Wound over Indonesia's 1960s genocide still festers

Wednesday 30 September 2015, by BAYUNI Endy M. (Date first published: 22 September 2015).

A failed coup sparked a widespread spate of killings 50 years ago. It left a legacy of violence and denials that continues to haunt Indonesia today.

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On September 30, 1965, Indonesia changed, in many more ways than one.

Nearly 50 years later, the nation has yet to come to terms with its horrible past: a massacre, of genocidal proportions, that was triggered by an event that happened on that fateful September night.

Seven army officers, including six generals, were kidnapped and murdered by junior officers belonging to the elite presidential guards unit. The Gerakan 30 September or September 30 Movement (G30S), as the perpetrators called themselves, said it had acted to pre-empt their seniors in the Council of Generals from staging a coup against President Sukarno. The movement was quashed in less than 24 hours, and the army quickly regained control and composure, in spite of the losses of its top officers.

And soon after, the massacre began.

The army, by now under the command of a young general by the name of Suharto, blamed the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as being the chief instigator behind the G30S movement, as part of its own attempt to grab power from the ailing Sukarno.

The military led the campaign, but most of the killings were conducted by religious mass-based organisations, including the Nahdlatul Ulama, that had been locked in intense ideological battles with the communists.

There are several competing versions put forward by historians about who first lit the fire of hatred that went on to consume so many, and about the extent of the involvement of the PKI, then the third-largest communist party in the world. What is clear is that this event led to the thorough extermination of the PKI members, their supporters and sympathisers, and many innocent bystanders who knew nothing about the ideological contestation .

Those who survived were not that much more fortunate. Tens of thousands were rounded up and sent to hard labour on Buru Island in the Moluccans, many dying there eventually.

The military called this event the G30S/PKI movement.

AFTER THE MASSACRES

During the Suharto years, Oct 1 was set aside as a day to mark the “sanctity” of the state ideology Pancasila against a communist takeover attempt.

Those who chose the date did not seem to see the irony that the second of the five principles of Pancasila is “humanitarianism” - there was nothing humane about the mass killing of fellow citizens.

Since the killing was never officially documented, no one knows exactly how many people died during the carnage in 1965 and 1966. Estimates ranged from a conservative 500,000 to two or three million people. Many historians regard this as the worst genocide since the Nazi Holocaust.

The main difference is, in the case of Indonesia, the deniers ruled. And they still do.

The series of tragic events triggered by the action on Sept 30 changed the course of history of Indonesia. President Sukarno was so severely weakened that in March 1966, he gave up all his powers to General Suharto. More than a regime change, this marked the beginning of the repressive and brutal military rule in the country that lasted more than three decades.

The Suharto regime inflicted greater damage than suppressing freedoms and basic rights.

A LEGACY OF VIOLENCE

By putting order and stability above all else, the military encouraged violent political cultures to flourish. Rows, sometimes even over the slightest differences, were settled by the power of the guns, if they were deemed a threat to national security.

Unlike the corrupt political culture the regime left behind, the legacy of the violent political culture is much less recognised. There has been no serious attempt to address this problem, even as Indonesia embarked on political and economic reforms to put the nation on the path of democracy in 1999.

Force and violence today are still used to settle differences or to bully people into submission. Although the military has stepped out of politics and national security is now the domain of the police, the political culture it left behind is still widely felt and, from time to time, rears its ugly head.

One problem is society’s prevailing attitude towards the massacre, ranging from a complete denial to a justification that it was an inevitable and necessary killing.

But democracy since 1999 has opened up the public space for wider debate and Indonesia has been struggling to come to terms with the national tragedy, a black page in the nation’s modern history that has serious and lasting implications on the life of the nation.

But after 50 years, closure is still not in sight. There have been attempts to bring the stories out, and to recognise that there are different interpretations of the events, besides the military version that had been imposed on the rest of the nation throughout the Suharto regime.

Books have been published to challenge or to offer different versions and interpretations of history.

The Air Force, for example, which was widely discredited amid accusations of complicit conduct in

the G30S affair, has produced a White Paper giving its own version of events. The children of PKI leaders have published books to present their sides of the story.

Scholars and historians researching this episode of Indonesia found difficulties talking to survivors and perpetrators, since most are unwilling to recall the trauma, preferring to leave the past behind.

Film documentaries have been produced, including the 2013 internationally acclaimed *The Act Of Killing* by United Kingdom-based producer Joshua Oppenheimer that looked at the killing from the perspective of the perpetrators.

Others have also resorted to writing novels, using the tragic episode as the backdrop to bring the stories out in the absence of official data.

Indonesians are just starting to get a better insight into what really happened then.

A LEGACY OF DENIALS

President Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur in 1999 issued an apology for the atrocities committed by Nahdlatul Ulama, which he once chaired. But after he died in 2013, many in the organisation said they owed no apology to anyone and did not recognise the apology made by Gus Dur.

The House of Representatives in 2004 endorsed a Bill on the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission modelled on South Africa's successful effort to deal with apartheid rule.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono ensured the Bill never saw the light of the day because as soon as he was elected, he sent it to the Constitutional Court, which duly quashed it as "unconstitutional". It is probably no coincidence that Dr Yudhoyono's father-in-law is the late general Sarwo Edhie Wibowo, commander of the army's Special Forces that led the communist purge in the 1960s.

The new House of Representatives, elected last year, reintroduced the truth and reconciliation commission Bill into the national legislative agenda and hopes to have this passed by next year.

The National Commission on Human Rights, an independent state body, in 2012 produced the most detailed report on the massacre to date, following four years of investigations, concluding that the communist purge amounted to a gross violation of human rights and a crime against humanity.

The report was presented to President Yudhoyono with a set of recommendations, including prosecution against perpetrators and for the state to issue an apology to the victims. Nothing has been heard about the fate of the report since then.

In spite of the growing body of information and data about what happened in the mid-1960s and now more open discussion in public, the old guards are still very much in power and their position prevails.

Even when they recognise that the massacre of communists took place, the old guards claim it was a necessary killing. They believed then, and still do today, that the communists would have killed them if they had not acted first.

So long as such attitudes take hold, those who expect an apology from the state will have to continue to wait.

Time heals but, given the deep wound inflicted by the tragic events in 1965 and 1966, 50 years may be insufficient for the healing process to be completed. Indonesia needs a little bit more time.

There is some consolation that there is at least more openness now for people to discuss what happened, and more efforts are being made to bring out the truth of that horrific period.

It might be left to the next generation - those who never experienced the trauma of the killings and the ordeal of living under a brutal military regime - to try to deal with this less emotionally and more objectively.

Only then, perhaps, can Indonesia close this dark chapter of its modern history.

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P.S.

* SEP 22, 2015:
http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/wound-over-indonesias-1960s-genocide-still-festers

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