

September 30, 1965

Indonesia: Not mercy, but justice

Sunday 23 September 2007, by [SARI Dita Indah](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2006).

Below is an article by Dita Indah Sari discussing recent Indonesian government responses to the plight of Indonesian citizens of Leftwing ideological persuasion who had their passports revoked in the late 1960s. The revocation of their passports was one of the policies pursued by the Suharto government as part of its suppression of the Left-wing of ideological politics. Since the fall of Suharto in May, 1998, the level and depth of discussion around September 30 increases with each passing year. [Max Lane]

The Indonesian government recently issued a ministerial decree to implement a citizenship law passed in July. The law will clarify the status of hundreds of Indonesians studying abroad during the alleged 1965 coup attempt who had their citizenship stripped by the Suharto regime after the overthrow of President Sukarno for alleged links to “subversive movements”. People’s Democratic Party chairperson Dita Indah Sari argues that dealing with the exiles’ status should not be an administrative question, but one of justice for victims of Suharto’s New Order regime.

For more than 60 years they have lived in foreign countries after the land upon which their own blood was spilled would not condescend to accept them. This is not some fairy tale, but an episode in Indonesia’s history.

Following the eruption of the 30 September Movement (G30S) affair in 1965, hundreds of Indonesians were unable to return home after they were deprived of their passports. These people, studying or working overseas in an official capacity, lost their citizenship after local Indonesian embassies revoked their passports.

The reason was a difference of political viewpoint. The victims were those deemed to be supporters of President Sukarno’s political line of Nasakom — nationalism, religion, communism — or members or sympathisers of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). After the massive bloodletting that took place all over the country, for Suharto’s New Order regime to annul their passports was a relatively simple matter.

For those unable to return home, their adopted countries did not offer many choices. With all their hearts, Indonesia had to become a thing of the past. Following the G30S affair, the fate of the families left behind was unclear, the exiles not knowing if they were dead or alive.

Most of these victims were forced to suffer endlessly in one place after another until in the end deciding to live in one country — where they have stayed to this day. Initially, being political escapees, because they needed legal, security and economic certainty, they were forced to change their citizenship.

Hundreds thus disappeared in foreign countries unable to expel their last breath in their mother country. Decades of their productive time passed by without being able to contribute anything to their beloved republic. They became scattered across countries such as Germany, France, the

Netherlands, Sweden, Russia and China. Usually they were elderly, over 60 years old.

Decades passed and the political situation began to change, and the government of former President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) tried to initiate a repatriation and rehabilitation of their rights. The then justice and human rights minister, Yusril Ihza Mahendra, flew to Europe to meet with their representatives, although the effort failed because of political reasons.

For its efforts the Gus Dur government was accused of compromising with the PKI, and not long afterwards Gus Dur was forced to step down and was replaced by Megawati Sukarnoputri. As Sukarno's eldest daughter, Megawati should have been more concerned about the issue, but she remained silent.

More recently, the current president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, expressed a desire to repatriate the exiles. The justice minister, Hamid Awaluddin, was delegated to facilitate the process. Essentially the Yudhoyono government wants to give them back their passports and citizenship through the newly ratified Law No. 12/2006 on Citizenship.

In principle, the government's intentions are positive. But from the various statements the government has made on the question, there are a number of basic issues that need to first be corrected, criticised or even challenged.

Firstly, the term used by the government to refer to the exiles is *eks mahid*, meaning former government-contracted students. They are referred to by this term because after their period of study was completed they were obliged to work as officials in a state institution for a certain period of time, as their overseas studies had been funded by the state.

This term is erroneous because it was not just students whose citizenship was revoked following the G30S affair, but everyone who was overseas and deemed to politically oppose the New Order regime.

This included students sent by the Sukarno government to study overseas (the majority were sent to former socialist countries), delegates from various mass organisations (labour, farmers', women's, youth, academic, cultural, sports and journalists' groups), Indonesian representatives to various international organisations and forums as well as state officials.

Because of this the name "*eks mahid*" is very misleading, even divisive. Will the rehabilitation policy only be valid for former students? If so, then how about the non-student exiles whose passports were also revoked? It would be more correct and fairer for them to be categorised as overseas political victims of Suharto's New Order.

Secondly, according to Yudhoyono and Awaluddin the planned repatriation of these exiles is based on a spirit of reconciliation following the ratification of the new citizenship law. There are also humanitarian grounds, because most are now quite old. However this type of thinking is narrow and shallow in character. Why? Because the exiles' problem is a political one, not just administrative.

The actions of the Suharto government in revoking the citizenship of a large group of citizens while they were carrying out their duties overseas — without trial — is a violation of the law and of human rights.

It is a political crime because it resulted in hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people suddenly becoming stateless, without status and abandoned to live in a foreign country for years.

The resolution of the exiles' problems should not be linked with the question of naturalisation.

Awaluddin's call for the department of foreign affairs to facilitate their citizenship documents indicates that the government does not understand, or is pretending not to understand, the real issues. If they are asked to submit a request for naturalisation it means the exiles are being equated with other foreign citizens who wish to become Indonesian citizens. But they lost their citizenship for political reasons, and there must be a political acknowledgement of this by the government.

The good political intentions and the seriousness of the Yudhoyono government can be measured by asking the following questions: Is the government willing to acknowledge that the revocation of their citizenship was a human rights violation and to then correct this? Does the Yudhoyono government have the courage to apologise for the political crimes of the New Order? How long will the government continue to provide cover for the New Order's actions?

It is impossible for a spirit of reconciliation and humanitarianism to be built on the negation of truth and justice. If this aspect is not addressed, is it then wrong for us to suspect that the Indonesian government only wants to build an image as a champion of human rights because it is presently campaigning to be elected as the chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission? Or that Yudhoyono is just dressing up his image because, it is said, that he is a candidate for a Nobel Prize?

Before correcting past mistakes, the Yudhoyono government must apparently correct its error in the way it views the issue of the exiles. For the exiles, the problem is no longer one of wanting to return home or not, missing the motherland or not. It is no longer one of urgency, because many of them, following Suharto's fall in 1998, have been able to visit the motherland and meet with those family members that still remain. The primary issue is one of truth and justice.

For the victims, the government's readiness to give amnesty to, to rehabilitate and to provide assistance to the leaders and supporters of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) is a painful slap in the face. The exiles were not separatists, nor did they try to divide the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (to borrow from the government's term).

Many even took part in the war to defend the newly independent Indonesian republic from the Dutch, and, ironically, were then abandoned by the republic. Unlike GAM, they never once stopped feeling themselves to be Indonesian, loving Indonesia, thinking like Indonesians, speaking the Indonesian language. Like a child yearning for its mother, they are tired of longing for their mother country from afar.

P.S.

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