

“Keroyokan: Mobs in Indonesia”

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Abstract: From horrific accounts of men decapitated and “*disataykan*” to “ordinary” accounts of stolen motorcycles, the routine beating and killing of alleged criminals by mobs or *massa* has become common in Indonesia. This paper examines the patterns of *keroyokan* – or mobbing – from 1995 through 2004 in four provinces and highlights the temporal, spatial and substantive variation of this phenomenon. Drawing from a database of provincial news clippings in Bali, Bengkulu, West Java and South Kalimantan this paper shows that *keroyokan* varies considerably and as such an understanding of the causes of this phenomenon must be nuanced and locally-rooted. The paper assesses whether the 1998 regime transition, 1997/1998 economic crisis and subsequent democratization affected the frequency of *keroyokan* and suggests that these explanations do not account for change over time in local mobbing. Rather the decentralization process that created local vacuums of state power and locally established patterns of violence account for patterns of *keroyokan* between 1995 and 2004.

Each murder shines a spotlight, and thousands of deaths are going on in the shadows. The mass media informs us of them, but the mass media also distances them. On such and such page in such and such a column of this or that newspaper, at this time in that program on television, an event, something of great profundity, has turned into a fact, something level, flat.

And even savagery becomes level and flat, one dot in one row, a dot the same as all the other dots. ... And suddenly we are aware that cruelty is not something distinct. No, we are not the wild, wild west. In the world recreated in John Wayne and Clint Eastwood films, death is a possibility for anyone, for no one monopolises violence. In our world today anyone, casually, is a potential victim, and anyone ... is a potential executioner. Cruelty crouches outside the door, ready to knock, asking to come in. (Goenawan Mohamad, 2002, pp. 235-6)

The prominent writer Goenawan Mohamad highlights an “ordinary” dimension of violence in contemporary Indonesia. The 1998 democratic transition has not brought about lower levels of violence, as newspaper accounts describe incident after incident of killings, whether there are in turbulent Aceh or on the streets of the capital Jakarta. Scholarly attention has predominantly centered on the conflict areas – Maluku, Aceh, Papua and Central Kalimantan, to name a few. Violence in “ordinary” communities has largely been ignored as scholars aim to understand major outbreaks of violence, usually ethnic or of late, terrorism. This paper aims to refocus attention away from the headlines of conflict to the regular inside columns, or “dots” as Goenawan’s label suggests. The “dot” in question is *keroyokan* or local mob violence.

Most Indonesians are familiar with *keroyokan* killings – a ritualized form of violence that involves the practice of an unlawful group, usually ordinary citizens, controlling and punishing crime usually in the form of a lynching, the inflicting of capital punishment.



Newspapers reports, especially those in the tabloids, feature *keroyokan* regularly and contemporary crime television shows often highlight cases of citizens taking the law into their own hands through “mob justice.” This “violent ritual,” to use Charles Tilly’s (2003) term, involves three components, a mob or “massa”, a violent entrepreneur(s), a leader(s) within the mob that instigate and inflict harm on the victim, and the victim(s), who may or may not be guilty of the alleged crime and is usually, although not exclusively, male. The ritual follows a similar pattern – a small mob or *massa* comprised of men and women captures the victim usually a male between the ages of 20 and 35, beats the victim or victims to death, sometimes after a shaming ritual, and in some cases sets the victim(s) on fire. Incidents include the beating of local thieves for simple things like stealing a shirt or swallow egg to more serious crimes involving rape and witchcraft.

In the West *keroyokan* is most closely associated with vigilante violence, in which a local group opts to impose justice by mobbing an alleged criminal. The terms *keroyokan* and vigilantism are treated separately in the body of the paper. The analysis will show that in Indonesia *keroyokan* – literally in Javanese the “ripping apart of people” – is broader than the Western narrow interpretation of vigilantism, which involves retribution for alleged criminal or deviant behavior, and takes on different forms often quite distinct from the Western definition of vigilantism. The variations in the forms of violence are developed below.

The causes of *keroyokan* vary considerably, across time and regions within Indonesia. Prominent reporting of *keroyokan* since 1998 has fostered the perception that the 1997/1998 economic crisis or *krismon* and the subsequent 1988 democratic transition have paved the way for more frequent cases of mob violence. The lynchpin in this interpretation is an increased level of crime, exacerbated by worsening economic conditions and a relaxation of political control in the post-New Order period. The calls of “*maling, maling*” or “thief, thief” followed by the beating, and, at times, burning, of alleged criminals has apparently become more common, as new words such as “*dimassa*” (mobbed to death) or “*disataykan*” (skewered like satay) have become part of the everyday Indonesian vocabulary, especially noticeable in the tabloids in 2001. Some go as far to blame *keroyokan* on “too much democracy.” This analysis suggests that the underlying causes of *keroyokan* are both local and national, and have less to do with the transformational crises of 1997-1998 than the subsequent political changes and underlying local conditions in communities. Ultimately, an understanding of *keroyokan* must be locally rooted.

This paper examines the frequency of *keroyokan* in Indonesia and traces the relationship between *keroyokan* and the political and economic changes since 1995. The evidence suggests that, while serious problems remain, particularly in the economy, changes in economic conditions and democratization *do not* directly correspond to levels of this form of violence. Rather, local factors – patterns of reporting on crime in different communities, historical practices of violence in specific areas and local intervention by elites -- and a weakness of state capacity at the national level, notably in the police and judiciary, and at the local level, exacerbated by the decentralization process that began in 1999, best explain the persistence of *keroyokan*. Due to space limitations, attention will



only center on two of locally-rooted the causes – decentralization and local patterns of violence. Using data collected in West Java (including Jakarta) and a preliminary analysis of findings from three additional provinces in Indonesia – Bali, Bengkulu and South Kalimantan – tracing levels of *keroyokan* from 1995 through 2004 – this paper shows that analyses of the *massa* or mobs provide rich insight to the persistence of “ordinary” violence across Indonesia. Understanding violence at the local level is especially important as the predominant pattern of violence post-1998 is changing from vertical state-induced to horizontal society-society violence.

Understanding *Keroyokan*: Spatial and Regional Variation

This paper is part of a study that has focused on four questions – how often is *keroyokan* occurring, what forms does the violence take, why is it occurring and, more importantly, what can be done to prevent it. The research is ongoing, and this paper represents an preliminary analysis of findings. The final project will cover a total of four provinces from 1995 through 2004 and include an assessment of areas within the provinces studied where and why *keroyokan* has not emerged. This paper focuses on the first three questions, the level and forms of *keroyokan* violence and its causes, drawing from the data in the four provinces.

Drawn to the subject of vigilantism by the accidental witnessing of a decapitation in a coastal town in Banten in 1999 (Welsh 2002), the first challenge was to compile a data set that would capture the frequency of *keroyokan*. This challenge was especially difficult, since many cases of *keroyokan* often go unreported, especially those in rural areas. Although the research focus was on the period of the democratic transition (post-1998), the analysis began in 1995 in order to examine whether levels of *keroyokan* corresponded to the democratic transition and subsequent democratization process. Faced with the challenge of poor records and confidentiality questions, three different data sets were compiled. The first, and most complete, (which forms the basis of the analysis that follows), was gleaned from local newspaper accounts.¹ The plethora of newspapers that emerged after 1998 facilitated the accounting process. The focus was on local crime reporting, especially in the tabloids, since this medium provided the most complete, albeit sensationalized, local coverage.² Due to the fact that many of these newspapers fail to keep issues past a few years and most are not computerized, these records have gaps that go well beyond the oversights of painstaking scans over daily issues. As such, the numbers below should be interpreted as indicators of trends rather than with definitive accuracy.

¹ The West Java (including Jakarta) data is derived from *Kompas* (1997-2004), *Pos Kota* (1997-2004), *Pikiran Rakyat* (1997-June 2004), *Radar Bogor* (2000-2004), and *Radar Cirebon* (2000-May 2004). The South Kalimantan data is gathered from the *Banjarmasin Post* from 1995 through July 2003. The Bali data is derived from three newspapers, *Bali Post* (1995-2004), *Nusa Post* (1995-2004) and *Denpasar Post* (2000-2003). Only two of these are “tabloids” – *Pos Kota* and *Nusa Post*.

² The accuracy of these papers are at times questionable, yet the base their reports on actual facts and sensationalize the reports rather than construct fabricated reports. This conclusion was reached after my research team tested a series of the reports as part of our in-depth interviews of cases in different provinces.



A second set of numbers was gathered from the police, who were forthcoming in providing available data in a number of areas studied,³ while the third set was collected from morgue data.⁴ Both of these sets are extremely spotty, and not used below due to the inconsistency in the records. The main obstacle in the classification of deaths involves the erratic and varied classification of killings, mainly caused by varied recording at the local levels.⁵ Both sets of records do not include a separate classification for *keroyokan* deaths. In most locales, *keroyokan* deaths were recorded under “other” murders, which did allow for a clear marker of incidents. It was not until 1999 that some local police stations in West Java began classifying *keroyokan* separately. They remain separately classified in Bali. Similarly, the Jakarta hospital introduced the new category in 2000, while Denpasar classifies the deaths as “murders” based on the medically diagnosed cause of death. The lack of consistent categorization permeates the police and morgue data in all four provinces. Compounding this shortcoming, there is the problem of completeness. In some parts of Java, many of the bodies “found on the side of the road” were admittedly not even recorded in police records, especially those involving charred remains.⁶ The most condemning shortcoming of police data, however, comes from the newspaper accounts that show that the police apparently were not involved in many reported cases. In West Java, for example, an estimated third of the cases were not reported to the police; the incidents either were too far away from the police station or police officers were not inclined to intervene in what some officers referred to as a “local affair.”⁷ Morgue data faces a similar problem, in that the distance to the morgue often prevented the transfer of remains and many bodies were buried locally. Thus, the analysis below draws from the newspaper accounts, with all of its shortcomings.

The data sets were complimented with interviews focusing on specific incidents and in selected areas. Incidents were selected based on variation and the areas were chosen based on the frequency of *keroyokan* cases. The aim was to compare the newspaper reports with accounts of at least two of the actors associated with an incident, namely the police officer, village leaders, mob participants and families of the victim. These interviews provided insight into the different causes of *keroyokan*. Here too, there were shortcomings, especially with regard to cases during the New Order period in which witnesses often do not recall the exact details of the incident, or have constructed a new version to explain the event, which often does not mesh with the specific details in the case in other accounts. Parallel “truths” of accounts coexist. Despite these methodological problems, the combination of newspaper accounts and interviews provide a rich background to assess *keroyokan*.

Local newspapers in the four provinces paint a disturbing picture of the frequency of vigilante killings. Newspaper accounts, detailed in Table 1, record 4,037 incidents

³ The police were most cooperative in West Java and Bali, where officers provided local data and insight into the history of specifics of individual cases of *keroyokan*.

⁴ Special thanks to Adrianus Meliala whose intervention provided access and solicited cooperation.

⁵ Police stations in West Java were provided a large supply of computers in 2001, and the Bali police increased their computer equipment in 2002.

⁶ Police Interview, Tangerang, August 2002.

⁷ Police Interviews, Bandung, Sumber and Majalengka, August, 2002



involving 5,506 victims, from 1995 through 2004.⁸ The data is from a small cross section of Indonesia, so the national figure is much higher. This is particularly significant since the four provinces were selected because they were seen as less violent than others, such as Central Kalimantan or East Java. Other research suggests similar, even higher, levels of vigilantism, in other parts of the country (Madden and Barron 2003).

Graph 1 traces the number of incidents and victims in the four provinces over time and shows that the combined number of incidents/victims increased sharply in 2001 and has decreased since then. Yet, both the number of incidents and victims has increased since 1999, compared to the New Order period. The data set for 2002 and 2004 needs to be further reviewed, however, so one should not see the numbers as definitive, but indicative of a trend. The highpoint date of 2001 is important, however, since it conflicts with our understanding of 1997/1998 as a critical turning point in the pattern of *keroyokan*.

Table 1: Overview *Keroyokan*: West Java, Bali, Bengkulu and South Kalimantan

1995	214	282
1996	126	168
1997	204	318
1998	191	416
1999	270	439
2000	564	795
2001	781	1007
2002	539	688
2003	566	692
2004	582	701

⁸ The data set needs one more final cleaning of the data, especially of the numbers from 2002 through 2004 in South Kalimantan and Bengkulu.



Graph 1: Keroyokan in Selected Indonesian Provinces, 1995-2004

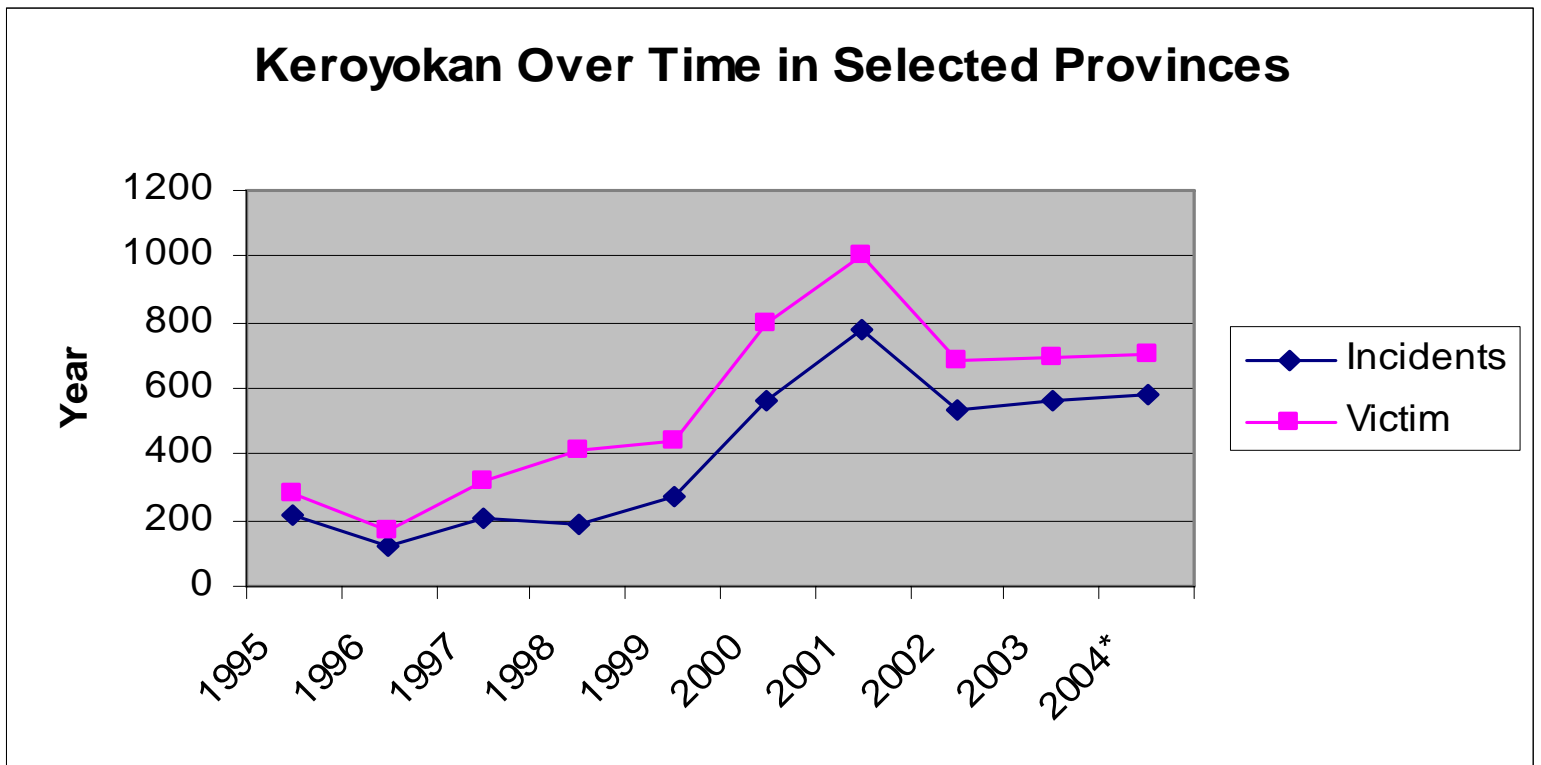



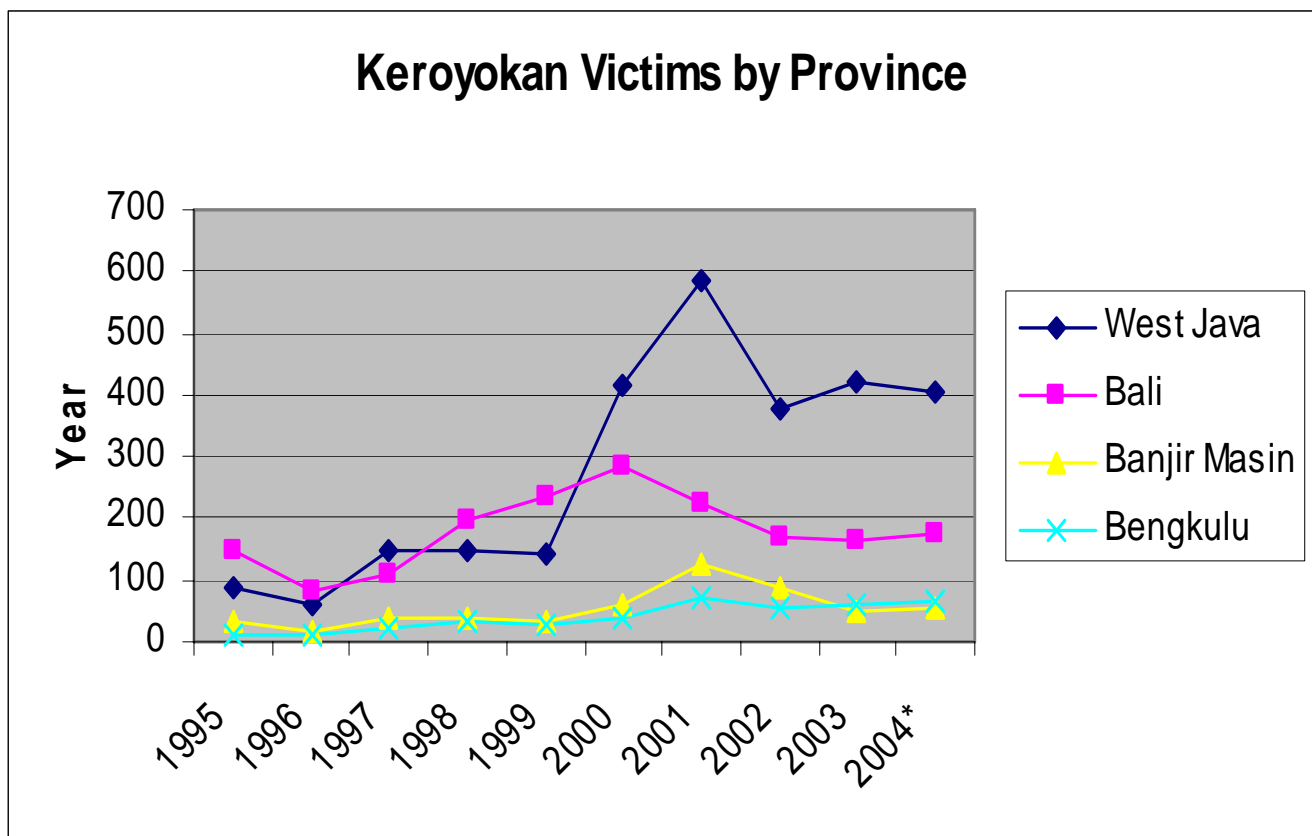
Table 2: Keroyokan in Specific Selected Provinces

Province	Cases	Victims	Burning
West Java	2,118	2,797	96
Bali	1,206	1,782	6
Bengkulu	314	391	7
South Kalimantan	399	536	12  6

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Table 2 above and Graph 2 below outline the pattern of *keroyokan* in the four provinces studied and show that the levels of *keroyokan* vary considerably over the four provinces studied. West Java, with a higher population, not surprisingly has the highest number of cases, while Bali reports the highest number of incidents per capita. South Kalimantan and Bengkulu report lower frequency of incidents, with the smallest province of Bengkulu the fewest. The pattern of the frequency of *keroyokan* in three of the specific provinces – West Java, South Kalimantan and Bengkulu, corresponds to the pattern of the four provinces as a whole, reporting the highest frequency of cases in 2001. In South Kalimantan and Bengkulu the increase is less sharp than in West Java. Bali does not follow the broader pattern, with the most cases in 1999. This difference suggests the need to acknowledge local conditions in shaping patterns.

Graph 2: *Keroyokan* Incidents by Province over Time



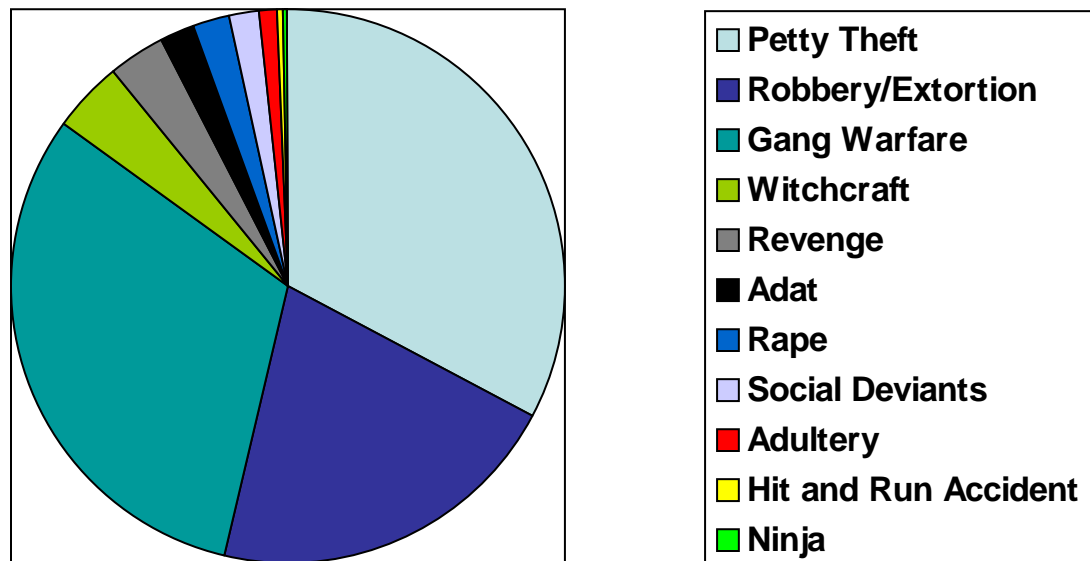
Regional variation is even more pronounced within provinces. In Bali, for example, the cases of *keroyokan* are concentrated in specific areas – Denpasar, Kerangasam and Gianyar, while the regions of Jembrana, Tabanan and Singaraja show considerably lower levels. A similar pattern is evident in West Java, where cases are concentrated in Jakarta and Tangerang, with fewer cases in the urban areas of Bandung or Bogor. Patterns over



time suggest a concentration of incidents that can be observed at the village or locality level within districts. Cases of *keroyokan* are common in a particular markets, such as Baimbai Market in Banjarmasin, in locations where there is a high traffic of gangsters such as the bus terminal in Denpasar, or in specific villages that repeat cycles of violence such as in Indramayu that involve *keroyokan*. Regional variation is a critical dimension of understanding *keroyokan* and ultimately understanding the factors that contribute to its prominence in some areas and not others.

Understanding *Keroyokan*: Variation in Form

Keroyokan also varies considerably in form and should be understood to be an umbrella that includes a diverse set of social phenomenon and types of violence. Although the ritual is similar in that the three core elements – *massa*, violent entrepreneur(s) and victim(s) – remain consistent, the catalysts, social networks and coordination associated with different incidents, level of brutality, targets and ultimately the social legitimation of the incidents differ.



The catalyst variation is straightforward. The majority of cases involve crime, yet the specific type of crime differs from petty theft (48%), hit and run accidents (0.5%) and robbery/extortion/drug pushing (21%) to rape (3%), inter-gang warfare (9%) and ninja killings (0.5). The overwhelming cases of *keroyokan* involve alleged crimes, thus the close association with vigilantism. Yet, many of the catalysts are interpersonal conflicts, such as revenge over alleged adultery (1.5%), shaming or conflict over land and/or water rights (5%). The revenge motive lies at the heart of many incidents, especially in rural areas. Others involve the behavior of the alleged victim deemed not to conform to the norms of local behavior, whether a drunkard, mentally ill or mentally handicapped (2.5%), or poorly practiced witchcraft (6%), usually involving alleged harm inflicted on



others. Finally, some cases are tied to local custom or adat and are carried out on the bases of a community decision for violating local norms. These adat cases are found in specific regions, such as Bali or South Kalimantan. The variation by catalyst is graphically described in the pie chart above.

The second factor that differentiates *keroyokan* is the *level of premeditation*. This captures the depth of social networks and level of coordination that is involved in carrying out an incident. The image of “amok” has falsely created the impression that *keroyokan* is always spontaneous. Many of the cases, especially those involving established personal relationships are systematically planned. The timing of the event, the rumors that are placed to discredit the victim and the coordination among the violent entrepreneurs require systematized organization and coordination. I distinguish between three levels of premeditation, (low, medium and high), which ranges from spontaneous responses to extensive organization over a minimum of days, and, at times, months. Incidents involving witchcraft, for example, are systematically premeditated, while cases of hit and run accidents are more reactive, more spontaneous reactions of witnesses to the accident. These differences are outlined in Table 4 below.

Equally significant is the *level of brutality*. On the surface it may be difficult to distinguish between the physical beating of a person and burning the helpless victim alive. Here too, there are subtle, but important, distinctions. In some cases, labeled “medium”, such as petty theft and hit-and-run accidents, the aim is to punish, not necessarily to kill. This is not to say that killing does not take place in these types of cases, but rather the intentionality is not as defined upfront. This is differentiated from “high” where participants aim to kill from the onset. There are two outliers that reach even greater levels of pain infliction, the witchcraft and ninja cases, labeled “very high.” In these types of cases the level of torture and physical bloodshed is considerable. In one victim in a Bogor morgue in August 2002 the level of pain inflicted on a victim was considerable; the decapitated body had the legs chopped off and no less than one hundred slashes all over the corpse. The autopsy revealed that most of the slashes had occurred while the victim was alive. The head was burned, but the skull showed that it had been cracked open earlier while the victim was conscious. The autopsy report estimated that the victim had been tortured for over three hours before he died. Ninja killings follow a similar pattern, although the level of premeditation is much lower. What appears to be occurring in these cases is increased brutality in order to exorcise spirits from these witches or ninjas.

A fourth difference in *keroyokan* is the target, the victim. In almost all the forms of *keroyokan* the victims are male, usually from the ages of 20-35. The average age of the victim in the 4,037 cases studied was 24. The only exception of cases involving women were witchcraft cases, which also varied in the age, usually older victims. In most forms of *keroyokan* the victim is known to the *massa*, an insider. Yet the high cases of petty theft, which usually target outsiders, not known to the *massa*, result in the majority of victims in the cases studied to be outsiders. The differences are also outlined in Table 4.



Table 4: Types of *Keroyokan*

<i>Catalyst</i>	<i>Premeditation (Coordination)</i>	<i>Brutality (Intensity)</i>	<i>Target (Social Relationships)</i>	<i>Social Legitimation</i>
Hit and Run Accidents	Low	Medium/High	Male Outsider	Community Justice
Petty Theft	Low	Medium/High	Male Outsider/Insider	Community Justice
Ninja Killing	Medium	Very High	Male Claimed "outsider"	Assault/Murder
“Serious Crime”: Extortion/ Robbery/Drugs	Medium	Medium/High	Male Outsider/Insider	Community Justice
Rape/Sexual Assault	Medium	Medium/High	Male Insider/Outsider	Community Justice
Revenge over Property (Land) /Face/Adultery)	High/Medium	High/Medium	Male Insider	Assault/Murder
“Deviant” Removal	High	High	Male Insider	Assault/Murder
Gang Warfare	Medium/High	High	Male Insider	Assault/Murder
Witchcraft	High	Very High	Male/Female Insider	Assault/Murder
Adat	High	High	Male Insider	Community Justice

The social legitimation of the different forms of *keroyokan* also varies and has important implications for repeated patterns of violence in a community. Incidents involving social deviants, witches, gang members and alleged ninjas are held to be assault or murder, depending on the level of harm inflicted and often trigger a vicious cycle of violence in a community. Incidents involving adat, petty theft, robbery/extortion and rape are deemed to be the decision of the community as a whole and often do not provoke responses from the deceased victim’s family members. Interviews with family members of victims in over thirty cases reveal a consistent response to broad imposed justice, although the cases of victims involved in petty theft are resented strongly. Most family members hold the view that the punishment imposed for petty theft– beating, death or burning – does not justify the crime of stealing goods less than the value of an motorcycle or *ojek*.



The distinctions in the form of *keroyokan* are best illustrated through examples drawn from the newspaper data set and interviews.

Hit-and-Run Accident: Yanto was caught driving his car recklessly in the village of Tanjakan Pamaruyan in Sukabumi on August 19, 2000. He hit the local mosque and a house before his car careened into a ditch. Residents captured him as he ran away and beat him. They turned him over to local leaders.

Premeditation: Low, Brutality: Medium, Target: Outsider, Legitimation: Community Justice

Petty Theft: In June 21, 2000 Mahman Suherman, 19, was caught stealing clothes to sell to purchase food while he was visiting his cousin in the village of Cisaat in Cianjur. Villagers caught him red-handed and beat him up before turning him over to the police. *Premeditation: Low, Brutality: Medium, Target: Outsider, Legitimation: Community Justice*

Ninja Killing: On November 12, 1998 two men, Adam Damyati and Sukarno, were killed after visiting a religious leader in the village of Kampung Kebun Tiwuh in Cianjur. Both men were outsiders, visiting a friend and apparently seeking religious guidance. The rumor of “ninjas” in the community quickly spread. A crowd, carrying sharp instruments and wooden sticks, rapidly gathered outside of the religious leader’s house. The religious leader came out and tried to calm the growing mob and continued to insist that the men were innocent. The crowd refused to believe him and claimed that they were trying to kill the religious leader. They surged into the house in search of the two suspected “ninjas” who at this point were hiding under a bed. Ransacking the poor religious leader’s house in the process, they dragged the men outside and beat Adam and Sukarno to death. In the process they cut their genitalia and severed all of their fingers, as well as slashed their bodies. *Premeditation: Low, Brutality: Very High, Target: Outsider, Legitimation: Murder*

“Serious Crime:” Extortion/Robbery/Drug Pushing: Ro, a local *preman* in Jagasatru Market in Cirebon, was caught extorting money from passengers in a bus in Cirebon on February 2, 2002. When the bus stopped at the market and he walked away, passengers gathered to complain about Ro’s behavior and slowly a crowd gathered to inflict his punishment, beating him repeatedly. The police intervened and he was incarcerated. *Premeditation: Medium, Brutality: Medium, Target: Insider/Outsider, Social Legitimation: Community Justice*

Rape/Sexual Assault: On August 21, 1998 in the village of Gabus Kulon in Indramayu DK a local *dukun* (witch doctor) was paraded around the village naked before he was beaten up by a mob. Apparently DK, a primary school teacher, had been sexually molesting his patients, a majority of them women, including teenage girls. The residents decided to spy on him, and caught him in the act. Thus began the naked parade and subsequent beating. DK was turned over to the



police. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: Medium, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Community Justice*

Revenge over Property/Face Loss: In Cileungsi in southern West Java MK a battery factory worker was attacked and murdered by a mob. Apparently the residents of this village had been complaining about the dumping of chemicals by the factory and decided to get revenge on the company by attacking its headquarters. MK became the representative of the company. He was stripped naked and beaten as the residents burned the security outpost, destroyed three cars and ransacked the office on July 28, 2000. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: High, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Assault*

Deviant Removal: In Kampung Baru in East Jakarta an unidentified boy was “sentenced by the crowd” as they beat him unconscious for throwing stones at a few houses on December 16, 1997. He had been a regular “pest.” The boy stuttered and shown symptoms of being retarded. He was left for dead before other residents who did not participate in the crowd took him to the hospital where he recovered although he shows signs of permanent brain damage from the beating. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: High, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Assault*

Adultery: In the village of Gambut outside of Banjarmasin Lidya and Hip were caught by residents in a compromising situation, coming out of a rented room in the housing district of Pankaria in December 29, 1998. Residents had been watching the couple for weeks. Residents angry at this extra-marital activity mobbed and beat the male Hip before taking him to the police, shaming him and publicly humiliated him for violating his marital oath. Both Lidya and Hip were taken into custody for questioning. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: Medium, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Assault*

Gang Warfare: In Central Jakarta in the wee hours of the morning of January 2002 a small group of men killed a relative of a military officer outside of the National Parliament. At first glance, the beating that led to the death of the 24 year old appeared to be the actions of a group of vendors removing an irritant that regularly harassed and extorted funds. Later investigation showed that the men in the mob, a group of rival *preman*, had waited for their opportunity to strike. The victim was traveling alone, without his usual friends (fellow rival gang members) and drunk, a perfect target. The victim, whose name is kept confidential due to the continued sensitivity of the case, died after he was systematically beaten and “marked” in a message over territory. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: High, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Murder*

Witchcraft: In August 24, 2001 in the village of Cimanggu Dua south of Bogor a forty-five year old man known as Saprudin was killed after he was accused of “*dukun santet*” or black magic. Apparently the rumors began weeks before his death. He was beaten, slashed and beheaded. Mob participants played a game of



soccer with his head. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: Very high, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Murder*

Adat: On November 3, 2001 hundreds of armed men burned four home-store buildings in the area of Petang near Denpasar and mobbed the owner, Suka, systematically beating and slashing him. The burning was deemed caused by a reluctance of the shop owner Suka to observe customary law, namely contribute to the temples and meet his social obligations. *Premeditation: High, Brutality: High, Target: Insider, Social Legitimation: Community Justice*

These examples, only a handful of the thousands of cases reported and examined, show that *keroyokan* varies considerably and how it is perceived in local communities also varies, with certain forms triggering other forms of violent retribution.

Causes of *Keroyokan*

The variation over time, space and form suggest the need for a nuanced understanding of the causes of *keroyokan*. Space considerations do not allow for an in-depth discussion on all the competing causes of *keroyokan* at the national and local level. Rather than systematically review each potential cause, the discussion below highlights three of the mistaken interpretations of the causes of *keroyokan* and draws attention to two of the most salient national and local factors that underlie these forms of violence.

At the national level, the focus has been on the political transition of 1998. Regime transitions are seen as potential moments of violence because of high levels of uncertainty. The uncertainty fosters anxiety, and disrupts ordinary routines, creating circumstances where a community may opt for the use of violence to resolve a dispute due to its greater finality over alternative methods. Most saliently, the uncertainty provides an opportunity to carry out a revenge attack, especially against those who were stakeholders in the previous regime. The attacks against the Chinese in Jakarta and other cities in May 1998 were viewed as punishment for their support of the Suharto government. The centrality of revenge during transitions was perhaps best described by Indonesia's leading writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer in the short story "Dendam" or "Revenge" (Anderson, 1989). The story narrator witnesses a mob interrogate and kill a Dutch spy in the transition year of 1945, leaving the pieces of his body for the dogs. Describing the actions as "justice of drunken men" Pramoedya shows that mob killings occur during periods of "opportunity", at moments where the potential unexpected can happen with greater impunity.

Regime transitions also create a power vacuum that increases competition among contenders for power. The power vacuum provides an opportunity for new stakeholders to assert their power, while at the same time raising the stakes of the competition. Due to its relative anonymity, *keroyokan* provides a means for groups to remove competitors. Within Indonesia regime transitions are historically held to be especially turbulent periods because the competition is seen as zero-sum, winner takes all. Part of this is the cultural perception of power. According to Benedict Anderson (1970), power in the



Javanese context is seen as a zero-sum contest, where power is contained within the power holder rather than practiced. The leader possesses power, often tied to charisma and other spiritual qualities, and thus must remove contenders who threaten his or her possession. Consequently, the competition is fierce, often violent. The zero-sum nature of the competition goes beyond cultural explanations, however, and is tied to the central role that the state plays in everyday life of Indonesians. Control of the state serves as the means to protect positions in society, since it is the engine for patronage. The widespread use of state patronage solidifies alliances between elites and ordinary citizens. From Jakarta to the countryside, regime transitions potentially threaten the survival of groups that are highly depended on the distribution of state coffers. The critical role that the center plays in distributing funds adds to the level of competition. The end result is higher expected levels of violence, of which *keroyokan* is the most common form manifested in local communities.

The data shows that the 1998 regime transition did not lead to higher levels of *keroyokan* in any of the four provinces, as Table 1 and Graph 1 showed above. In all of the provinces, violence was higher in 1997 than in 1998, and although it increased between 1998 and 1999 in West Java and Bali, it decreased in 1999 in South Kalimantan and Bengkulu. A closer look at the monthly number of incidents in three of the provinces that experienced the most cases in the year 1998, illustrated in Graph 4 below, shows that the critical months, May and June, actually experienced a slight drop in cases overall during these months, with a higher number of cases later in the year, well after the transition of power. Table 5 lists the actual number of incidents and shows the number of incidents in October and November were more than double of those that occurred in May and June. The regime transition itself did not see a sharp increase in *keroyokan*.

Graph 4: Keroyokan Incidents in 1998 by Month in Selected Provinces



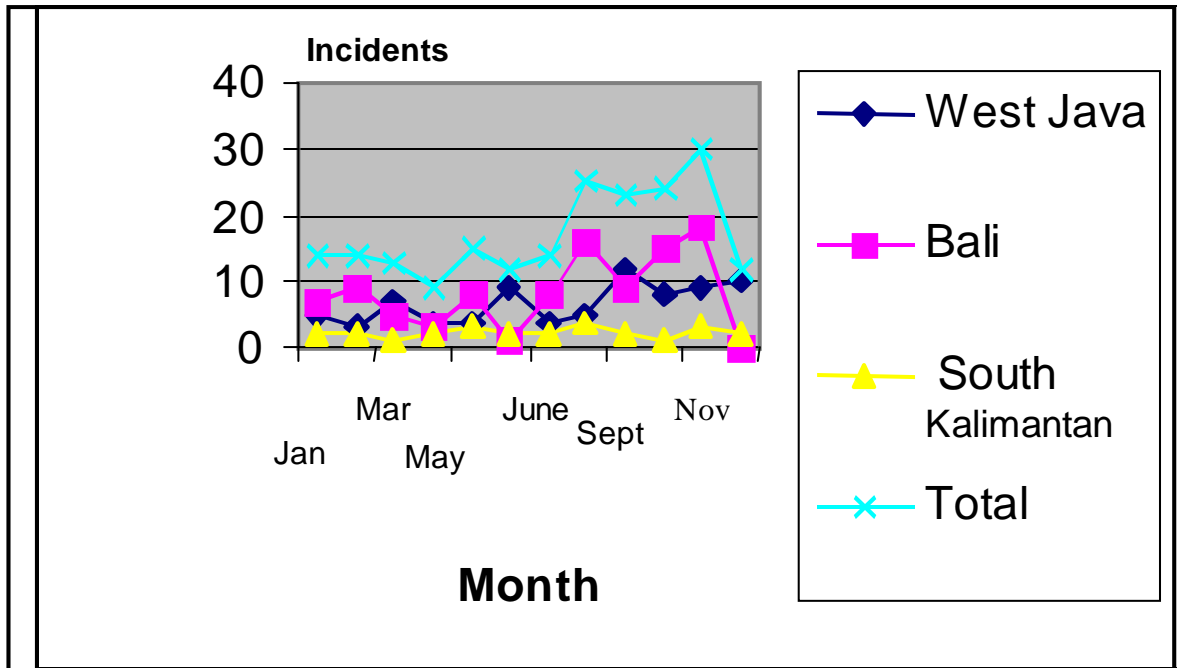


Table 5: Keroyokan Incidents by Province in 1998⁹

Date	West Java	Bali	South Kalimantan	Total
Jan-98	5	7	2	14
Feb-98	3	9	2	14
Mar-98	7	5	1	13
Apr-98	4	3	2	9
May-98	4	8	3	15
Jun-98	9	1	2	12
Jul-98	4	8	2	14
Aug-98	5	16	4	25
Sep-98	12	9	2	23
Oct-98	8	15	1	24
Nov-98	9	18	3	30
Dec-98	10	0	2	12

The democratization process, as opposed to the transition itself, is also often mistakenly associated with *keroyokan* in Indonesia. Critics of democracy in Indonesia, especially among the security forces, suggest that greater democracy has given the people too much freedom, and thus ordinary feel empowered to take power into their own hands through *keroyokan*. The argument builds on the assumption that the authoritarian rule of the New Order provided more security, in essence kept citizens in check due to fear of state reprisals, and that the more open democratic regime unleashed greater potential for violence in citizens who no longer were subjected to the same level of control.

⁹ The data for this table is gathered from six newspapers whose records are the most comprehensive for 1998: *Kompas*, *Pos Kota*, *Pikiran Rakyat*, *Banjarmasin Post*, *Bali Post* and the *Nusa Post*.



To date, the relative success in achieving each of these – extension of rights, greater channels for non-violent claims and more parties for conflict intervention – is mixed. Although democratic practices are clearly more robust than the New Order period, there are shortcomings in the process, particularly in the protection of rights and actors invested in non-violent dispute resolution. Human security, for example, remains a serious concern, as many feel that rights are not assured.

The relationship between *keroyokan* and democratization is more complex than this broad generalization. On the surface the numbers do not support this assertion. The changes over time in all four of the provinces and the consistent decrease in *keroyokan* since 2001, at a time when democratization expanded in Indonesia, suggests that democratization per se did not shape practices.

Another myth associated with *keroyokan* has been tied to economic conditions. *Keroyokan* is seen as the result of the *krismon*, or economic crisis that began in 1997 and led to a massive deterioration in the economy and rise in poverty in 1998, especially in Java and urban areas. The argument rests on the assumption that difficult economic conditions encourage violence; they are seen to increase crime, simultaneously reduce tolerance for crime and increase competition for resources at the local level, all of which are held to lead to more frequent cases of *keroyokan*. On the surface, economic conditions did not play a decisive role in increasing the numbers of cases. A closer look at the different forms of *keroyokan*, however, suggest an increase in the proportion of petty theft cases since 1997 as a share of the overall cases. This was especially prominent in 2000 and 2001, where petty theft accounted for an overwhelming majority of the *keroyokan* incidents. While the economic crisis as a whole was not a determinant of patterns, economic conditions did increase a specific form of *keroyokan*.

Since the regime transition, democratization and economic crisis cannot account for the levels of *keroyokan* as a whole, the main causes of *keroyokan* rest elsewhere. The two most prominent causes emerging are the decentralization process and local historical patterns of violence in communities. The gradual increase of *keroyokan* cases, and the 2001 highpoint in incidents culminating with the implementation of decentralization suggests that the weakening of state institutions at the local level was instrumental in influencing patterns of local violence. A vacuum at the local level of power, rather than at the national level, provided insight into rise in *keroyokan*, supported by interviews in the provinces. Police officers, in particular, identify the inability to consistently maintain order during the expansion of their control over areas in local communities and conflict over jurisdiction of issues between the army and police, especially in more remote areas such as South Kalimantan. Decentralization of authority at the local level also involved the absence of local leaders for conflict resolution, creating a context for conflict to be resolved through alternative means. What is important here is the synergy between local and national conditions. National policy changed local structures of authority and conflict resolution, creating space for greater local violence, a resulting 2001 rise in *keroyokan* incidents. As local leaders and police asserted their authority, the number of incidents reduced. The variation in how decentralization occurred in local communities across



Indonesia, provides insight into why in some areas where the local power vacuum was not as significant, such as Bali, *keroyokan* did not rise sharply, while in others such as South Kalimantan, it proved significant.

Practices of *keroyokan* in local areas, however, must also be understood within a local paradigm, as opposed to national causes. The regional variation in the form and frequency of *keroyokan* noted above is the result of established patterns of violence. These historic patterns can take the common use of a specific form of *keroyokan*, such as witchcraft in southern West Java or adat in eastern Bali, or the location of conflict, such as ongoing land struggles among villagers and territorial disputes among gangs. Local learning and legitimation of violence plays a critical role in explaining why *keroyokan* occurs in certain forms in some areas and not others and in higher frequency in some areas and not others. Local leader legitimation of these forms and incidents as a legitimate form of conflict resolution supports historic patterns, allowing *keroyokan* to persist. Importantly, local conditions and leaders have a critical role in shaping whether *keroyokan* will occur and what form it will take in specific communities.

Conclusion

By drawing attention to the variation over time, space and form of *keroyokan*, this paper shows that a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon is essential for minimizing this form of local violence in the future. *Keroyokan* has persisted for a local time in Indonesia and its prominence has increased as horizontal violence has become more common than state induced conflict. By recognizing the critical role that local conditions play in shaping this phenomenon and moving away from broad generalization regarding the 1998 transition, subsequent democratization and 1997 economic crisis, a richer understanding of the practice of *keroyokan* can be attained. This paper aimed to set the framework of the variation and identified two of the important local conditions affecting *keroyokan*. Further research and more careful illustration of local case studies in future work will enrich this discussion further.

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