

The 1965-66 killings in Indonesia: Sensitive truths

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The exhumation of mass graves from 1965-66 is a fraught and dangerous business

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Approximately half a million people died in the 1965-66 killings in Indonesia. But where are the remains of all these people? From the accounts we have of the killings of 1965-66, we know bodies were dumped in a range of locations including rivers, isolated forests and rubber plantations, cane fields, wells, cemeteries and limestone caves in southern Central Java. During the New Order, many people in local communities knew where mass graves were located but any discussion of them was taboo. Even today, there is still a sense of fear about sharing knowledge of them with outsiders.

In the last decade, however, victims' groups, NGOs and the National Commission of Human Rights have made efforts to document the mass graves. One of the most vocal advocates of justice for the dead and the recovery of the remains of those killed was Sulami, a former member of the communist women's group Gerwani who, with Pramodya Ananta Toer and Umar Said, co-founded the Foundation for the Research into Victims of the 1965-66 Killings, known widely as YPKP. One of the specific goals of YPKP was to conduct investigations of mass graves to prove that the killings of 1965-66 took place.

The exhumation

Between 16 and 18 November 2000, YPKP exhumed a mass grave in Situkup forest near Dempes village on the outskirts of Wonosobo in Central Java. This gravesite was unusual because a prison official had recorded the names of people killed at this site and YPKP was in contact with a surviving family member of a person on this list.

Syaiful H Shodiq was part of a group of Muslim youth activists concerned to make amends for the role of his organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, in the violence of 1965. He assisted YPKP in negotiating with the district head and his deputy, who had ties to NU, for permission to exhume the grave. The deputy head initially asked YPKP to delay the exhumation, forcing YPKP to go to the National Human Rights Commission, which intervened. When they presented their case to the commission, YPKP argued they wanted to exhume the grave so that Sri, the person they had been in contact with, could bury her father properly. The excavation team identified some of the victims in the grave using the list of persons taken to the site, skeletal evidence and personal items found at the site. A medical consultant, Dr Handoko, determined that the killings had been carried out using short and long barrelled rifles of the kind used by the military. The forensic team was able to identify six of the 26

people in the grave.

Given the strong climate of anti-communism during the New Order, the Wonosobo exhumation went surprisingly smoothly. Local members of the youth wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama, Ansor, were on site for the exhumation to assist with security, as were members of the security apparatus attached to the political party PDI-P. The exhumation also attracted widespread media coverage and international attention.

For YPKP, the physical evidence from this grave was important as a form of proof both of this specific atrocity and of the mass killings of 1965-66 in general. But despite the positive identification of several individuals from the mass grave at Wonosobo as victims of the killings and the finding that the people in Wonosobo had been executed by rifles, the YPKP was unable to submit this evidence as part of a larger investigation on 1965 because at that point the National Commission of Human Rights was not mandated to investigate the massacres.

For those in attendance at the exhumation, the opening of this grave presented the first opportunity for them to witness evidence of the deaths of community members or relatives. Surviving family members wanted answers to questions that for almost forty years they had not been able to ask, such as where their own family members had been buried. For Sri, the woman who had contacted the YPKP, the recovery of her father's remains brought some sense of closure and allowed her to rebury his remains respectfully.

Reburial thwarted

After the identified remains were returned to their families, those not yet identified were stored at Dr Sarjito Hospital in Yogyakarta. But then things began to deteriorate. After several months, the hospital contacted YPKP to inform them that they could no longer store the remains. YPKP decided upon a reburial of the remains in a small ceremony with multi-faith prayers for those who had died. At a symbolic level, the reburial served to rehumanise the victims of this violence, thus challenging the long held view that communists were somehow subhuman and deserving of their fate.

A former political prisoner and member of YPKP, Irawan Mangunkusuma, offered to donate land for the reburial in the sub-district of Kaloran north of Yogyakarta. In the lead-up to the scheduled burial on 25 March 2001, YPKP reassured the religious leader Kiai Khozim and the Temanggung police intelligence chief that they were not going to make a big fuss. Only six coffins were to be used to bury the remains of the twenty unidentified persons recovered from the Wonosobo exhumations, with the remains of between two and five people in each coffin. In addition, the coffins for the remains would be much smaller than normal coffins. The YPKP committee had also visited Kiai Khozim's nearby pesantren (Islamic boarding school), Pondok Pesantren Sumur Blandung to gain approval for the reburial.

But the day before the ceremony, members of the Kaloran Muslim Brotherhood (FUIK) made it known that they intended to obstruct the proceedings and a mob of young men blockaded the road leading to the house of Mangunkusuma. When members of the organising committee tried to escape with the remains of six people, a group of around fifty protesters stopped the second vehicle. They assaulted the driver and a member of the organising committee, dragged the coffins out of the vehicles and strewed the remains on the ground. The skeletons were rescued for later reburial, but the mob burnt the remaining coffins and destroyed Irawan's home.

There are conflicting accounts about the reasons for this violent disruption. Syaiful heard reports that the local military had tried to provoke the hard-line factions of the two NU-aligned parties PKB

and PPP to obstruct the reburial and to isolate those young members of the NU who had supported YPKP. It appeared that the main motivation for this action was to defend the institutional image of both the military and the NU, both of which had played a major role in the killings. On the other hand there were also reports that some of the men involved in the obstruction were from Laskar Jihad which at the time was searching for shared Islamic causes in addition to its campaign in Maluku.

Even though the National Commission of Human Rights protested about the violence to the head of the Temanggung police, there were no arrests or prosecutions of those responsible for the violence, suggesting a lack of broad support or sympathy for YPKP's cause. However, under political pressure, religious leaders disbanded FUIK, the anti-communist group which had emerged to oppose the reburial.

Aftershocks

The Kaloran incident shocked members of the YPKP. Many within the organisation realised that the reburial had not been properly planned and that they were perhaps overconfident about the extent to which community attitudes towards the events of 1965 had changed.

Sulami herself suffered shock and her health deteriorated rapidly due to the emotional and physical stress associated with the events. Since then, YPKP has split into several organisations, all of which have continued to document mass graves throughout Indonesia. They have not, however, been involved in any further exhumations. In fact, Wonosobo is the only known example of a successful excavation of a mass grave from 1965.

Two NGOs that have also been involved with mass grave identification are SEKBER 65 (Joint Secretariat 65) based in Solo and Kasut Perdamaian (Shoe for Peace) based in Jakarta. Members of the National Commission of Human Rights appointed in 2007 have also formed a team to investigate the killings. They have collected extensive evidence of gravesites across Indonesia. This evidence will not, however, be used for legal purposes unless the Attorney General calls for further investigation after considering the team's findings. But given continuing opposition within Indonesia to opening this past, there is only a small possibility that those further investigations will ever take place.

P.S.

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