

Kees van Dijk, the author of this book, has indeed fulfilled his promise to fill the gaps of knowledge in the historical events in the then Netherlands Indies, shortly before and during the First World War. Van Dijk, however, is only interested in the events that may have directly or indirectly connected with the big war. Who would then be surprised to learn that he apparently simply ignores the events that might have taken place in the same period in the areas outside Java?

Whatever the case, Kees van Dijk should be complimented for writing such an excellent, massive volume. He may not have tried to give any bold theoretical historical reconstruction on the significance of the big war, he has nonetheless not only filled some important gaps in the knowledge of the past but also gives, indirectly, perhaps, new insight in the historical process of the national formation of Indonesia.

Dewi Anggreini, *Tragedi Mei 1998 dan lahirnya Komnas Perempuan*. Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2014, 214 pp. ISBN: 978-979-709-809-4. Price: IDR 63,000 (soft cover).



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Dewi Anggreini's book reads like a diary: the reader is drawn back to the chaotic months surrounding President Suharto's fall in May 1998. The book is a stark reminder that to this day, victims of the riots that set a number of Indonesia's city ablaze during that time have yet to receive any form of justice.

Seasoned journalist and writer Anggreini follows the experience of 14 women – academics and activists – who became closely involved with the riots' rape victims. A number of them would later become part of the National Commission on Violence against Women, or Komnas Perempuan.

Jakarta, May 1998. The city had become the stage for mass student demonstrations, reflecting the nation's political discontent towards Suharto's regime, and intensified by a spiralling financial crisis. Violence erupted following shooting by security forces that left four Trisakti University students dead on 12 May. The trepidation of Myra Diarsi, founder of women's rights organization Kalyanamitra, grew as she started seeing mobs looting stores and buildings set ablaze. This turned into horror when people started speaking of

gang rapes mainly – but not exclusively – in the city’s Chinese neighbourhoods.

Within days Diarsi’s Kalyanamitra joined hands with diverse social and women’s organizations supporting the victims: setting up telephone hotlines, coordinating doctors, hospitals, and counsellors. The monstrous stories of sexual violence started pouring in. Kalyanamitra director Ita Nadya was called by two men who then brought Nadya to two petrified victims: “They were abducted and then gang raped in a van. After that, they were tortured and had their nipples cut off, before being thrown out of the vehicle. That was how the two men who called Nadya found them [...]. Although their condition was critical, the women initially refused medical help.” (pp. 32-33).

Gradually, through fieldwork and careful information gathering, the volunteers became convinced that the riots were orchestrated rather than spontaneous. “A group of people would urge or direct the masses to wreck, loot, and set buildings on fire. Strikingly, while the masses were locals, the agitators were unknown in the neighbourhood. They clearly came from elsewhere” (p. 156).

The book underlined the multiple obstacles faced by the volunteers. While they wanted to inform the public about the atrocities and demanded that the authorities took action, they were also fiercely protective of the identities of the victims, who were too afraid and traumatised to come forward with their stories.

Defence Minister, and Armed Forces Commander General Wiranto sparked the activists’ anger when he said that his men had not found any rape victims at any hospital, and thus concluded that “there was no evidence. No victims. No witnesses” (pp. 59-60).

The victims’ fear – and that of the volunteers – was certainly not unfounded. While doing their work, the volunteers were continually harassed by threats, in person or by phone. Probably the book’s most chilling account is that of 18-year old rape victim Ita Martadinata, who had the courage to speak up and was about to travel to the USA to tell her story. On 9 October 1998, shortly before her planned departure, she was found dead with her throat cut and multiple stab wounds. Police dismissed the murder as a robbery gone awry and announced the case closed (p. 130).

One government official that did react positively to the plight of the women activists was Indonesia’s highest civil servant: President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, Suharto’s civilian vice president who took over when the former general stepped down on 21 May. The book’s first chapter described the 15 July 1998 meeting between the president and the group of women activists with distinguished psychology professor Saporinah Sadli as the spokeswoman. The unusually open meeting was concluded with Habibie reading a statement on national television that “I, on behalf of the government and the Indonesian people, condemn the violence during the riots which happened simultaneously at different places, including violence against women” (p. xxxiv).

A week later, the president formed TGPF (Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta or ‘Joint Fact Finding Team’) to probe the riots. The team included government

and military officials as well as rights workers, including Saparinah Sadli. The team conveyed, using a number of sources, that some 1,200 people perished during the May riots and that 168 people were victims of sexual violence, 20 of whom died. Over 150 of the sexual violence cases occurred in Jakarta.

Later that year, on 9 October to be exact, Habibie issued a presidential decree that established the National Commission on Violence against Women, or Komnas Perempuan, with Saparinah Sadli as chairwoman.

Anggreini's choice to compose her book through the personal experiences of the activists brings her message close to the reader. At the same time, however, this narrative, rendered 14 times, becomes repetitive and sometimes loses clarity.

Also, while the book emphasises that the riots were orchestrated, it falls short of pointing the finger to specific factions, let alone naming names. Other authors have been bolder, such as Sai Siew Min (2006), who wrote that "speculation was given over to conspiracy theories about whether General Prabowo [Subianto] was the mastermind behind the May violence".

These points aside, Anggreini's book tells a dark page in Indonesia's history that must not be forgotten. She achieves this goal, as witnessed by the fact that the launching of her book in May 2014 was widely covered by the media, and consequently put the May 1998 riots back in the public's attention.

The book is also a sad reminder that impunity remains a nagging problem of Indonesia, with a list of bloody episodes waiting to be processed such as the killings in 1965/66 and two decades of gross violations in East Timor. In her foreword, Anggreini points out that "at the time of this writing, no one has yet been brought to justice" for the 1998 riots (p. xiii).

Perhaps the timing of the book's release was meant to coincide with the election of the country's new president, with a hope that it would be included in his "to do" list.

Marzuki Darusman, TGPF member, who has held key functions including Prosecutor General, warns in the book's introduction that "too many victims are still waiting for clarification, recognition, apology, and justice" (p. xxi).

REFERENCE

Sai, Siew Min. 2006. "'Eventing' the May 1998 affair; Problematic representations of violence in contemporary Indonesia", in: Charles Coppel (ed.), *Violent conflicts in Indonesia; Analysis, representation, resolution*, pp. 39-57. London/ New York: Routledge.
