Prior to the onset of communal violence in December 1998, Poso district had no immediate history of unrest. Throughout the 32 years of authoritarian rule under Suharto’s New Order regime, the area had remained a sleepy rural district in an unremarkable outer island province. Only the middle-aged or more elderly among the district’s then 420,000 residents would have remembered the predations of two regional rebellions in the 1950s, the hardships of Japanese occupation, or earlier battles against the Dutch (Schrauwers 2000). Yet as was to become abundantly clear, there were a number of characteristics of Poso’s local economy and social structure that made the district unusually vulnerable to the occurrence of communal violence, albeit under specific circumstances. As scholars have subsequently identified, Poso shared these traits with the other four locations at which large-scale communal violence took place during Indonesia’s democratic transition.

This chapter outlines this current scholarly consensus on the common enabling context of the post-authoritarian episodes of large-scale communal violence. As mentioned in the introduction, three single author works have contributed the most to identifying this context (Bertrand 2004; Sidel 2006; van Klinken 2007). In particular, I will set out how this shared context manifested in Poso district itself. The enabling context for violent conflict may appear a curious starting point for this book, given my overall focus on the dynamics of violence. But although the reasons for the onset of violence do not explain the nature of its subsequent specific manifestation, the enabling context nevertheless remains an important part of a comprehensive history of the conflict.

There are two levels to the enabling context for Indonesia’s post-authoritarian conflicts: the overall national context on the one hand, and the particularities of the sites of violence on the other. The central feature of the national context was the democratic transition itself, in particular the climate of uncertainty that prevailed following Suharto’s May 1998 resignation. Groups that had enjoyed privileged access to power and resources under Suharto worried at how they might maintain their advantage; others sought to advance their own position (Bertrand 2004; Sidel 2006; van Klinken 2007).
The uncertainty of transition was experienced everywhere, whereas large-scale communal violence took place in five specific sites. Evidently then, the second level of context—local particularities—also mattered. In general terms, these particularities were a local economy unusually reliant on state resources, in a location with a relatively even religious demographic. Sidel (2006) quantifies the religious dimension of such vulnerability, observing that each of the sites of religious violence fell within the range of a 30–85 per cent Muslim population. (According to the 2000 census, Indonesia’s overall population was 88 per cent Muslim and 9 per cent Christian.) This admittedly broad range is significant because it indicates the presence of a significant religious minority. The economic features of this context, on the other hand, have been most specifically articulated by van Klinken (2007), who proposes a vulnerability index derived from provincial workforce statistics. His index multiplies the rate of recent deagrarianization by the percentage of the non-agricultural population employed as civil servants, with a higher figure for either thus suggesting greater vulnerability. The index attributes high vulnerability to each of the five sites where large-scale communal violence occurred, but also produces several false positives—highly-ranked provinces that did not experience violent conflict. None of these false positive provinces fall within the range of religious composition Sidel proposes, however. In combination, therefore, the two factors correspond precisely to the five provinces where violence took place (Davidson 2009).

The national and local-level elements of this enabling context are outlined below.

An Uncertain National Transition

When President Suharto was forced to resign in May 1998 in the face of escalating popular protests, few of the dictator’s closest associates went with him. In a televised address announcing his departure, Suharto handed power to his trusted protege, Vice President B.J. Habibie. Habibie was next in line for the presidency under the Indonesian constitution, but few protestors would have considered him to be markedly more democratic in outlook than Suharto. Nevertheless, his ascension to the presidency split the protest movement. Some remained implacably opposed to Habibie as a New Order holdover. With no obvious alternative candidate, however, many preferred to give the newly installed president a chance. With the authoritarian era parliament still in place and Habibie as