Framing religious conflict: primordialism writ large

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Is there a dynamic correspondence between the unfolding of media narratives about conflict and how that conflict plays out on the ground? In particular, can this question be applied productively to the Maluku wars, an outbreak of religious violence at the end of Indonesia's long developmentalist epoch (1966-1998)? This paper argues that far from being disinterested purveyors of unproblematic truths, media workers are implicated in the creation and spread of ideas and images that shape the political discourses which exacerbate violent conflict. Its method is discourse analysis of a canon of journalism that reported the conflict in its first few years. Despite their papers' diverse origins, news reporters from both metropolitan dailies under study – Kompas and Republika – employed storytelling conventions that produced 'primordialist' readings of this violence. This textual strategy on top of an analytic failure to track shifting power relations between political elites in Jakarta and Maluku did nothing to assist a negotiated peace and may have contributed to the war's significant escalation.

"The best place from which to tell the story of a war is close to the action but at some distance from the values."

- Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media* (2005)

Background

Communal war in Maluku's chain of islands from early 1999 brought unprecedented devastation to Indonesia's eastern periphery. A conflict whose inter-religious hostility was unique in Indonesian history began as crudely-armed young men attacking entire neighbourhoods, but soon it became apparent that many fatalities were the result of intervention by various units of the security forces.

By July 2000, under a civil state of emergency, 14,000 troops were stationed across Maluku; however, their large numbers did not translate into reduced violence. By early 2001, in the capital Jakarta, President Abdurrahman Wahid's position was becoming untenable, owing to fracturing within his own party and loss of confidence within the parliament. It was during this period of a waning presidency that security forces took their most decisive action against Islamic militants known as Laskar Jihad, having only 12 months earlier facilitated their passage to the region.

Ethno-religious hatred and war exploded at the end of the long developmentalist epoch, a period coinciding with the reign of President Suharto (1966-1998). When the first free national elections were held in June 1999, the conflict was well underway in the south (Ambon) but yet to erupt in North Maluku. That long period saw the Indonesian press transformed into one subservient to centralised state power, as all civil institutions were progressively re-made to serve state interests - defined in terms of national development and stability.

The ideology which underpinned nation-building under Suharto was known as *Pancasila* (Five Principles) and the press industry which lacked autonomy from state control became known as the Pancasila press. Its transformation, however, was not without periodic bursts of fighting spirit, which attempted to open civil space to not only assert autonomy but also act as a counter-balance to state power. This resistance, most notably in 1974, 1978 and 1994 – on each occasion crushed by brute state force - drew on an older anti-colonial tradition with its origins in the birth of an indigenous press in the late nineteenth century. The tradition infused the nationalist movement in the twentieth century and underpinned its struggle (*perjuangan*) towards independence, declared at the end of the war in 1945 (Adam 1995: 176). The anti-authoritarian impulses, which nourished the press before and after the defeat of the Dutch colonial order helped forge a movement referred to as the perjuangan press.

The revival of this latter press movement in the 1990s was instrumental in hastening the collapse of Suharto's New Order and fragmentation of its political forces after 1998. A number of important policy developments followed regime collapse: the granting of hundreds of new press licences after May 1998; the abolition of formal press licensing the following year; the end of mandatory membership of the state-sanctioned journalists' union (PWI)[1] and later (under Wahid) the dismantling of the Department of Information.

The end of dictatorship opened the way for a much pluralised political landscape with the freeing-up of political expression and association. Much of this initial expression was unrestrained; having endured more than thirty years of suppression, the groups to take advantage of the new atmosphere of political contestation included those bound by ethnic and religious identity and interests, including regional interests.

Within Indonesia's unitary state, ethnicity and religion were seen as primordial identities and a permanent threat to the national culture, which was glorified over all other forms. The fact that Indonesia contained hundreds of ethnic groups and a complex history of religious politics was overlooked in favour of de-politicisation. Pancasila was a non-negotiable ideology backed by an all-powerful state that suppressed sub-national identities and beliefs precisely because New Order ideologues knew that such beliefs contained the seeds of political mobilization against the state. But these repressive policies only served to sharpen ethno-religious identities, including in Maluku.

In general terms, communal conflict across the Maluku archipelago in 1999 derived both from the rupture of pre-1998 arrangements between political elites in Jakarta and Maluku and the sudden opening of opportunities for political contestation over 'communal goods'. Openings appeared when Suharto's centralized patronage system started to break up – a system based, as it was, on the co-option of regional elites and enforced by a loyal military. As communal resources became 'up-for-grabs' and as national elections were looming in June 1999, elites in Maluku mobilized their grassroots supporters who organized themselves into militias drawn from the islands' Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods and villages.

In Ambon, the war originated both from competition between Christian and Muslim Ambonese for political office and public service jobs and conflict between indigenous Christian Ambonese and assertive migrant traders from South Sulawesi of Islamic faith. In the north, it was a land dispute between (mainly Christian) indigenous Kao and Muslim settlers from Makian Island who were suspected of consolidating their control of the north Maluku district bureaucracy and positioning themselves to control revenue from a gold mine on Kao land. Critical in sustaining northern violence was the ongoing communal-religious competition to capture the machinery of government when a new province of North Maluku was created in September 1999.

Although the wars in the south (Ambon) and in the north (based on Halmahera Island and spreading to Ternate and Tidore) had different beginnings, once fighting became militarized, mobilization converged along religious lines.

Reporting civil war

Representing the Maluku wars[2] as a 'national experience' was always going to be sensitive because communal strife raised the spectre of national disintegration. Despite their newly won freedoms, the Indonesian press carried some heavy baggage. They were used to direct military-bureaucratic intervention, known in

professional circles as *kebudayaan telpon* (telephone culture) and the routine supply of graft (envelopes of cash) to reporters in return for attending and giving favourable coverage to government (and other) press conferences/events, known as *kebudayaan amplop* (envelope culture).

During the chaotic transition, democratic euphoria was tempered by emerging threats. The reformist movement known as *reformasi* – which the press helped bring into being – empowered communal groups tied to emerging political contenders. With political authority at the centre weakened by the collapse of the patronage system referred to above, and with security force loyalties divided, delivering numbers at street demonstrations became a tactic of choice for competing political interests.

For a profession that had hitherto accepted reporting communal conflict as taboo, these emerging pressure groups presented new dilemmas. As communal tension spilled over into violence in several regions across the republic, reporters were aware that their acts of reporting could have a direct consequence for "the raising and suppressing of community emotion" (Qodari 2000: 11). They were also aware that hostility could be turned against media organizations themselves.

Research by Gazali of regional press and radio reporters revealed a fear of 'mob dictatorship' in reaction to news content. He cites "at least five serious cases of a massive mob attack against a media office" occurred between July 1999 and February 2000 (2002: 136).[3] Direct harassment and physical attacks on media workers had a corrosive influence and assumed greater importance as New Order tactics of direct bureaucratic interference receded.

Stanley argues attacks on media facilities and property involve a transfer in the capacity for repression from 'the state' to 'the people' but media repression, he admits, comes from groups who possess a direct relationship with state elites (2006: 195). Yet, even during the New Order, much political repression in general was subcontracted to groups straddling the political and criminal realms - some of it to civilian militia 'irregulars' under military patronage. The reformasi era's much more contestable political terrain saw these coercive resources transferred to political parties through their paramilitaries and civilian militia (Hadiz 2003: 603).

Failing to make a decisive break with the past, the new era of competitive politics reproduced patrimonial ties between elite patrons and politically directed mobs with the capacity to convey community outrage against offending targets, including the media. The factionalised military and police were not only key subjects of reportage but also key institutions which interacted with the news media as it sought access to places of battle and information filtering from those places. Local reporters (not from the two Jakarta newspapers) testified to being placed in danger when gathering news and became hyper-sensitive to the charge from one religious group or the other of taking sides. This sensitivity was formed around a reporter's religious identity brought on by the war's contagion of suspicion; so conflict conditions served to steer reporters away from firsthand accounts that were not 'official'.

> I control my reporters. I say don't take sources from the grassroots, from those at war, that's not permitted. If you take a source from a warrior, he will definitely take the side of his own group. He only sees his own area, not other people's (Pinontoan 2001).

According to media sociologist Gaye Tuchman, choice of sources is part of the process of source legitimation; while their comments may be disputed, officials are never challenged over their right to make news. This structure, she says, theoretically allows the reader to decide who is telling the truth; by structuring the alternatives, reporters absolve themselves of responsibility for getting at the truth (1978: 92).

In turn, the highly sensitive nature of partisan accounts pushes reporters into the 'safe' hands of government officials.

> To avoid taking sides with one group, we just use the one government version. We are then accused of being a mouthpiece for the government by the Islamic group. In the conflict area, it's possible the only neutral source is the government one. Because they don't take the side of one group or the other, for us government and security forces are still very neutral (Djalil 2001).

The regional press suffered most from the communal pressures applied to all media. Religious polarisation in the neighbourhoods of Ambon city led one newspaper to split along religious lines. Territorial segregation – a military goal of combatants – was mirrored in professional segregation to the point where papers identified as 'Christian' (due to the make-up of the staff) were denied access to territorially-segregated Muslim areas – and vice versa.

But while police and military patrolled the boundaries of these areas and fed information to reporters that they could not otherwise establish firsthand, some reporters used their networks among the security forces to gain access to sensitive locations. A Jakarta-based magazine reporter – herself a Christian – recalls how she was able to use her contacts among 'green' faction (Islamist) members of TNI who brokered interviews with Islamic leaders under military protection (Sidjabat 2001).

How two influential national newspapers handled these new operating conditions in their coverage of communal violence in Maluku is the subject of this paper.

The national newspapers

The two news organizations - Kompas and Republika - respectively originate in different religious camps, both born at moments of profound political change, and both with their fortunes - like all Indonesian media businesses - tied to their interactions with the state.

In the constricted terrain of Sukarno's Guided Democracy from 1959, press organs tended to be mouthpieces for political parties. The government formalised this client-patron structure in early 1965 by passing a regulation requiring that every newspaper needed to be officially endorsed by a political party or mass organization (including the armed forces) which would be responsible for editorial content. (Dhakidae 1991: 55; Hill 1994: 29).

Thus, the seeds of the Pancasila press during the New Order were sown in the preceding Sukarnoist period, a time when political power was consolidated through creeping centralism, declining pluralism and the binding of press content and market survival to political-military patronage.

Sukarno's authoritarian turn saw the return of the 1945 constitution, a document heavily influenced by the legal philosophy of 'integralism'. The integralist state was less a reflection of society than its embodiment, but not just any society. It "mirrored the institutions and ethos of a (highly idealized) traditional village community in which there was no sense of separation between rulers and ruled" (Bourchier 1997: 162).

> The proper role of the state was not simply to regulate society but to encompass it, involving itself in all aspects of social life for the sake of the well-being of the whole – the whole family as it were (Bourchier 1999: 186).

Integralism inspired and justified a way of seeing state-society relations which fitted the New Order regime perfectly. It acted as a shield against accountability and attempts by the press to assume a watchdog role against government misdeeds. The media were to be 'partners' in national development.

With the wholesale slaughter of leftists following the crushing of the Gestapu coup in late 1965, the press system in which leftist parties had been dominant was destroyed; the purge of the bureaucracy went hand-in-glove with a purge of journalists with only army sponsored newspapers surviving (Dhakidae 1991: 55-57)

With the emasculation of political parties, the New Order government set about implementing its policy of depoliticising society, including the press. But in its first ten years, the newspaper market was transformed as much by market and technological forces as by the heavy hand of the state.

With new print technology applied from the late 1960s, progressive companies like Kompas-Gramedia flourished, with industry growth tied to national development objectives and regulated by state policy. The newspaper business was thus transformed from one based on political competition to business competition (144). The economic and political climate allowed for generalist newspapers like Kompas to extend to "larger depoliticised readerships" cross-cutting religion, ethnicity and political creeds (149).

The newspaper that went on to become the largest circulation daily in Southeast Asia was a child of the Indonesian Catholic Party. Kompas Daily was established in a climate of competing influences on the increasingly autocratic Sukarno. Pitted

against the (communist) PKI and its network of papers, Kompas's establishment took advantage of the demise of a number of right-wing papers.

On the question of ethnic control and ownership, it was largely Javanese Catholic. Its founding editor Jacob Oetama argued the newspaper was committed to breaking down ethnic and religious barriers, something reflected in its mixed workforce (248).

Kompas was a pioneer of the Indonesian press business and enjoyed rising circulation – 100,000 per day by the early 1970s. It was under Oetama's editorial leadership that its forthright, opinionated journalism was tempered in the face of "the intensity of the increasing inroads of the state into the world of journalism" (253).

However, Kompas's path-breaking success was still captive to arbitrary state power as it discovered in 1978 when following student protests against government corruption and the president himself, seven newspapers, including Kompas, received temporary bans (313).

The Kompas-Gramedia Group, according to Hill (1994: 84), showed itself more than any other to be prepared to operate within the constraints set by the New Order. The conglomerate had interests including book publishing, printing, travel, hotels, insurance and advertising. Since the late 1980s, the expansion of its publication stable through buyouts and management deals gave it access to a number of regional city markets plus a proliferation of specialist publications (85).

It viewed its own success as being able to respond to the changing tastes of an emerging middle class as well as a decision to downplay religious affiliation and invite gifted Muslim liberals to write for its publications (Hefner 1997: 88). It was this Catholic-owned publishing group from the 1970s onward that rode the wave of media expansion on the back of a growing urban middle class. By contrast, the Islamic daily *Harian Abadi* – the voice of modernist Islam – had been cut down in the bannings of 1974.

It would be 20-odd years before another general publishing licence (SIUPP) was granted to a mass-circulation Islamic newspaper. In one sense, the creation of Republika newspaper (first published in 1993) was closer to the politicised press model that held sway before the rise of press empires in the 1970s and 80s. The paper was a venture sponsored by *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia* (The Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) or ICMI (pron. Ich-mee).

ICMI – although not a political party – was a significant political force which formalized a movement that began in the late 1980s among educated, urban Muslims. Its patron was vice-president B.J. Habibie whose own appointment to high office reflected the Suharto regime's accommodation with political Islam. This 'Islamic turn' was Suharto doing what he did best: balancing the factions within the civilian and military bureaucracies to shore up his own power (Liddle 1996: 630). ICMI was the aspirational voice of middle-class 'modernist' Muslims and a vehicle used less for the propagation of religious ideology and more to vent longstanding grievances and contemporary aspirations. Republika thus covered themes for which earlier Islamic press organs had been victimised, such

as challenging the crony-capitalist business model favouring ethnic Chinese and holding back *pribumi* (indigenous) businessmen, who are overwhelmingly Muslim (Liddle 1996: 618; Bertrand 2004: 86).

While ICMI and Republika had the blessing of the ruling party (Golkar), their intellectual pursuits gave rise to a dissident wing, which articulated independent views often at odds with Golkar orthodoxy. Of numerous examples of promoting a democratic discourse in its pages was *Republika's* coverage of the aftermath of a raid on the headquarters of *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia* (PDI) on 27 July 1996 by elements of the security forces. The attack was aimed at derailing the rising popularity of the party and sidelining its leader Megawati Sukarnoputri. The attack itself led to protests and riots in support of PDI, which the government blamed on activists from the left-wing underground *Partai Rakyat Demokrasi* (People's Democratic Party) or PRD.

During the trial of PRD activists, Republika's sympathetic coverage of the activists and scepticism of the government case upset both pro-government stalwarts and conservative Islamists, the latter believing their new-found legitimacy within the New Order was being imperilled by the Islamic paper's perceived sympathies and youthful cosmopolitanism (Hefner 1997: 97). The paper's flaunting of doctrinal purity and its willingness to promote an open discourse on a plurality of topics, according to Hefner, saw them walking a tightrope between "demonstrations of respect for the government and maintaining the independence required to win readers and demonstrate that Muslims can be principled journalists" (96).

The vibrant public sphere spurred on by media liberalization led to a proliferation of journalists' groups but few unions with industrial strength. In this environment, the state paternalism that marked the Pancasila press endured along with family-style business culture, which obstructed professionalisation (Romano 2003: 170). The post-1998 reinvention of New Order personnel within a competitive political sphere of parties and parliaments squeezed journalists between the lure of old habits and new, unfamiliar challenges to their professionalism, physical safety and their employers' institutional survival.

Once communal violence in the east became a topic of national coverage, newspapers, according to Qodari, found a way to avoid direct reporting of the warring parties by sticking to civilian and military official sources:

> [M]ilitary and bureaucratic sources are far easier to obtain. Entering certain conflict areas endangers journalists. In religious conflict like Maluku, quotations from military sources and bureaucrats are considered more neutral since journalists can be shielded from the accusation of giving voice to one of the warring groups (Qodari 2000: 6, FN 8).[4]

The following survey of newspaper texts identifies the news discourses that developed in the news pages over key periods during the conduct of the wars. But first a methodology is required against which these narratives can be judged. The focus is on what narratives emerged and how their meanings can be interpreted within the chosen framework. The study does not attempt an ethnographic study

of these two news organizations nor their news production processes.

The chosen framework is 'peace journalism', a term that gained currency following the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation in the early-to-mid 1990s. Indonesians even used the term *Balkanisasi* (Balkanisation) to express their own fears that regional violence could lead to a break-up of the Indonesian state. In its best known formulation (Lynch 2001; Lynch & McGoldrick 2005; Lynch & Galtung 2010), peace journalism counterposes its values with 'war journalism'. War journalism is characterised by a zero-sum approach to conflict: a bi-polar game between two parties contesting a single goal where victory followed by ceasefire equals peace (Lynch 2001: 16). Its interpretive framework is rigid in the sense that it is not designed to offer the audience any insight into the circumstances under which violent conflict might remain unresolved and re-surface; peace is simply the absence of war.

Similarly, Lynch & Galtung characterise these 'syndromes of journalism' in terms of 'violence-victory' (war journalism) and 'conflict-solution' (peace journalism). But these orientations are not mutually exclusive (2010: 12). Nor is the peace-journalism syndrome a cover for peace advocacy (17). They identify a tendency in news discourses to treat violence *as the conflict.*

> [W]ill peace journalism also report violence? Of course. But it will report the violence by all sides, and the suffering of all sides, not only their violence and our suffering. It will also go deeper, reporting the invisible causes and effects of violence without falling into the trap of confusing violence and conflict (2010: 12).

War-journalism discourses tend to deal with elite people in elite countries and rely heavily on official government sources. This is especially so during military action when such tendencies are complicit in government-military efforts to keep reporters away from the battlefield, depriving them of primary observation and independent sources of information. War journalism employs storytelling forms that increasingly align themselves with the strategic logic of warmaking. War journalism implicitly recognises that for every victory on the ground, a corresponding 'media war' must be declared, fought and won.

In regard to cultural conflict, Shinar has questioned the efficacy of the concept of resolution when it equates with 'end-of-conflict'. Such approaches are often associated with peace agreements and settlements, which deliver 'reconciliation'. He believes that these approaches are ill-suited to be applied to cultural conflicts, marked by intractability, durability, low-intensity, unconventional 'battlefields' and the use of 'irregulars' as fighters (2003: 2-3).

By adopting the prevailing model of elite peace-making, the news media contributes to a 'crisis of expectations' when such agreements fail to 'stick'.[5] Shinar makes the point that while reconciliation is newsworthy, this media frame is a mismatch for the conflict under his study (Israel-Palestine). So, following the 2000 Intifada (Palestinian uprising) hopes were dashed and the media reverted to focusing on the escalating violence rather than the causes of protracted, cultural

conflict. This is a useful example of war journalism resulting not simply from a loss of faith in reconciliation after being overrun by events, but from an analytic failure of the profession.

The importance of news discourses providing something other than a mirror of elite agendas is demonstrated in the case of Maluku where the 'resolution' was framed in terms of decisive government action. As pressure mounted on President Wahid to 'end' the conflict, some of his political opponents used the communal war to urge escalating military intervention as the preferred solution. Wahid resisted this knowing an empowered armed forces - whose powers his government was trying to curtail - was as well positioned to escalate the fighting as it was to ending it.[6]

Wars – especially those fought with distinct political goals in mind - are open to the manipulations of media diplomacy. Internationalising local struggles spotlights not only powerful national and transnational negotiators but sub-national armed groups. Those intent on 'making' the news will always internalise media narratives as part of their negotiating arsenal. Lynch describes the process thus: "Every time anything is reported, another layer is deposited in the collective understanding of the kind of facts likely to be reported in future – an understanding which then forms the basis of calculations by newsmakers." (2001: 11)

Thus, the alternative framework of interpretation – peace journalism – is contingent on an accurate, thorough analysis of the conflict at hand. In the Maluku case, this meant understanding volatile centre-periphery politics including the context of attempts by former Suharto loyalists to de-stabilise the civilian government. To follow this approach, reporters would need to find ways to extricate themselves from elite agendas and their mouthpieces and focus on the longer-term prospects for inter-communal peace in the region, irrespective of who was in power in Jakarta.

A rich body of controversy has both questioned and advanced the idea of peace journalism by applying it to different conflict scenarios (Hackett 2006; Hanitzsch 2007; Kempf 2007; Loyn 2007; Ottosen 2010). Notwithstanding debate over whether the peace/war journalism dichotomy is too simplistic, for the purposes of this study, it is worth asking how these opposing paradigms can be identified in newspaper texts.

'Primordialist media narratives' is the preferred term for selecting those discourses where 'war journalism' is in the ascendancy. It requires some definition.

At its most general, primordialism is simply a strong sense of group identity based on some primary form of affiliation: primordial affiliations are "culturally encoded systems of meaning with implications for behavior and effect" (Hoben & Hefner 1991: 18). Primordiality is a permanent social and historical fact in all societies that transcends the simplistic duality of tradition and modernity. However, within some Western intellectual traditions, it acquired a negative meaning – a kind of social affliction where attachment to blood, language, religion and memory

made groups violence-prone and indisposed to embracing mature, modern civic order (Appadurai 1996: 143). This evolved as a social-scientific explanation for a myriad of social ills in postcolonial societies, which were seen as obstacles to modernisation.

While discredited in social theory in recent times, the tendency to see allegiance to highly personalised institutions which predate modernity [7] as a fundamental organising principle of regressive social action persists in modern belief systems. A form of cultural determinism, this primordialist thinking has been sustained and legitimised within popular culture, not least through media communication. It is a function of such primordialist discourses to blur the distinction between primordial attachments as a social fact and primordialist (moral and ideological) arguments that underpin mobilisational politics, social engineering and violent escalation.

Primordialist discourses, in periods of growing state centralisation, tend to ascribe pre-modern attributes to local solidarities, especially when they pose resistance to this expansion. In the Indonesian case, therefore, the lived primordialism of regional subjects was repudiated by the developmentalist state and its foreign financiers as anti-progress.

So, ethnic or cultural explanations for group behaviour often imply an unconscious primordialism, where actors are portrayed as lacking the calculus of modern rational thought. Where such explanations enjoy a common-sense popularity, they take on an ideological function, obscuring how symbolic resources are consciously instrumentalised by group interests (including state interests) within a dynamic, modern political context. Ideological messages depend for their efficacy on such symbolic obfuscations.

The post-1965 Indonesian state characterised threats to its authority as 'internal' to the body politic. Its official defence was to stigmatise primordial identities – expressed through the euphemistic acronym SARA[8] – as inherently irrational and dangerous. Part of the New Order's ideological strategy, therefore, was to objectify local solidarities and declare their symbolic expressions taboo.[9] Unreflexive, unconscious passions, if allowed to express themselves, the strategy implied, could unify groups, explode and run out-of-control.

Appadurai addresses the same question from a different angle. Primordial identities are powerful and potentially dangerous because they can be organised into culturalist movements.[10] These are not unconscious outbreaks of a primordial contagion but groups taking cultural difference as their conscious object (1996: 147). These politicised groups variously may seek recognition, autonomy, survival, operate locally or transnationally, but they all employ communicative tactics that seek to draw the media onto contestable moral terrain. In this way, media narratives become implicated in culturalist agendas and the conveyance of their ideological interests. News media especially must keep faith with their audiences (or language community) by remaining active and relevant in the public sphere but avoid capture by ideological interests whose narratives their audiences are likely to reject.

In this sense, a primordialist narrative might be a successful media strategy for reporting conflict because it resonates with an audience; but it might also offer little to explain the processes and events that are the subject of reportage. Indeed, a story grounded in a primordialist premise renders historical, contextual explanation redundant. Alternatively, reified, ahistorical (primordialist) constructions of collective identity might emerge as a preferred reading of events where other textual strategies are unsuccessful or untried. It is this falling back on a primordialist reading – in the absence of other textual strategies – that prevails in the news reportage of both Indonesian newspapers under study. In either case, media narratives will tend to naturalise primordialist readings of the physical and ideological dimensions of violent conflict, as the following textual analysis demonstrates.

Framing religious conflict

The data surveyed comes from clusters of news reportage chosen to coincide with significant events and developments spanning an 11-month period from the second major outbreak of riots in Ambon in late July 1999 to the declaration of a state of emergency across the Maluku provinces in late June 2000.[11] Within these clusters, 79 articles were surveyed – 43 in Republika and 36 in Kompas.

What follows is a quantitative tally of descriptors for combatants broken down into 'generic', where the basis of group affiliation is not revealed as in dua kelompok yang bertikai (the two warring groups) and 'non-generic', where group affiliation is explicit in the naming of combatants as in massa Kristen (the Christian mob). These naming conventions emerge either in a nominal form (e.g. two warring groups) or adjectivally, describing a conflict (e.g. the inter-communal fighting). Both types are recorded in these categories. Phrases such as tokoh masyarakat (community leader), tokoh beragama (religious leader) and references to agents provocateurs (provokator, oknum) are not counted unless it is clear they are directly involved in the fighting.

Table 1
GENERIC & NON-GENERIC DESCRIPTORS FOR COMBATANTS
July 1999 – June 2000 (selected periods)

Daily	#articles	generic	non-generic
Republika	43	57 [59%]	39 [41%]
Kompas	36	53 [81%]	12 [19%]

Table 2
GENERIC & NON-GENERIC DESCRIPTORS FOR COMBATANTS
26th December 1999 – 8th January 2000

Daily	#articles	generic	non-generic
Republika	22	26 [45%]	31 [55%]
Kompas	18	29 [72%]	11 [28%]

Clearly, the degree to which Kompas seeks to avoid descriptions that reveal a religious basis to hostility and war is very high and greater than Republika's.[12]

However, the contrast between Kompas's caution and Republika's privileging of Islamic viewpoints (enabled by greater use of non-generic language) in some respects is overdrawn. What the two Indonesian researchers (Qodari & Eriyanto) do identify are changes between the early stages of the war in the north (Oct – Nov 1999) and the period of its escalation after Christmas in the same year. Not only do the number of news reports increase in the second period, but also Republika's coverage becomes more 'fierce' (galak) in style and content as the number of Muslim victims explodes (9). This is reflected in my own results for a similar period in Table 2.[13] The sharp rise in Muslim deaths in the post-Christmas period coincides with an increase (14%) in Republika reporters' propensity to describe victims as 'Muslims' and their attackers as 'Christians'.

But more telling is the picture that emerges from Table 1, derived from data over the full sample period[14] and encompassing reportage from north and south. In the 11-month sample, while not as pronounced as Kompas (81%), Republika's preference for euphemism and sanitised language when describing combatants is significantly high (59%). Despite the different orientations of these papers, the challenge of reporting civil war produces continuities as well as divergence in reporting styles and professional outcomes. This is reinforced by the following comparative treatment of sourcing.

Table 3
OFFICIAL STATE VERSUS PARTISAN SOURCES
July 1999 – June 2000 (selected periods)

Daily	#articles	official	partisan
Republika	43	65 [48%]	72 [52%]
Kompas	36	93 [87%]	14 [13%]

Table 4
MALUKAN AND NON-MALUKAN SOURCES
July 1999 – June 2000 (selected periods)

Daily	#articles	Malukan	non-Malukan
Republika	43	69 [43%]	93 [57%]
Kompas	36	40 [32%]	86 [68%]

The most obvious result from Table 3 is Kompas's hyper-dependence on official-state sources, both civilian and military. Republika displays a much more even distribution between official and partisan sources. However, sourcing preferences converge when both papers show a preponderance of sources from outside the conflict zone (Table 4).[15] Kompas's official source dependency is exacerbated by its superior score for non-Malukan sources, producing Jakarta-centric, official

discourses where storytelling from the conflict zone is muted, often inaudible. Republika's apparent lesser dependence on officialdom is offset by a number of factors: first, its partisan sources are overwhelmingly Islamic and second, out of those partisan sources, a clear majority (61%) speak from outside the war zone (that is, Jakarta). This suggests an official-source dependency exists – though one less slavish than Kompas – with a tendency to be a reliable outlet for Islamic political agendas organised from Jakarta.

Kompas did not so much avoid Christian sources but partisan, self-consciously Christian ones. Conversely, while all its partisan voices were kept to an absolute minimum (13%), when partisan Muslim spokespeople did speak, they did so stridently and without balancing comment.

The textual suppression of the identity of combatants undermined professional obligations to explain the bases of hostility. This privileged primordialist readings of the apparently endless outbreaks of violence across time and space. The censorious instincts of editors, one theory suggests (Eriyanto 2000), are employed to dampen conflict, avoid aggravating partisan anger and enlarging hostility not just in the battle zones but also throughout the general population. While verifying whether this approach can achieve such goals may be untestable, it raises deeper questions of professional purpose: which aspects of journalistic narrative can be legitimately tampered with to achieve these avowedly higher goals; by what criteria do editors mandate the selective removal of narrative elements for this purpose; and in a related sense, what commercial and professional considerations apply in editorial decisions that deem certain information needs of readers (e.g. knowing who is attacking whom) to be expendable? Such decisions also have implications for who is telling the story since such self-censoring often involves ceding narrative control to certain classes of story-tellers (e.g. official sources).

If the dividend from oblique naming techniques is a non-confrontational storyline, the deficit is narrative clarity. It might be said that terms like 'inter-communal' in the context of news on Maluku would be recognisable by readers as an oblique reference to religious-based communal conflict; but in practice, this reporting style more often than not muddies rather than clarifies the factual situation.

These issues come up earlier in Kompas's coverage of trans-regional conflict occurring simultaneously in Ambon and North Maluku. On 31st December 1999, first mention of the post-Christmas mass killings of Muslims in Halmahera are made in the form of a casualty estimate; but Kompas reporters make no mention of who is killing whom, only that clashes were 'between groups of different religions'.[16] The 'tragedy' in Tobelo, the report suggests, is somehow related to a 'big riot' in Ambon just prior to it, but no light is shed on this connection so it remains speculative; in the lead paragraph Ambon clashes are described as 'spreading' to outlying areas, including North Maluku, overlooking the local history of the latter conflict. When details later emerge that these clashes were in fact one-sided massacres (pembantaian) of Muslims, Kompas's habitual use of 'safe' terms like *bentrokan* (clashes) is exposed. So too is its ability to make sense of ensuing Muslim outrage and its mobilisational spin-offs compromised.[17]

Similarly, editorial preferences to tell the Maluku story through official-state and Islamic political discourses centred in Jakarta left little room for accounts of the ground war in Maluku. When the civil emergency is put in place in June 2000, there is a rare and brief mention of 'red and white troops'. It is revealing of Kompas's studious detachment from the conduct of the war that these troops' *Panglima Perang* (war commanders) – 17 months after the start of the conflict – remain unnamed. In fact, both papers have little to report on the commanders' leadership structures, recruitment, military tactics or strategic thinking.[18]

No doubt official-source dependency and detachment from the ground war – in the Maluku case as elsewhere – are functions of the lack of access to the war zone and its direct participants. However, it is questionable – at least from this textual analysis – whether either paper sought to get close to the battlefields in order to allow local dynamics and insights to drive their conflict narratives. Even when stories moved away from the rancour of Jakarta politicians or the minimalist expressions of military spokesmen, descriptive accounts of physical destruction and verifying the number of dead and wounded were almost always preferred to explanations of violent phenomena in their local setting. On the rare occasions when reporting space was given to analysis, commentators opined from Jakarta, not from the heart of the action.

Security personnel and their media masks

If the advantages of official-source dependency include easy access to officials, the downside is that it hampers the development of consistent storylines and the ability to pursue them through to independent conclusions. Nowhere is this more apparent in the survey sample than in coverage of the role of state security forces (SSF). A persistent question thrown up throughout the 79 news articles is: 'are the security forces part of the solution or part of the problem?' This complex theme infiltrates a broad array of conflict events in the archipelago and efforts at all levels of the political centre to restore order to its fracturing eastern periphery.

The ambiguous and sometimes renegade role played by SSF presents itself throughout the texts under study; but these in the main consist of passing references rather than systematic inquiry. Consequently, one of the key political and strategic issues behind Maluku's communal wars receives a fragmentary treatment in news discourse. Partisan security personnel (whether TNI or police) are generally referred to as *oknum* (rogue elements); sometimes the term provokator is used indirectly but never explicitly to describe *aparat* (security personnel). Such SSF behaviour is usually described as *memihak* (taking sides) but the basis of partisanship (for example, religious identity) is rarely spelt out.

At times, the inability of SSF to restrain hostile groups is highlighted,[19] while at others, the practice of shooting into warring mobs with resulting casualties is mentioned in dispatches.[20] The military's reassurance to politicians and the public that 15 battalions had been deployed to the province[21] is contrasted with reports of villagers rejecting TNI protection and forming their own security posts.[22]

The SSF's apparent tactic of discharging their weapons to disperse or separate warring parties sometimes becomes confused when locals are reported accusing 'rogue security personnel of taking sides with certain groups' (*oknum aparat memihak kelompok tertentu*). This presents openings for narrative inquiry but in one case, it is not until the final paragraph we are presented with a powerful image around which a single storyline might have been built:

> The security forces - both TNI and police - appeared to be having increasing difficulty dispersing the attackers who were equipped with weaponry almost the same as possessed by the security forces themselves.[23]

When, occasionally, the primary news angle involves 'oknum aparat', there is no independent information to compare with the SSF accounts. We read only that TNI or police suspects are being investigated, for example, for the shooting of 21 victims in an Ambon village: a TNI commander suggests his suspect personnel were provoked by the sniper killing of a colleague.[24] Even more intriguing is an unsourced report accusing a police lieutenant-colonel of orchestrating riots clandestinely, whose case is being handled by TNI.[25] Another report has agent provocateurs acting on behalf of 'national political constellations' posing in SSF uniform with false rank.[26] When a report of a seminar airs serious allegations of SSF institutional corruption (rather than the errant behaviour of individual 'oknum'), the TNI response is to demand proof: "logically, it does not enter our minds to engineer riots".[27] This important theme is not interrogated in subsequent editions of either paper within the survey sample.

There are very limited references linking rogue behaviour to the religious faith of SSF members. Nor in the sample is there any analysis of the ethno-religious make-up of SFF units, their geographic origins or the timing of particular deployments in relation to the conduct of the war. This is in keeping with the minimalist approach to reporting the religious affiliation of combatants. Occasionally, when the link is made, they remain uninterrogated, such as 'oknum Brimob Kristen' (rogue Christian riot police)[28] or 'tembak di antara aparat TNI yang berbeda agama' (shooting between TNI personnel of different religions).[29]

Precise connections between SSF, the complicity of 'rogue elements' in criminal activity and the religious-communal partisanship of such elements are subject to deepening confusion in reportage of a major security debacle in Ambon just prior to the state of emergency in June 2000. Following clashes described vaguely as having elements of SARA[30], the riot police's armoury at Tantui is ransacked by 'a mob' and their living quarters burnt to the ground with SSF fleeing the mayhem. A police spokesman admits the possibility of rogue elements of TNI/national police being involved. Amidst the growing rancour of calls from Jakarta's political circles to end the conflict, a journalistic disentangling of so demoralising an event could have helped to reveal what the central government and its disorderly security apparatus were truly facing in restoring peace in the periphery. Instead, readers suffer endless repeats of military officials pledging 'firm action', 'upholding of the law' and 'arrests of provocateurs'. Meanwhile, an embattled president issues tough

but impotent warnings to unnamed 'big shots': "Your actions have gone too far. If we run out of patience, look out! There are limits…Those who have high rank, large wealth will be run over by the people."[31]

Conclusion

In summary, for large parts of the sample period both daily newspapers under study fell back on 'safe' integralist principles when reporting the progress of the protracted Maluku wars. Both sets of reportage were content to cede intellectual initiative to established state information sources, preferring civilian and military officials to mediate between communal strife and their reporters. This approach underpinned narratives, which lacked continuity over time, suppressed the identity of combatants (and their authentic voices) and left unexplored their complex relationship to their enemies, including themes unrelated to religion. As a direct consequence of this narrative distance, the news pages were filled with 'talking heads' expressing Jakarta-centric political manoeuvres and agendas, stressing partisan political feuding outside the Malukan battle zones. Malukan cross-communal solutions and peace initiatives were all but invisible in the news pages of both papers.

Undercontextualised facts and opinion underpinning this style of 'talking journalism' (*jurnalisme omongan*) were preferred to narrative inquiry building towards transparent conclusions.

Changes in the balance-of-forces on the northern front of the battleground did not prompt reporters to re-capture narrative initiative from official sources but rather amplified the disadvantages of distance from the battlefield. Nor did it shift focus from Jakarta official discourses to ones inside Maluku's combat zones. Instead, an intensification of the war in the north (including atrocities against Muslims villagers after Christmas 1999) led to an enhanced media focus on Jakarta-based agendas, but now involving paramilitary mobilisation. Both papers eschewed narrative complexity in favour of reproducing (mostly uncritically) the simplistic war rhetoric of paramilitary leaders and their (sometimes unwitting) ideological supporters. Republika used its reports to encourage its readers to identify as vicarious victims of (unexplained) 'Christian aggression' in an outer province. The call for jihad from Jakarta allowed it to affirm its nationalist credentials by giving voice to resurgent elements of Islamic nationalism. Neither daily seized the chance to interrogate the national implications of a deployment of fighters to an already war-ravaged region of the republic.

Primary vehicles for agendas at the political centre – official state sources and state-aligned Islamic political contenders – secured largely unfiltered access to the news pages and were thus able to present their own crafted spin on Maluku violence that harmonised with their own political strategies. This cancelled out independent framing based on narrative continuity by offering vested interests wedded to prolongation of the war direct lines of access to national audiences.

Both papers promoted primordialist perspectives of violent conflict by offering no consistent alternative readings in their news discourses. But each paper did so by

way of different discursive methods. Kompas's official-source hyper-dependency soaked up drip-fed statements from the security forces to produce a minimalist, context-less and truncated presentation of separate 'eruptions' breaking out around the archipelago. Undernourished by a lack of strong narrative threads and denied the chance to engage with the realities of distant violence, Kompas readers were left to ponder each eruption as unexplainable, and therefore as confirmation of irreconcilable religious differences.

Unsurprisingly, after minimising religious-communal oppositions in deference to entrenched reporting taboos inculcated during the previous era, both papers were found wanting when these questions pulled rapidly into focus in 1999 and sharpened at the beginning of 2000. Consequently, the reportage of both papers was tightly anchored to the vicissitudes of elite politics at the centre and cut adrift from the extreme suffering in a politically marginal province, whose crisis was alleged to have so preoccupied Jakarta's powerbrokers.

What neither paper attempted was to disaggregate the complex entanglement of interests and players working between the centre and periphery and between the combat and non-combat spheres. The fragmentation of security forces was only going to be intelligible if it was informed by the long and bloody history of civilian militia forces (some formed along religious lines), created and commanded by, and cooperating with Indonesian army and police. But instead, both papers – either actively or by default – became vehicles for mining a far simpler and accessible corner of national historical memory – base religious primordialism.

Religious enmity was presented as natural, inevitable and without end and so lacked explanatory power. By privileging this aspect of religious experience in the news text, their stories could not begin to decipher the interactions of rogues, warriors and Jakarta-based war beneficiaries that prolonged the war.

In its place, the Maluku maelstrom was portrayed both actively and unwittingly as a war-without-end, above the manipulations of political agency. The media's failure to address shifting power relations between political elites in Jakarta and Maluku was a spectacular failure of journalism that did nothing to assist a negotiated peace and may have contributed to the war's significant escalation. Unwittingly or not, both newspapers analysed in this study produced storylines that reinforced the rhetorical logic of warmaking.

Notes

1 See Neumann (2000: 15).
2 The plural is used to denote war erupting in different geographical zones within different time frames; there is a general distinction between a war in the south (Ambon Island) and in the north (mainly Ternate & Halmahera) but fighting was also prevalent in areas away from these centres. See van Klinken (2001).
3 In August 2001, the largest daily newspaper in Aceh, Serambi Indonesia was threatened by a separatist group with having its premises burnt down and its workers killed and as a result, suspended publication (Mater, G. 'Indonesia's free press not a trouble-free press, correspondents say' <freedomforum.org>

19th August 2001). See also 'Attacks against journalists continue', AJI/IFEX press release, 13th March 2000.

4 Qodari's study covers news of the North Maluku conflict during the period 25th October to 15 November 1999 and apart from Republika and Kompas also includes Suara Pembaruan, a Protestant affiliated national daily.

5 On this theme, see Wolfsfeld in Irvan (2006: 36).

6 Parliamentarians such as the PPP's Hamzah Haz were calling for a military emergency to be imposed in North Maluku from early 2000. See, for example, 'Abu Lahab dan Abu Jahal Ambon akan Kita Gulung Bersama' (Ambon's Abu Lahab and Abu Jahal will bring us together), Republika, 8th January 2000 and 'Umat Islam Desak Gus Dur Segera Selesaikan Masalah Ambon' (Islamic community asks Gus Dur to immediately resolve the Ambon problem), Republika, 10th January 2000. Even when a civil emergency was introduced across the entire Maluku region in late June 2000, a full military emergency was still an option, according to the coordinating minister for political & security affairs; see 'Gubernur Maluku berlakukan Jam Malam Maluku' (Governor brings in Maluku curfew), Republika, 28th June 2000.

7 For various case studies from Western and non-Western societies, see West & Sanders (2003a).

8 Acronym stands for suku (ethnic), agama (religious), ras (racial), antar golongan (inter-group); the latter itself was a euphemism for 'class'. The term enabled government officials and citizens alike to speak in oblique terms about cultural conflict, as in konflik SARA (SARA conflict) without shedding light on its nature and context. This served government policy by suppressing its political dimensions.

9 This was especially so when such expressions were politically salient; timeless, authentic, 'folk' traditions under official supervision, however, were promoted or even mandated in their Indonesianised form. See Schrauwers (1998: 204) and Budianta (2000: 116).

10 Appadurai uses 'culturalist' in a manner analogous to 'primordialist'; this adjectival form connotes the ideologising of identity in the sense inferred by Eisenstadt (1996: 31-34).

11 Survey periods are identical for each newspaper: 25th – 31st July 1999 (the week immediately following a major outbreak in Ambon – the so-called 2nd riot); 21st – 25th August 1999 (the period immediately following the first major outbreak on Halmahera, North Maluku at Malifut); 26th Dec 1999 – 8th Jan 2000* (coinciding with major and sustained outbreaks in Ambon on 26th Dec, on Halmahera on 27th and easily the most lethal period of the war; includes the key gathering in Jakarta at Monas on the 7th Jan); 7th – 8th April 2000 (includes reportage on a major meeting and demonstration in front of the presidential palace by Laskar Jihad paramilitaries); 24th – 30th May 2000 (period when Laskar Jihad troops were first present in Maluku); 24th – 30th June 2000 (period immediately following a major attack on police armoury in Ambon and includes declaration of state of civil emergency on 27th). * For Kompas, this period was extended to 10th January 2000 as there was no edition on the 8th.

12 This is broadly consistent with the results of news content analyses by Qodari (2000) and Eriyanto (2000) who examine the North Maluku conflict in two different periods. They found that generally Republika represented North Maluku as a religious conflict and openly judged the opposing sides; whereas

Kompas adopted a 'safe' position and avoided passing judgment on either side (Qodari 2000: 8-9).

13 This period of intensified violence in the north roughly coincides with Eriyanto's sample period which covers 26 Dec 1999 – 15 Jan 2000, though his analysis applies only to reporting on North Maluku.

14 That is, my selected dates over the full 11-month sample period.

15 Stark biases towards non-Malukan Islamic sources were found for both papers in Sudibyo's research which surveyed the period 7th – 15th January 2000 (2000: 28).

16 Victims are described as 'people from Tobelo' (warga Tobelo, not warga Muslim Tobelo) and their attackers 'the other group/the disturbing group' (warga kelompok lain/kelompok pengganggu, not Christian attackers); attacks in Galela are referred to as kerusuhan/pertikaian (rioting/fighting) without naming the sides; only by naming the settlements that were attacked and the ones which were the subject of reprisal attacks might the reader be able to identify who is attacking whom. See 'Sekitar 265 Orang Tewas di Maluku Utara' (Around 265 people killed in North Maluku), Kompas 31st December 1999: 1.

17 Senior editorial & research manager at Kompas, Daniel Dhakidae, acknowledges that his paper was "not too successful" in explaining the Maluku conflict to its readers but attributes this to "ideological obstacles" rather than any skill deficiencies (Dhakidae 2001).

18 See 'Kontrol Tetap Diperlukan' (Control still needed), Kompas, 29th June 2000: 1 & 11.

19 For example, see 'Takkan Ada Keadaan Darurat' (There will not be any state of emergency), Kompas, 30th December 1999: 1.

20 See ' Kerusuhan Ambon Meluas, 11 Tewas' (Ambon rioting widens, 11 killed), Republika, 28th July 1999: 1; and 'Orang Luar Dilarang Datang ke Maluku' (Outsiders banned from entering Maluku), Kompas, 24th June 2000: 1

21 '15 Batalyon Ditugaskan ke Wilayah Maluku' (15 battalions deployed to Maluku area), Kompas, 12th January 2000: 3.

22 'Korban Tewas dalam Lima Hari 453 Orang' (Victims killed in 5 days: 453), Republika, 31st December 1999: 1.

23 'TNI akan Bertindak Lebih Tegas' (TNI will take firmer action), Kompas, 25th June 2000: 11.

24 '4 Anggota TNI Jadi Tersangka Kasus Penembakan di Galala' (TNI members become suspects in shooting incident in Galala), Kompas, 19th August 1999: 17.

25 'Diselidiki, Aktor di Balik Pertikaian di Ambon' (Investigated, actor behind fighting in Ambon), Kompas, 23rd August 1999: 11.

26 'Pemda Minta Pusat Atasi Kemelut Ambon' (Provincial government asks the centre to overcome the Ambon disaster), Kompas, 16th August 1999: 12.

27 'Penilitian PSPK Indikasikan TNI Terlibat dalam Kerusuhan Ambon' (PSPK research indicates TNI involved in Ambon riots), Republika, 27th May 2000: 2.

28 'Tobelo and Galela Jadi Ladang Pembantaian Kaum Muslim' (Tobelo and Galela become killing field for Muslims), Republika, 5th January 2000: 13.

29 'Menneg HAM Akui Pemerintah Kurang Koordinasi Soal Maluku' (Minister for Human Rights admits lacks of coordination on Maluku problem), Kompas, 7th January 2000: 11

30 A New Order acronym for suku (ethnic), agama (religious), ras (racial) and antar-golongan (inter-group) conflict designated by New Order ideologues

as 'off-limits' for journalistic reporting. Official generalities like 'security disturbance' were repeated in news discourses to avoid acknowledging group difference (ethnic, religious) as a basis for protest and mobilisation. 'Konflik SARA' became a catch-all term to allude to but ultimately suppress solidarities based on cultural identity. In their place, national identity (and allegiance to the state) was promoted systematically as the supreme form of collective identity and belonging within Indonesia's Pancasila democracy. See Antlov (2000).

31 'Orang Luar Dilarang Datang ke Maluku' (Outsiders banned from entering Maluku), Kompas, 24th June 2000: 1.

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