

Transforming Conflicts through Food:

A Surakarta Case Study¹

AGNES CHEN AND PAULUS HARTONO²

It is well known that the Indonesian city of Surakarta is not short on food—cheap, delicious food. Residents and tourists alike find this city, located in the middle of Java, brimming with busy mobile food stands (called *angkringan*) selling wrapped rice, fritters, and satay; and *wedangan*, where mats are sprawled out for people to sit on and enjoy their meals. From the coconut milk-infused rice of the traditional *nasi liwet* to the more recent addition of Western food found in Mister Burger franchises along busy streets, Surakarta, better known as Solo, clearly celebrates food anywhere and at any time.

Since activities nearly always revolve around food in Solo, it is not surprising that Mennonites and other faith groups have discovered that coming together over a meal is a powerful way to prevent and transform conflicts in the city. Furthermore, for Mennonites in Solo, food has served as a platform to witness the presence of Jesus Christ and to invite everyone to commit to the simultaneously Christ-centered and universal values of justice, peace, truth, love, and creation care.

In addition to its culinary reputation, Solo is a city that historically has been a center for supporters of various ideologies, such as nationalism, communism, and Islamic militancy. The convergence of these strongly held ideologies has often led to destructive encounters between supporters of opposing factions. In Solo, which is known as the “city with a short wick,” even a little ethnic, religious, or sectarian friction might set off a full-blown conflict across the city.³

1 Some parts of this article are adapted from the authors’ earlier publication, Agus Suyanto and Paulus Hartono, *The Radical Muslim and Mennonite: A Muslim-Christian Encounter for Peace in Indonesia* (Semarang, Indonesia: Pustaka Muria, 2015).

2 Agnes Chen is a volunteer with Mennonite Diakonia Service and Lembaga Perdamiaan Lintas Agama dan Golongan (LPLAG, the Peace Institute across Religions and Groups). Rev. Paulus Hartono is a pastor at GKMI Solo (Gerjeka Kristen Muria Indonesia, or Muria Christian Church in Indonesia) in Central Java, Indonesia. He founded and currently serves as the director of Mennonite Diakonia Service, Christian Radio Immanuel FM, and LPLAG.

3 The Indonesian translation is “kota bersumbu pendek.”

Such an incident occurred in the 1980 razing of Chinese-owned homes, shops, and offices in Solo, spurred by a personal conflict between a Chinese-Indonesian and students of a local school for gym teachers.⁴ Because of the underlying tension of competing ideologies, Solo suffered twelve large-scale conflicts from 1911 to 1999 that generally involved mass riots, the razing of properties, and even death.⁵

The most recent riot of 1998–99 was triggered by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the collapse of Suharto’s military dictatorship. Toward the end of Suharto’s regime, university students took to the streets to advocate for democracy. During this time, controversial riots were stirred among the urban poor across major Indonesian cities against predominantly ethnic Chinese communities, leading to severe human rights violations. In addition to the loss of human lives and the raping of ethnic Chinese women—which are only now being acknowledged and processed in the nation’s collective memory—the riots led to the looting and destruction of many ethnic Chinese homes, properties, and businesses. In Solo alone, the riots destroyed 60 percent of its buildings and other infrastructure.⁶ Additionally, the upheaval ushered in a period of unemployment and a shortage of food and other basic needed resources, particularly for those in the lower classes of society.

In the wake of the devastation created by the 1998–99 riots, some faith communities led by Mennonite pastor Paulus Hartono of the Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI, or the Christian Muria Church in Indonesia) Synod, decided to take action.⁷ A number of religious representatives formed an interfaith committee—intentionally including individuals across ethnic lines—to pursue humanitarian projects together. As USAID relief arrived in the very practical form of rice, the Interfaith Committee (IFC) was tasked to distribute this food to local families. For a year following the riots, USAID and IFC

4 Ayuk Ningrum, “Analisis Kerusuhan Etnik Cina dan Pribumi (Jawa) Pada Tahun 1980 di Surakarta Dengan Sumber Wawancara,” *Ilmu Sejarah*, November 15, 2013, accessed June 23, 2015, <http://ayukoye.blogspot.com/2013/11/analisis-kerusuhan-etnik-cina-dan.html>.

5 “GKMI Menjadi Gereja Transformatif di Surakarta,” *berita GKMI* 40, no. 482 (November 2007): 63; Musni Umar, “Dr. Musni Umar: Partisipasi Masyarakat Solo dan Demokrasi (Bagian ke IV),” *Musni Umar Website*, March 7, 2011, accessed June 20, 2014, <http://musniumar.wordpress.com/2011/03/07/dr-musni-umar-partisipasi-masyarakat-solo-dan-demokrasi-bagian-ke-iv/>.

6 Paulus Hartono, interview by Agus Suryanto, Surakarta, Indonesia, 2014.

7 There are three Mennonite synods in Indonesia: Gereja Injili Tanah Jawa, Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia, and Jemaat Kristen Indonesia.

partnered to distribute rice to 12,000 families in Solo. The collaboration proved to be a success. Both the community and USAID praised the way in which the committee distributed the rice efficiently and with integrity.⁸

But IFC did not stop there—they felt compelled to respond further, especially as religious extremism rose across the country. In the early 2000s, Islamic paramilitary groups bombed Western nightclubs in Bali, the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, and Christian churches throughout Indonesia. In response, IFC developed their programs in interfaith and intergroup dialogues, alongside a capacity for political analysis and movement building.

IFC's vision to transform Solo from the "riot city" into a center for peace also led them to establishing a forum. FPLAG (Forum Perdamaian Lintas Agama dan Golongan, or the Peace Forum across Religions and Groups)⁹ seeks to develop a network of peacebuilders in five districts in Central Java among those who form the (often overlooked) backbone of their societies—including women, youth, and religious communities. Their second goal is to support their network in peace education in Asia and beyond. This group has sent Indonesian peacemakers, with the help of Mennonite Central Committee, to share and gain peacebuilding tools at Mindanao (Philippines) Peacebuilding Institute (MPI) and the Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI), housed at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, VA). The Forum has also strived to increase their communication and cooperation with Islamic paramilitary groups¹⁰ and other parties that have used their religious and political identities to justify violent acts.

Shortly after its formation, this Peace Forum had an opportunity to cultivate reconciliation in the city through a partnership with Joko Widodo, the mayor of Solo during this turbulent time. Widodo was deeply passionate about extending his relations across sectarian lines and sought FPLAG leaders' insight on how to strategically build peace. The Forum suggested to Widodo that sharing food was the key to building relationships. These leaders recommended that he gather various faith and political representatives for a meal and as a time for conversation, relationship building, and decision making. This was a successful practice they had learned from Chinese leaders in Solo who used

8 Paulus Hartono, interview by Agus Suryanto, Salatiga, Indonesia, 2014.

9 The Forum later turned its legal status and name into Lembaga Perdamaian Lintas Agama dan Golongan, or the Peace Institute across Religions and Groups.

10 Peacebuilders in Central Java are careful not to label militant groups as *terrorists*, *radicals*, or *extremists*. These words are politically loaded and have triggered interreligious conflicts in the past. Neutral terms such as the Indonesian word *lascar* (front or army) are preferable.

meals as a time for conducting business transactions.

Following FPLAG's suggestion, Widodo invited local religious and political leaders from moderate to militant camps to eat together once every three months. At each meal, the mayor would give an introduction and then open the table for discussion on how peace might be built in Solo. Every guest was given space to contribute, and this time allowed a diverse gathering to share about their respective work and communities in an informal and intimate setting. Over time, these meals built interreligious communication, respect, and trust. For many, these gatherings were a form of catharsis and helped prevent conflicts. The peace values cultivated at these dinners helped Joko Widodo become recognized as a credible leader on a national level; he eventually became the governor of Jakarta and now serves as Indonesia's seventh president.¹¹

Shared food also paved the way for constructive dialogues in Solo between the Mennonite community and an Islamic paramilitary group called the Hezbollah Front. Like many other Islamic fronts, this group was birthed in Solo and has contributed to anti-Christian wars in Central Sulawesi and church closures in Central Java. Paulus Hartono, one of the two authors of this paper and founding leader of FPLAG, mediated a radio dispute between the Hezbollah Front and another Islamic radio station in 2003. After this encounter, Hartono audaciously showed up at the Hezbollah headquarters to have tea and build *silaturahmi*, or fraternal ties, with the Hezbollah commander Yanni Rusmanto. The first time Hartono visited the command center, Rusmanto told him, "Anyone outside of the Islamic community and creed is a *kafir* (infidel). You are an infidel! And because you're an ethnic Chinese, your blood is *halal*." Adding salt to the wound, Rusmanto added, "It is *halal* for us [Muslims] to kill you."¹² Yet Hartono's persistence week after week paid off. By the time of Eid al-Fitr, Rusmanto had finally warmed up to Hartono, and they spent the next couple of years gathering frequently to chat informally over tea.

The friendship that developed between Rusmanto and Hartono eventually helped defuse the religious tension surrounding Solo in the aftermath of the

11 Joko Widodo also used informal meals as a way to negotiate support for his proposed business and economic reforms in the city. See Rushda Majeed, "Defusing a Volatile City, Igniting Reforms: Joko Widodo and Surakarta, Indonesia, 2005–2011," *Innovations for Successful Societies* (Princeton University, July 2012), accessed April 13, 2015, <http://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/publications/defusing-volatile-city-igniting-reforms-joko-widodo-and-surakarta-indonesia-2005-2011>.

12 Sumanto Al Quturbi, "Engaging Extremists Key to Peace," *The Jakarta Globe*, January 29, 2013, accessed June 20, 2014, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/archive/engaging-extremists-key-to-peace/>.

Bali, Marriott Hotel, and Indonesian church bomb attacks. During the time when IFC members were strategizing about how to respond to the bombings, Hartono decided to invite the Hezbollah commander to a dialogue with Christian pastors regarding the alarming rate of forced church closures. Rusmanto accepted the invitation and found himself gathered with two hundred Christian pastors at a restaurant in Solo. In this dialogue moderated by Dian Nafi, a leader from Nahdlatul Ulama—the biggest moderate Islamic group in Indonesia—Rusmanto explained that the churches that were closed lacked proper building permits. The pastors then explained the difficulties in processing church permits in their neighborhoods. Some pastors asked, “Do mosques and *musholas* (Islamic prayer rooms) require building permits? If they don’t, why are churches being targeted for their lack of permits?” These questions caused Rusmanto to reflect,¹³ and marked the beginning of a journey that eventually brought him to embrace peace-oriented Christians.

Gathering together around the same table, like in the stories above, is important for Mennonite and Christian witness in religiously pluralistic societies. The life and teachings of Jesus reveal to us that mission is more than simply “winning souls” and trying to increase church membership within a congregation. We are called as Christians to emulate Jesus as the definition of peace, modeling his gracious and expansive engagement with people from diverse backgrounds. It is Jesus “who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall” between Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:14). He reconciled genders, races, cultures, and nationalities and called Christians to do the same. Mission has to be understood as being more holistic, consisting of building relationships and radically breaking down barriers that distinguish “us” from “them,” just as Christ sought to reconcile humans with God.

When Mennonites engage other faith communities, even Islamic militant groups (like Hartono), we must be clear that we are coming from a Christocentric framework. This clarity helps provide an honest foundation on which healthy relationships can develop. Yet the belief in Jesus as Messiah should not be used as the parameter for unity with other faith communities. In a country where proselytization is a sensitive issue and “Christianization” is a fear held by a growing number of Muslims, Mennonites in Indonesia must actively encourage others to adopt universal yet Christological values of justice, peace, love, truth, and creation care, because the values of Jesus Christ are not simply for those who attend a Christian church. Although conversion from these interfaith dialogues could occur, it is not the purpose of these encounters.

13 Paulus Hartono, interview by Agus Suryanto, Salatiga, Indonesia, 2014.

These experiences of Mennonites utilizing the communal nature of food in Solo teach us not to underestimate the power of eating together. They teach us that breaking down barriers is possible, that conflict can be transformed into peace, and that we have been blessed with the opportunity to help usher God's shalom into our own communities through the power of the Holy Spirit. We hope that this shalom will be just as abundant, accessible, and commonplace in the city as the busy mobile food stands (*angkringan*) and the mats (*wedangan*) where people gather to enjoy their meals.