

Reflecting on the meaning of 30 September 1965 in Indonesia

Thursday 5 October 2006, by [LANE Max](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2002).

The 30th September is the anniversary of the attempted mutiny-“coup” organised by Colonel Untung and others. Colonel Untung organised the detention of several senior army officers (generals) in the Indonesian army whom he suspected of plotting against President Sukarno. These moves by Untung failed. As the mutiny against the generals collapsed, the six detained generals were executed. General Suharto, who was not in the list of generals to be detained, organised a counter-move, blamed the whole affair on the Indonesian Communist Party and Sukarno and used his possession of the political initiative to launch one of the most massive violent political purges of the 20th century.

I [Max Lane] reprint two earlier articles I wrote and which were published in the Jakarta Post below. [Introduction written October 5, 2006]

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Sept. 30, 1965: What was really at stake?

JAKARTA POST, October 1, 2002

Max Lane

In the last years of the New Order and since the fall of Gen. Soeharto, discussion opened up within Indonesian society about the real nature of what happened on Sept. 30, 1965. A consensus had developed among a large section of the country's intelligentsia, NGO community and democratic activist movement that Sept. 30 was a great human tragedy.

More than one million people lost their lives: This has become an acknowledged fact of great sadness and concern. A number of short stories, poems and films have been written or produced lamenting this tragedy. There has also been a great deal of interest in uncovering the facts of the events of Sept. 30 and the weeks afterwards. Did president Sukarno know about Col. Untung's plans? Did Soeharto know and was he

involved? Did the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) really know what was happening or were just a few individual PKI leaders aware? Are there other facts that still have to be uncovered?

One outcome of this discussion, especially in the first few years after the fall of Soeharto, was the appeal for “reconciliation”. Figures such as the publisher, Goenawan Mohammed, raised the example of Nelson Mandela as somebody who led the way for reconciliation between the supporters of apartheid and its victims in South Africa after the overthrow of apartheid.

Former president Abdurrahman Wahid, even before he became president, also urged reconciliation. He even sent a message to the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) urging the repeal of the MPR decree banning the spreading of Marxist and Leninist ideas.

This recommendation for reconciliation was rejected, on the other hand, by the writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, demanding instead accountability for those responsible for the mass murder, mass imprisonment and confiscation of property.

The discussion of “tragedy” and “reconciliation”, and even of justice, however, misses one major question: Why? Why did it happen? Why did Soeharto and his allies deem it necessary for such a wholesale purge of society? More than one million people were slaughtered; all active worker, peasant and women’s campaign organizations were banned, purged or otherwise disempowered; scores of newspapers and magazines were closed; half of the intellectual and artistic community were killed or imprisoned; all left-wing political parties were smashed and later on even conservative parties were virtually taken over by the state special operations. Why?

In the sharp and bitter polarization of society between 1960-1965, what was at stake? What indeed was being fought over?

>From the point of view of Sukarno’s supporters including the biggest political party, the PKI, they saw looming in the future a country dominated by corrupt and repressive business generals working hand-in-glove with Western business and financial interests. They called the business generals, *kabir*, capitalist bureaucrats, and the Western business and financial interests, *Nekolim* — neo-colonialism and imperialism. They assessed that if the country was taken over by these parties, most Indonesians would be sacrificed for their personal wealth and economic interests. They also feared that such a new set-up would undermine the development of a genuine, and independent national culture,

something that was still developing only 20 years after independence.

Opponents of Sukarno and the PKI were divided into two camps, but two camps that worked together. The Armed Forces, a section of the conservative religious organizations (though not all of them), and people who owned land opposed Sukarno because his policies undermined their privileges.

The Sukarno government began a program of retooling, that is of dismissing corrupt officials, especially kabir, which threatened the privileged position of business generals. The government also talked about arming trade union and peasant organizations, threatening the Armed Forces monopoly on weapons.

The government also introduced laws attempting to distribute land. Peasant unions which unilaterally occupied land, when the law failed to be implemented quickly, vigorously supported these laws.

Some religious organizations were opposed to the Sukarno policies for ideological reasons — hostility towards communism as an atheistic ideology — and also because their leadership were drawn from the land-owning and business layers of society.

The Sukarno government also nationalized first Dutch, then British and Belgium foreign companies as well as some American companies. Indonesia refused to become a member of the International Monetary Fund or take conditional loans from the World Bank.

This alliance between the Armed Forces, land-owners and Western business interests also found an ally in a section of students and intellectuals. Most students were, however, still organized in the big student organizations affiliated to the Sukarnoist and communist parties. Many of the anti-Sukarno students and intellectuals went on to become prominent figures during the New Order period: Goenawan Mohammed, Arief Budiman, Sjahrir, just to name a few.

At the time, they saw the Sukarno government as a dictatorship based the cult of the personality. A survey of the press and magazines of the time and of the discussions among the political public indicates that the level of repression under Sukarno was minimal. Two political parties had been banned for effusing to disassociate themselves from military coups in Sumatra and Sulawesi. However, the leadership and memberships, and their affiliated organizations, continued to operate.

However, there were elements of authoritarianism in the Sukarno government's methods. Political discourse, even criticism and opposition, had to be made in the language of Sukarnoism. Sukarno's opponents were forced to pretend to be supporters of Sukarno and to attack their opposition as fake Sukarnoists.

Of course, the government was not the only source of repression during this period. A bigger source was the Armed forces itself, which banned left-wing publications and activities in many provinces. Even in Jakarta, as early as 1960, Pramoedya had been arrested by the military and gaoled for one year. After all, this was a period of martial law.

The Sukarno government's resort to cult tactics and later to arresting some opponents were violations of human rights, although on a smaller scale than that carried out by the Armed Forces even before 1965, let alone compared to the mass slaughter after 1965. These methods used by the government confused the situation and facilitated some students' attention being directed away from the real issue at stake.

Today nobody speaks of kabir and Nekolim. But how different are the concepts of kabir versus KKN, and how different are the Sukarnoist critiques of Nekolim and today's criticism's of the exploitative role of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization?

Aug. 17 and New Order: Nation-building problem

The Jakarta Post August 13, 2002

Max Lane

Indonesia was in a state of constant revolutionary motion from the beginning of the 20th century until Sept. 30, 1965. All around the world the modern nation state was created through revolutionary processes. The French Revolution, with its slogan of "liberty, fraternity, equality" has probably made the greatest impact on the popular mind although other European nations also experienced great revolutions.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of a modern nation state called Indonesia was non-existent. What is now the Indonesian archipelago comprised a wide range of societies. There were strong and highly developed kingdoms and societies organized along tribal lines.

There were no modern nations, that is, communities with clear geographical borders, a common language, common currency and shared economic life, and a shared cultural outlook.

Like the struggle in Europe against despotism under kings and princes, in the archipelago, the political struggle associated with the struggle to create and establish the modern state was related with the struggle against colonial despotism; which often utilized aspects of the old, feudal despotism of the sultans and kings that dominated the islands before the arrival of the Dutch.

The struggle cannot be separated from the struggle for freedom of despotism of all kinds. Most leaders of the anti-colonial movement, figures such as Sukarno, Mohammad Hatta, Syahrir, and the one who started it all, Tirta Adhisuryo, were all democrats, opposed to despotism.

Their answer to colonial despotism was the idea of "Indonesia Merdeka" — a "free" and "independent" Indonesia. Tirta Adhisuryo, the subject of the series of four novels by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (the "Buru Quartet"), founded the first newspaper that struggled against colonial despotism. The newspaper's slogan was "voice of the governed".

It was the cry of the governed against despotism that triggered a great revolutionary process, leading to the idea of a multi-ethnic nation, "Indonesia", that brought into being the great mass movements of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Sarekat Islam and Sarekat Rakyat; and that inspired the proclamation of independence on Aug. 17, 1945 and the political, guerilla and diplomatic struggle between 1945 and 1949.

Indonesia was, and therefore is, the product of a conscious struggle for democracy and not a manifestation of a cultural, ethnic or religious unity. Later, various leaders and movements sought to give more specific content to the call for "Indonesia Merdeka". Some did seek to draw ideas for this purpose from stocks of ideas from pre-existing cultural traditions.

These included various trends in Islam and from Javanese folk as well as aristocratic philosophy. But never was any of this thinking far away from one or other of the streams of thought on modern democracy. Sukarno could draw on Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx, while using Islamic and Javanese folk concepts.

The anti-colonial movement developed great streams of Islamic, social democratic, and socialist thinking. The proclamation of independence followed by intense struggle until 1949 ended Dutch colonialism and formal transfer of authority from the Netherlands to the Republic of Indonesia. The Indonesian state was established, a huge step in building an Indonesian nation. But formal independence did not complete the formation of the nation.

The Indonesian language needed to be spread to the population and to be developed into the real language of the people. Political institutions that would convince the people that they were real owners and participants of the new country had to be established. A national culture had to be developed that was more than just a conglomeration of traditional cultures; a national literature had to be established. The economy had to be restructured out of the hands of the Dutch and developed as an instrument of the welfare of the Indonesians, and not a small group of Dutch, British and U.S. companies.

The process of nation building, of completing all these tasks, was characterized by struggle between the ideological perspectives that had developed during the previous decades. This process, including up until 1965, despite various distortions, was essentially democratic: All the major ideological streams in society were able to participate. Political parties were the main engines of nation building; ideological struggle was the essence of its democratic character.

In 1965, Maj.Gen. Soeharto suppressed all struggle between ideologies, imposing a single formal "ideology", "Panca Sila". The New Order also introduced, by both force and money politics, a single

real ideology combining extreme obedience to authority and desire to be obeyed (gila hormat), worship of money and vulgar economic growth and consumerism. We can call this ideology "Golkarism".

Parallel with this was a suppression of the political parties of the Left, the purging of centrist parties of their Left wing and the gutting of the right-wing parties of the ideological life. Soeharto's suppression of ideological struggle and his gutting of the political parties also ended key elements of the nation-building process itself. President Sukarno regularly stressed right up until 1965 that the national revolution was not finished. Soeharto destroyed the revolutionary process before it could be completed.

None of the political institutions, neither the parties that survived during the New Order nor the parliamentary institutions, developed as genuine instruments of participation and ownership. Even now the mass of the population is alienated from these institutions and the political elite that inhabits them. Not surprisingly, local rather than national sentiment is strengthening. Even in Java, people are demanding provinces of their own, such as Cirebon.

The trend towards localism and the alienation from political institutions, including parties, will only be reversed if ideological life can be restored. Nation-building can only be resumed and completed with a conscious effort to redefine once again what is meant by "Indonesia Merdeka".

In the political institutions, Golkarism still prevails. In the mainstream parties, one form or other of Golkarism dominates. Many new parties have been formed but none yet have been able to launch a new ideological offensive to redefine and give content to the "Indonesia Merdeka" that was proclaimed on Aug. 17.

Where will such a dynamic come from? The New Order created a political elite rolling in money whose ideology is Golkarism. The New Order also created a mass of tens of millions of poor people, alienated from the institutions of the political and conglomerate elite.

In the 1920s, Sukarno told the story of how he watched a poor farmer work his land with a single buffalo and no matter how hard he worked remained poor. The man's name was Marhaen. Marhaenism, or an ideology of prioritizing both the needs and the organization of the poor developed as a popular outlook during the national revolution between the 1920s and 1965.

Now very few speak of the "Marhaen": But there is more talk of the "rakyat miskin", the poor. Now there is no great "poor peoples movement", but everywhere the poor protest their conditions and grumble about the elite. If the elite has created Golkarism, then a poor peoples movement, when it develops, will surely also produce ideologies of its own.

P.S.

* From Max Lane's blog:

http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/maxlaneintlusia/2006/10/reflecting_on_the_meaning_of_3.html