

After “The Act of Killing”: Indonesia, 1965 - Rehabilitating victims, rehabilitating revolution

Indonesia and 1965: rehabilitating victims, rehabilitating revolution under a counter-revolutionary state

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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 and the Indonesian Left, including 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 former members of the pre-65 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, 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 PRD founder, Danial Indrakusuma, working 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 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, via 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 those killings which guaranteed the creation of the Indonesia that exists today. There were rumours that the President may “minta maaf” but that did not eventuate. Indeed, the rumours provoked a string of organisations, 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 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 PENGKHIANATAN 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 difference. Indeed, in the schools, the old policy of referring to G30S as G30S/PKI has recently been re-introduced, 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 remains an essentially counter-revolutionary state.

There have been very few counter-revolutionary states in the world over the also 100 or so years. Of course, all states are latently counter-revolutionary, that is, they will probably try to suppress efforts to overturn and destroy them. There have also been many examples of repressive states - in Southeast Asia, for example, Marcos's the Philippines. 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 difference between a repressive state, even a very repressive state, and a counter-revolutionary state. In my abstract, I criticized the formulation by Douglas Kammen who referred to it 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 recognize sufficiently explicitly the revolution that was underway, or about to take place. The counter-revolutionary 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 the 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: the Indonesia Left, comprising Sukarno, the PKI, the left-wing of the PNI, Partindo, smaller groups like ACOMA and their mass organisations were on the verge of political victory.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, it was the most right commentators and academics, such as Justus van der Kroef and the horrific Arnold Brackman, who proclaimed this reality: Indonesia was about to "fall" (as they would see it). Liberal scholarship did not want to emphasise this reality, I think, because in the Cold War atmosphere of the time, anti-communist sentiment was powerful. The U.K., U.S. and also the Australian governments all expressed open and strong praise for the counter-revolution and its violence, defending the counter-revolution politically and diplomatically as well as financially, and in some cases, militarily. Liberal and left liberal scholarship, I think, 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 the closeness of Indonesia to revolution. Not only were Sukarno, the PKI, the PNI, Partindo and other left groups winning the political battle, gaining support among the population. Inside the PNI, its left wing was expelled in August, 1965. A significant section of the NU leadership had aligned with Sukarno. The Left's main civilian opponents weakened by relative lack

of support were being pushed out of the system, albeit by undemocratic administrative means. MASYUMI and PSI were banned in 1960, then MURBA was later banned after a campaign by the PKI. The influence of the left was undoubtedly also growing within the Armed Forces officer corps. But simply the scale of the support for the Left forces was the crucial thing. Scholars like Donald Hindley, who researched the PKI in the 1960s, and others, estimate that the Left organisations in Indonesia had around 20 million active members. I estimate that if there had been elections in 1963 or 1964 there would have only been between 35 million voters. The Left also de facto "held" the position of the President, although 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 organisations, whatever Left critiques of the programmes might perhaps be offered, were based on the mobilisation of Indonesia's poor against the social classes of landlords and military capitalists. That's where the 20 million members came from; and their class targets were explicit.

This closeness to revolution, based on such mass support, whatever kind of Indonesia it may or may not have delivered, framed everything that the right did. A political revolution with such a class struggle basis, if successful, rarely leaves open the possibility of going back to the previous order. 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 counter-revolution.

There is a kind of ugly, horrific dialectic to such situations, very evident in the Indonesian case. 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, I suspect unprecedented anywhere in the world. One significant factor that made this possible was the Left's political opponents had such a weak class basis. There was no capitalist class of any note, just a mass of poor petty petty bourgeoisie, peddlers, as Geertz called, as the vast majority. There were military capitalists but they 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 landlord class, but localized, fragmented and 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, to turn to the Army as their 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 ACT OF KILLING.

A brief comparison with Chile is interesting. The military seized power overthrowing President Allende in 1973, and violently crushed the Chilean left. In Indonesia, Marxism-Leninism was banned. In Chile a new constitution was introduced banning parties that had class struggle ideology as their basis. It is still de jure in effect. However, the balance of forces between left and right was closer. While there was a well-organised and significant Left wing, there was also a significant bourgeoisie and at least two established, right-wing or centre-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 and Unidad Popular and the Christian Democrats even held talks to discuss a possible coalition. The parliament in 1973 had an anti-Allende majority and was continually undermining Allende. In Indonesia the parliament in 1965, which had been appointed by Sukarno, had a clear majority in support of Sukarno, if not always in support of the most radical of his policies.

This meant that in Chile there was not the same 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 ideological and political

strengths of their own, 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”, but Indonesian scale 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. The counter-revolutionary state there was weaker and more short-lived. Most crucially, the Left ideological traditions among the large urban working class were not able to be wiped out. In some ways, a revolutionary 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-revolution desperate to prevent the success of an impending revolution. The ideology of class revolution and long and centrally important existence of that ideology 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, don't dare publish Volume 2 with Sukarno's post independence speeches, often aimed at domestic ruling classes. Although 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 20 million people active on the Left before 1965 is banned, taboo, and demonized. And maintaining this is core to the state, while it remains a counter-revolutionary state, still 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 to seek justice should be supported. An expression of “sorry” by the state, if it were to happen, would help. But real rehabilitation, and justice, cannot occur without rehabilitation also of the ideology of the victims – and in this context we must remember there are 20 million victims, who lost their rights 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 the victims, all 20 million, whether posthumously or not, will not be possible except as part of a full restoration of normal (liberal) democratic rights. That is there needs to be re-winning of the right of the now demonised ideologies to equal rights with other ideologies: the right to openly exist and be active. The millions of victims will not be rehabilitated and the injustice they suffered recognized while they are defined by their attachment to a demonized ideology. The fate of the victims is intimately intertwined with re-winning this legitimacy, equality and right.

There have been efforts. President Wahid declared his desire to repeal the offending MPR bans on communist ideology 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, which 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% against such a liberalization.

THE ACT OF KILLING makes many important points. One central one is that the counter-revolution was victorious and is still in power. While some of its repressive mechanisms have weakened, the state is still a fully counter-revolutionary state – it has not yet been pushed back to being only

latently counter-revolutionary, as has happened in Chile. This appears sometimes to be lost in some of the discussion in Indonesia, and is this most obvious in discourses about 'reconciliation'. Reconciliation was made popular in South Africa in post-apartheid South Africa, i.e. 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 are de facto arguing that the victims, who are still demonized and oppressed, should reconcile with their ongoing tormentors.

I attended a special event in 2002 for Joesoef Isak at T.I.M. During the evening a choir of elderly women, all former political prisoners or members of left mass organisations, 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 publisher of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's books after 1980, invited the veteran respected anti-PKI journalist, Rosihan Anwar, who was in the audience, onto the stage. It was a 'conciliatory' gesture. But the next day, Anwar complained that how was reconciliation possible when they still sang the Internationale. Reconciliation meant accepting the conditions of the counter-revolution's victory. This was the issue also behind the sharp polemics between Goenawan Mohammed and Pramoedya Ananta Toer at one point when Mohammed attacked Pramoedya for calling "reconciliation" rubbish.

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Re-winning equal rights for the ideology of the pre-65 left, of course, will inevitably be a complicated process. At one level, it relates to a basic democratic principle: freedom of speech and organisation, a right which has also not been re-won 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 the 30th September and the morning of October 1 is also important and is being more and more explained, very well, I think, by John Roosa's book, *Pretext for Mass Murder*. Exposing the reality of the terroristic nature of the violence, as depicted by *THE ACT OF KILLING*, is also a crucial part of the process, so that the contemporary generation is confronted with the inhuman origins of the state that now governs them. The much lower intensity for 15 years of the old counter-revolutionary systematic propaganda in schools, 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 1,000s of social science academics, as well as activists, in Indonesia will have to carry out the majority of these tasks.

Campaigns to force a "say sorry" statement; court cases; 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 20 million victims via the official demonization of the ideology they held at that time is also not challenged, at the very least at the level of rights. One manifestation of how avoiding 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 there is some hand-ringing, none of the characters are Leftists, unashamedly members of the PKI or other organisations and 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 was. These novels and films on the one hand strengthen a sense that there was indeed a terrible event, but they also actually reinforce the demonization of the 20 million members of left-wing organisations. They are so taboo, 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 – that is not the point. There is not even the depiction of such people as genuine people, 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. The aspect 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, now, in practice, despite its formal illegality. This will be a part of the overall process of pushing the counter-revolutionary 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 to formulate their perspectives. And 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, where the primary agency was the Army, also mobilizing urban and rural lumpen elements, was part of counter-revolution 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 the counter-revolution murdered is essential to its character. Re-winning 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.

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 for today. But there is also a deeply existential aspect. Some of these former activists perhaps no longer are convinced of their old ideology. But many remain convinced. 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, murdered. Others have lost their livelihood and property, if they had any. Many lost their youth to prison or hiding. But all of them, the millions and millions of them, through the total banning and demonization of their ideology, its rubbing out from all history, have also, for 50 years, have had their personhood also denied. They can only be who they are in private, in secret, or with close friends. It is sad and anger-generating to witness this close up. 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.

Max Lane
