
Indonesian Born Chinese: Between Discrimination And Contribution

Throughout the history of Indonesia, since the colonial era, Indonesia has been indoctrinated with “Divide et Impera”, a dividing and ruling mindset. Indonesian under Dutch rule was educated and promoted to be divided, in which religion and racial issues became an easy topic to stir any division between the people. That indoctrination, unfortunately, carries on until today. One racial-ethnic that was the easy “victim” to be blamed are the Chinese Indonesian. During the Dutch era, they are not allowed to take part in commerce. The pribumis are mainly designated towards the laborious and plantation duties. The commerce are assigned to the Chinese immigrants. Even though the Chinese were restricted in their access to the government and natural resources, they managed to thrive in making successful businesses, and have become the cornerstone of Indonesian commerce for centuries. The downside of this condition resulted in the perception that Chinese Indonesians are business savvy and richer than the pribumis. The new order regime that ruled thirty five years ago played this perception to discriminate and suppress the Chinese minorities. One can easily observe that minorities residing in Indonesia were put under social and political pressure during this era, notably the Chinese Indonesian descents on their domination over Indonesian economy and commerce. This unfavourable attitude towards Indonesian - born Chinese has provoked a particular aftermath towards them, which unfortunately has elevated more tensions between the ethnic Chinese and native Indonesians in terms of racism, discrimination, and a political stance.

Based on the repeated ten-year population census conducted by Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) in Indonesia, Chinese ethnics compose about 1.2 per cent of the population in Indonesia (BPS, 2010). In relation to this, it is reported that among the percentage, numerous entrepreneurs have accomplished significant economic achievement, as well as have developed a sustainable establishment to generate income towards Indonesia. For instance, one of the most prominent private banks in Indonesia, Bank Central Asia (BCA) is established and managed by Indonesian born Chinese families, for about sixty-one years. Moreover, Djarum corporate, another distinguished corporate which has run in Indonesia for about sixty-seven years, has also contributed significantly towards Indonesia’s economic growth. Despite the many contributions of Chinese ethnics who built up Indonesia’s economy to where it is today, and with the change of general attitude of the younger generations toward the Chinese Indonesian, there is yet a day where Chinese ethnics are truly considered ‘Indonesian’.

To continue with, most Chinese-Indonesians have detached from its origins - their Chinese background. During the Suharto era (the former president of Indonesia), a set of discriminatory rules had been established and targeted directly to Chinese-Indonesians. They were required to abide by the rules with the intention to potentially and systematically eradicate Chinese ethnicity. One of the popular and infamous rule includes forcibly requiring Chinese descents to change their last names into something more Indonesian in tone, forbidding any form of chinese tradition within the country, banning any Chinese language in the education system, and general practice involving any Chinese dialects. Due to those ethnic restriction, numerous Indonesian-born Chinese who specialize in commerce therefore have encountered multiple hindrances in establishing businesses in Indonesia and their effort in gaining favours from the government often time result in impassable condition. It is such an unfavourable circumstances

to witness, as for over centuries, both Chinese immigrants and Indonesian-born Chinese have successfully managed to elevate Indonesia among the commerce settings in the world. Additionally, it is reported that among two hundred fifty corporates across countries, two sizable corporates, Tokopedia and Traveloka, managed to achieve assets beyond one million US dollars. Hence, the two companies have then acknowledged as “unicorn corporates.” Furthermore, corporates managed by Indonesian-born Chinese, have significantly performed essential roles in advancing Indonesian economic growth and in earning reliability from potential overseas manufacturers, stakeholders, and inventors. Overall, regardless of the amount of discrimination the Indonesian-born Chinese have experienced throughout the centuries, it can be seen that this particular group of people have displayed successful efforts to develop Indonesia’s businesses in an international scope, to generate more revenue for Indonesia’s business development, and to enhance Indonesia’s economic growth in the long run.

The main reason why the Chinese ethnics were thought of as separates from indigenous Indonesians was because of the Dutch Colonists. During this era, the Dutch Colonists constructed a hierarchy among various ethnicities in Indonesia. The main motive for this action was to emphasize the foreignness of Chinese Indonesians towards the indigenous. They considered the Chinese ethnics to be better and different from indigenous Indonesians but less than the Dutch. Thus, they occupied the middle ground position in the hierarchy which upset the Indonesians. Furthermore, the Dutch even constructed a law where each racial group had to be clothed based on their ethnic backgrounds. Indians with Indian clothing, Chinese with Chinese clothing, and so on. Wearing western clothing for non-Europeans would involve getting a permit, otherwise it would be illegal. With this, it planted an idea in Indigenous Indonesians that they are in fact different from Chinese ethnics. Hence, why stereotypes still remain in Indonesia up until now.

During the Dutch colonial era, Chinese-Indonesians were limited to a certain extent in terms of opportunities in ranks of bureaucracy, army, and education. These were generally closed off from the people with Chinese ethnicity. In the midst of discriminatory colonial politics, the field that was open to the Chinese was in fact trading. In the early to mid 19th century, retail trade was the main foundation for Chinese ethnic businesses. They took independence and became middlemen, fish traders, small scale vendors, etc. They began to grow their business from scratch and actively seek ways to expand their own business network. Gradually, they were finally able to compete and set aside most Indonesian traders and businessmen, however not the Dutch. However, the role of ethnic Chinese in the economic field further increased during the era of the struggle for the independence of the Republic of Indonesia and the Guided Democracy. They were able to successfully take over large Dutch companies that were nationalised which took a turning point.

However, then started the era of the ‘Orde Baru’ where Soeharto took leadership. Suharto and his regime used the new order to pursue prosperity in accordance with the government’s beliefs which were evidently racial. The Indonesian Business Data Center between 1992 to 1996 noted that 300 conglomerates, which consists of mostly Chinese descent, controlled sales of Rp. 227.2 trillion and acquired assets valued up to Rp.425 trillion.

Despite the outstanding economic records that are held by Chinese ethnics, the new order continued to launch its racial politics and rules by putting up signs nationwide which promoted a negative perspective towards Chinese ethnics. This action made Chinese ethnic businessmen unable to do much. The style of economic development elitism that the New Order displayed

was evidently fragile, as indigenous Indonesians grew hatred towards the Chinese. Eventually, the demonstration ended with the attack and destruction of Chinese ethnic houses which started the riots in May 1998.

During this time, many Chinese fled abroad in hopes of finding safety - some even chose to reside there permanently. Thus, the number of Chinese-owned businesses began to plummet.

However, during the substitution of Suharto, President Habibie took charge and guaranteed security to Chinese ethnics. This is when Chinese businesses in Indonesia started to rise yet again. Furthermore, the reformation era in Indonesia was designed with a shared commitment to build a substantive democratic system, a democracy that gave birth to prosperity.

In the business world, the 1998 economic crisis indeed triggered the collapse of many conglomerates, especially ethnic Chinese descendants because they used their own banks to fund business projects with low profitability. Whereas according to records on the Stock Exchange after the 1997-1998 Monetary crisis, the economic power of Chinese ethnic conglomerates did not fade. Even until now, it seems that the mastery of Chinese ethnic conglomerate business is still strong.

Moreover, in politics, Chinese Indonesians have received considerable public attention in past year, mostly because of the Jakarta gubernatorial election and blasphemy controversy involving Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (as known as Ahok).

A popular governor with consistently high approval ratings, Ahok, was widely tipped to win the 2017 Jakarta election held earlier this year. This was of course until the now-infamous blasphemy case over public comments that Ahok had made in September last year that allegedly insulted the Al-Maidah 51 verse of the Qur'an. Within weeks, a series of mass protests organized by hardline Islamist groups involving hundreds of thousands of angry Muslim protesters from all over Indonesia took place in Jakarta. These called for Ahok to be prosecuted for blasphemy or even be put to death, but increasingly, the angry chants took a hateful and racist tone against the ethnic Chinese.

The rise of anti-Chinese narratives seen throughout the Jakarta election and the Ahok blasphemy case have prompted questions about whether old stereotypes and negative prejudices against the ethnic Chinese have persisted despite almost two decades of policy and societal reforms.

However, increasingly negative sentiments against Chinese in recent times have been disturbing. In fact, even before the Ahok blasphemy case, there had been several alarming instances that indicate a return of anti-Chinese narratives. Anti Ahok opposition and groups have publicly attacked him based on his Chinese ethnicity since before he first took office as Jakarta vice governor in 2012. This involve not only Ahok. During the 2014 presidential election, a black campaign against political ally Jokowi claimed that he is actually of Chinese descent. Jokowi's campaign team was quick to deny allegations of Chinese ethnicity, but the very fact that such accusations needed to be publicly denied demonstrates the negative political connotations still strongly attached to Chineseness.