Dewi Anggraeni


In May 1998 Jakarta experienced a series of disturbances that stirred the country’s social and political landscape. The student movement on 12 May, killing four university students (later known as Kerusuhan Semanggi or the Semanggi tragedy), marked the beginning of the reform movement. In the following days (13–15 May) the people in Jakarta, Solo, and Medan were shocked by riots attacking Chinese Indonesians. The student movement in Jakarta, demanding government reform and combating corruption, brought down President Suharto on 21 May. The fall of Suharto occupied the headlines of the national and international media and overshadowed the anti-Chinese riot that continued weeks after the new President Habibie was inaugurated. Not many Indonesians know what really happened during that period but numerous countries condemned the violence against women of Chinese decent in Jakarta and other cities. The book Tragedi Mei 1998; Lahirnya komnas Perempuan (May 1998 tragedy; The birth of the National Committee on Violence Against Women) published in 2014 reveals the stories that were kept secret for sixteen years.

Dewi Anggraeni interviewed volunteers, professionals, and activists (mostly women) involved in helping the victims of May 1998 violence to recall their observations, experiences, and feelings. They expressed shock, disbelief, fear, anger, confusion, disappointment, helplessness, depression and frustration. The individual observations and experiences during that chaotic period intertwine, and are assembled to form a mosaic of the reality of the May 1998 tragedy. This reality was unfortunately first denied, then disregarded, and finally censored by the authorities and suppressed out of fear by the victims and their families.

The book gives insight into what happened to the middle income Chinese community of Jakarta. They were targeted in the riots which were triggered...
by social jealousy stemming from the perceived special treatment and privileges given to the Chinese business people by Suharto regime. On 13–15 May 1998 many Chinese families in Jakarta’s business center and residence areas were attacked on the streets and at home, their houses burnt and their business/shops looted and torched. Homes of Muslims were spared from the attack. Mobs of men brutally raped, mutilated, and murdered Chinese women (young and old) or left them behind to die. Many gang-raped victims committed suicide because of shame, guilt, or desperation. Casualties of the violence were not limited to the Chinese only. People on the streets (including children) were lured to rob shops and the provocateurs torched the shops. The exact number of casualties among both the Chinese and non-Chinese is unknown as the reports are not documented.

To the dismay of the victims and those who provided support to the victims, the police and the military did not come to rescue them during the three days of violence and in the weeks thereafter. Absence of security forces during these riots raised speculations about the government’s involvement in the riots. Instead of helping, the authorities accused the women NGO’s and professionals helping the victims of fabricating the issues that are not backed up by sufficient evidence—blaming the victim. The survivors and witnesses were too terrified to testify. Many survivors and the families left Jakarta or fled the country. Even the Chiefs of the military and police forces denied the magnitude of the violence that had strong indication of racism. Fortunately there were eye witnesses, professional trauma teams, and other volunteers (women and men) who helped the survivors to recover from the trauma and to regain their dignity and self-confidence. The psychological trauma remained disturbing for the rest of their lives.

The book illustrates the dynamics of the process to obtain official recognition of the May tragedy. Professionals, academicians, NGO’s and volunteers organized themselves to reach the highest authority. Two months after the tragedy President Habibie officially recognized and condemned the violence that destroyed the lives of so many in the Chinese community in Jakarta and other cities, and apologized to the victims and their families. Further, to handle the matter the President established the Komnas Perempuan (the National Committee on Violence Against Women) and assigned a special fact-finding team to make a thorough investigation. The findings of the investigation, however, were not published and up to now no one has been prosecuted.

The book is easy to read, presenting the information without deep analysis from the historical or sociological perspectives. The photographs in the book illustrate some of the actions taken by the volunteers and activists in that period. It is a pity that the reader’s concentration is sometimes interrupted.