

Chinese 'visibility' reflects RI success

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The end of the New Order era has opened new opportunities for Chinese-Indonesians to significantly participate in the cultural and political life of the country, according to a visiting Singaporean scientist.

"Among the resurgence of other identities in Indonesia, the visibility of the Chinese identity has increased, reflecting the success story of multiculturalism in Indonesia," Chang-yau Hoon, a lecturer of Asian Studies at Singapore Management University, said during his book launch in Jakarta on Wednesday.

In his book, titled *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media*, he explains that with public support, Chinese-Indonesians managed to defend their rights and liberate their long-suppressed identity in the wake of Soeharto's fall in 1998.

Soon after, Chinese activists established various groups, which were based on political, social-cultural or religious backgrounds, to intensify their efforts to gain a better position in society.

Among the groups are the *Tionghoa Reform Party (PARTI)*, *Chinese Clans Social Community (PSMTI)* and *Chinese Youths Solidarity for Justice (SIMPATIK)*.

However, Hoon noted that the political movement was initially met with resentment from fellow Chinese-Indonesians as well as from *pribumi* (indigenous Indonesians).

"Economist Kwik Kian Gie and prominent businessman Sofjan Wanandi [both of Chinese descent] expressed reluctance to support exclusive Chinese political parties, saying that they would reinforce the sense of ethnic separation," he wrote.

In addition, Thung Ju Lan, an Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) senior researcher, suggested that political turbulence among Chinese-Indonesians was a natural process in a country that had shifted from authoritarian rule.

"The polemic happened to all ethnicities in the nation, including the Chinese. This is a part of a generational change," she said.

Hoon noted that the Chinese had successfully realized their resurgence, which was clearly reflected in the annulment of discriminatory regulations and growing tolerance among the public.

Former president Abdurrahman Wahid was celebrated as a pluralist who ultimately recognized the Chinese Lunar New Year, or Imlek, as a National Holiday.

Abdurrahman appointed Kwik as coordinating economic minister in 1999. Kwik went on to become the head of the National Development Planning Board (Bappenas).

Recently, the nation also witnessed rising tolerance in society with Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, a Chinese-Indonesian, elected as deputy governor of Jakarta this year.

"I think Ahok brings a lot of hope to the nation, not just to people of Chinese descent, because Jakarta, in particular, proved that it could rise above SARA [tribal affiliations, religion, race and societal groups] issues," Hoon said.

Eddie Lembong, chairman of the Nabil Foundation, said that the Jakarta gubernatorial election signified public acceptance of Chinese-Indonesians, especially in the political sphere.

"It should boost Chinese-Indonesians' confidence and dedication to their homeland, Indonesia," he said.

Hoon said stereotyping remained the biggest stumbling block between indigenous Indonesians and Chinese-Indonesians, the latter of which comprise about 3 percent of Indonesia's 240 million population.

"Schools should promote pluralism. We see Chinese educated in different schools, very few go to public schools. They live segregated lives in exclusive environments. This attitude needs to be changed," he added. **(yps)**