

Indonesia 1965: Rehabilitating Victims, Rehabilitating Revolution¹

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IT IS VERY HEARTENING TO SEE the increased and more open discussion of the 1965–68 mass killings of supporters of President Sukarno, the Indonesian Left, and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), internationally and within Indonesia. The stark and cruel brutality of the 1965 murders revealed by the confessions in the film “The Act of Killing” has played a very important role in provoking this discussion. The public release of the main findings of the KOMNASHAM Report affirming the systematic role of the state and the military in the killings and the passing of this report to the current Indonesian government has also been very important. The ongoing work of the former members of the pre-1965 political left—now mostly aged—in raising the issue of their plight, digging up mass graves, and through other campaigns has been crucial. Former GERWANI leader, Sulami, played a heroic role in pioneering this process among her comrades. There have also been court cases seeking compensation for loss of property and violence suffered, which are sometimes successful, sometimes not.

The role of younger activists has also been crucial at certain times. The first digging up of mass graves was carried out under Suharto by *Partai Rakyat Demokratik* (PRD) founder, Danial Indrakusuma, with English film-maker, Max Stahl. Indrakusuma led two further mass grave efforts during the short Habibie interregnum.

This increased activity has certainly won more profile and more space for campaigning and lobbying on the issue of rehabilitation and justice for the victims of the 1965-68 terror. At this point, however, we

would have to register that the main gains won have been at the level of a small increase in public discussion; not of broader public opinion shifts, nor changes at the level of state policy. The state, under the current Yudhoyono government, has ignored the KOMNASHAM report. In fact, the Minister for Politics and Security made a comment that he thought the 1965 mass killings were justified as it was what guaranteed the creation of the Indonesia that exists today. There were rumors that the President may “*mintamaaf*” (apologize) but that did not eventuate. Indeed, the rumors provoked a string of organizations, including the Nahdatul Ulama, to make statements rejecting such a stance.

The ability to launch these campaigns and court cases does represent a change in atmosphere. This was helped greatly by the fact that as soon as Suharto left power and the New Order as such ended, so too ended the systematic and intense national New Order anti-PKI propaganda. Most symbolic of this has been the end to the systematic, compulsory screening of the terrible but brutally vivid film “Pengkhanatan G30S.” School children who have gone through the school system in the last 15 years have not suffered that indignity. It is making a difference, but not yet a defining one. Indeed, in the schools, the old policy of referring to G30S as G30S/PKI has recently been reintroduced, with very intimidating messages being sent into the teacher training system.

Counter-revolutionary state

The reality is that while the repressive power of the state was delivered a heavy blow in 1998—when the army was unable to protect Suharto’s dictatorship; and in 1999, when it was also unable to enforce a victory in the East Timorese referendum—the basic character of the state, and the ruling class of which it is an instrument, has remained the same. It essentially remains as a counterrevolutionary state.

There have been very few counter-revolutionary states in the world over the last 100 years or so. Of course, all states are latently counterrevolutionary; that is, they will probably try to suppress efforts to

overturn and destroy them. There have also been many examples of repressive states, one of which is in Southeast Asia, the Philippines under the Marcos regime. But actual counter-revolutionary states—states who have *come to power on the basis of the active suppression of revolution*—are rare. Perhaps Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia are the two other big examples, although of very different types. It is important to be able to identify the differences among a repressive state, a very repressive state, and a counter-revolutionary state. In my abstract, I criticized the formulation by Douglas Kammen who referred to it as a “counter-revolution” aiming “to destroy the social bases of President Sukarno’s left-leaning Guided Democracy.” While using the term “counter-revolution,” Kammen fails to sufficiently and explicitly recognize the revolution that was underway, or about to take place. The counterrevolutionary violence of 1965–68 was not aimed at ending Sukarno’s “left-leaning” regime but was primarily aimed at destroying the social bases of the *next government*.

Both liberal scholarship and commentary since 1965, as well as the minuscule amount of left-wing analysis, fail to give sufficient weight to a crucial reality: that the Indonesian Left—comprised of Sukarno, the PKI, the left-wing of the *Partai Nasional Indonesia*(PNI), *Partai Indonesia* (Partindo), smaller groups like *Angkatan Komunis Muda* (ACOMA) and their mass organizations—were on the verge of political victory.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, it was the far-right commentators and academics, such as Justus van der Kroef and the horrific Arnold Brackman, who proclaimed the reality that Indonesia was about to “fall” (as they would see it). Liberal scholarship did not want to emphasize this reality because in the Cold War atmosphere of the time, anti-communist sentiment was powerful. The U.K., U.S. and Australian governments expressed open and strong praise for the counter-revolution and its violence, defending the counter-revolution politically, diplomatically, financially, and in some cases, militarily. Liberal and left liberal scholarship wanted to be able to say that the violence was politically unnecessary. They also emphasized that Sukarno himself was not a communist.

It is important to understand that Indonesia was close to revolution. Not only was the Indonesian Left winning the political battle, they were also gaining support among the population. Within the PNI, its left wing was expelled in August 1965. A significant section of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) leadership had aligned with Sukarno. The Left's main civilian opponents that were weakened by relative lack of support were being pushed out of the system through undemocratic, administrative means. *Partai Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia* (MASYUMI) and *Partai Sosialis Indonesia* (PSI) were banned in 1960. *Musjawarah Ra'jat Banjak* (MURBA) was later banned after a campaign by the PKI. The influence of the left was undoubtedly growing within the Armed Forces officer corps. But simply, the scale of the support for the Left forces was the crucial thing. Scholars who researched the PKI in the 1960s, like Donald Hindley and some others, estimate that left-wing organizations in Indonesia had around twenty million active members. I estimate that if there had been elections in 1963 or 1964 there would have only been between thirty-five million voters. The Left also de facto "held" the position of the President, although it was excluded from significant positions in the Cabinet and the Army top leadership.

The prospects for a Sukarno-PKI-Left government were real. These political organizations, whatever the Left critiques of the programs might perhaps be offered, were based on the mobilization of Indonesia's poor against the social classes of landlords and military capitalists. That is where the twenty million members came from; and their class targets were explicit.

The impending revolution—one that is based on mass support—framed everything that the Right did, whatever kind of Indonesia it may or may not have delivered. If successful, a political revolution with class struggle as its basis rarely leaves the possibility of going back to the previous order open. It is set as a life-and-death battle. The closer to revolution, i.e. the more support the revolution has, the more desperate the counterrevolution.

There is a kind of ugly, horrific dialectic to these situations which is very evident in the case of Indonesia. The Left grew from tens of thousands of members in the mid-1950s to 20 million just ten years later. This happened with the ideological support of the President, but in the face of physical harassment from the Army and conservative groups. It is an absolutely incredible growth; one I suspect is unprecedented anywhere in the world. One significant factor that made this possible was the Left's political opponents' weak class basis. There was no capitalist class of any note; just a mass of poor petty bourgeoisie and peddlers (as Geertz called them) as the vast majority. There were military capitalists who only emerged around 1958-60 when Dutch firms were nationalized and reigned over a bankrupt modern sector that had just lost its Dutch investors. There was a localized and fragmented landlord class who relied almost entirely on religious ideology to win support. By the early 1960s, it was clear that the political parties of the right were losing the battle for hearts and minds. They then had no choice. If they did want to lose the political war altogether, they had to turn to the Army for political leadership. In 1965, when these forces were implementing the killings, they also had to rely on mobilizing lumpen-proletariat elements. So weak and bereft were the elite classes of cultural, political and ideological strengths. We see this in the film "The Act of Killing."

A brief comparison with Chile is interesting. The military seized power, overthrowing President Allende and violently crushing the Chilean left in 1973. A new constitution was introduced banning parties that held the class struggle ideology as their basis. It was still *de jure* in effect. However, the balance of forces between the Left and the Right was closer. While there was a well-organized and significant Left wing, there was also a significant bourgeoisie and at least two established, right-wing or center-right parties, such as the Christian Democrats. In parliamentary elections, the votes were close to 50-50, Right versus Left. Allende from the Socialist Party, Unidad Popular and the Christian Democrats even held talks to discuss a possible coalition. The parliament in 1973 had an anti-Allende majority that continually undermined him. In Indonesia, Marxism-

Leninism was banned. However, the 1965 Indonesian parliament, which had been appointed by Sukarno, had a clear majority in support of Sukarno, if not always in support of his most radical policies.

This meant that in Chile, there was not much total desperation among the civilian anti-Left political parties for military protection against the Left, i.e. its total physical destruction. They were grateful for the coup, but the classes opposed to the Left could draw on their own ideological and political strengths that were separate from the Army to help consolidate the new regime under Pinochet. The violence was horrific in Chile where the pre-coup slogan was “Jakarta is coming.” However, the Indonesian reference for the scale of repressive violence was not necessary; neither was the same level of the use of lumpen elements. Chile then had its *reformasi* in 1988—ten years before Indonesia’s. The counter-revolutionary state there was weaker and more short-lived. The most crucial part was that the ideological traditions of the Left among the large urban working class were not wiped out. In some ways, a revolution was further away in Chile in 1973 than in Indonesia in 1965.

In Indonesia, the New Order was founded as part of a successful, all-out counter-revolutionary measure desperate to prevent the success of an impending revolution. The long and centrally important existence of the ideology of class revolution had to be wiped out and it was done so systematically and with desperation. Marxism-Leninism, Left Sukarnoism, and all revolutionary writers were banned. Even today, the publishers of *Dibawah Bendera Revolusi* do not dare publish the second volume containing Sukarno’s post-independence speeches, which were often aimed at domestic ruling classes. But Bonny Triyana and friends did dare publish his post-30 September 1965 speeches, breaking important ground in the book, *Revolusi Belum Selesai*.

The ideology of the twenty million people active on the Left before 1965 is banned, tabooed, and demonized. Maintaining this is core to the state, while it remains counterrevolutionary and organically connected to how it came into existence. Some of the repressive mechanisms of this state have been weakened, but its basic character has not yet changed.

Rehabilitating victims, rehabilitating revolution

Of course, every effort to expose the human suffering of those years; every effort to bring the violence, injustice and illegality of that suffering to the attention of a new generation of Indonesians; and every effort to seek justice should be supported. An apology from the state, if it were to happen, would help. But real rehabilitation and justice cannot occur without rehabilitating the ideology of the victims; and in this context, we must remember that there are twenty million victims who lost their right to express and campaign for their ideology.

I am not arguing here that it is necessary to re-win support for that ideology—that is a separate question. I am arguing that full rehabilitation for all the twenty million victims, whether posthumously or not, will not be possible unless there is full restoration of normal (liberal) democratic rights. That is their need—to regain the right to openly exist and be active under the now-demonized ideologies; and for such ideologies to rightfully exist alongside others. The millions of victims will not be rehabilitated and the injustice they suffered will remain unrecognized as long as they are defined by their attachment to a demonized ideology. The fate of the victims is intimately intertwined with regaining this legitimacy, equality, and right.

There have been efforts. President Wahid declared his desire to repeal the offending bans of the People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia (MPR) on communist ideologies and to have a "free market of ideas," as he put it. This was without doubt one of the reasons why many parts of the elite in and out of the parliament turned against him. More recently, Constitutional Court Judge and presidential hopeful Mahfud stated that communists and atheists were legal. This was a step forward, but a very tiny one, as he also made it clear that they could existentially "be" a communist, but not try to spread their ideas. But the parliament, I suspect, would still be 100 percent against such liberalization.

"The Act of Killing" makes many important points. Central to this is that the counter-revolution was victorious and is still in power. While some of its repressive mechanisms have weakened, the state is still fully

counterrevolutionary; it has not yet been pushed back to being only latently counterrevolutionary, like what happened in Chile.

This sometimes appears lost in some of the discussion in Indonesia, and is most obvious in discourses about ‘reconciliation.’ Reconciliation was made popular in post-apartheid South Africa—in a situation where the previously repressive state had been overthrown and where its victims were stating their willingness to reconcile with their previous oppressors, whom they had just defeated. In Indonesia, those arguing for reconciliation use a *de facto* argument that the victims, who are still demonized and oppressed, should reconcile with their tormentors.

I attended a special event in 2002 for Joesoef Isak at Taman Ismail Marzuki (T.I.M.). During the evening, a choir of elderly women, all former political prisoners or members of leftist mass organizations, sang songs on stage. One of these was a spirited and well-sung rendition of the “Internationale.” Also during the evening, Isak—a veteran journalist from before 1965 and the publisher of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s books after 1980—invited the veteran and respected anti-PKI journalist, Rosihan Anwar, who was in the audience, to the stage. It was a ‘conciliatory’ gesture. But the next day, Anwar complained, asking how reconciliation would be possible when they still sang the “Internationale.” Reconciliation meant accepting the conditions of the counter-revolution’s victory. This was also the issue also behind the sharp polemics between Goenawan Mohammed and Pramoedya Ananta Toer at one point, when the former attacked the latter for calling “reconciliation” rubbish.

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Regaining equal rights for the ideology of the pre-1965 Left, of course, will inevitably be a complicated process. At one level, it relates to a basic democratic principle: freedom of speech and organization—a right which has also not been regained for various religious outlooks as well as for separatist ideas. It should, of course, be addressed at this level as a

fundamental principle. At the same time, it cannot but also be addressed in its specific historical context.

The truths of the political situation that developed during the 1950s and 1960 urgently need to be re-studied, written about, and debated. What was being struggled over—the programs and platforms of parties; the interests that they represented; the weaknesses, limitations and contradictions of the tactics; and methods of all forces—need to become a central issue of politics. What exactly happened on the evening of 30 September and the morning of 1 October is also important and is being more and more explained very well, I think, in John Roosa’s “Pretext for Mass Murder.” Exposing the reality of the terroristic nature of the violence, as depicted in “The Act of Killing,” is also a crucial part of the process; so that the contemporary generation is aware of the inhumane origins of the state that now governs them. For 15 years, the much lower intensity of the old counter-revolutionary systematic propaganda in schools—which is a reflection of the weakening of repressive mechanisms—makes young people much more open to listen and then investigate for themselves. In all these areas of research and writing, researchers and analysts from outside Indonesia can make a contribution, although the now thousands of social science academics as well as activists in Indonesia will have to carry out the majority of these tasks.

Campaigns to force a statement of apology, court cases, and more exhumations of mass graves—all these will play a role. But I suspect that they may all come to nothing if the basic demonization of the twenty million victims via the official state-demonized ideology they held at that time is also not challenged, at the very least, at the level of rights. One manifestation of how the avoidance of this issue creates unhelpful ambiguities is reflected in the recent bout of novels and films set against 1965 or its aftermath period, such as Leila Chudori’s *Pulang*. While these novels have an element of acknowledging the 1965 violence as a humanitarian tragedy, and some hand-wringing as well, none of the characters are Leftists, unashamedly members of the PKI or other

organizations and are comfortable with their ideological choice. They are usually people caught up as collateral damage, friends, relatives, people manipulated into becoming involved, or at best, naïve people who didn't really know what the nature of the ideology they were supporting. On the one hand, these novels and films strengthen the sense that there was indeed a terrible event; but they also actually reinforce the demonization of the twenty million members of left-wing organizations. They are so tabooed, "*najis*," that they cannot even appear in the story. Of course, given the political culture in Indonesia today, one cannot expect a spate of novels with communist or leftist heroes. However, that is not the point. The point is that there is no depiction of such people as genuine, active and comfortable with their ideological choice, whether or not they are main or minor characters. They are too demonized. Winning rehabilitation means defeating the unqualified hegemony of this perspective.

There is, of course, another aspect of this process of winning democratic equality of rights for ideologies. Discussed here so far is its relevance as part of the process of rehabilitation of the victims of the 1965–68 violence. The other is its significance for new generations of Indonesians who wish to have the freedom to exercise that right in contemporary Indonesia. It is already clear that there is an increasing number of people exercising this right despite its formal illegality. This will be a part of the overall process of pushing the counterrevolutionary state back—winning, at least, liberal democracy and its full rights. While the ideology remains formally demonized, the poor have no historical lexicon to draw upon and formulate their perspectives. They can still face an outburst like that of Deputy Jakarta Governor Ahok who slammed the Pluit poor who resisted his plans to remove them from their homes as PKI.

I have argued that the systematic murder and violence of 1965–68, as well as the mobilization of urban and rural lumpen elements, was part of a counterrevolution aimed at preventing an impending political and social revolution. This has formed the character of the current ruling class (whose character is also vividly exposed by "The Act of Killing") and its

state. The demonization of the ideology of the people and the counter-revolution murder is essential to its character. Regaining equal rights for that ideology, at first perhaps *de facto* and then *de jure*, is an essential part of any process of winning rehabilitation, justice, and even compensation for its victims—the millions of them—and their descendants. The victims who suffered most were those tortured and then killed, and those imprisoned and tortured. But all those who lost their rights, often their livelihoods, were victims as well.

But there is also a deeply existential aspect of this analysis. Yes, its primary purpose is to bring out the politics of what happened back then and its implications today. However, some of these former activists are perhaps no longer convinced of their old ideology, but many remain so. Some old, in their 80s, can still gustily sing NASAKOM Bersatu, the Internationale and other songs of their ideology. That is indeed “who they are;” in many ways their personhood is defined by their ideological allegiance. Some have been imprisoned, tortured, raped, and murdered. Others have lost their livelihood and property, if they had any. Many lost their youth to prison or hiding. For fifty years, all of them had their personhood denied through the total banning and demonization of their ideology, and its rubbing out from all of history. They can only be who they are in private or when they are with close friends. One is saddened and angered to witness this up close. Pramoedya called himself a mute who could only sing to himself: *nanyi sunyi seorang bisu*—and he was a rare *korban* (victim) who did win some public space.

This enforced mute’s silent singing is what needs to be ended.

Note

- ¹ This essay appeared on 4 September 2013 on Max Lane’s blog, *Max Lane Online*. Originally titled, “After THE ACT OF KILLING...Indonesia and 1965: rehabilitating victims, rehabilitating revolution under a counter-revolutionary state,” it has been reproduced here with minor changes in formatting, etc. The editors would like to express their gratitude to Max Lane for kindly granting permission to publish his essay in this issue of *Asian Studies*.