

A daring leap of faith

Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia are now getting involved

By **Yenni Kwok** in Jakarta

Pantai Mutiara, a wealthy ethnic Chinese enclave in north Jakarta, still looks like a neighborhood under siege. Two-meter-tall gates barricade street entrances. "People are still afraid," says a security guard, taking shelter from the afternoon sun in his makeshift wooden hut. During the May riots last year anti-Chinese mobs got as close as 100 meters. Afterward, the residents raised money to erect the giant gates.

Rich Chinese still put up barricades, but other ethnic Chinese are starting to leave their enclaves - both literally and figuratively - to participate more fully in their country's politics. For many, it is a daring leap of faith. Art curator Amir Sidharta, 35, never dreamed of getting politically involved. After all, he was more absorbed in painting, sculpture and other fine arts. "I always believed I should be neutral," says Amir (who, like many Chinese, adopted an Indonesian name). But he changed his mind when he was invited to join the National Mandate Party led by prominent Muslim intellectual Amien Rais. "There are so many policies that never get addressed," says Amir.

Toward that end, the Chinese have even formed their own Unity and Diversity Party. It's not doing that well in the ongoing vote count, except in West Kalimantan, where the Chinese have a strong identity. But mostly they back the new national parties because an ethnic-Chinese party would have no clout and because they feel betrayed by the ruling Golkar group. A lot of Chinese-Indonesians are supporting the front-running Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) led by Megawati Sukarnoputri. The party's parliamentary slate even includes an ethnic Chinese candidate, Kwik Kian Gie, Megawati's economic adviser.

For the first time, too, Indonesians are talking openly about race. During Suharto's regime, the topic was taboo. Yet, for months after the riots, newspapers and magazines were awash with articles about ethnic relations. Some Chinese wrote impassioned columns or letters explaining how Indonesian they are or saying that they have as much right to be called

Indonesian as the *pribumis* (indigenous people).

But people are not just talking and writing. Some are taking real action. Motivated by their youth, many Chinese have, besides joining political parties, set up pressure groups. "They're very dynamic," says Arief Budiman, professor of Indonesian at the University of Melbourne.

Ester Jusuf, 28, shot to prominence last year after she and fellow lawyers established Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa (National Solidarity). They have aggressively lobbied the government to pass anti-discrimination laws or brought court cases to seek justice for riot victims. Ester makes common cause with the urban poor, the forgotten victims of the riots. "Racism targeted the Chinese, but in the end everyone was a victim," she says.

Chinese-Indonesian youth have a different attitude from their parents, who mostly went to Chinese schools until Suharto closed them in 1966. The younger generation attends school with other Indonesians and follows the same curriculum, which emphasizes Indonesian nationalism. They are also relatively free from the trauma of 1965-1966, when the government repressed the communists, closely linked with China, and then suppressed almost all manifestations of Chinese culture.

In the late 1980s, some young Chinese began joining other dissidents in underground political activism. Now, because of *reformasi*, they can agitate for change openly. "The will has always been there, but there has never been a channel," says businessman Iwan Tumewa, 35. He and some other friends set up a foundation to give loans and training to small entrepreneurs, both Chinese and pribumis. "In the past, we could have been suspected of trying to curry favor," says Iwan.

The current president, B.J. Habibie, has banned any official use of the words "pribumi" and "non-pribumi." Parliament is also planning to ratify the U.N. anti-discrimination convention. However, the Constitution still retains discriminatory clauses like Article 26, which automatically grants citizenship only to pribumis, while requiring others to be naturalized. It may take years to change such laws and longer to alter deep-seated prejudices. Nevertheless, something is stirring among younger Chinese, who want people to know that they are just as Indonesian as anybody else.

The article was published in Asiaweek (www.asiaweek.com), 16 July 1999.