignite the conflict once again. Poso has become fertile ground for conflict, and it is quite sensible to conclude that even a small incident precipitated by regular individuals could lead to massive violence.

McRae stated that the act of violence itself could only be understood as the transformative power to shape and direct the course of conflict. Far from conspiracy, violence in Poso flourished because different causes converged and used those differences to justify violent acts by some local leaders. Once violence happened in a particular time and space, it stayed there for a period of time, waiting to prevail by destroying what it could and haunting the people. All of McRae's findings are the implication of theoretical preference to focus on the agency, leaders, and core

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<sup>4</sup> On the dynamics of security sector reform in post-New Order Indonesia, see Muhamad Haripin, *Reformasi Sektor Keamanan Pasca Orde Baru: Melacak Pandangan dan Komunikasi Advokasi Masyarakat Sipil* (Tangerang: Marjin Kiri, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The term "securitization" is widely used in international relations and security studies; it is used to frame particular events as important or even dangerous, so that they are perceived as needing special attention. See Ole Wæver, "Securitization and Desecuritization," in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie Lipschutz (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86.

combatants as the agents of violence to retaliate, gain social privilege, and preserve something perceived as religious duty.

In *A Few Poorly Organized Men*, McRae has been done a remarkable job of collecting the puzzling facts surrounding the Poso conflict and eloquently presenting them in a historical narrative. The book is valuable reading for Indonesia specialists, peace and conflict analysts, and scholars of Asian Studies in general.