

(A draft, please do not cite without permission)

Framing Indigenous Community: Media Representation of the Collective Identity of the Pro-Tapanuli Activists in Indonesia¹

By Suzanna Eddyono²

Abstract:

This paper explores how collective identity is framed within the context of the unified national identity in the Post-Suharto Indonesia. The importance of religion and ethnicity as the markers of group boundaries in Indonesia not only colors discussions about what serves as the basic element for the emergence of a nation within a modern and new democratic system, but most importantly how particular groups identities and unified national identity are constructed . Focusing on a local movement demanding the creation of a new province in North Sumatera, Indonesia, this paper discusses how a local media outlet frames collective identity of the movement activists. Applying discourse analyses of newspaper articles published between April 2009 and December 2010, this paper shows that a local newspaper frames the identity of the Pro-Tapanuli activists as an “indigenous community,” while at the same time linking this identity to the unified national identity.

Key words: indigenous community, media representation, and unified national identity

1. Background

The transition from Suharto’s New Order to a more democratic system is marked by local elites’ attempt to express grievances using identity politics (Bertrand 2004; Colombijn 2003; Heffner 2005; van Klinken 2003). For example, current study demonstrates the salient of using the politics of identity in local and provincial general elections in Medan (Aspinall 2011). These

¹ A draft, will be presented at the 14th International Graduate Conference in Yogyakarta, October 30-31, 2012

² PhD student, Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, and she can be contacted at sue2@pitt.edu

studies suggest that religion, ethnicity, and region can be politically used to re-invoke groups' boundaries. The question then is not only what it is that serves as the basic element for the construction of the future of the nation-state, but most importantly how the unified national identity, particular groups' and collective identities are constructed in the Post-Suharto Indonesia.

In 2004, a group of Tapanuli leaders proposed a new Tapanuli province separated from the North Sumatera province. Later, in 2007, a rally took place demanding the formulation of the new Tapanuli Province. And again, in February 3, 2009, around 2000 protesters gathered in front of the legislative building demanding that the legislative body discuss a proposal for the new province. Because of the emotional involvement in such a public demand, a council speaker, Abdul Azis Angkat, died a few hours after the rally had turned violent. The police announced sixty seven activists as suspects and categorized all the suspects into several different groups, namely protest initiators, field coordinators, those who paid the protesters, and those who mobbed the council buildings or destroyed property. The suspects included university students, university teaching staffs, members of local parliamentarians, priests, and some lawyers. Those found guilty were sentenced between two and a half years and twelve years in prison.

The protest did not merely gain local media attention. Two national newspapers, *the Jakarta Post* and *the Kompas* daily newspaper cover the story widely. In Medan, two local newspapers, *Waspada* and *SIB*, intensively reported the event, and framed in differently. So contrast was the content of the newspapers that a week after the protest, the Association of Independent Journalists (AJI) urged PWI, the national organization of journalist, not only to investigate but also to sanction *SIB* for its unbalanced reports.

Following up AJI's demand, two media studies centers in Indonesia, KIPPAS and LSPP, collaborated to publish a report of a content analysis of the two local newspapers. Based on 109 newspaper articles in a two weeks period—a week before and a week after protest-- sixty one articles in *SIB* were in placed as headlines or at least in the front page. In comparison, *Waspada* only published forty eight articles on different sections including the headlines. The report also notes that the two local newspapers emphasized opinions rather than facts, and concludes that *Waspada* and *SIB* neglected the importance of the two-sided coverage in their reporting. Consequently, the two newspapers are considered violated the standard of objectivity of media report, and contributed in constructing symbolic violence. KIPPAS and LSPP conclude that

Waspada and particularly *SIB*, therefore, violated journalistic ethical conduct (Anto 2009). The PWI finally demanded an explanation from *SIB* and urged this local newspaper to control its journalists' reports so as not to violate journalist ethical conduct (PWI 2009).

2. Research Question

The report published by KIPPAS and LSPP suggests that *Waspada and SIB* exclusively cited two different religious groups (Christians by *SIB* and Muslims by *Waspada*). The report is failed, however, to notice that whereas *Waspada* targeted Muslims as well as Malay, South Tapanuli, and Minangkabau, *SIB* had Christian and Toba Batak readerships in mind. Focusing only on *SIB*, this paper takes account the overlapping two categories of *SIB's* readers, and explores *how this local newspaper frames the collective identity of protesters as an "indigenous community," and links this idea to the concept of the unified national identity.*

3. Methods

As a pilot project and part of a broader study comparing four newspapers framings –*SIB, Waspada, the Jakarta Post, and Kompas*—this study particularly focuses on the way in which *SIB* frames the collective identity of the protesters demanding a new Tapanuli Province. Based on my initial analysis of *the Jakarta Post* adapting Semetko and Valkenburg's conceptualization of five framings (Semetko 2000), this national newspaper emphasizes three frames in portraying the protest. First, the newspaper focuses on those who were responsible for the death of North Sumatera council speaker (*responsibility frame*). Second, the newspaper pays attention to the protesters violent attack on the council speaker (*the human interest frame*). Finally, the newspaper emphasizes the antagonism between the protesters and the council speaker, and the disagreement between different authorities concerning the death of the council speaker (*the conflict frame*).

The death of the North Sumatera council speaker gained *the Jakarta Post online's* attention to the extent that all of its articles about the Pro-Tapanuli protest from February to April 2009 (39 articles) contain a paragraph portraying the death of the speaker. The paragraph describes in detail the way the protesters attack the speaker physically, suggesting that the *Jakarta Post's* construction of the protest focuses mainly on a particular aspect of the event that is

the death of the North Sumatera council speaker; the newspaper failed, however, to capture the grievances of the protesters.

This paper starts exactly from the grievances of the protesters as represented by *Suara Indonesia Baru*'s online articles and photos published from April 2009 to December 2010. The total 144 online materials include 132 photos and twelve articles. To check these online sources, sixteen printed articles containing photos published from May 2009 to May 2010 are compared to their online versions. I purposively use "Tapanuli" as keywords on *SIB* online then selected articles that reported the protest demanding a new Tapanuli province. On December 2011, all the articles and photos were downloaded and saved in *MS Words* formats. This strategy allows the current data analysis although since 2012 *SIB* online is no longer available.

Although framing analysis is useful to identify the extent to which the frames emerge in the news (Semetko 2000), the standardized yes-or-no answer does not allow us to see deeper into the issue. Taking account of this limitation, I created framing codes from themes and concepts that consistently emerged from the data. In this regard, data analysis was conducted simultaneously at the same time the framing code was developed. This qualitative approach is beneficial to identify frames that *SIB* online used in its stories about the protest after the event.

4. Findings

Although media agenda does not always overlap with the public's agenda, media framing can influence the public, public opinion, and public agenda (d'Haenens 2002). So important is the role of the media in the process of social construction of protest, that Gamson and Meyer define the media systems as political opportunity variables and as sites of struggle for the nature of opportunity (Gamson 1996). The media is also influential in constructing grievances and success expectations for collective action although this does not mean that media has a direct impact on its audience and social movements because "the actual formation and transformation of collective beliefs take place in exchange within the groups and categories with which individuals identify" (Klandermans 1992).

It is also important to note that the media are bias in transforming the information that it transmits. As Klandermans and Gosslinga (Klandermans 1996) explain, "Space limitations alone introduce selectivity in the production of media discourse. Mass media select and interpret available information according to principles that define news value. In so doing they produce a

transformed reality which diverges from the reality as a social actor defines it.” For example, in their analysis of meaning construction for individuals who join collective action concerning disability allowance (DA) in the Netherlands, Klandermans and Gosslinga (1996) show that the media does not cover issues in details, instead the media puts emphasis on the debating actors. Their study suggests that, unintentionally, media bias potentially provides support for a movement. This is explained through the process of a dynamic interaction between the media and social activists in influencing public discourse and individuals’ raising consciousness. Such dynamic is generated in “the multi-organizational field,” a place for selecting and adapting information for consciousness raising. In this sense, as parts of an alliance system of an actor, groups and organizations facilitate individuals accessing information, discussing their experiences and the moves of their opponents, and learning about their new situation. The awareness of the issue and their positions reinforce individuals’ conception of an “us” and “them” dynamic. Such a process “drives them to become radicalized” (Klandermans, 1992: 98).

Adapting Klanderman’s multi-organizational field, this paper assumes that to understand what behind the framing, and how media outlet (in this case *SIB*) constructs the collective identity of the protesters, it is important to see the relationship between the owners or the management of this newspaper and the Pro-Tapanuli movement, and then the post-event coverage of the protest. These relationships can be identified from the newspaper’s stories and other secondary sources. I have not triangulated this information with those behind the news—for example the owner, editors, journalists, etc— suggesting the limitation of this initial study.

4.1. The link between SIB’s management and the Pro-Tapanuli Movement

Some studies have already discussed the ways in which local newspapers in Medan frame their coverage aiming at maintaining and if possible raising their market, while at the same time represent and perpetuate particular groups’ identities. Studies on local media in Medan suggest that local newspapers pay attention to group identities of the targeted audience, and pragmatically frame their stories to gain public interests. A study on how two local newspapers (*Waspada and Sumut Pos*) frame a bank robbery in Medan demonstrates that particular framings that the editorship decided are based on the calculation of profit, the analysis of angle of issues that their audience might be interested in, and the ideology of the newspaper (Priadi 2011). Another study by Susan Rodgers (1991) insightfully connects three main newspapers in Medan

to the ethnic and religion background of the newspaper's management³. Whereas *Waspada* is seen as "a Muslim, southern Batak paper" and *Analisa* has tie to "Medan's large Chinese-Indonesian community," *SIB* is managed by a group of people identified as Christian Toba Batak. Based on her study on cultural page on *SIB* and *Waspada*, since the mid-1970s, Rodgers argues that these local newspapers functioned as "an intense arena for defining ethnicity and relating it to a national framework" (Rodgers, 1991: 88).

The studies above suggest that newspapers' stories are partly shaped by the management and the journalist behind the media. Presumably, interrogating the relationship between these actors and the event that they represent is important to understand why newspapers select particular framings. *SIB*'s coverage on the pro-Tapanuli protests, was prompted by a strong connection between the owner and management of this newspaper to the Pro-Tapanuli movement. Concerning this, although *SIB* targets a broader audience than Christian and Toba Batak readership (Rodgers 1991), its stories about the Pro-Tapanuli protest highly represents this particular ethnic group.

SIB was founded in 1970, by GM Panggabean, a Christian Toba Batak man who also led the management of the newspaper until 2011. He placed members of his family in various positions in the management of the newspaper, including his son, GM Chandra Panggabean who held the position as the second chief editor. The later Panggabean was also the leader of the movement aiming at the creation of a new Tapanuli Province. Soon after the event, GM Chandra Panggabean was taken to prison under the accusation of being responsible for the chaos protest that caused heart attack and then the death of Abdul Aziz Angkat, the North Sumatera council speaker, amidst the protesters. Chandra Panggabean was sentenced eight years in prison on July 12, 2009; yet *SIB* continued its reportages until the end of 2010. As the following sub-section discusses, this circumstance partly explains the persistence of *SIB*'s coverage and the framings that the newspaper applied in reporting the protest after the event.

4.3. Framing the indigenous community: Tapanuli province for Tapanuli people

SIB framed the collective identities of the protesters by centering on Christian-Toba Batak identity, re-invoking the idea of indigenous Tapanuli community, and linking this image to

³ According to Rodgers (1991), despite the specific groups' backgrounds, however, the newspapers targeted broader North Sumatera readerships

the concept of the unified national identity, particularly after the event of the protest. First, the newspaper emphasizes the protesters' demand for creating a new Tapanuli province as a response to the economic marginality of Tapanuli people. Then, *SIB* describes these protesters as “heroes⁴ of Pro-Tapanuli” or “*pejuang Pro-Tapanuli*.” The construction of the protesters' collective identity this way, marks the beginning of *SIB*'s representation of the idea of Tapanuli *indigeneity*. It re-invents and perpetuates this idea, by frequently including Tapanuli songs, *ulos*, *boras sipir ni tondi* rituals, and *upa-upa*.

For example, *SIB* highlighted in details, the scene when the protesters sang the “O Tano Batak” song, while their families, particularly mothers, were watching in tears. *SIB* also made sure that their readers were aware of “*Darah Juang Tapanuli*, a new song created by the activists in prison expressing their grievances while at the same time emphasizing their sacrifices for Tapanuli people. A more explicit message can be captured from pictures of two activists who handsomely dressed in Toba Batak outfit, while reading their statement of defense in court.

In the same vein, *SIB* published pictures and stories where a national leader and a priest gave the *Boras Sipir Ni Tondi*⁵ to two student activist and the leader of Pro-Tapanuli movement. The first picture portrayed a moment when the two student activist sitting on the ground with *ulos* on their shoulders in the front of Sabam Sirait, a national leader, who stood and bent to touch the head of one student. This moment took place in the front of the Human Right Commissions office in Jakarta, where the students and small numbers of protesters voiced the same demand as in Medan earlier. The caption under the picture informs the readers that Sabam Sirait, gave “*boras sipir ni tondi*” or encouragement to the students. The second picture shows the same ritual involving different actors. Readers are presented the spectacle when the Pro-Tapanuli leader, GM Richard Panggabean stood with *ulos* on his shoulder; while an *HKBP* priest lifted his hand pouring a small amount of rice on Panggabean's head.

⁴ *SIB*'s construction of these protesters' collective identity is in contradiction to that of, for example, *the Jakarta Post*. In my analysis of this national newspaper line articles, *The Jakarta Post* explicitly defines the protesters as anarchist and violent. In general, the newspaper identifies those who participate in the protest as suspects, the mob, the protest and protesters, demonstrators, the rally, mass, and a group of people. The newspaper uses adjectives such as angry protesters and links them to the attack of Abdul Azis Angkat. Also, frequently “the mob,” is used in combination with adjectives such as angry and violent.

⁵ This ritual symbolizes community support to its members who need strength and encouragement after encountering calamity in their lives.

While SIB's framing might persuade its audience to see Tapanuli people as an indigenous community with the right to have a new Tapanuli province, the framing is in juxtaposition to its emphasis on the idea that this community also belongs to Indonesian nation-state. This latter framing is obvious from SIB's coverage of its staff's donations to various orphanages managed by Muslim as well as Christians groups, SIB's reports of local and national leaders from diverse political and ethnic backgrounds that visited the protesters, particularly GM Richard Panggabean in the prison. Or, from SIB's a picture of an activist who had a small red-and-white symbol on his black t-shirt during the hearing in the court.

The juxtaposition of the two framings suggests that not only does SIB have two specific readerships in mind: the Christian-Toba Batak groups and beyond, but it also emphasizes that the Tapanuli indigenous community is a part of Indonesian nation state. To understand what prompted SIB to shape its stories this way, we need to look at the shifting landscape where SIB's management stood, a point that is discussed in the following sub-section.

5. Discussions

The dynamic between activists and media construction of protests is inevitably related to their context. As Tarrow suggests, "... contentious politics is not born in organizers' heads but is culturally inscribed and socially communicated. The learned conventions of contention are part of a society's public culture" (Tarrow 1998). Moreover, there is a particular repertoire that serves as a constraint (Tilly 1999). Studies from different locations (Auyero 2003; Bayat 2007; Boudreau 2002; Scott 1990), clearly show that different contexts have different repertoire of contentions.

In Indonesia, under the Suharto regime (1971-1998), cultural production was regulated in the following way. *First*, the government repressed media with its strong corporatist control (Boudreau 2002). It authorized a representative for each media organization responsible to implement "government prescriptions and proscriptions for the industry" (Sen 2000). Through this practice, the government eliminated undesirable participants and suppressed any conflict in industrial relations or in the news media reports.

Second, the Suharto regime defined media as "vehicles for the creation of a 'national culture'" and made guidelines on "what to say, what not to say and who could speak in which medium." In this sense, the media played an important role as a mediator between culture and

politics. As Sen and Hill write, the media mediated “the translation of culture into politics and politics into culture” (Sen 2000). Hand in hand with media’s self control, the government barred communist sympathies from media, and it eliminated left-wing cultural institutions. Most importantly, the regime banned any text that possibly “inflamm[e] ‘primordial’ ethnic, religious, racial or ‘group’ tensions abbreviated as SARA which was used to hinder media’s reports of ethno-religious tensions (Sen 2000).

However, ten years before the regime collapsed, the press began to work as an industry and at the same time responded to its middle class readers and demanded greater freedom for the press. In terms of corporatist control, there was a successful attempt of journalists to challenge the government’s version of press representative organization through the founding of Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) in 1994 (Sen and Hill 2000:54). Underground press was also an important alternative for social movements’ activists aiming at “eroding the legitimacy of the New Order and Suharto” (Menayang 2002) as well as the internet upon which the government’s control was very limited (Sen and Hill 2000; Sen 2002).

In the Post-Suharto Indonesia, the media, particularly newspapers, operate in a more relaxed atmosphere although Suharto’s successors’ policy concerning the openness of media is highly debated (Nyman 2006). For example, after Abdurrahman Wahid abolished media restriction by closing down the Department of Information (Sen 2000), the next president, Megawati Soekarno Puteri, brought back media restriction. Despite the debatable intensity of the impact of this new restriction, media pays more and more attention to forbidden topics such as labor issues (Nyman 2006). Moreover, due to the process of democratization in Indonesia that provides political opportunities for redefining identities, media are more confident in reporting what was considered as “inflamm[e] ‘primordial’ ethnic, religious, racial or ‘group’ tensions (abbreviated as SARA) (Sen 2000).

At the same time, elites practice the politics of identity to gain voters at national, regional and local elections. Particular identity also becomes a reference for proposing new provinces and municipalities. Since the implementation of the law on regional autonomy in 1998, there are six new provinces and 198 new regencies and municipalities created in Indonesia. Currently, Indonesia consists of 33 provinces and 491 regencies and municipalities. It is within this context that the Pro-Tapanuli movement emerged, and the juxtaposition of its framings gains its political significance.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper explores how collective identity of protesters is constructed in the Post-Suharto Indonesia. Focusing on a local protest demanding the creation of a new Tapanuli province in North Sumatera, this paper discusses how a local media outlet, the *Suara Indonesia Baru (SIB)* frames the collective identity of local protesters. Taking account of the relationship between who behind the news, the protest, and the framings that the newspaper applied in portraying the protesters, this paper shows that *SIB* used two framings: the indigenous Tapanuli community and its link to the unified nation-state. This paper also demonstrates that the juxtaposition of these two framings provide an imagination of an indigenous community that fits in Indonesia as a modern nation-state.

7. References:

- Anto, J., Pardede, Pemiliana., Purba, Truly O., Haryanto, Ignatius., and Sulamit, Trinanti. 2009. "Perang Protap di Sinar Indonesia Baru dan Waspada: Analisis Isi Kecenderungan Pemberitaan Isu Pembentukan Provinsi Tapanuli pada Surat Kabar Sinar Indonesia Baru dan Waspada Periode 28 Januari-10 Februari 2009." Medan and Jakarta: KIPPAS and LSPP.
- Aspinall, Edward, Sebastian Dettman, and Eve Warburton. 2011. "When religion trumps ethnicity: a regional election case study from Indonesia." *South East Asia Research* 19(1):27-58.
- Auyero, Javier. 2003. *Contentious Lives: Two Argentine Women, Two Protests, and the Quest for Recognition*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Bayat, Asef. 2007. "A Women's Non-Movement: What It Means to Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 21(1):160-72.
- Bertrand, Jacques. 2004. *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boudreau, Vincent. 2002. "State repression and democracy protest in three Southeast Asian countries." in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State*, edited by Nancy Whittier David S. Meyer, and Belinda Robnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Colombijn, Freek. 2003. "When there is nothing to imagine, nationalism in Riau." in *Framing Indonesian Realities. Essays in Symbolic Anthropology in Honour of Reimar Schefold*, edited by Gerard A. Persoon Peter J.M. Nas, and Rivke Jaffe. Leiden: KITLV Press.

- d'Haenens, Leen and Chantal Verelst. 2002. "Portrayal of Indonesia's Reform in the Dutch Print Media." *International Communication Gazette* 64:183-97.
- Gamson, William A., and David S. Meyer. 1996. "Framing political opportunity." Pp. 275-90 in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*, edited by Doug. McAdam, John D McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Heffner, Robert W. 2005. "Muslim Democrats and Islamist Violence in Post-Soeharto Indonesia." in *Remaking Muslim Politics. Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, edited by Robert W. Hefner. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Klandermans, Bert. 1992. "The social construction of protest and multiorganizational fields." Pp. 77-103 in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by and Carol McClurg Mueller Aldon M. Morris. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Klandermans, Bert., and Sjoerd Goslinga. 1996. "Media discourse, movement publicity, and the generation of collective action frames: Theoretical and empirical exercises in meaning construction." Pp. 338-55 in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*, edited by Doug. McAdam, John D McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Menayang, Victor, Bimo Nugroho, and Dina Listiorini. 2002. "Indonesia's underground press: the media as social movements." *Gazette: the International Journal for Communication Studies* 64(2):141-56.
- Nyman, Mikaela. 2006. *Democratising Indonesia: The Challenges of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Priadi, Ribut. 2011. "Berita Terorisme Medan (Analisis Framing Pemberitaan Terorisme Medan di Harian Waspada dan Harian Sumut Pos)." in *Communication*. Jakarta: Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta.
- PWI. 2009. "PWI inginkan SIB tetap eksis." Jakarta.
- Rodgers, Susan. 1991. "The Ethnic Culture Page in Medan Journalism." *Indonesia* 51(April):83-103.
- Scott, James C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven and London Yale University Press.
- Semetko, Holli A. and Patti M. Valkenburg. 2000. "Framing European Politics: a Content Analysis of Press and Television News." *International Communication Association* (Spring):93-109.
- Sen, Krishna and David T. Hill. 2000. *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Voctoria: Oxford University Press.

- Sen, Krishna and David T. Hill. 2002. "Nitizen in combat: conflict on the internet in Indonesia." *Asian Studies Review* 26(2):165-87.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 1999. "From interaction to outcomes in social movements." in *How Social Movements Matter*, edited by Doug McAdam Marco Giugni, and Charles Tilly. Monneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- van Klinken, Gerry. 2003. "Ethnicity in Indonesia." in *Ethnicity in Asia*, edited by Colin Mackerras. London: RoutledgeCurzon.