
Fires, Urban Environments, and Politics in Contemporary Jakarta

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Destroying the city's neighborhoods in violent ways, sometimes putting thousands of people on the street, fires have been part of the common urban landscape of Jakarta since colonial times.¹ Their unchallenged strength makes them part of the everyday life of the metropolis, suggesting that Jakarta is doomed to experience them repeatedly. They reveal not only the transformations of the urban landscape but also the manner in which the city has developed as a whole. This essay questions the relationships between fires and governance in the city. Fires afford a vantage point from which to view the transformations of the structures of city planning and management over time. They expose how urban environments are controlled, both from a physical angle and with respect to their more political and social aspects. As they are complex phenomena, whose causes and reasons can range from mere accidents to arson, they involve different types of actors and practices (formal, informal, and occult) in the urban arena.

Focusing on the fires that have taken place during the period of great transformation of the Indonesia's capital city – since the mid-1960s up to the twenty-first century – this essay seeks to address the links between the evolving physical urban environment and the political means of governing a metropolis.²

It will first analyze the extent of fires in the city in connection with the modernization of the city, then the chronology of neighborhood fires since the 1970s; this will then lead to an assessment of the proposed solutions and reconstruction schemes. Finally, I will show that fires point to an elaborate management of the city, involving not only government officials, but also political parties, the civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the population. Combining formal and informal practices, the story of uncontrolled fires in Jakarta exposes evolving power struggles in a changing metropolis, from the conflicting views on what a city and its society should be (including its poorer segments of the population) to the more or less informal means to achieve such goals.

Fires and Modernity

Throughout the history of Jakarta, fires have been a steadily increasing phenomenon. From 150 recorded fires in 1966 (with more than half hitting residential developments and houses), they rose to 500 a year in the 1970s. Since then, there were an average of 700 to 800 fires a year, except in some particularly hot years like 1982, when 1,082 fires occurred in Jakarta, and 1997 with 1,175 outbreaks.³ During the 1960s, they displaced an average of 7,000 people a year, with peaks due to large fires in 1967 (24,617 people lost their homes), in 1971 (20,969 people), or in 1972 (19,000 displaced persons).⁴ In the 1980s, the figures fell to an average of about 10,000 displaced people a year in Jakarta, but since the 1990s the numbers have risen again well above 20,000 and even 30,000 (34,854 in 1994 and 37,705 in 1997). In the meantime, the population within the city limits went from 2.9 million in the 1961 census, to 4.6 million in 1971, then to 6.5 million in 1980, 8.26 million in 1990, and 9.66 million in 2010, while the metropolitan region (the Jabotabek) numbered more than 25 million inhabitants.⁵

Fires tend to follow two basic patterns: huge blazes that burn down entire neighborhoods and smaller fires that hit the city regularly. Their most frequent cause is poor electrical connections, in highly flammable environments (53 percent of the fires in 2005, for instance). Next come oil stoves (11 percent), cigarettes (5 percent), and oil lamps (4 percent). These figures, which hint at the pattern of energy supply in Jakarta households, also suggest a certain evolution. For instance, in 1971, oil utensils (stoves and lamps) accounted for 29 percent of fires, whereas electricity was responsible for 28 percent of the blazes. Such percentages remained stable throughout the 1970s, and it was only in the 1980s that the stove- and lamp-related fires declined, whereas electrically induced fires increased. These figures point to a shift not only in the types of fires, but

also in the overall equipment of Jakarta's poorer neighborhoods, with the spread of electrical service.

The physical environment of Jakarta also accounts for the origin of fires. Fires usually occur in the densest neighborhoods, where there is a favorable environment: narrow alleys, small houses built of wooden materials or other highly flammable materials, in a semipermanent or temporary manner (to use the local classification). The blocks of houses are also separated by narrow alleys that do not prevent fires from spreading from one side to the other, resulting in huge blazes.⁶

Thus fires negatively point to construction standards in Jakarta, to the high flammability of materials, but also to the urban morphology, the economic and environmental problems that result from poverty. They point to an urban ecology that reflects the conditions of the built environment and the transformations of the city.⁷ These facts have contributed to a representation of Jakarta as a poor city, a view that is often relayed by the city officials. Fires in kampongs still point to the dichotomy between an urban landscape evolving toward greater modernity and factors that tend to recall the development problems faced by a country such as Indonesia.⁸ Fires are thus linked closely to wider notions of development in Jakarta and Indonesia. From the planner's point of view, their occurrence may be understood as a sign of a certain backwardness of the metropolis, of a city in need of modernization. Fires are thus linked to broader urban policies and can be used and abused in city transformations.

Fires and Change: Burning and Expanding Jakarta

Since the 1960s, different types of neighborhoods have been affected. The biggest fires occur in neighborhoods with high population densities and low construction standards. The majority take place in poor and densely populated kampongs that are generally rebuilt in their aftermath (fig. 18.1). For instance, in the northern subdistrict of Penjaringan, fires started occurring frequently in the 1970s. Eleven fires happened in the 1980s, and since then, more than twenty-six fires have displaced more than one hundred persons a year. If some of these blazes are of criminal origin, most of them are accidental. In such cases, the neighborhood is rebuilt by the local population, in a way that resembles the previous kampong.

In the 1960s, a few large fires happened, such as the 1967 Utang Panjang fire, near Kemayoran. With more than three hundred houses destroyed and 4,900 people left homeless, this fire was of criminal origin. Three attempts to

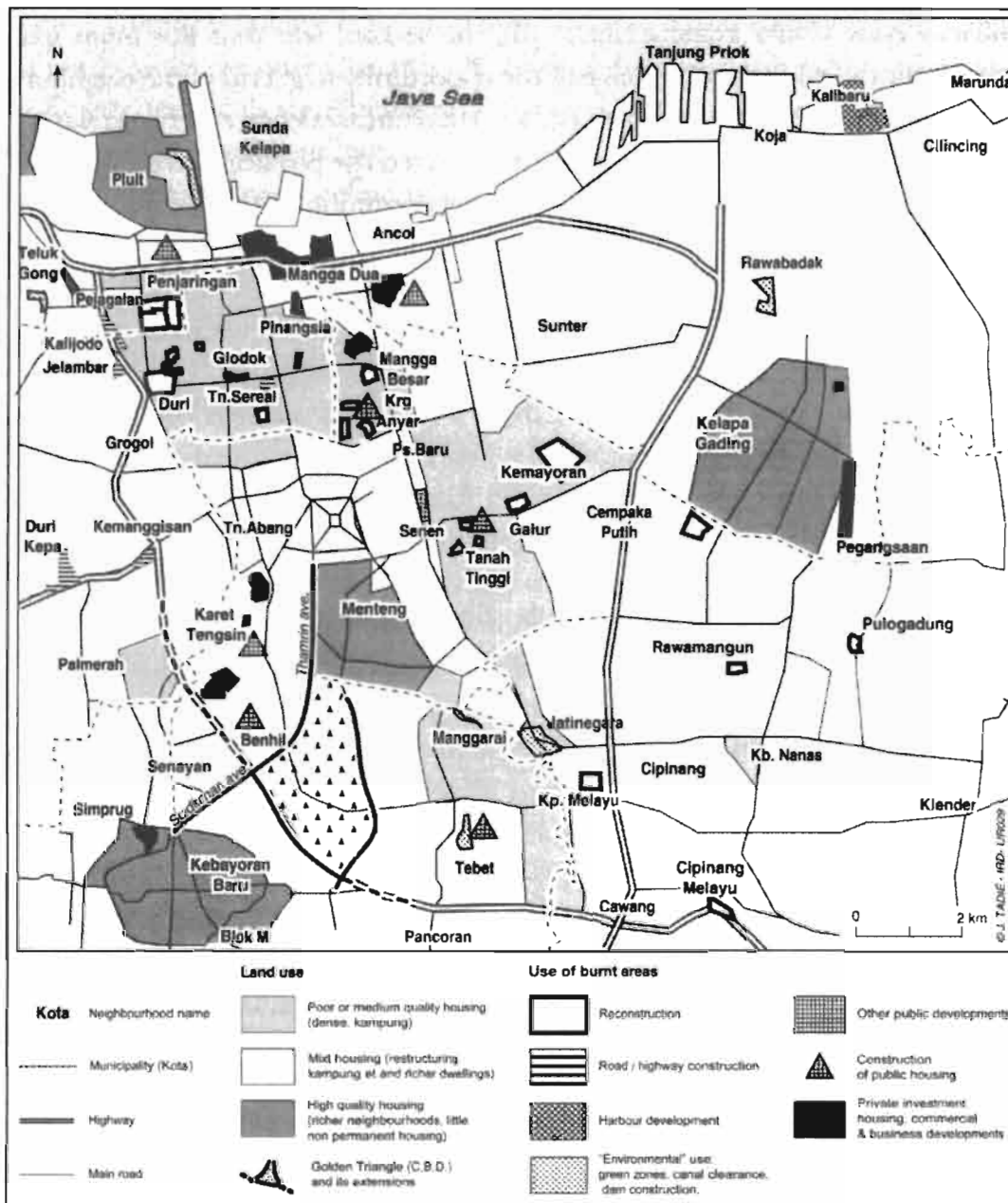


Figure 18.1. Types of use of the major *kampung* fires in Jakarta (1970–2004). (Map by author.)

set fire to the neighborhood had already occurred, and the instigators had revived the flames that had been put down.⁹ In such a context, in the aftermath of the 1965 coup, which brought General Suharto to power and led to the annihilation of the Indonesian Communist Party, two conclusions were drawn by the newspapers. The first was that it was sabotage from Communist individuals, thus reproducing the rhetoric of the beginning of the anti-Communist

Suharto New Order regime (1966–98); the second was that the municipal government should take advantage of the opportunity to get rid of the neighborhood gangs. From that time onward, a certain ambivalence emerged relating to fires. They were destructive events that affected the physical environment of communities, greatly jeopardizing the living condition of the locals; yet they were also tools for the improvement of the city in the local government's view.

Such types of fires persisted as Indonesia and Jakarta went through tremendous change resulting from the economic growth of the New Order, with the major boom taking place from the end of the 1970s onward.

During the 1970s, little change can be seen in the patterns of fires. Huge fires were still a necessary preamble to certain construction projects. This was the case, for instance, in the commercial Pasar Baru district, where fifty-five houses burned down in November 1972, leaving 717 inhabitants homeless. The fire occurred as the inhabitants were to be evicted and replaced by the growing commercial center. Financial compensation was still in the process of negotiation. Other fires occurred in commercial zones that were to be transformed, such as in the Senen area, one of the biggest markets in Jakarta, where the largest informal prostitution center of the city—Planet Senen—was closed in 1972 after several fires. The land was then used for road widening and the creation of public amenities, such as a youth center including a sports facility.¹⁰ Fires also occurred in areas that were beginning to experience change, soon to be reached by the city's modern thoroughfares, as was the case near Thamrin Avenue or its extension to the south, Sudirman Avenue, in what was to become the Golden Triangle, Jakarta's main business district. In the meantime, fires still broke out in dense popular neighborhoods as had happened before.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, many more blazes occurred in the city. But the geography of such catastrophes points to different types of issues. During the 1980s, fires began to hit a greater number of areas. They reflected the growth of Jakarta, which between the census of 1966 and that of 1990 had doubled in population, from 4 million inhabitants in the limits of the Special Region to 8.26 million. This increase probably also reflects the greater reliability of available data, especially with the creation of city newspapers such as *Pos Kota* and the more detailed coverage of fires in the national newspapers.

Since the 1980s, several types of districts have experienced intense transformation due to fires. Kalibaru, located next to the harbor of Tanjung Priok, in North Jakarta, had been susceptible to fires since the 1960s, but since the end of the 1970s, ten major fires occurred, nine of which displaced over a thousand people. In each case, the inhabitants recall the fires that hit the area as if they

were a common fatality. The most severely devastated districts in this series of blazes were the ones closest to the harbor developments, where truck and container terminals were being developed, as well as next to the harbor that specialized in wood handling.

In the meantime, a second type of district was emerging: the neighborhoods located near the Golden Triangle (the business district). Such an area as Simprug, now an elite residential district with a golf course, located near the Senayan Stadium, was hit by several fires. Prior to the 1970s, there were a number of disputes because the area was scheduled to be a site for new developments. But fires still continued occurring throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1989, 200 houses were destroyed on the site where an elite complex now stands; the same happened in March 1993 (172 houses) on the site of a projected road. Other fires occurred in Karet Tengsin and in Bendungan Hilir, both on the western part of the Golden Triangle.

Throughout the 1990s and into the new century, these trends were confirmed, as new development projects followed one another. Penjaringan burned repeatedly, and other areas experienced similar conflagrations, such as the Northern Ancol subdistrict (near the recreation center situated on lands belonging to the railway company), the Golden Triangle, or real estate developments such as Kelapa Gading. Fires also occurred in combination with the construction of infrastructure, clearing ground for the urban freeways that were to be built in the 1990s. Blazes destroyed whole neighborhoods, in Pejagalan for instance, in the north of the city, where three hundred houses burned in May 1992. Financial compensation for land clearance was provided by the Provincial Government in the aftermath of the fire, but generally below the requested levels. In September 1992, the same happened a little to the west, in Kalijodo (in the Jelambar subdistrict), which was also to be crossed by a freeway. Whereas fires usually cleared ground for the construction of highways, in the twenty-first century the trend has changed as settlements under elevated freeways have been submitted to blazes, as in Ancol, where thirty-four houses under a freeway were burned in June 2001, or in Penjaringan in 2007. After this fire, which weakened the foundations of the pillars supporting the freeway, the city decided to remove all the settlements located underneath such elevated highways.

Fires have therefore been part not only of everyday life in Jakarta but also of its development and growth. Though most of the fires are not related to urban developments, several fires took place in circumstances linked to urban development projects or land disputes. This shows that destructive events have increasingly been related to the city's growth since the 1970s.

Regenerating Jakarta: Fires as a Tool for Development

When a fire breaks out in Jakarta, most people in the neighborhood tend to run for safety as fast as they can, in rare cases rescuing their most valuable belongings. Firefighters usually arrive late, and the large fires last an average of three hours.¹¹ In this inferno, while most inhabitants flee the site, others endeavor to put the fire out, forming bucket brigades or destroying houses so that the blaze will not spread. Violent acts also take place. Thieves take advantage of the havoc to steal motorbikes or other valuables.¹²

Disputes may also occur. On December 2, 2002, in Penjaringan, for instance, a man was arrested by the neighborhood residents during a fire. He was suspected of theft. When his belongings were examined, he was found to be carrying a plastic bag filled with gasoline. Next to the bag were mosquito coils and matches.¹³ In a neighboring house, six bags filled with two to five liters of gasoline were also found. The newspapers also hinted that the November 1990 Kalibaru fire had been caused by arson, because gasoline had been found on the ground and the fire appeared to have been set in three different places by people carrying weapons.¹⁴ These anecdotes suggest other dimensions related to fires: arson and larceny. If thefts point to common delinquency, arson reveals ongoing trends in the city's evolution: fires are also a means of revenge and of displacing people by force.

Arson can usually be related to several factors, from psychological and individual motivations to more-complex ones.¹⁵ In Jakarta rumors of arson in kampongs occur each time there is a land dispute.¹⁶ In such cases, they can be seen as ways to weaken the resistance of the inhabitants and to put them in a vulnerable position. Arson is seldom detected. Not all fires are investigated by the police, who in most cases are unable to determine their causes as the scene is usually left in a shambles.¹⁷ Fewer than four fires a year are usually attributed to criminal causes. Yet rumors point to the evolving use of arson in Jakarta. They show how fires can be a tool for city planning and a means of brutal urban transformation. They also reveal a set of actors who are seldom seen publicly in Jakarta's urban management, although they are omnipresent. Those "people carrying weapons" or the people with gasoline refer to the middlemen often used in Jakarta for settling disputes outside the legal frame. Referred to as *jago* or *preman* in the local context, they play an important part in Jakarta's management, from handling security matters to intimidation.¹⁸ In the smaller fires, it seems that some of these *premans* have been used. In larger fires requiring more technology, such as department store fires, for instance, some interviewees

also suspected former military students were responsible for those deeds. They thus refer to the instrumental dimension of fires in conflict settlements, besides the law.

In the aftermath of fires, neighborhoods are usually rebuilt, often in the same dense pattern, which takes more or less time according to the wealth of the population (as homes are seldom protected by insurance), in a way that reminds us of the other ways of coping with fires in Asia.¹⁹ The inhabitants first must wait for the authorization of the city before they can rebuild their houses. In so-called illegal or informal kampongs, some techniques of fire mitigation have been applied, although they are not directly aimed at addressing those hazards. For instance, since 1969 the government has implemented the Kampung Improvement Program (since 1974 in partnership with the World Bank). Its aim is to upgrade the urban environment through infrastructure and social development. In fact, only the environment upgrading was carried out.²⁰ Regarding fires, its main achievement was to provide better access to neighborhoods, but it did not prevent fires from starting in newly reorganized kampongs. Other solutions proposed by the government reflected the idea that kampong fires were due to overpopulation of neighborhoods resulting from immigration; they consisted of emigration schemes for the victims: sending them back to their villages of origin, or to the Outer islands of Indonesia, as part of government-funded transmigration programs aimed at redistributing the population of the country.

Still other solutions included buying new, "modern" equipment, such as fire trucks (which are often too big to pass through the narrow alleys of Jakarta's kampongs); installing water hydrants (but with insufficient water pressure, if water is available at all, due to the inadequate municipal water networks), or, after 2000, installing fire alarms. This system, called smart alarms, is meant to solve the cross-checking problems and delays of the Firefighting Agency by installing public phones directly linked to the fire stations, in a manner reminiscent of the emergency phones common in the streets of American cities. With such solutions, one can see how imported techniques and procedures have influenced attempts to solve Jakarta's fire problems. Nevertheless, they also reveal the problems that come with adopting outside models that are not always adapted to the local situation.

Since the end of the 1980s, other planning trends have prevailed in treating Jakarta's urban poor and, therefore, the number of kampong dwellers struck by fire. These plans have involved the building of public flats. The first public-housing project was the construction of flats in the Tanah Abang area in 1983. Nevertheless, only in 1987 did such schemes start to be used as a solution to the

fires in frequently stricken areas. It was proposed that victims relocate first to existing units before having new apartments built on lands left vacant by the fires. The first records for such relocation are in Karang Anyar, where inhabitants were to resettle in such flats, which they refused at first, and in the Penjaringan subdistrict, with the construction of flats in 1987–88.²¹ Such a move, as can be seen in the Penjaringan instance, continued throughout the 1990s till the beginning of the new century. These policies were often regarded with suspicion and resisted in several areas such as Karet Tengsin and Tanah Tinggi in 1993 or Bendungan Hilir in 1995.

In Tanah Tinggi, for instance, a fire occurred on July 6, 1991. It left 5,800 people homeless and destroyed 736 houses on state-owned land. The reconstruction authorizations were late to come. Although officials acknowledged that the land was for housing purposes, they nevertheless asserted it could be planned in a better way, with public housing.²² Those statements were slow to be issued, and the inhabitants, dreading such a policy, had already started reconstructing their own homes and opposed the construction project. Two years later, on July 5, 1993, a second fire occurred in the same exact location, destroying 360 houses. The residents of the neighborhood went to the mayor's office to oppose the proposed construction scheme but to no effect. Ten days later, compensation was proposed to allow them to rent a place during the construction, and they were offered special prices to move into the future flats. Again the inhabitants refused, citing previous experiences, when the relocated residents were forced to pay more than the agreed sum if they wanted to occupy the flats. In August, rioters prevented city officials and firefighters from entering the area.²³ The result was that the army had to intervene to secure the site and remained for a week in the neighborhood (at the inhabitants' expense). The flats were eventually completed in 1994, but only part of the population was able to move into the resulting flats because of the expensive credit schemes.²⁴ During all those processes, rumors of arson circulated following the fires.

In all these cases, such rumors were repeatedly denied by the city government. Officials would first assert that plans for reconstruction had already been made and had nothing to do with the fires, such as in the statement of Governor Wiyogo in 1991.²⁵ They would usually emphasize the appalling situation of the *kampung* for which action had to be taken. Another point of view stated that public flats were needed in Jakarta because of land shortage and that burned *kampongs* would be replaced by such housing.²⁶

This trend, which appeared in the 1980s, can be interpreted as a solution to fire-prone areas because the public-housing projects allow better access to neighborhoods. They are a means of rationalizing urban space and represent a

regional model in efforts to eradicate poverty. But the rumors of arson surrounding those processes add another dimension to this solution. Why were those flats built under such traumatic circumstances?

In a context of economic growth (in the 1980s and 1990s), these processes can be understood as a way of giving Jakarta a modern image, inspired by policies already implemented by several of Indonesia's neighbors (such as Singapore, for instance).²⁷ Thus not only would the flats built near the prestigious avenues represent such a trend but also more-remote ones such as in Penjaringan or Tanah Tinggi.

Their construction can also be interpreted as a way to integrate informal land into an official urban economy. With public funding, monthly rentals, or credit reimbursement to pay for the flats that were sold, these lands entered the economy of the formal city. They are also to be understood in the international context, where policies affecting the urban poor had shifted to promote housing finance and loans rather than slum upgrading. This was the case, for instance, in World Bank shelter policies.²⁸ They were thus regarded as a solution to housing problems for the urban poor in the third world.

Fires are one of the ways Jakarta has been shaped since the 1960s. Regarded fatalistically as a long-standing abuse about which little can be done, they nevertheless show how the city is managed and expose different overlapping visions of what Jakarta is to become. Occurring in different types of neighborhoods, fires reveal the different concerns of people in the city, from poverty and survival-related issues, to modern international developments linked with globalization (in the business districts such as the Golden Triangle, for instance). Fires thus integrate the different aspects of the life of the metropolis, showing the (lack of?) coherence of some public policies as well as the different sets of actors who have a stake in such catastrophes.

Who Controls Jakarta? Fires and Their Users

In such transformations, several types of actors intervene and contribute to the reshaping of Jakarta's burned areas. If the population plays a major part in the reconstruction in the form of resistance to unwanted transformations and even to the entry of firefighters, other agencies and actors are also involved.

The Firefighting Agency, as a service of the provincial government (in this case the Jakarta Capital Special Region), is managed and funded by it. It is generally blamed for its inefficiency, its slowness in responding to emergencies, its insufficient provision of water at fire sites, and its solicitation of bribes in

order to fight fire. The agency acknowledges it has human resource problems: an insufficient number of firemen, aging staff, and so forth. But there are also management problems. Apart from the rumors of extortion, there were also cases of trials for corruption, especially concerning the purchase of equipment (which is neither novel nor unique to this agency).²⁹

The agency's slowness in responding to fires can be attributed to several reasons: traffic jams, financial negotiation between the agency and the inhabitants for intervening, and verifying the truth of the fire alerts by phone (which slows the firefighters' departure). The population also blames the agency for firefighters arriving too late (sometimes on purpose) and for not having any water, which sometimes leads to confrontations in which the firemen are attacked.

In the aftermath of the fires, other types of actors intervene, especially in the relief process. The forensic police investigate the scenes to determine if the fires were accidental or not. But in environments such as kampongs, it is often difficult to trace the causes of fires and often preferable that the latter remain unknown.³⁰ Other stakeholders include the neighbors; official actors (the heads of neighborhoods subdivisions); the provincial government; the Red Cross; various NGOs, some more and others less visible in their interventions; political parties; and organizations bordering on illegality. These actors reveal other types of uses of fires in Jakarta.

During the New Order regime, most of the aid following fires was channeled through the ruling political party, Golkar, and organizations linked to it (such as women's or youth organizations), as well as the Indonesian Red Cross. However, since the 1998 political liberalization, the number of aid volunteers present at such sites has increased noticeably, especially at the larger disasters. Most organizations even build command posts, or *posko*, which are supposed to concentrate all the relief in a central location before it is redistributed to the victims. These posts are intended to coordinate the aid; collect funds, food, and other types of basic provisions; and then redistribute them to the affected population.

Several political parties are most often present at fire sites in Jakarta: the Golkar, the nationalist Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDI-P), the Muslim Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN), the Islamist Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), and more recently the Partai Demokrat. They usually provide basic needs. Whereas Golkar's aid is usually channeled by direct donations, with visits of party representatives to the sites (which are also to be reported in the papers), the other parties build command posts.

The nationalist PDI-P started implementing its own grassroots relief policy at the end of the Suharto era as a means of expanding its popularity. It began

to formalize its relief activities in 2006, when it founded the *Baguna* (*Badan Penanggulangan Bencana*), a special unit for interventions during catastrophes. It aims to intervene within a twenty-four-hour period and bring tents, essential supplies, and sometimes material to help rebuild destroyed infrastructures. In practice, however, it often has little besides tents to distribute to victims, as was the case, for instance, following a fire in 2007 in Duri.

The Islamist PKS seems to be one of the most active political organizations. Its program promotes a moral society, with the eradication of corruption, social development, the alleviation of poverty, and the building of a society based on Islamic values. Its intervention at the grassroots level is, on the one hand, a means of showing that the party implements its program and that its deeds match its words. But in interviews its deputies at the local parliament had the same discourse on fires as the city government, both concerning their causes (for which they blame the population) and their remedies (public housing in flats). The PKS is also involved in emergency aid because it provides a means to extend its political basis, in a way recalling the Muslim Brotherhood's use of the 1992 Cairo earthquake (although PKS representatives maintain that they do a better job than their Egyptian counterparts).³¹ Postfire aid can be seen as a way to promote the party and gain support for it.

These relief activities organized by political parties may thus be interpreted in diverse ways. One can first see these activities as part of a bid for political expansion. This is clear in the case of some political parties (e.g., the PKS and the PDI-P). In such a context, what is often sought is the creation of a new clientele, in order to increase the party's power. Thus the shift from the New Order to the *Reformasi* era since 1998 can be interpreted as a shift of actors. During the Suharto era, this kind of relationship was monopolized by the Golkar. After 1998, the Golkar's monopoly was challenged by the new political parties, which were quickly gaining local support. Similar practices have thus been perpetuated, but with a wider scope, with increasing numbers of actors endeavoring to expand their clientele. During electoral campaigns, such as in July 2008, just after the launch of the 2009 campaign, numerous political parties could be seen at fire sites, with many more volunteers than in normal times (such as in the July 2008 Duri Utara fire). These variations in the help given at the local level by the political parties show the importance they assign to grassroots intervention. The progression of the popularity of the PKS party in the local elections in Jakarta would also tend to confirm the usefulness of such policies: in 2004 it became the first political party to receive nearly a quarter of the votes.

If the intention of the political parties is indeed to expand or to create popular support, its efficiency can be questioned. In practice, it appears that

the victims accept the aid, regardless of who brings it. This point can be linked to the volatility of voters in Jakarta, the difficulty for parties to gain a territorial basis, and the general disrepute in which political parties are increasingly held in the press.³²

Their increased presence can also be considered part of the trend toward giving disasters, risks, and environmental hazards better consideration in national policies, especially in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami that hit Aceh.

A third interpretation would see these relief activities as signs of individual spontaneous help by individuals in the political parties.³³ This hypothesis is sustained by the lack of postcatastrophe follow-up by the parties and of any established discourse on aid. Even within the PDI-P, the establishment of the Baguna section was presented as a personal act, being set up by former President Megawati Sukarnoputri. Eventually the lack of clear distinction between the action of NGOs and that of political parties in the field adds to this blurring of categories and also to the inefficiency of the purported expansion of political parties.

The NGO level is much more difficult to study in Jakarta at present as it is constantly being reshaped since the fall of the Suharto regime.³⁴ In the aftermath of fires, different NGOs have intervened according to the types of neighborhoods that had been destroyed. I have mostly seen advocacy NGOs out in the field when evictions were involved. A second class of NGOs is composed of religious organizations, Buddhist for instance, especially in North Jakarta, which are often active in providing relief, or Islamic, such as the Dompot Dhuafa linked with the Islamic daily newspaper *Republika*. A variant type is made up of Islamic religious NGOs with links to political parties such as Aksi Cepat Tanggap (ACT) founded in April 2005.³⁵ This NGO has intervened in several regions in the outer islands, is meant to collect funds for the relief operations, and is closely linked to the PKS.³⁶

This short typology shows different types of relationships between NGOs and the victims of fires, which are not new but take on new overtones in the *Reformasi* context. The advocacy NGOs tend to defend the rights of the weak, and they try to organize them. If such organizations did exist during the New Order, the decentralization process tended to put them closer to the governing bodies, in a more direct relationship. On the contrary, those linked to political parties, such as ACT, deny doing any advocacy but officially assert that they want to become models of how to help society and to be professional in their action.³⁷ The distinctions and complementarities between ACT and the PKS can also be questioned and reflect the persistent problems of Indonesian NGOs

and political parties regarding funding. Thus as one PKS member of parliament recognized, ACT was one means to obtain some funding for the relief operations of the PKS.

These trends in relief operations in the field show the links between the highest spheres of governmental organizations (from local institutions to political parties) and the population at the grassroots level. If the use of burned land created an image of confrontation (inhabitants evicted, lack of proper compensation), this recent use of fires shows how essential the population is to local politics, especially since the decentralization process of 1998, which led to the direct election of the provincial governor (one could see command posts of the candidates during the campaign for such elections). In the capital city, fires thus reflect the peculiar dimensions of disasters and their polysemy.

Fires reveal the links between modernity, power, and daily constraints. They reveal the functioning of a metropolis over time, from the changing uses of land, on the one hand, to the use of the victims in relief policies, on the other. In this case the change of political regime has led to an increasing number of actors intervening at the grassroots level. Yet the numerous rumors about criminal elements and practices surrounding a large number of those events show how fires are still a sensitive topic. They show how the population, when it resists new developments and market-driven practices, can be dealt with in a brutal way, by the use of intimidation (and middlemen), evictions, and fire. In the economic realm, fires also reflect different forces at work in the city, from grassroots reconstruction, using the informal sector and more or less informal reconstruction methods, to capital-intensive projects that change the physiognomy of whole neighborhoods, where reconstruction is part and parcel of Jakarta's strive toward modernity and international competition in a regional context.

In Jakarta, as in other cities, fire mitigation is intrinsically connected with politics, much more so than with the Firefighting Agency.³⁸ In a context where the agency is considered incompetent, fires question the policies surrounding urban management. They show how kampongs are considered not as residential neighborhoods to be upgraded but residues to be dissolved. The seeming powerlessness of the Firefighting Agency thus comes from its intermediate position, in which it is meant to alleviate the worse situations and does not have the means to combat fires in an effective way. In this whole process, it can be regarded as an intermediary in urban politics.

The ambivalent and ambiguous uses of fires reveal how they create opportunities for greater power, both for political elites and for the city administrations.

The inhabitants of fire-stricken areas are therefore mere tools to achieve such goals. Fires thus expose the relationships between the exercise of power, its meanings, and the development of the metropolis. Competition for urban land and for power are closely linked. Changes in the management and uses of fires signal transformations of the political realm at large. In this case, over more than forty years, little has changed. Policies regarding fires and their victims still look alike, and the grassroots are still considered in the same ways, despite changes in political regimes. Fires symbolize the formal transformations of a city as well as the blurred Indonesian politics.

NOTES

1. Batavia, capital city of the Dutch East Indies—renamed Jakarta when Indonesia gained independence—was regularly struck by fires. This essay addresses this phenomenon in recent times, when Jakarta underwent major transformations under Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98) and the following democratization period, the Reform, or *Reformasi* era (since 1998).

2. The material for this essay comes from interviews and observations during my dissertation fieldwork on a different topic in the Tanah Tinggi subdistrict in Central Jakarta, which had been burned down several times. Further surveys were conducted from 2005 to 2007. I have also conducted interviews with actors from the Provincial Government (the Fire Fighting Agency in particular), the forensic police, political parties and non-governmental organizations. Additional information and statistics were drawn from newspapers when no archive was available.

3. These are usually characterized as drier and hotter El Niño years. In a built environment, where the human factor seems predominant, this correlation with dry years seems strange. It can be explained by the scarcity of water or even more conducive environments with drier wooden materials. See Stephen Pyne, *Fire: A Brief History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 112–13.

4. Those huge blazes are not a new event in Jakarta. For instance, in July 1952, 10,000 people lost their houses, in 1953 as much in the Tanah Tinggi subdistrict. During the colonial era, 1,500 coolies lost their houses to fires in Bladongan in 1854. The Dutch hygienist programs in the first part of the twentieth century also addressed such issues. Cf. Johan W. Tesch, *The Hygiene Study Ward Centre at Batavia: Planning and Preliminary Results (1937–1941)* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1948).

5. Badan Pusat Statistik, *Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010*, www.bps.go.id (accessed August 17, 2011).

6. Such aspects are underlined by several authors but in historical context; see Lionel Frost, "Coping in Their Own Way: Asian Cities and the Problem of Fires," *Urban History* 24, no. 1 (May 1997): 7–8; and Stéphane Yerasimos and Franck Fries, eds., "La Ville en feu: Actes de la journée du 4 juin 1993 organisée par le Laboratoire 'Théorie des Mutations Urbaines,'" *Cahiers TMU*, nos. 6–7 (September–December 1993): 172.

7. Lionel E. Frost and Eric L. Jones ("The Fire Gap and the Greater Durability of Nineteenth Century Cities," *Planning Perspectives* 4 [1989]: 341), for instance, emphasize the differences in the flammability of cities as they undergo various stages of growth, in Western cities in particular, with the reduction of fire damage by the increasing use of less-flammable building materials. Such considerations would thus hint at the processes of modernization of cities. These schematic evolutions are nevertheless debatable as construction materials, their volatility, and cheap prices can be part of strategies for coping with fires.

8. In a general sense, *kampung*, or kampongs, usually refer to popular and poorer neighborhoods.

9. *Kompas* (Jakarta), June 27 and 29, 1967.

10. See Jérôme Tadié, "The Hidden Territories of Jakarta," in *The Indonesian Town Revisited*, ed. Peter J. M. Nas (Münster: Lit Verlag; Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), 402–23.

11. These statistics are highly approximate as they are an average of the fires displacing more than five hundred inhabitants in Jakarta from the 1990s to 2005, with many the durations for many fires lacking.

12. Theft occurred during the September 1988 Karet Tengsin fire, for instance, according to *Suara Pembaruan* (Jakarta), September 12, 1988.

13. *Suara Pembaruan* (Jakarta), December 3, 2002.

14. *Pelita* (Jakarta), November 5, 1990.

15. Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilisation* (London: Allen Lane, 1992), 158–59.

16. These rumors of arson are also widespread in cases of market or department store fires, where insurance issues are at stake.

17. In the statistics given by the forensic police in 2006, arson would not be substantiated in most fires investigated.

18. See Jérôme Tadié, *Les Territoires de la violence* (Paris: Belin, 2006), 167–69.

19. Frost, "Coping in Their Own Way," 9.

20. Charles Goldblum et al., *Métropoles de l'Asie du Sud-Est: Stratégies urbaines et politiques du logement* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987), 150–81; Susan Abeyasekere, *Jakarta: A History* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), 222–26; Ali Sadikin, *Gita Jaya: Catatan H. Ali Sadikin, Gubernur Kepala Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, 1966–1977* (Jakarta: Pemerintah Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, 1977), 258–63; Alison Murray, *No Honey No Money: A Study of Street Traders and Prostitutes in Jakarta* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15–16, 22.

21. Construction of other such blocks was begun in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2002 (and usually completed one year later). Data from the Housing Agency of the DKI (Capital Special Region of Jakarta), Jakarta, January 2006.

22. In Jakarta's planning system, the land on which the kampong was settled was meant for housing purposes. Nevertheless, a great part of it was state land, and most of the inhabitants had use rights.

23. "In these occasions they [the firemen] come fast. Try and imagine when there's a fire, they come late on purpose, waiting for our houses to be burned down first." *Kompas* (Jakarta), August 12, 1993. Information about the Tanah Tinggi case comes from

interviews and the newspapers *Kompas* (Jakarta), *Pos Kota* (Jakarta), *Sinar Pagi* (Jakarta), *Suara Merdeka* (Semarang), *Harian Pelita* (Jakarta), and *Media Indonesia* (Jakarta) from those periods.

24. This is a trend in housing flats in Jakarta, where the intended population is usually not the one that eventually occupies the flats. See *Kompas* (Jakarta), October 26, 2000.

25. *Bisnis Indonesia* (Jakarta), November 7, 1991. In this article the governor also says that the location of future public housing had already been programmed and enumerates the locations for Central Jakarta.

26. Statement from an official of the Housing Agency of the DKI Jakarta (Kasubdis Pengendalian Pembangunan Perumahan DKI Jakarta), *Media Indonesia* (Jakarta), April 4, 1995.

27. See Nancy H. Kwak, "The Politics of Singapore's Fire Narrative," this volume.

28. See "The Evolving Objectives and Outcomes of World Bank Shelter Assistance," in *Thirty Years of World Bank Shelter Lending: What Have We Learned?*, ed. Robert M. Buckley and Jerry Kalarickal (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), 7–22.

29. Charges of extortion are denied on a regular basis by the agency. For a rare newspaper account of such misconduct, see *Kompas* (Jakarta), April 17, 1983. The chief of the West Jakarta subsection of the agency was tried in July 2005 for fictitious projects that led to his personal enrichment. See *Koran Tempo* (Jakarta), November 29, 2005.

30. In an interview, a former head of the forensic police, who specialized in arson, told me how, during the New Order, the investigators were often forced to conclude that the fire was an accident, whereas that was not the case.

31. Cf. Zulkieflimansyah, "Overcoming the Fear: PKS and Democratization," *Jakarta Post*, December 13, 2005, and interview with the author, August 22, 2007. Several PKS members of the local parliament declared that in the 2004 elections, they made gains in districts in which they had intervened.

32. I would like to thank the *Kompas* (Jakarta) Research and Development Department for these insights.

33. In this case, the aid could be interpreted in a more culturalist point of view, as a prolongation of *gotong royong*. See Niels Mulder, *Inside Indonesian Society: Cultural Change in Java* (Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1999), 68, 175. I would like to thank Risa Permanadelli for discussions of this matter.

34. On NGOs in Indonesia, see Philip Eldridge, "Non-Government Organizations, the States, and Democratization in Indonesia," in *Imagining Indonesia: Cultural Politics and Political Culture*, ed. J. Schiller and B. Martin-Schiller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), 198–228; *Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat menyuarkan nurani menggapai kesetaraan* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2004); cf. Lea Jellinek, "Collapsing under the Weight of Success: An NGO in Jakarta," *Environment and Urbanization* 15 (2003): 171–80, for a critical view of the transformation of NGOs during the *Reformasi* era, as well as Anu Lounela, "Take the Money or Die: A Flood of 'Democratisation' Dollars Has Corrupted the NGO Movement," *Inside Indonesia* (January–March 2002), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edition-69/take-the-money-or-die-3007418> (accessed on March 2, 2006).

35. Most of the members of ACT were in the Dompét Duafa sponsored by the *Republika* (Jakarta) newspaper.

36. Interview with Zulkieflimansyah, PKS member of parliament, August 22, 2007. When I interviewed the ACT managers, they denied such links. In fact, during some relief operations, I saw ACT vehicles bringing basic goods to the PKS command post.

37. Interview with Ahyudin, executive director of ACT, August 27, 2007. Such a discourse can also be interpreted as legitimating the NGOs especially compared to political parties: the NGOs have better access to the population (from which they gain their legitimacy) and better understand the people, which allows them to take better care of them.

38. For an example of another city, see Kwak, "The Politics of Singapore's Fire Narrative," this volume.

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