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## A Case Study of Human Right Violations during the HKBP Crisis in Indonesia, 1992–1998

Saut Sirait and Andar Parlindungan

### Introduction

In an increasingly civilized, modern, advanced world, outrageous events can occur in the church's environment.<sup>1</sup> Six people lost their lives, thousands of people were injured, and many fled from their hometowns after being terrorized and intimidated for more than a year. Two hundred and twenty people were arrested by the police and the army and were detained without ever going through a legal process. In addition, 16 people were arrested on charges of killing a policeman on a public road in front of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) Siraituruk, Porsea, North Tapanuli courtyard in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> All those detained were subjected to violence in the form of severe injuries, broken bones, and mild bruises and swelling.

The author was asked to record the empirical experience from the perspective of the victims of the 1992–1998 events within HKBP. It became an opportunity and a blessing in itself to answer the questions that kept coming up and are unresolved so far.

This chapter is divided into several parts. The first part talks about the intervention of the ruling powers, followed by the failed military coup and then continued with the occurrence of divisions and violations of human rights. The final section closes with critical reflection.

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1. This chapter is an eyewitness report from Rev. Saut Sirait and UEM Reflection by Dr Andar Parlindungan.

2. See Moxa Nadeak, Saut Manurung, Sabar Situmeang, Gomar Gultom, Robinson Butarbutar, Mori Sihombing, and Saut Sirait (coordinator), KRISIS HKBP Ujian Bagi Iman dan Pengamalan Pancasila (Biro Informasi HKBP, 1995); and Gomar Gultom, Saut Sirait, Asmara Nababan, Sumurung Samosir, Keyakinan Dalam Pencobaan (Jakarta: Pustaka Sopo Metmet, 1993). These books are the main references in this chapter.

## Intervention of Rulers

In 1987, Rev. Dr Soritua A. E. Nababan was elected as ephorus or bishop in the hope that the HKBP's function and responsibility would return to being light and salt for the world. One of the things that Ephorus Nababan prioritized was the development of faith that is connected to and has an impact on the reality of people's daily lives, especially in overcoming poverty, both spiritual and material. Education and training for awareness and strengthening of the people with regards to agriculture, animal husbandry, the environment, law, and human rights according to the Bible played an important role.

The energetic and dynamic coaching and training programs received an enthusiastic response from the community. Collaborations were held with other religious organizations in Indonesia, especially Nahdatul Ulama, which at that time was led by Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid), non-governmental organizations such as the Community Initiative Development Study Group (KSPPM), and student networks. The people were beginning to dare to voice their aspirations and demands to the government, including regarding one of the largest companies in North Sumatra, PT Inti Indorayon Utama (PT IIU),<sup>3</sup> a pulp mill which was heavily polluting the environment.

In the 1990s, the government tried to strongly curtail all the organizations and interest groups that showed a critical attitude toward it, by all means possible. The main instrument was the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (ABRI),<sup>4</sup> using their so-called dual functions.<sup>5</sup> The structure of ABRI in Indonesia fits perfectly with Morris Janowitz' theory regarding military supremacy in developing countries: (1) Authoritarian-personal type of civil-military control. (2) Authoritarian mass party control. (3) Democratic-competitive control. (4) Civil military coalition. (5) Military oligarchy.<sup>6</sup> Military dominance over civilian supremacy was very high. To show that Indonesia was a democratic country, President Suharto held elections in

3. PT IIU was the largest company in Tapanuli that processed wood into pulp and rayon. The company was involved in widespread deforestation, including of the community's customary forests. Wood processing has a strong stench, causing severe dizziness. The smell can affect tens of square kilometres of the surrounding area.

4. The Indonesian joint armed forces at the time, ABRI (Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia), consisted of land, air, sea, and police forces.

5. "Dwi-fungsi ABRI," or ABRI's "Dual Functions," meant that ABRI was not only in charge of defence affairs, but also all life aspects of the community.

6. Morris Janowitz, *Military in the Politics Development of New Nations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3–15.

which the winner was already set, namely the Golongan Karya (Golkar, Party of Functional Groups)<sup>7</sup> and two other parties mere complements, namely the United Development Party (PPP, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan) and the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI, Indonesian Democratic Party).

Although HKBP was not affiliated with any political party, HKBP programs also had implications for political realities. In the June 1992 elections, PDI won a significant number of votes as well as seven seats in the North Tapanuli local Parliament, which had previously been vacant. Even though Golkar won the election, losing the seven seats was a slap in the face for the authorities, especially Batak state officials, businessmen, and Golkar officials, in particular those who were HKBP members.

The 1990 HKBP Youth Conference in Sipirok became the starting point for the destruction of the HKBP. The conference had already commenced when it was stopped and dissolved by the police for unclear reasons. The dismantling continued with the dissolution of the Great Synod in the same year in Pematangsiantar. The authorities tried to remove Rev. S. A. E. Nababan from HKBP leadership, starting with efforts to delegitimize him.

The government then formed a Peace Team which was directly led by General (ret) Maraden Panggabean, at that time the chairman of the Supreme Advisory Council (DPA and a former Minister of Defense, concurrently commander of the Armed Forces) of the Republic of Indonesia. Indonesian constitutional law was bypassed in the formation of the Peace Team.<sup>8</sup> In a meeting with government officials, ABRI, pastors, and members of the HKBP in Sipoholon, North Tapanuli, the head of the Peace Team said: "Nababan must be finished!"

## **The Failed Military Coup Attempt at the Great Synod**

The authorities gave permission to conduct the Great Synod at the Sipoholon Seminarium, North Tapanuli, on 23-28 November 1992. Just before the opening ceremony, as many as 400 soldiers wearing helmets clad in leaves and assault weapons with bayonets surrounded the Sipoholon Seminarium building. The commander of the Kawal Samudera Military

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7. At the time, Golkar was not a political party in the traditional sense but had participated in general elections and had been the winner since Suharto came to power in 1967.

8. In the Indonesian constitution, the DPA has a position equal to the president. The legal basis for the formation of the Peace Team came from a memo of the Minister of Religion, number MA/132/1990, 6 September 1990, to the chairperson of the DPA. This should not have happened, as the position of the Minister of Religion is under the chair of the DPA.

Resort, Army, Colonel Daniel Toding, used one room to establish a tactical command post (*Kotis*)<sup>9</sup> at the location of the Great Synod meeting. They took over the duties and functions of the organizing committee.

The atmosphere of the Great Synod became disorderly, and some of the participants who had been “worked on” by the military were disruptive. Military personnel entered the conference room freely and signalled to certain participants to continue talking loudly and interrupt the proceedings. Toward the end of the session’s permit deadline, Ephorus Nababan ended the meeting and asked the committee to prepare for the closing session and the evening worship service. After coordinating, Ephorus left the conference room and headed for the official residence to prepare for the closing ceremony.<sup>10</sup> After Ephorus left, the secretary general of the HKBP, Pdt. OPT. Simorangkir, and the military resort commander (Danrem), Colonel Daniel Toding, took over the leadership of the meeting. Soldiers with bayonet blades mounted on their weapons forced participants to enter and closed all the doors. Danrem Daniel Toding ordered Pdt. OPT Simorangkir to read out a decision on the formation of a leadership caretaker (something previously unknown in HKBP). The majority of the participants were very surprised to see the takeover attempt of the leadership of the Great Synod. They demanded that the statement be revoked and expected to be shot if it were not revoked.

These actions of the military commander were a first in the history of the churches in Indonesia and perhaps in the world. From the facts and events that occurred, this action was an attempted constitutional coup carried out by the military against the church leadership for the purpose of placing a pastor who submitted to them as the Ephorus of HKBP.

After failing to carry out the constitutional coup, the military used its power in a blatant fashion. On 23 December 1992, the commander of the Regional Military Command (Pangdam) I/Bukit Barisan, which operated in the northern part of Sumatra, in his capacity as head of the Coordinating Agency for Assistance for Regional National Stability Stabilization (Bakorstanasda), issued a Decree, No. Skep/3/Stada/XII/1992, appointing Rev. Dr. Sountilon Siahaan as the official Ephorus HKBP. Based on the decree of the military, Rev. Sountilon invited and held a Special Great Synod

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9. The fact that there was a strategic command room and troops wearing combat uniforms and equipment indicates that the military viewed this operation as an act of warfare.

10. During the Great Synod of 1992, I served in three areas: as recorder of minutes, member of the organizing committee, and member of the security committee, and so witnessed the proceedings first-hand.

on 11-13 February 1993 at the Tiara Hotel in Medan. Ephorus Pdt. Soritua Nababan and most of the participants of the 1992 Synod were not included. After this synod, the HKBP was de facto split into two factions, and each declared itself legitimate. Those who oppose the government intervention call themselves HKBP SSA (Setia Sampai Akhir, meaning “Faithful to the End”), and those who accepted the government intervention call themselves “SAI Tiara” (Sinode Agung Istimewa Tiara, after the name of the conference venue of the special synod).

## **Division and Human Rights Violations**

After the appointment of Rev. S. M. Siahaan as the acting Ephorus by the military commander of the Northern Sumatra region, covert military operations began to be carried out. Pastors and elders were visited to persuade them to recognize and accept the appointment of Rev. S. M. Siahaan as Ephorus. Threats were issued if they refused, and the military made efforts to divide the congregations and incite the congregants against the pastors and elders who did not submit to the military. All of the pastors who refused the military were forced to flee Northern Sumatra.

The military soon began to follow up on their threats of violence. After many intimidation attempts of congregation members, the military started killing their most vocal opponents. I was present when evidence in the form of shell casings, photographs, and witness reports was handed to the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM). Until today, these cases of killings have not been investigated or resolved.<sup>11</sup>

On Good Friday, 9 March 1993, the military opened fire on a group of congregants on their way to the church service. Several people suffered injuries but survived. Nine vehicles were burned. This open military aggression caused outrage in the community, not just among HKBP members. The military then began to form plainclothes groups called *satgas* by recruiting thugs to carry out operations. With strong support from the military, the *satgas* forcibly entered homes and churches during services. The pastors and congregants who opposed the military started holding services in other locations to avoid the *satgas*. More than 1000 civilians suffered light and heavy injuries from attacks by the *satgas*.

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11. In 2019, HKBP theological seminary in Pematang Siantar invited the head of the national human rights commission (Komnas HAM) to give a public lecture. During that opportunity, I asked about the killings, but no further information has been given to date.

Legal efforts were made by the victims, such as a lawsuit to the State Administrative Court for the decisions of the authorities as well as against acts of violence committed by the army and the *satgas*. However, none of these cases was resolved by the law. The chairman of the Administrative Court of Medan City, Mr. Lintong Oloan Siahaan SH, was immediately terrorized the day after holding the first trial in the case of Ephorus Nababan's lawsuit against the Pangdam I/Bukit Barisan Decree regarding the appointment of Pdt. S. M. Siahaan as Ephorus. His residence was stormed by dozens of masked people who broke windows and put rotten meat in his house. Surprisingly, Lintong Siahaan was then placed on "leave" for an indefinite period of time.

The descriptions above show that the actions taken by the military and their lackeys can definitively be classified as human rights violations. In our opinion and as we know, human rights—which include civil and political rights, such as the right to life, freedom, expression, opinion, religion, worship, and association—are rights that cannot be violated, even in war conditions. There are no requirements regarding human rights other than protecting and fulfilling them. All of these rights were violated by the Indonesian authorities at the time, using the military.

### **Critical Reflection: All Are Victims**

On 5 December 1992, the executive committee of the Godang HKBP Synod was summoned to the Bukit Barisan Military Command/I Headquarters in Medan. After the meeting, the Commander of the Military Intelligence Detachment, Lieutenant Colonel Paris Ginting, pulled me by force and took me to his room, accompanied by two soldiers with the rank of sergeant. I was shouted at, slapped in the face, and hit several times in the chest. This happened because they were angry with the report on the chronology of the trial of the Great Synod that I had made in my capacity as scribe. After being satisfied with venting their anger, they then asked me to write a letter to the commander in chief stating that the chronology of the Great Synod was a lie and at the same time to apologize. They promised to help with my future career if I promised to leave Nababan and help the military. In order to get out as soon as possible, I promised to give them an answer within two weeks. After two weeks, I did not give an answer; a few days later, the North Tapanuli Resort Police issued a summons, with no clear reason or legal basis. I ignored the summons. The following week the same letter came, and I ignored it. Not long after, information from a police

source came out that my name had been included in the list of wanted people (Daftar Pencarian Orang, DPO).<sup>12</sup>

A joint police and army operation was carried out to arrest me. Unfortunately, two elderly pastors, Rev. Nelson Siregar and Rev. Ramlan Hutahaean, as well as a young pastor, Samuel Sitompul, were taken from Rev. Hutahaean's house on 12 May 1994. They were detained at the Tarutung Military District Command headquarters, then transferred to the Tarutung Police Station. For a month they were missing, with the family and staff of the HKBP not knowing their whereabouts and condition. We then received news that they had been admitted to Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob) Hospital in Medan.

Samuel Sitompul (now the superintendent of the Lampung church circuit) was badly hurt. His jaw was dislocated from the many beatings by the soldiers. He said that the military thought he was me (Saut Sirait). When he said he was not, they became furious and beat him even more. It is unclear whether they thought he was lying or whether they were frustrated because they caught the wrong person.<sup>13</sup> Although I was terrified, I chose not to leave North Tapanuli and continued to spread awareness about the decisions made by the authorities about the leadership of HKBP being unconstitutional and unbiblical.

As mentioned before, two months later, on 9 March 1993, I led a group of approximately 2000 people, 90 percent of whom were women and young people from Tarutung to Narumonda, to the Good Friday service. On the main road near the village of Sitolu Ama, we were accosted by a combination of the army, police, and the *satgas*. Through the loudspeaker came the command to stop and disperse. The name Rev. Saut Sirait was also called out to be captured and killed. I spontaneously moved forward and was immediately attacked by several soldiers. Many youths protected me. Feeling outnumbered, the soldiers then started shooting, and several of the young men who were fighting with me were hit in the thigh and calf. Nine cars

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12. At that time, I was the youth director of HKBP and concurrently an assistant to Ephorus. I formed a new semi-autonomous HKBP Youth structure, starting from the Center District, Resort and Congregation. The head of the Silindung District HKBP Youth was a member of the police in Tarutung, and so accurate information could be obtained.

13. With a lawyer from the Medan Legal Aid Institute and some relatives, I organized their pick-up from the military hospital to transfer them to the Communion of Churches in Indonesia Hospital (RS-PGI), Cikini, Jakarta. It was there that I interviewed them to make a report on their detainment and torture.

were burned, and the group became scattered to save themselves from being chased. The youths and I held on to prevent the soldiers from pursuing them. After the group was able to safely return home, I hid in a ditch and was only able to get out at 2:00 in the morning. I no longer feared for my life after this traumatizing event.

There are so many victims who can no longer talk about the violence of the army. My own mother, a widow, illiterate, 70 years old at the time, was stabbed with a bayonet by the soldiers. Her thick brassiere prevented the blade from penetrating her body, but her entire chest and shoulders were bruised heavily. All she wanted was to go to church on Good Friday.

I visited Herbert Hutasoit's family who have a daughter, a high school student. Initially, her dream was to become an HKBP pastor, but the incident that happened to her father caused immense pain to her soul, making her very ill. Mr. Hutasoit was the first victim who was tortured and murdered by the army. He was kidnapped late at night. The next morning, his dead body was found in the bushes. His whole body was pierced by bullets, his eyes were gouged out, and his genitals were cut off. In our accusation to the Indonesia Human Rights Commission in 1993, the eyewitnesses reported that he was kidnapped by some people wearing military clothing, and they had heard frequent gunfire. Mr Marpaung, who was over 70 years old, was killed, and his body was placed under a small bridge in front of the HKBP Narumonda church. At the close of the traditional event of his burial, his eldest son, who represented the family, submitted a complaint in front the entire audience to jointly find the perpetrators. According to Batak customary law, all those present are bound to jointly fulfil the request. That is, a grudge that will not disappear before the perpetrator of the murder is found and brought to justice.

The trauma of the victims' families remains. The dead no longer have feelings. Victims who are still alive have a constant feeling of anger in their lives and try to find a way to reconcile the feelings of their wounded soul. The families of the victims who died continue to be haunted by questions: Why were our loved ones taken from us? Why has nobody been brought to justice?

Although the Republic of Indonesia has undergone reform of its political system for a long time, it has never looked at solving human rights violations that have occurred. Almost all previous human rights violations, not only those experienced by the HKBP members, are not dealt with. This includes the 30 September 1965 events (G30S/Suharto/PKI) and the shootings of

people by military officers in Lampung and Tanjung Priok in the 1980s. Everything is kept quiet. It is as if it never happened.

After the Joint Synod was completed to unite the HKBP, efforts to carry out joint worship services with both parties to channel broken emotions were discussed several times. But so far, this has never been implemented.

In my opinion, in this case, all HKBP servants and people are victims of an authoritarian regime of power. President Suharto was a constitutional dictator by engineering the legal and political system. The SSA faction became a direct victim, and the SAI Tiara faction became an indirect victim. Only the treatment of the authorities toward the two sides distinguishes them. The hegemony of the ruler over the SAI Tiara is carried out by providing support and facilitation for the purposes of the ruler himself. The SAI Tiara party accepted the hegemony of the ruler voluntarily. The hegemony of the SSA is done in a different way, carrying out subjugation through acts of violence, for the purposes of the ruler as well.

## **Going Forward**

In this event, international support and solidarity poured in. The United Evangelical Mission (UEM)—which is closely connected historically to the evangelism movement in the Batak lands—opposed the harassment carried out by the government and the church. Rev. Dr Jochen Motte, head of the department of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation at the UEM called upon the entire global Christian community to offer intercession to the wounded HKBP as part of the body of Christ (1 Tim. 2:1), and they were called to be together in suffering (1 Cor. 12:26). The HKBP crisis opened the world's eyes to the fact that human rights violations and the arbitrariness of the authorities must be faced together theologically and ecclesiologically. The UEM urged the church community in Germany to show their solidarity by writing to the Indonesian government or the German government. The UEM also expressed its solidarity with HKBP, in particular to victims of human rights violence, while voicing that reconciliation can be realized only by ending acts of violence and ending external intervention for independent church authorities.

Rev. Dr Robinson Butarbutar (currently ephorus of HKBP) intensively distributed news about the conflict to the international community, especially to the UEM. For Butarbutar, unity and reconciliation could be realized only if justice for all victims of human rights violations was restored; the church was no longer interfered with by external forces, specifically by

the New Order regime; and all forms of violence perpetrated by the military ceased. Only with justice and the independence of the church can the fruit of evangelism and freedom for the church be realized.

Statements and concerns for both the HKBP under the leadership of PWT Simanjuntak and the Indonesian government were issued by various international ecumenical institutions, such as the World Council of Churches, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), the Westphalian Church (EKvW), and the Rhineland church (EKiR). Reiner Groth, director of the UEM, also sent a letter to the German chancellor at that time to explain the problems that occurred in the HKBP, in particular the intervention and military atrocities that did not heed the principles of human rights against the HKBP led by Dr. Soritua Nababan.<sup>14</sup>

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States on 11 September 2001 changed the face of the world. An attitude that I think is very evangelical is raised with a big theme: “Forgive but don’t forget.” For this reason, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum was immediately scheduled to open on 11 September 2011. Near this memorial is the 1776 ft (541 m) One World Trade Center, which was completed in 2013. The Pentagon was repaired, and the Pentagon Memorial opened next to the building in 2008. Land acquisition for the Flight 93 National Memorial was carried out in November 2009, and the memorial was officially opened on 10 September 2011. Not only are ceremonies and commemorations are carried out by citizens and the United States government, but a physical memorial exists to remember these horrific events and the victims of this terrorist attack. Everyone is educated not to be trapped in a “culture of forgetting” for themselves, their fellow humans, and their nation; at the same time, the world is invited to remember.

“Lest we forget” is the maxim of the victims of cruelty and terror who erect memorial monuments. Not because the victim is a hero, or a person of merit, fame, or inspiration, but because they are fellow human beings who are victims. The message is very clear: these things must never happen again. Forgiveness is a concept known all over the world without a dogmatic siege

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14. Jochen Motte, Thomas Sandner, and Peter Demberger, eds, *Kirche in der Krise: Texte zur gegenwärtigen Auseinandersetzung um die Christlich-protestantische Toba-Batak-Kirche (HKBP) in Indonesien (1-1993) (2-1995)* (Wuppertal: Vereinte Evangelische Mission)

or claim to a particular religious message. It is not a religious teaching but an approach that deeply heals the inner wounds of the survivors and the families of victims.

In my opinion, the lack of efforts within HKBP to forgive but also to remember past events is not a result of cultural differences or different perspectives. To enjoy a better future, one must be aware of the past. Even though the number of victims is far smaller than that of the September 11 attacks, the nature of suffering, death, cruelty, and humanity is the same in all space, time, and situations.

In the Batak cultural tradition, efforts to restore the spirit and health of victims of ordinary accidents are still being carried out, called the *mangupaupa* event. Institutionally, it is time for HKBP to carry out such a recovery. Not to bring up old wounds but to carry out the noble tradition of “forgiving and remembering.”