

Jakarta Post - July 20, 2000
Editorial and Opinion

The seeds of discontent in the beautiful Maluku islands

By Angelique L. Picaulima van Engelen and Harley Saimima

JAKARTA (JP): Macho and fierce are correct ways to describe natives of the Maluku islands. An intrepid race that sailed the oceans to the Pacific Islands about 2,000 years ago, the legends of some Polynesians say their remote ancestors came from the Maluku islands.

For hundreds of years the islands' produce kept kings and governments in power, or, due to a lack of produce, toppled them. Ships from all over the world sailed there; some of the visitors stayed and blended with the local population, leaving behind Asian, Arabian and European descendants.

Until some years ago, the most obvious fact of life in Maluku was the harmonious relationship between people of different faiths and lineage.

The plurality needed a system to keep mavericks, found in any race, in check. Traditional laws held these dauntless and militant people on a short leash. A system was created where kings were only appointed from a few families. Fear and restraint installed through custom or adat made people wary of committing violence against each other.

The various communities lived in either Christian or Muslim villages, but with good intervillage relations, until the Soeharto regime imposed the Javanese system of village heads, through local elections or by political appointment.

Since 1,300 a system of "blood brotherhood" between villages prone to disputes had covered all disagreements. Whenever a dispute reached a certain level of intensity and preparations for a full-scale war, either between Christian and Muslim, Muslim/Muslim or Christian/Christian villages, had been made, these local kings convened.

As soon as an understanding to bury the hatchet was reached, the villagers were ordered to attend a reconciliation ceremony. Witnessed by their kings, religious leaders and elders, both sides apologized. A peace agreement through apela gandong ceremony, often enhanced by mystic performances, was a sacred and binding agreement.

That was then, when every person knew his or her place in community and adhered to a system which kept their bellicosity and militancy at bay.

History shows that the traditional authorities have toppled -- through the absorption of Maluku into the United Republic of Indonesia in the 1950s, the victory of the Indonesian Military (TNI) over the Republic of South Maluku, and a systematized undermining of the Christian community since the early 1980s.

This has created an immense void. The fall of the untouchables led to the latent threat of aggression, which has exploded into communal clashes of unheard fierceness.

It is difficult to account for the ongoing violence but it may be at least partially explained by the marginalization of Christians in Maluku; politically, due to their involvement with the Dutch colonial powers and its armed forces, the KNIL; and economically, through the exploitation of exceptionally rich Eastern Indonesia. They also belong to a minority religion in the country. Ambonese in particular belong to a traditional purist sect of the Calvin Protestant Church, a sect too severe even for most Europeans.



During Dutch rule the Ambonese were either scholars, civil servants, soldiers, spice farmers or fishermen. Most thought trade was below their social status; approximately only 10 percent of them were engaged in small-scale trading.

As far back as the late 1970s things went well. Clove, nutmeg and other trades flourished and the people liked being in the new republic, their militancy dormant due to increased prosperity.

Then Akib Latuconsina was appointed as Maluku governor. It was reportedly him who started the rivalry between the two major religions.

Two days after his appointment, he forbade the ringing of church bells in the churches near his residence (in predominantly Christian Ambon!). Next came the waves of migrants from Java, sponsored by the local and the central government.

Within a couple of years, the population scales started to tip dangerously as these Javanese-oriented, government-sponsored transmigration projects, had by then transported thousands of families and their offspring to Maluku. Here they not only lived on land acquired through forced "land reform projects", but were also intentionally separated from the local population.

These migrants created predominantly Javanese oriented villages, which mostly flourished.

As the migrants and other settlers became stronger, the interaction between adat villages became weaker.

The governor in Ambon started to openly favor the Muslim community. Before Akib's appointment, Christians and Muslims built mosques and churches together. Greetings of Assalamu'alaikum on Christmas Day and Salam Sejahtera on Idul Fitri were a cherished local tradition; in many families some members were Muslim and some were Christian. Now people greet each other by cutting each others' throats!

In Jakarta people are raising charges about the Christianization of Indonesia. Churches and seminaries have been targeted by fanatical mobs, and many Christians live in constant fear of being accosted because of their religion.

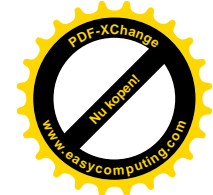
Meanwhile, the policies and financing of the former government can be said to have played a role in the proselytizing of Christians in Eastern Indonesia.

This is because all migrants, except a few who have doctored their documents, adhere to the Muslim religion, an informal prerequisite for membership of the transmigration program. Used to hardship on Java, hard-working and seasoned in small-scale trade and other crafts, the newcomers, with the help of government officials who had their own plans, in time began to control the economy and local government, whereas the Chinese and the Makasarese from South Sulawesi controlled the outbound trade.

Ambon's new elite started to undermine the power of the church, Christians started to feel threatened and it did not need much before militancy raised its ugly head.

Slowly but surely much cherished Ambon was gradually strangled by fanatical and power-hungry men. Still, the rivalry had not yet reached its peak in the absence of religious overtones. However, Ambon had become a volcano, bubbling and boiling, preparing for a major eruption "when the time and the price was right".

Maluku Christians grappled with their unexpected fall from grace under Soeharto, increasing poverty through dabbling in the clove trade by Soeharto's son Tommy, invasion of migrants on customary lands confiscated through the land reform projects and systematic discrimination.



The elderly became apathetic and quarrelsome -- but the youngsters became unruly. The educated left to seek opportunities in the western part of the country, while the uneducated stayed and got into one mischief after another.

If the Ambonese had been belittled under Sukarno they would have adjusted to their inferior position. This did not happen; Sukarno knew well enough that the Maluku people would never have joined the Republic docilely if they had not been promised some sort of equality and, of course, freedom to practice their religion.

Over-populated Java needed the vastness and the riches of Irian Jaya, the international trade, sea thoroughfares, the fishing concessions, the gold on Haruku island and other natural resources of Maluku and the forests in the center of Kalimantan, all predominantly Christian regions.

In retrospect, the exploitation and marginalization of Eastern Indonesia and its peoples was a grand plan, cleverly designed and duly executed by unscrupulous politicians, and aided by the army and greedy businessmen.

Indonesia's "Armageddon" was created by its own people against its own people. Ludicrous or not, the monetary crisis, the fall of Soeharto and his handymen and the full-scale religious war in Ambon and the outer islands may end up saving Maluku people from something even more sinister and inimical; the gradual, institutionalized obliteration of a courageous and proud race.

Angelique L. Picaulima van Engelen is married to an Ambonese and has stayed a number of times in Ambon, most recently before the riots began. Harley Saimima is a student at Pattimura University in Ambon.