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**The Inverted Chinese/China  
Problem in Indonesia: A Preliminary  
analysis on the 2011 Surabaya  
incident**

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**Abstract**

A clash between the police and journalists covering a Falun Gong gathering in Surabaya 2011 have shown a significant change in understanding the triangular relationship between Indonesia, China and the Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. During the Suharto period, ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and China as a foreign state were the problems for the Indonesian government. After the political reforms in Indonesia together with the Rise of China in 2000s, in some situation, it is the Indonesian government together with the Chinese government which is the problem for some ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Ethnic Chinese people were seen to be close with China and their loyalty to the nation was doubted. But now it is the Indonesian government which is viewed as being too close to China and thus harming national integrity, and suspected of being unnationalistic.

**Keywords:** Indonesian politics, Rise of China, Ethnic Chinese, Freedom of Press, Sovereignty

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# The Inverted Chinese/China Problem in Indonesia: A Preliminary analysis on the 2011 Surabaya incident

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## 1 . Post 1998 and the May 2011 incident in Indonesia

After the violence against the Chinese in Indonesia that shocked the world in 1998, redress efforts in Indonesia for the ethnic Chinese have been successful in the public arena. The socio-cultural and political rights of the Chinese have been restored such that they now have the right to run for Presidency, which used to be legally in doubt due to a clause in the constitution stating that the President must be *asli*, or indigenous. This clause was cleared by an amendment to the law on citizenship in 2006(Chandra 2008; Matsumura 2009)<sup>1</sup>. Together with other

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<sup>1</sup> On the 2006 Amendment of Citizenship law, the issue was that the constitutional clause which stipulates the Indonesian President have to be an "Asli". Thus many understood that by the word "Asli", the constitution excluded not only the former colonial power such as the Dutch and the Japanese, but also the ethnic Chinese to become a President. The problem was that there was no clear legal definition to the term "Asli" for a long time, thus some could argue that the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were not entitled to become a President, because they are not "ethnically native". Thus the article was supplemented by a note that says, "Asli" here does not exclude any Indonesians of particular ethnic background, and it means solely that they are naturally born as an Indonesian. Thus, to seal any legal doubt that the ethnic

reforms toward political freedom in Indonesia, the Chinese/China problem during the Suharto period, in which ethnic Chinese were often blamed by the government for foreign subversive acts, for economic disparity and for social disharmony is becoming a thing of the past. Political reforms and efforts by both Indonesian government and ethnic Chinese social organization in Indonesia since 1998 have led to very important historical changes, securing the civil rights of Chinese Indonesians not achieved by previous governments. And as far as its legal status is concerned, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were not a “problem” as it had been in many ways during the Suharto era<sup>2</sup>.

In 2011, a leading Indonesian media, *Tempo*, on May 9<sup>th</sup> and a leading English newspaper in Indonesia, *The Jakarta Post*, on May 10<sup>th</sup>, both covered a small, but a rare story. Lukman Abdul Rozaq, a cameraman from Trans7 who was covering a Falun Gong march in Surabaya on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, was quoted as saying: "Suddenly, police in plain clothes attacked the crowd with helmets, including the journalists. I was hit from behind. I retaliated but the number of policemen in uniform was higher."<sup>3</sup> Lukman was not the only one to be attacked in the incident. TVRI cameraman Joko was also kicked by police officers, Septa Rudianto from Radio El Shinta Surabaya and New Tang Dynasty Television contributor Eko Oscar Nugroho also had been hit by the police<sup>4</sup>.

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Chinese in Indonesia can become a President.

<sup>2</sup> The successful efforts by the Chinese organization are well described in Hoon, C. Y. (2008). Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Brighton, Sussex Academic Press.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the following article. Wahyoe Boediwardhana, ‘Police questioned over attack on journalists’, *The Jakarta Post*, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Surabaya.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

After the incident, journalists in Surabaya reacted in protest and requested Inspector General Untung Suharsono Radjab, the chief of the East Java Police, to review the case. Major journalist groups in Indonesia including the Indonesian Journalists Association (*PWI: Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia*), the Radio Indonesia Journalists Alliance (*Alwari: Aliansi Wartawan Radio Indonesia*), the Television Journalists Association (*IJTI: Ikatan Jurnalis Televisi Indonesia*) and the Alliance of Independent Journalists (*AJI: Aliansi Jurnalis Independen*) joined forces to pressure the police chief to investigate.

Interestingly, the Jakarta Post article cited two contrasting comments on this case , one by the police and the other by the Chinese embassy.

First, by the police,

*. . . . . East Java Police spokesperson Comr. Rachmat Mulyana said the restrictions on the movement in Indonesia were apparently upon the request of the Chinese government through its envoy in Indonesia. "The movement is banned in China. We are concerned that if we allow it to exist, it would have a negative impact on the Chinese-Indonesian community in East Java. If it's just a parade, it's okay. We respect the relationship between Indonesia and China," Rachmat said<sup>5</sup>.*

And second, by the Chinese embassy,

*..... the Chinese vice consulate in Surabaya, Sun Guo Yuan, denied the Chinese government had asked the police in Indonesia to suppress Falun Gong in Indonesia. "I absolutely don't know anything about the incident. We were closed*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*on Saturday and Sunday so we don't know about the matter at all. And, it is not true what they accused us of," Sun said<sup>6</sup>.*

This police aggression itself might not be special in Indonesia in terms of its size and its level of brutality. However, this small case of clash between the police and the journalists shed a light on new and a rather larger question. A question on how important is it to meet the political demands of China especially with the use of force against the Indonesian citizens. Or moreover, how much influence does China have in changing Indonesia's internal governance rules. The above police comments have clearly stated that the one of the reason of aggression came from the concern over bilateral relationship, whether or not the Chinese embassy had requested. As seen in the comments by the Chinese embassy, cited by the Jakarta post, is not surprising. Historically speaking, many clashes in Indonesia have regarded to have China's "hand (*campur tangan*)" behind, but never proved. However, whether it is by request, or by voluntary decision, the reasoning of police act to suppress the Indonesian demonstrators and journalists covering the event who were not acting against the Jakarta government, is somehow a very important incident to note. As a preliminary research on the case, I would like to point out two points why I think this is an importance case<sup>7</sup>.

Firstly, the above police aggression towards the reporters was not just a matter of Falun Gong or freedom of religion. Falun Gong followers took this case seriously

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> A detailed case narrative can be obtained in COMMISSION, A. H. R. (2011). "INDONESIA: Surabaya police beat journalists – regional police cover up the case." from <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-120-2011>.

as a violation to their social practices which are not banned in Indonesia. But the point that drew attention among the Indonesians was rather on a matter of freedom of the press<sup>8</sup>. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are considered to be one of the major achievements of Indonesia as a democratic nation after Suharto. The degree of press freedom in Indonesia is proudly considered to be in world standard, especially when compared to other Southeast Asian countries. Indonesia, as a rising champion of democracy in the region in recent years, unlike Malaysia and Thailand where media reporting has been tightened during recent years, has enjoyed unprecedented press freedom in its history<sup>9</sup>. This incident was a major challenge to this freedom of the press, despite it contained no message to attack the SBY government per se. This was the first reason why the violent, unseemly aggression by the police toward the reporters surprised the public.

Secondly, and more importantly, despite the denial by the Chinese embassy that it had requested the Indonesian authority, the police were thought to be doing a favor for the Chinese embassy which had clearly condemned the activities of the Falun Gong. Journalists considered the police action have harmed the “national

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<sup>8</sup> Falun Gong, as opposed to the Chinese government, claim they are not a religious group.

<sup>9</sup> Indonesian government, especially under the second term of President SBY, has claimed that Indonesia are the champion of Freedom and Democracy in Southeast Asia in various occasions. President SBY himself once said that “we have awakened our democratic instinct” in a Keynote Speech at The 6th Assembly of World Movement for Democracy, April 2010. (Full text in <http://indonesia.gr/keynote-speech-at-the-6th-assembly-of-world-movement-for-democracy/>)

Also, outside Indonesia, various organization judged that Indonesia’s press freedom has an impressive standard of freedom. For example, the Freedom House report on Freedom of Press, ranked Indonesia, together with Philippines as “Partly Free” while other eight ASEAN members all were categorized in “Not Free” Reports could be found in, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press>

principle” in which Indonesia takes pride in. In this case, the pride was freedom of the press. In a way, it signaled that if a journalist in Indonesia upsets Beijing, not Jakarta, an aggression is waiting, an aggression which could be more severe than when they attack the Jakarta authority. So it was also a matter of Indonesia and China, particularly the influence of Chinese government toward the Indonesian authority vs. the Indonesian people. It was not just one another issue of a demonstration by a social or religious group, but because of the nature of Falun Gong as well, the event raised question on the influence of Chinese authority toward Indonesian authority and a question of Indonesia’s political freedom as a sovereign nation state in the era of Rise of China.

Taking the above two points into consideration, the larger question here is on how would Indonesia manages to deal with the rising political power of China. Number of studies had identified the economic growth of China’s impacted on the economic arena through its trade and its investment and natural resource strategies. Another series of work identified the impact on the diplomatic relationship in ASEAN+3 and EAS, APEC and so on. Basically, these work clarifies the ways in which the relationship between China and Indonesia have developed their interdependency during the last ten years. But in this paper, I would like to focus on a different dimension of the two countries. Among the large question I mentioned above, the Surabaya 2011 case shows one aspect on what way the political power of China would influence the political principle and the domestic socio-political environment of Indonesia.



## **2. Chinese domestic issue becomes an Indonesian domestic issue: Roundtable discussion on the Strategic Partnership of Indonesia-PRC, 2005**

As far as the Indonesian government is concerned, the issue was not entirely new, and had been predicted years ago. In 2006, a meeting organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs discussed the topic of bilateral relationships with China in a thorough manner. Specialists from various fields and high-ranking officials gathered to review the strategic partnership with China which had been agreed in Jakarta six months earlier. The partnership agreement was signed after celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Bandung Conference held in 1955, between Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao. Thereafter, good relationships between the two countries as central pillars of Asia were often mentioned in the newspapers and TV in Indonesia.

The majority of participants at the meeting of 2006 in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, especially those from industry, tourism, and mining, viewed China or the Rise of China as an economic opportunity. The keyword of the discussion was “Cooperation (*Kerjasama*)”<sup>10</sup>. Most of the discussions were on economic issues, such as the strategy for using the rich natural resources of Indonesia in the bilateral relationship, and boasting tourism together as a new emerging market that lies between the two countries. Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda was quoted as emphasizing the strong economic ties between Indonesia and China.

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<sup>10</sup> Six out of Nine discussion session of this whole meeting were titled with the word “Cooperation”, such as “Cooperation on Investment, Monetary and Energy”, “Cooperation on Trading”, “Cooperation on Natural resources”, “Cooperation on Tourism”, “Cooperation on Education and Social-Culture”, “Cooperation on Science and Technology”.

With confidence and high expectation, he shared the prospect that the bilateral trade between the two nation will escalate to 30 billion dollars a year by 2010, which is almost double size of 2005, 16.8 billion dollars. Coordinating Minister of Political, Legal and Security affairs who was attending the roundtable discussion was also quoted as “Indonesia should make the use of (*memanfaatkan*) the momentum of Rise of China(*Kebangkitan China*) for the national importance” (Hasyim 2006). Not only the economic ministers but also the minister in charge of political and security affairs commented positively on the “Rise of China” after the discussion.

According to the media coverage on this roundtable discussion, economic reasons motivated most of the government officials and the Indonesian elite to strengthen the relationship between two nation to the next level<sup>11</sup>. The long history of conflict with the Chinese in Indonesia and the pendulum of the relationship between the two countries were not reported, possibly because of that the government had to maintain its fully positive attitude considering its diplomatic impression.

However, if we look into what actually have been discussed, one session of the meeting had a complete different tone from the economic “Coopertation” regarding political affairs. A speaker from the Ministry of Home Affairs delivered a presentation titled “Several Anticipation by the ministry of Home Affairs and Local Governments that would emerge in the indonesia-China bilateral relationship” in the session “The issues that may wedge in the Bilateral relationship of Indonesia and China”. In short, he warned the fellow Indonesian

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<sup>11</sup> These economic arguments may not be new and may not be particular about China, and were merely about maximizing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages of deregulation vis-à-vis an emerging economy.

government officials that with closer relationships between the two giant countries, China's domestic issues would affect Indonesian politics, and even restrain political choices for Indonesia's domestic policy(Direktorat Jenderal Asia dan Pasifik dan Afrika 2006).

So what did he mean by China's domestic issues? First, the Falun Gong. Despite the well-known ban on Falun Gong activities in China, and its strong message toward the foreign countries to act in accordance to Beijing's principle onto the group, Indonesia has long loosely allowed their activities. The opening and the closure of a radio station in Batam 2005 started to draw attention on the matter in Indonesia, and the Falun Gong has gradually become a source of conflict within the Indonesian government, how to deal with it. Here, the pattern of conflict was beginning to shape between those who take the Beijing's message at utmost importance and those who not. It was not a matter of whether or not the group poses any danger within Indonesian society. It was rather about the political conflict that would arise from whether the authority should allow their activity in Indonesia or not. Since this issue was primarily handled by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the speaker expressed its "anticipation" on the matter.

The second concern raised by the Ministry of Home Affairs is on Tibet. In June 2006, group of a member of Indonesian foundation "The Roof of the World" led by the chairman Mr. Enrico B. Soekarno visited Dharamshala to meet Dalai Lama. In the meeting, the delegation passed the invitation for Dalai Lama to visit Indonesia from Abdurrahman Wahid, the former President of Indonesia and also the head of the largest Muslim community in Indonesia, Nahdatul Ulama. He

was the leader of “The Roof of the World”, in organizing religious leader’s dialogue. In the meeting, Dalai Lama accepted the offer and planned to visit Indonesia in 2007, in an occasion Abdurrahman Wahid organized a “religious leader’s dialogue” in Indonesia.

Third and foremost is the Taiwan issue. Taiwan has always been a major issue in Chinese diplomacy. In November 2005, the President of Taiwan, Chen Shui Bian, made an emergency landing on the Indonesian island of Batam, which lies just across the Malacca straits facing Singapore, because it was declared “running out of fuel”. With final approval given by the Governor of Riau Islands, Ismet Abdullah, President Chen and his delegation landed. The event took an interesting turn when the secretary to the Vice-President, Alwi Hamu, went to Batam and greeted Chen and his fellow businessmen from Taiwan; the meeting was said to be following an order by the Vice-President in a private capacity<sup>12</sup>.

This meeting angered President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, because it prompted unnecessary speculation over Indonesia’s One-China policy. This was exactly what the Ministry of Home Affairs had wanted to prevent. Only if Indonesia can manage the tension between China and Taiwan and benefit from the tension using its diplomatic capacity, it is acceptable from the Ministry of Home Affairs’ standpoint. However, if Indonesia becomes trapped and sandwiched between China and Taiwan, it will eventually end up limiting the political freedom of Indonesia and will lead to a major loss for the country. In the case of Taiwan President Chen’s landing, it affected negatively onto the relationship between the President and the vice president. Governor of Riau Islands was severely scolded

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<sup>12</sup> Regarding the emergency landing, see Luhur Hertanto, ‘Kalla Tegaskan Kedatangan Chen Tak Salahi One China Policy’, *detik.com* May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

by the President, therefore, it damaged the relationship between the central government and the local government as well. From the standpoint of the Ministry of Home Affairs, these rifts between the Indonesian government agencies are both totally unacceptable and unnecessary hence the warning at the meeting<sup>13</sup>.

The issues of Falun Gong, Tibet, and Taiwan are in a way, common issues for Indonesia. As an official of home affairs have anticipated in his discussion, they are China's domestic issues and are now limiting the domestic political space of Indonesia. This was the point that the Ministry of Home Affairs wanted the fellow Indonesian government members to be well informed of. The Ministry of Home Affairs would take a very different position compared to other institutions by prioritizing the sovereignty and autonomy of Indonesia from "Chinese influence". The host of the whole meeting, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which naturally defines national interest within the international setting, would prioritize good relationships with neighboring countries and balanced relationships with foreign nations especially with the strong China rather than the religious or political freedom of domestic supporters of Falun Gong, Taiwan or Tibet.

In the history of Indonesia, the Taiwan/China issue has been a major political choice among the military generals and powerful politicians and officials. The conflict was magnified by domestic rivalry between the communists and anti-communists during the Cold War era in Asia especially in the 1950s and

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding the details of this roundtable discussion, I have described in a report submitted to "2006 - 2007 JETRO Research group on "The analysis on China's economic and diplomatic strategy and the future state of East Asia".

1960s.. In the early 1960s, after the PRRI/PERMESTA, Indonesia had difficult relations with Taiwan and moved closer to Beijing. Because Sukarno government judged that Taiwan was behind the PRRI/PERMESTA movement. However, after the G30S coup attempt in 1965, Indonesia turned against Beijing and improved relations with Taiwan<sup>14</sup>. The historical experience of severe impacts on domestic society created by changes in foreign relations, especially with China, as well as the obvious differences in principles among different ministries with regard to relationship-building with China, has led the Ministry of Home Affairs to warn the government about today's optimistic and euphoric relationship between Indonesia and China. Especially, in this roundtable discussion meeting where majority of government official talks about strategy in the sense that Indonesia should take full economic benefit from the rise of China, without taking the political and social risks that comes together.

### **3. Problematizing the government, not the people: a major shift**

During the Suharto period, the Indonesian term *Masalah Cina* was used for three

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<sup>14</sup> PRRI (*Pemerintahan Revolusioner Republik Indonesia*: Revolutionary Government for the Republic of Indonesia) refers to the conflict among military commanders seeking autonomy in Sumatra in the late 1950s, and Permesta (*Piagam Perjuangan Semesta*: Charter for Universal Struggle) is another action taken mainly in Sulawesi. In this conflict, the Sukarno government asserted that the “rebels” were receiving support from the Kuomintang of Taiwan, thus after the end of the “rebellion”, Taiwan was condemned by the Sukarno government for its subversive acts. Mossman, J. (1961). Rebels in Paradise, Indonesia's Civil War. London, Jonathan Cape. The changes in diplomatic relationship between Indonesia and China/Taiwan is detailed in Mazingo, D. (1981). China's Policy toward Indonesia 1949-1967. Ithaca, Cornell University Press. and Hong, L. (2011). China and Shaping of Indonesia, 1949-1965. Kyoto, Kyoto University Press.

subcategories of problem: the problem of China as a state, the Chinese as both foreign and domestic people, and Chinese culture. These were problems for the government and for the state, which was defined to serve its political needs(Aizawa 2010).

Put simply, during the Suharto period and in certain moments during the previous administration, when we talk about issues on *Cina*, in Indonesia, it was the people, the ethnic Chinese, who were the problem for the government.

For example, in 1966, after the G30S coup attempt in Indonesia, ethnic Chinese were regarded by the new government led by Suharto of being suspicious of being too close to Beijing which then, the Suharto-led-Government saw as a foreign country opposing to setup the new Suharto regime. For Suharto, Beijing was a political obstacle, and also the ethnic Chinese were positioned within Indonesian society as a suspicious group unknown of their loyalty to the nation. Surabaya, where the Falun Gong incident took place in 2011, was in 1966, a place where then regional military commander Sumitro had taken severe measures toward the ethnic Chinese residents. He forced them to move out of the rural area to the urban centers such as Surabaya, stripping off their business license, and encouraging them to leave from Indonesia. But now, it is the government which is the problem for Indonesian people for its unpatriotic attitudes.

Before, the Chinese people seemed to be close with China and their loyalty to the nation was doubted; sometimes they were viewed as potentially subversive or the root cause of social disharmony. Therefore the ethnic Chinese were in the

position to always “prove” that they are, with no doubt, Indonesians both legally and culturally. It could be that, in the near future, the Indonesian authority to be positioned in a place to continuously prove they are more loyal to the Indonesian people than to the Beijing government. This reversal, or inverted position of the state and the people on the Chinese/China problem, seems to be a shift for the first time in the long history of the China/Chinese problem in Indonesia. In certain moments, the ties between the two governments seem to be closer than the ties between the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and China. Or the reality could be that the Chinese government’s pressure toward the domestic issue in Indonesia is gaining a new level.

The incident in Surabaya in 2011 suggests a small but a fundamental change in the structure of the triangular relationship among the Indonesian government, the Chinese government and the Indonesian people. Governments used to be suspicious about their own people. But now the government needs to defend itself against the suspicions of its people as to whether they are pro-people or not. A comparison of the Suharto period and post-Suharto period reveals an interesting difference on this issue. The interesting thing is not merely the diplomatic level such as the change of Chinese government’s approach toward the Indonesian government, nor the ethnic Chinese’s civil and social rights. It is rather the shift in who disparages who, i.e. before it was the government and the non-Chinese Indonesians who disparaged the ethnic Chinese, but now, it is the ethnic Chinese and the non-Chinese Indonesians who disparage the government. It is the government which is viewed as being too close to China and thus harming



national integrity, and which is suspected of being unpatriotic, by favoring China rather than its own people. It could be the cleavages within the government which is caused by different standpoints regarding the issues on China that creates social disharmony. Among the various changes regarding the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia that took place during the time of political reforms in Indonesia together with the economic and political rise of China, this Surabaya case suggests that the whole dimension of politics of disparaging the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in the past, is changing.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to claim that the so-called historical Chinese/China problem has been completely solved in Indonesia. As far as the legality of the issue, Chinese Indonesians have gained both the same rights and responsibilities as other Indonesians, but it is too early to say whether equality has been achieved in social life both for ethnic Chinese and for non-Chinese.

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