Local politics in West Kalimantan have assumed a strong ethnic colouring since the end of the New Order. Some of this has been conflictual, such as the violence in 1997 and 1999. Since the mid-1990s rifts have developed between the two biggest ethnic groups, Dayaks and Malays, over strategic appointments. Tension over political appointments aggravated after the end of the New Order, involving mass mobilization and sometimes violence. However, ethnicity also functions in quite peaceful ways in West Kalimantan, particularly after 2000. Indeed it can be argued that the politics of ethnic ‘power-sharing’ now widely adopted at the district level has successfully pulled the sting of the violence and prevented a recurrence of the episodes of 1997 and 1999.

This chapter describes the rise of ethnic identity politics in West Kalimantan and asks to what extent they also offer possibilities of civility (as well as the much better known possibilities of violence). It begins by introducing the ethnic politics of Dayaks and Malays prior to the 1998 reform (Reformasi). Ethnic politics here refers mainly to the politics played or led by ethnic elites to secure greater representation in the executive and legislative branches. The first two sections show that the Dayak political resurgence after 1998 was not an instantaneous movement, but a reaction to a history of repression dating back to the colonial period. The third section discusses how the authoritarian New Order regime retarded local politics and hampered discussion of ethnicity, and the unintended effects of this policy. The last sections discuss how the 1998 reform led to a resurgence of ethnic politics.

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