

Stigma against communism kills freedom of speech with ban on history book

Sunday 8 October 2006, by [TAUFIQURRAHMAN M.](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2006).

The Jakarta Post. On Aug. 11, 2006, The Jakarta Post received notice of the arrival of a small package that would prove valuable in showing that, despite all the talk of democracy and freedom of speech, little has changed in the way the bureaucracy works.

It was for a book written by Ruth T. McVey, a prominent scholar on Indonesia who is professor emeritus at the University of London.

The book focuses on Indonesian communism as its theme, a subject that was strictly off-limits in the country until the downfall of the authoritarian Soeharto regime in the 1990s.

"The Rise of Indonesian Communism", in fact, is no rabble-rousing manifesto bent on persuading readers to take up arms and fight the powers that be.

It's a highly pedantic textbook, not to say tedious in parts, which meticulously chronicles the development of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), from its founding to its temporary eclipse in 1927 after a failed insurrection against the Dutch colonialists.

Every university student who cares enough to go to the public library will have probably come across this book, if they do not own a (photo) copy of it themselves.

After all, it is compulsory reading for any student of political science during their early years in college.

So when the Customs and Excise Office at the Soekarno Hatta International Airport prevented the entry of the book, it was obvious that it was due to the same old stigma against communism.

The Post set out to navigate the bureaucratic maze to find that 40 years after the PKI was banned, and eight years after the advent of reform, the specter of the "red menace" still hangs over the country.

"Your book was barred from entering the country because the Customs and Excise Office deemed it a prohibited material as it contains the theme of communism," said one staffer at United Parcel Service (UPS), who handled the Post's shipment and initially attempted to get the book released.

"And if you insist on wanting the book's release, you need to get approval from the Attorney General's Office."

The UPS staffer suggested the Post first contact the library division of the AGO to obtain clearance.

With no insider contacts at the AGO, the only way to get the information was by calling its office.

The Post's experience in trying to obtain a response is a fitting example of the way the country's

bureaucracy operates in “serving” the public.

Attempts to contact eight telephone lines in the name of the agency were futile. They were either busy or out of order.

“We don’t ask for payment for any license that we issue, but it’s up to you if you want to pay a sum after the approval is issued,” a low-ranking AGO official in the intelligence division said, recommending that the Post/submit a copy of McVey’s book for screening purposes.

The official also called up a female superior, who instructed the Post to write an official letter to the Customs and Excise Office to request a copy of the book.

UPS, in fact, was kind enough to fax the cover, introduction and a number of pages deemed to contain communistic content, but that did little to change the AGO’s policy of barring McVey’s book.

“As far the book is concerned, it can be categorized as illicit material. It has been suggested by its title and we need to get the complete copy of the book to first study it before making any decision about giving permission for it to be published or circulated here,” the female official told the Post.

She explained the AGO’s routine procedures in examining a book. “We will first set up an inter-departmental team that will review the book and a decision will be made maybe two weeks after we first convene.” Well, so much for freedom of speech.

The ban on Marxism and Leninism has never been officially lifted; an attempt to do so by the People’s Consultative Assembly in 2003 was met with strong opposition from the political establishment.

The AGO is empowered with the legal authority to monitor the circulation of written materials.

During the heyday of Soeharto’s authoritarian rule, the AGO served as the grand inquisitor in banning written materials deemed capable of disrupting political stability.

It banned, for instance, the classic work of writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the Buru quartet, believing some of its contents propagated the teachings of communism.

At the expense of academic freedom and the potential for the country’s youth to really learn the history of their country, in the mid-1980s the AGO also banned numerous scholarly works. They included Harold Crouch’s -Army and Politics-, Kunio Yoshihara’s -The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in Southeast Asia-, Richard Robison’s -Indonesia: The Rise of Capital- and David Jenkins’ -Soeharto and His Generals-.

There has been two months of waiting since the Post first tried to obtain the McVey book, involving dozens of work hours to follow standard procedures (there was even a referral to another Customs and Excise Office at the noncommercial Halim Perdana Kusumah Airport recently).

McVey’s book remains stashed away somewhere in a vault at the Customs and Excise Office. It seems the work, like so much of the country’s history, has yet to see the light of day, buried under continuing bigotry and narrow-mindedness.