
HISTORY, MEMORY, AND THE “1965 INCIDENT” IN INDONESIA

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With the events of 1998 that climaxed in the stunning moment of President Suharto’s resignation, Indonesia embarked on a transition from a tenacious authoritarianism. These changes have prompted re-examination of assumptions and tenets that have shaped the state, its laws and institutions, and the experience of being a citizen. They have also spurred calls for justice and retribution for persistent patterns of violence. Suharto’s New Order is the only government that most Indonesians alive today have ever known, and its passing has sparked notable interest in reviewing and assessing earlier chapters in the national story. This retrospective moment has not been systematic, and there are indications that it may not be sustained under the administration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri.¹ Nonetheless, public discourse continues to spotlight key actors and events from the past, including some that have long been hidden, suppressed, or unmentionable. Among these topics, the killings of 1965–66 are a particularly difficult and dark subject. In this essay, I will discuss some of the recent representations of this particular element of the collective past and offer some thoughts on how “1965” figures in contemporary public discourse, in social and private

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1. Such a view was hinted at in a July 2001 speech by the current vice president, Hamzah Haz, who stated that Indonesians should not continue attacking the legacy of the New Order—the army-dominated system Suharto put in place after the ouster of President Sukarno’s “Old Order”—as the former contained both positive and negative aspects, and had kept Indonesia from becoming a communist state. However, responding to strong international pressure, the current government has opened Indonesia’s new ad hoc Human Rights Tribunal, which in March 2002 began to try 19 police, military, and civilian militia members accused of crimes against humanity during the violent reaction to East Timor’s independence vote in 1999.

memory, and in efforts to bring a new national consensus and governance arrangements into being.²

For those unfamiliar with the story of 1965–66 and its tragic aftermath, I will not attempt a detailed recapitulation here, as a number of important accounts are readily available.³ To sketch the essentials, polarization between left and right in Indonesia came to a head on the night of September 30, 1965, when six senior generals and a lieutenant were kidnapped and murdered as part of an attempt to establish a governing “revolutionary council.” This coup, carried out by military officers, was quickly countered by other elements in the armed forces under the direction of General Suharto. Subsequently, then-President Sukarno was marginalized and stripped of power, as popular antipathy toward the left, especially toward the huge Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, Partai Komunis Indonesia), was roused and manipulated by the military. A tidal wave of violence—with citizens killing other citizens—washed over several areas of the country for more than five months. In addition to hundreds of thousands of killings, many thousands of people were variously tortured, detained, and imprisoned without trial, some for over a decade, while countless others suffered exile, stigmatization, harassment, ostracism, and abrogation of civil rights that endure until the present.

To date there exists no single accepted and authoritative account of the “30th September Movement” (usually referenced with the acronym G-30-S)

2. This paper uses the term “1965” to encompass not only the mass violence of late 1965 and early 1966 but also the legacy of political imprisonment, purges, and suppression of the left, as well as the stigmatization of millions of ordinary citizens in political, social, and cultural life. Much of the material and observations on which this paper is based were gathered while I served as representative for the Ford Foundation in its Jakarta office, but the views expressed here are my own. I am grateful to many individuals inside and outside Indonesia who shared their views and experiences with me, and to Foundation colleagues Anthony Romero and Alex Wilde, who encouraged my interest in this subject. Learning about the field of transitional truth-seeking was inspired and assisted by Priscilla Hayner, Paul van Zyl, Douglass Cassel, and Alex Boraine.

3. Estimates of the numbers killed during the months of terror immediately following the September 30, 1965, events range from 100,000 to 1 million. See Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesia Killings, 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 21, 1990); Benedict Anderson and Ruth McVey, *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Interim Report Series, 1971); Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Adam Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia in the 1990s* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); and Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). Indonesian media are now quick to publish new documentation concerning the mass violence, as was seen in 2001 with detailed accounts of the release (and attempted withdrawal) of a volume of the U.S. State Department’s Foreign Relations of the United States series concerning the U.S. government’s knowledge and actions during the 1965 events. See “Merajut Kepingan Dokumen Kasus G30S” [Assembling fragments of the G-30-S case documents], *Tempo* (Jakarta), October 7, 2001.

and its aftermath, and a number of key incidents and the roles of particular actors remain mysterious. There are five different scenarios that can be distilled from the literature on 1965: first, the killing of the generals was entirely conceived and carried out by the PKI and its sympathizers; second, the “attempted coup” was the result of an internal armed forces struggle; third, General Suharto was the coup’s actual instigator, or he at least influenced, manipulated and distorted the killing of the generals for his own ends; fourth, President Sukarno allowed or encouraged disaffected officers to act against others said to be part of a secret “Council of Generals”; and fifth, foreign intelligence operations were involved in an attempt to oust the left-leaning Sukarno from his influential role in Indonesia and among Third World nations. Some accounts combine more than one of these scenarios.

Within Indonesia, however, a singular official version of 1965 events has been promoted almost without deviation. Indonesian citizens have been taught through pervasive government rhetoric and symbolism, as well as through the narrow school curriculum, that the Indonesian Communist Party alone was responsible for the murder of the generals, and thus was a traitorous force that needed to be completely eliminated at all levels of society. Within the tightly controlled domestic discourse about 1965, and under a security apparatus that has been ruthless toward dissenting viewpoints, most Indonesians have lived in conditions of willed amnesia or fearful silence concerning G-30-S and PKI.

Foreigners such as myself who have lived in Indonesia have frequently experienced reluctance and circumlocution from friends or colleagues when asked about what happened in 1965. International scholars have found it difficult to do fieldwork and write openly about the subject because of a restrictive system for obtaining research permits and out of fear of endangering their respondents. Nonetheless, the killings and repression (the post-coup massacre in which the political left was eliminated, followed by many years of stigmatization and lustration of persons connected to the PKI) have echoed down the years—the proverbial sounds of silence—as a motif and emblem of the New Order. Any discussion of these events in the present must start from the understanding that this is a difficult topic to voice, and that many Indonesians directly and indirectly affected by the terror have been unable or reluctant to share their memories with neighbors or even close relatives. Even those not involved in the events of 1965–66 have been compelled to demonstrate ideological “cleanness” in accord with the anti-communist national consensus, and also as a condition of their acceptance into education, professions, or public service. It is difficult to estimate the numbers of citizens compelled to conceal personal memories of, or links to, G-30-S, and who have been silenced and intimidated within the enduring, pervasive social regime that followed.

Acknowledgment in the Public Sphere

The approaching end of the New Order was clearly signaled by the erosion of Suharto's power during the economic crisis and student demonstrations of 1997–98. These events were accompanied by a change in the public weather, as the wind of *reformasi* (reform) blew open the doors of the Indonesian media, stirring ideas and opinions in a manner not seen for many years. Some of this shift was due to a diminished fear of censorship, while groundbreaking changes in the media—the live broadcast of television news direct from location, and the advent of unscripted talk shows such as Wimar Witoe-lar's widely popular "Perspective"—also produced new public space. As a result, analysis of 1965, including the themes of the PKI, mass killings, detention, and victimization, began to re-enter public and official discourse.

I would like to note a distinction here between "1965" as a factual category in the social and political history of Indonesia and the "1965" that has long appeared in New Order discourse as a trope signifying threat, betrayal, and anti-nationalism. Ariel Heryanto has written about the latter "1965," which he refers to as the "discursive phantom of the Communist threat."⁴ In his article "Where Communism Never Dies," Heryanto examines the ways in which Suharto's regime continued into the 1990s to conjure the specter of communist subversion to elicit mass obedience and how the "reproductions" of this communism penetrated popular culture in ways quite disconnected from real communists or actual killings. In the absence of stable or coherent truth about the events of 1965, Heryanto argues, the regime was allowed great creativity in producing the semblance of communist threat. This contributed to the "hyper-reality" of a political life in which, for instance, every five years, citizens mobilized for exuberant campaign parades in election rituals where everyone already knew who would emerge the winner.

This triggering of traumatic memory through simulacra was effective in discouraging or neutralizing potential opposition throughout the New Order period. Thus, when the fledgling neo-left Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD, the People's Democratic Party) emerged in the mid-1990s, the *bahaya laten* (latent danger) of a revived PKI was easily evoked. Of course, Indonesian intellectuals and political scientists were quick to point to post-Berlin Wall Europe and the former Soviet Union to argue that communism in Indonesia was not a credible bogey any longer. Free-flowing information and images from the globalized media thus began to have a demystifying effect on the

4. Ariel Heryanto, "Where Communism Never Dies," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2:2 (August 1999), pp. 147–77.

prevailing discourse about what many Indonesians refer to as *peristiwa enam lima* (the '65 incident).⁵

Another change that helped reframe public attitudes toward 1965 came from the growing international human rights campaign. Beginning in the 1980s and growing stronger through the 1990s, courageous individuals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) documented and criticized numerous incidents of extrajudicial killing, detention and disappearance, repression of legitimate protest, and so forth. Groundbreaking work in this field was undertaken by human rights lawyer Yap Thiam Hien, as well as the leading independent group Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (Legal Aid Foundation) under such notable figures as Adnan Buyung Nasution and Todong Mulya Lubis. Their advocacy of fundamental human rights (HAM, *hak asasi manusia*) indirectly contextualized the violence and detentions after G-30-S as part of the New Order's record of rights violations. In the second half of the 1990s, this argument became more explicit among activists such as Moenir, founder of KONTRAS (Commission for the Missing and Victims of Violence), whose work on political disappearances was driven by patterns of human rights abuse that originated in the New Order's violent beginnings.

Among cultural figures who contributed substantially to changing perceptions was the leading writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Each time his books were officially banned, the public was reminded of the legacy of political imprisonment, and of the existence of numerous people with the "ET" designation for "ex-political prisoner," on their identity cards.⁶ Each time international recognition was accorded to Pramoedya, it became harder to suppress his literary achievement. By the time he received the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay award in 1995, Pramoedya was already a hero to Indonesia's alienated students, some of whom were arrested and imprisoned for possessing and promoting his writing. The award launched a bitter polemic in cultural circles about the permissibility of acknowledging Indonesia's intellectual left; a byproduct of that debate was renewed discussion about the PKI's cultural wing LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, League of People's Culture) in which Pramoedya had been important prior to 1965. By late

5. I have adopted the "1965 incident" terminology in the title of this essay because of its ubiquitous use in Indonesia, where it is a relatively neutral and inclusive term referencing the events of September 30th, the violence that ensued, as well as the general conditions of intimidation that prevailed. The actual killings following on G-30-S took place into the early months of 1966 and sporadically thereafter in some regions.

6. *Eks tahanan politik*, *eks tapol*, or *ET*, means 'ex-political prisoner'; numerous controls and regulations enabled identification and surveillance of these individuals and their families by intelligence agencies and local officials. While the government now issues identity cards to former prisoners without the ET code, these have expiry dates and must be renewed, while ordinary citizens have cards that are valid for their lifetimes (Hardoyo, personal communication, April 2002).

1998, Pramoedya's name was frequently in the public ear, and the new edition of his long-banned book on the ethnic Chinese, *Hoakiau di Indonesia* [Overseas Chinese in Indonesia], was the occasion of a high-profile seminar and book-launching that raised the issue of stigmatization—whether of controversial writers or minority ethnic groups—to renewed prominence.⁷

At the midpoint of the 1990s, press treatment of *peristiwa enam lima* was still cautious, elliptical, and gave little space for suggestion of alternative viewpoints.⁸ This period began to see the publication of several books on 1965, including memoirs by parliamentarian Manai Sophiaan and former Sukarno minister Oei Tjoe Tat. Both were banned, as the government produced its own “white book” reiterating the official version of 1965 events in which the PKI's Special Bureau, a clandestine political arm, played the central role.⁹ A watershed work was published by the Institute for Studies on the Free Flow of Information (ISAI, Institut Arus Informasi Indonesia). Its *Bayang-Bayang PKI* [Shadows of the PKI] countered the government's stance through extensive compilation of foreign reporting and existing evidence.¹⁰ It too was banned, but like the memoirs, was widely circulated informally. Other books followed, and thus by the time of Suharto's resignation, public perceptions were shifting and the long-impermeable aura of taboo around “the 1965 incident” had started to dissolve.

With the reinvigoration of the media in 1998, a flood of commentary, reflection, and zealous criticism of the New Order poured forth. Newspapers and weeklies published interviews with witnesses to 1965 who had long been silent. The pages of the prominent weekly *Tempo* featured former Colonel Abdul Latief, a key figure in the events on September 30, 1965, who was finally released from prison in 1998; A. M. Hanafi, the Sukarno-appointed

7. “Surat Pramoedya Buat Chen Xiaru” [Pramoedya's letter to Chen Xiaru], *Tempo*, October 12, 1998.

8. For instance, a feature article in the major daily *Kompas* looked at the livelihoods of residents on Buru island, in whose prison camps 10,000 ETs had been exiled; the article claimed that by dint of hard work, Buru islanders hoped to rid their home of its “black” reputation as home to members of the outlawed PKI. See “Pulau Buru Mengubah Citra Eks Tapol” [Buru changes political prisoner image], *Kompas*, May 10, 1994.

9. See “Gerakan 30 September: Pemberontakan Partai Komunis Indonesia, Latar Belakang, Aksi, dan Penumpasannya” [The 30th September movement: Insurrection of the Indonesian Communist Party, its background, actions and eradication] (Jakarta: State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 1994); *Kehormatan Bagi yang Berhak* [Rightful honor] (photocopy, 1994); *Memoar Oei Tjoe Tat, Pembantu Presiden Soekarno* [The memoir of Oei Tjoe Tat, assistant to President Sukarno], ed. Pramudya Ananta Toer and Stanley Adi Prasetyo (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1995).

10. This independent media institute, founded by prominent journalist Goenawan Mohamad, is just one of a number of groups bringing out a stream of factual reporting on incidents of violence and human rights violations all over Indonesia. *Bayang-Bayang PKI* was published by ISAI in Jakarta in 1995.

ambassador to Cuba from 1963–66, long in political exile; Wisnu Djajeng-minardo, the Air Force commandant at Halim Perdanakusumah Air Base, the location of many of the events on September 30 and immediately after; and former Chief Justice Soegih Arto, who presided over corruption trials in the early days of the New Order.¹¹ The now-defunct newsweekly *D&R* published a series of critical reports in September and October 1998 on the fate of former President Sukarno and the suspicious circumstances of Suharto's rise to power.¹²

This reportage contributed to growing uncertainty about New Order official history and its anti-communist truisms and shed new light on long-suppressed social and intellectual leaders. For instance, a biography of politician and educator Siauwi Giok Tjhan, a cabinet minister under Sukarno imprisoned for 10 years by Suharto, illustrated the contributions of ethnic Chinese citizens beyond their stereotyped role as key players in business conglomerates.¹³ Books by Carmel Budiardjo and Sulami portrayed the circumstances of leftist women and political prisoners, helping to discredit powerful New Order propaganda about paganism, sadism, and sexual violence on the night of September 30.¹⁴ In addition, Saskia Wieringa's analysis of how images of violence by women were exploited by the media in 1965 (to propagate the notion that the left should be eliminated by violent means) was published in Indonesia,¹⁵ while Indonesian academics Hermawan Sulistyono and Iwan Gardono Sudjatmiko produced dissertations on the 1965 killings that further eroded official history.¹⁶

11. The four interviews cited appeared on October 12, 1998, December 19, 1999, June 20, 1999, and July 4, 1999, respectively. For more on the historical testimony of Colonel Latief, see excerpts from his book on 1965, along with an interview and commentary by Benedict Anderson in *Tempo*, April 16, 2000.

12. See 1998 *D&R* cover stories in the issues of September 26, "Bung Karno: Poisoned?"; October 3, "Soeharto, the PKI and the CIA"; October 10, "Dewi Soekarno: 'Soeharto Lied'"; and October 24, "The 'Missing' Medical Notes: Bung Karno's Last Days" (my translations).

13. Siauwi Tiong Djin, *Siauwi Giok Tjhan* [Siauwi Giok Tjhan] (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1999).

14. Budiardjo, a director of the London-based human-rights group TAPOL, wrote about the lives of "tapol," political prisoners, in *Bertahan Hidup di Gulag Indonesia* [Surviving in Indonesia's gulag] and visited the country in 2000 after long being considered persona non grata. Sulami was a senior officer of the women's organization GERWANI, Gerakan Wanita Indonesia [Indonesian women's movement]. After release from prison, she wrote *Perempuan: Kebenaran dan Penjara* [Women: Truth and prison]. Sulami has been a popular speaker at NGO forums and conferences, and she co-founded the advocacy group YPKP, or Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan 1965–1966 [Research Institute on the Victims of 1965–66 Killings].

15. *Penghancuran Gerakan Perempuan di Indonesia* [The destruction of the Indonesian women's movement] (Jakarta: Garba Budaya and Kalyanamitra, 1999).

16. Sulistyono's dissertation was published as *Palu Arit di Ladang Tebu* [Hammer and sickle in the sugar fields] (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2000).

Within two years of Suharto's resignation, these and many other accounts were widely available.¹⁷ It would have seemed unlikely before the second half of 1998 that publishers could bring out novels set in 1965, such as those recently published by former *Harian Rakyat* journalist Martin Aleida, and ex-political prisoner Putu Oka Sukanta, without being hit with a ban.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Pramoedya's works were sought out even though the formal ban on his work was never lifted. As a result of the openness in print and broadcast media, "1965" began to be perceived as part of the roster of wrongs committed by the former regime and part of the past that needed rectification. With public antipathy toward the former president growing, some Indonesians began to question the official versions of 1965 with which they had grown up.¹⁹

Once he became president in October 1999, Abdurrahman Wahid (popularly referred to as Gus Dur) quickly set a new tone and raised the ante in the political stakes around the truths of 1965. Wahid had long been an advocate of free speech and human rights; soon after his inauguration he invited Pramoedya Ananta Toer to the presidential palace, stating that he was an admirer of the writer's historical fiction and seeking Pramoedya's advice on Wahid's plans to revitalize Indonesia's maritime culture.²⁰ In a speech on International Human Rights Day, December 10, 1999, Wahid invited all Indonesians living as political exiles to return. On a stopover in Europe in early 2000, he met with a group of Indonesian political exiles in Paris and asked government ministers to take steps to restore the civil rights of former detainees and exiles.²¹ These actions spurred heightened attention to the conditions of the detainees and their families, and led to calls for revocation of onerous

17. Other titles include *Plot TNI AD-Barat di Balik Tragedi '65* [Behind the 1965 tragedy: The army and the west's plot] (Jakarta: TAPOL, MIK and Solidamor, 2000); *Menyingskap Kabut Halim 1965* [Lifting the fog over Halim Airbase, 1965] (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1999); *Gerakan 30 September: Antara Fakta dan Rekayasa* [The 30th September movement: Between fact and manipulation] (Yogyakarta: Center for Information Analysis, 1999); *GESTAPU: Matinya para Jeneral dan Peran CIA* [The 30th September movement: Deaths of the generals and the role of the CIA] (Yogyakarta: Cermin, 1999).

18. Martin Aleida, *Layang-layang itu tak lagi mengepak tinggi-tinggi* [The kites no longer fly high] (Emansipasi-Damar Warga, 1999). Sukanta's book is *Merajut Harkat* [Repairing dignity] (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1999).

19. The newsweekly *D&R* published a report on efforts in "historical revision" in its edition of May 10–15, 1999. See also *Tempo's* issue of October 3, 1999, for a survey of New Order historical claims and alternative interpretations: "Gerakan 30 September 1965: Tragedi Bertirai Kabut" [The movement of 30th September 1965: Tragedy in a fog of uncertainty].

20. "Gus Dur Merindukan Kejayaan Majapahit" [Gus Dur's nostalgia for the glory of Majapahit], in the weekly *Gamma*, November 14, 1999.

21. As reported in the lead story in *Gamma*, "Pulanglah Si Anak Hilang" [The lost child returns], January 9, 2000. See also "Govt. Puts Out Welcome Mat for Political Exiles," *Jakarta Post* (in English), January 30, 2000.

regulations mandating control and surveillance of “ET” individuals.²² Wahid’s next move came during an appearance on the morning television talk show *Secangkir Kopi* [A cup of coffee] on March 14, 2000, when he referred to killings of alleged communists committed by elements of his mass organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, Council of Scholars). The president registered his apology for such actions and encouraged citizens to “open up” the history of 1965 and other incidents of human rights abuses.²³ These presidential forays into the hazardous minefield of G-30-S official history were duly noted, but Wahid’s next effort was both unexpected and hugely controversial. In calling for a revocation of the ban on Marxism-Leninism, known as Decree No. 25 of 1966 of the People’s Consultative Assembly, he struck at the heart of the weakening specter of communism in Indonesia through an attempt to demystify an ever-present yet relentlessly suppressed bogey, and in doing so challenged the foundation of the New Order itself.²⁴

Wahid argued that the ban was unconstitutional in limiting freedom of thought and expression and Indonesia needed to liberate itself from what analyst Kusnanto Anggoro has called the “chains of fetishism” that had led to abuse of the state apparatus as a tool of political repression.²⁵ But Wahid miscalculated the extent of the public’s readiness, and was unable to convey the democratic conceptual framework of his proposal. A burst of strong criticism exploded around him, as uneasy local religious leaders cited dangers of atheism or of the rebirth of the PKI as a legal party. Rivals from within the reform movement, including People’s Consultative Assembly chair Amien Rais, saw Wahid as overreaching his powers and quickly moved to block any parliamentary debate over the proposed revocation. Student groups criticized the president for sparking anxiety among the people, and anti-communist demonstrations erupted in Jakarta and other cities in early April 2000. Anti-left vigilante and Muslim groups made their opposition known by descending on the presidential palace as well as threatening an advocacy group working on behalf of 1965 victims.

22. The infamous Ministerial Instruction no. 32 of 1981, titled “Guidance and Monitoring of Former Political Detainees and Prisoners of G30S/PKI,” restricts the livelihoods, movements, and social interactions of such individuals. See “Activists and the government overlook ex-political detainees,” *Jakarta Post*, March 18, 2000; and “Aturan-aturan tentang ‘Bersih Lingkungan’ Harus Dicabut” [Regulations on ‘clean political environment’ must be revoked] in *Kompas*, March 15, 2000.

23. See “Gus Dur: Sejak Dulu Sudah Minta Maaf” [Gus Dur: Been apologizing a long time], *ibid.*, March 15, 2000.

24. In 1966, one of the *Tri Tuntutan Rakyat* or *Tritura* [Three demands of the people] was the banning of the PKI and its ideology; Suharto consolidated his power by supporting and then acceding to the Tritura demonstrations.

25. “PKI: Opening a New Chapter, Without Closing Book,” in the *Jakarta Post*, March 30, 2000.

The public process of coming to terms with the legacies of 1965 thus lost its earlier focus on recovering history and was readily subsumed within familiar polarizations: left vs. right, communism vs. Islam. This tendency still threatens to overshadow, and may preclude, a deeper dialogue on the implications of the violence stemming from 1965 for the country's emerging democracy. What began with those killings continues to plague Indonesia today in acts of vigilantism, mob violence, and terrorism by clandestinely organized groups. Intolerance of political opposition is a feature of present-day discourse just as in the past, and the capacity to resolve differences on the basis of values of civility and tolerance appears as fragile today as in 1965. The phantom of communist revival was invoked in early 2001 by Akbar Tandjung, the parliamentary Speaker and leader of Golkar, the former ruling party, in the form of accusations against the small, neo-left PRD party. In Indonesia's major cities, anti-PKI sentiment appeared in banners and graffiti, as witnessed in a sign hung above a Jakarta highway in August 2001 reading "PRD + DEKRIT = PKI."²⁶

The Path of Formal Truth-Seeking

According to those close to President Wahid, his controversial proposal to revoke the ban on communist teachings sprang from a spirit of reconciliation that acknowledged the sufferings inflicted by 1965 and its aftermath.²⁷ Even before Abdurrahman Wahid became Indonesia's fourth president, however, calls were heard for official action to investigate and rectify the wrongdoings of the Suharto years, including massive state corruption and legal and human rights abuses. Former President B. J. Habibie helped establish investigative commissions on rights issues during his brief tenure in 1998–99, including the Joint Fact-Finding Team (Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta) set up to look into the killings, riots, and rapes of May 1998 in Jakarta, as well as a National Human Rights Commission inquiry into military operations in Aceh. In the months following Suharto's resignation, there was a widespread sense that the reform agenda must include uncovering the entire legacy of New Order abuse of power, including 1965. An August 12, 1998, *Jakarta Post* editorial, "Truth and Reconciliation," predicted that it would be "only a matter of time before people who felt the brunt of the government's wrath for their links, direct or otherwise, to the outlawed communist movement in Indonesia, begin to demand restitution."

26. *Dekrit* [decree] refers to the controversial declaration of emergency by former President Wahid issued on July 23, 2001, which triggered his removal by the People's Consultative Assembly.

27. See the remarks of Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab, cited in "Communism Protected by Constitution: Gus Dur," in the *Jakarta Post*, April 13, 2000.

In that atmosphere of social conflict, restiveness in the provinces, and public suspicion of government, such calls for official truth-seeking efforts were frequently linked to an agenda of national reconciliation. A leading military spokesperson at the time, General Agum Gumelar, cited the need for a national dialogue, or *rembug nasional*. The Jakarta Social Institute, a local non-governmental group associated with the Volunteer Team for Humanity (Tim Relawan Kemanusiaan), which itself conducted community-level investigations into the events of May 1998, issued a “reflections” paper at the end of the year that mentioned the need for a Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) model for Indonesia. Earlier in the year, senior and respected public figures such as Emil Salim had called for truth and reconciliation efforts in a national workshop on human rights. However, statements from NGOs and officials alike lacked specifics about how such commissions might work, and which sorts of “truth” needed to be clarified or acknowledged.

A more concrete proposal for an “Independent Truth Commission for National Reconciliation” (Komisi Independen Pencari Kebenaran untuk Rekonsiliasi Nasional) appeared in January 1999—the product of none other than Abdurrahman Wahid. Called by its acronym KINKONAS, this would have been a non-official commission comprising leading Indonesian as well as prominent international figures. Its terms of reference were to “find, and acknowledge, the truth regarding major issues and incidents, such as the issues of East Timor, Irian Jaya and Aceh, with the purpose of formulating ways to resolve these issues and allow Indonesians to learn from the past so that similar mistakes would be avoided in the future.”²⁸ The possibility of including the events of 1965 among the range of issues for KINKONAS to consider was not precluded. Then-President Habibie and the military were cool toward both the agenda and the international composition of KINKONAS, however, and Wahid’s own growing status as a possible presidential alternative in 1999 overtook his initiative: in the end, KINKONAS was never realized.

When Wahid became president in October 1999, Indonesia had been badly bruised by the international exposure and criticism of the August-September violence by anti-independence militias in the former province of East Timor. Expectations in some segments of the public were that the government would proceed with a transitional justice agenda, that human rights prosecutions should and would occur, and that a long-awaited opportunity was open to present the truth about wanton military-supported excesses in Timor and other regions of the country.

28. Excerpted from typescript document, “Independent Truth Commission for National Reconciliation,” dated February 19, 1999 (n.p.).

There is not space in this discussion for details on legal and political debates around Indonesia's transitional justice efforts.²⁹ In brief, a law to establish a Human Rights Court was drafted, debated in Parliament, and finally passed in late 2000, following on the earlier Human Rights Law enacted in 1999. A bill to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is still (in mid-2002) in draft form. These pieces of legislation have involved nongovernmental groups and rights activists on their drafting committees, public discussions, as well as parliamentary hearings on each bill. Legal rights advocates have queried how far the government and the military are willing to go in opening up the record of the past. Passage of the Human Rights Court law, for instance, has been linked to Indonesia's efforts to forestall any action in the World Court to prosecute senior figures for war crimes in East Timor. It is important to recognize that in these formal judicial processes, the killings of 1965 figure as just one among many historical events that may require investigation. Other cases of violence and patterns of repression by the state on the roster include those in Tanjung Priok, Lampung, Aceh, Irian Jaya, the "Malari" riots of 1974, the attack on PDI headquarters in 1996, disappearances of activists in 1998, the Trisakti student deaths, and the murders of labor organizer Marsinah and journalist Udin. There are advocates and campaigners for each of these episodes and many others.

Despite the flurry of legislative activism, many Indonesians remain skeptical about the government's commitment to achieving justice and convinced that courts, prosecutors, and judges are deeply corrupt and ineffective.³⁰ There is only moderate optimism that a TRC could be effective, since the public has witnessed many high-level governmental commissions that appeared to accomplish little. Some human-rights activists argue against the TRC concept, seeing it as a compromise with the New Order that might preserve impunity and grant sweeping amnesty. In this view, the judicial process is the only valid path toward justice. There is a marked absence of voices that explain the tradeoffs between judicial and non-judicial forms of

29. As one example, there has been considerable controversy over the new Human Rights Court law because of its non-retroactivity provision, which precludes prosecution under that law for crimes committed before the statute existed (in accordance with international legal norms). Parliament and the executive would need to recommend that special Ad-Hoc Human Rights Tribunals be established for cases antedating the statute.

30. The hapless furor in 2001 over the hunt for Tommy Suharto (who disappeared after his conviction and 18-month sentence for fraud were upheld), and the failure of all police efforts to arrest him, was viewed by Indonesians as proof of high-level governmental weakness or collusion. Now that Tommy has been arrested, and put on trial in March 2002 (accused of plotting the murder of Justice Syaifudin Kartasasmita, who had found him guilty), the government hopes to be seen both domestically and among international donors as responding to widespread public demands for justice.

truth-seeking and argue for both elements to form part of Indonesia's endeavor to deal with the legacy of New Order violence that began in 1965.

There is international experience supporting the proposition that a truth commission process could address the atrocities of 1965 in a manner that serves the dual objectives of historical understanding and justice in a transitional Indonesia. Looking at the record of some 20 commissions empaneled around the world, it is evident that truth commissions can establish an official public record of lasting value.³¹ They can forge understanding of broad patterns of abuse in a way that differs from a court's focus on a limited number of provable individual crimes and perpetrators. A truth commission can suggest reforms in institutions and in laws to prevent recurrence of atrocities and can recommend legal actions against perpetrators or reparations for victims. And perhaps most crucially, truth commissions are a forum for society to listen to the voices of victims themselves and acknowledge the reality of their suffering. It is this latter dimension that is most often overlooked at elite levels in Indonesia as the country comes to terms with its troubled past.

At this moment, the draft law for Indonesia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission would include the killings of 1965–66 within its mandate. Yet, with the aging and death of many survivors and witnesses, special attention needs to be given to how these events will be investigated and understood, what kind of evidence is still available, and what protection and support of potential witnesses might need to be provided. A truth commission would need to define carefully the goals of revisiting 1965 and convince a doubtful public that the commission represented a concern for all citizens' rights and was not simply a method for the government to launch political attacks on its rivals (for example, on the former ruling party Golkar).

A truth commission looking into 1965 could prove especially valuable if it defined its purpose as historical clarification, rather than limiting its mandate to determining individual culpability or naming perpetrators. Through listening to people directly involved in and affected by violence and extralegal acts, a commission could build a comprehensive picture of the extent of the killings, their deep and abiding impact on Indonesian society, and the manner in which they institutionalized and justified horrific violence. While it is daunting to seek criminal prosecution through the difficult and costly effort of building cases against crimes in the distant past, a commission could nonetheless acknowledge individual suffering and loss, help build a new shared awareness, and perhaps address the collective, silenced memory that is at the heart of this troubled legacy. The lessons learned in such a process could well help Indonesia to, as the *Jakarta Post* put it, "come to terms with our

31. See Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

violent past . . . to uncover the truth surrounding what must rank as the darkest page of the nation's modern history."³²

The Work of Personal Memory

Among the constraints to be overcome by any truth commission effort in Indonesia would be the long-imposed suppression of individual memory. Until very recently, a pervasive sense of fear and avoidance has held back memories of 1965, and it has been rare for victims to voice their experiences. As mentioned above, many survivors, perpetrators, and witnesses have held their personal recollections in cautious silence. Given prolonged stigmatization by the New Order,³³ as well as continuing "anti-communist" polemics,³⁴ one can understand the continued reluctance of eyewitnesses and victims to come forward with their stories.

But with the end of the New Order, the opening of public discursive space as discussed above, and the initiation of legal efforts to establish a new human-rights regime in Indonesia, speaking about personal experience has in some measure become less risky. This is in part because of the individuals and groups who work on gaining recognition for victims. The publication of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's memoirs, which first appeared in Indonesian as *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* [Silent song of the mute] and were edited in English under the title *The Mute's Soliloquy*,³⁵ and also his international book tour in 1999, have been benchmarks in this effort. In 1999, Pramoedya, Sulami, and other former prisoners established the YPKP, which has gathered information and testimonials in several regions. The Volunteer Team for Humanity, similarly, works at the local level to document personal experiences, with an agenda of promoting humanitarian ideals and rehabilitation for for-

32. "Our conscience," *Jakarta Post*, March 17, 2000.

33. Two state institutions of ideological control, the *Litsus* [Special Investigations] and *Bakorstanas* [Coordinating Agency for National Stability] were closed in March 2000; however, regulations are still on the books that require former political prisoners to report to local authorities regularly and restrict their employment opportunities and civil rights. In some parts of Indonesia, these policies are still strictly applied.

34. In 2001, scattered actions by a variety of self-declared anti-communist groups occurred regularly. In addition to scapegoating the neo-left PRD party, some groups such as the *Gerakan Pemuda Kabah* (GPK, Kabah Youth Movement) harassed independent organizations working on rehabilitation issues. In May, major bookstore chains were warned by the *Aliansi Anti Komunis* [AAK, Anti-Communist Alliance] and other groups to remove "communist" titles from their shelves or face vigilante raids on National Awakening Day (May 20). The threats prompted many stores to remove popular books such as *Pikiran Karl Marx* [The thought of Karl Marx] by Frans Magnis Soeseno. The AAK has been led by Timorese militia leader Enrico Guterres and appears to be an eclectic mix of Muslim hardliners, allies of former President Suharto, and nationalists opposed to the secession of East Timor (see "Threats Drive Books Underground," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2001).

35. Edited by Willem Samuel (New York: Hyperion East, 1999).

mer prisoners and others suffering discrimination. The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan) works with independent groups on a program to build support systems for victims and witness protection programs.

In all these efforts, students, members of faith communities, and local volunteers are contributing to the creation of an environment where fear does not entirely silence victims, including those of the 1965 events. This process of validating personal history must evolve within each community, for in many cases victims and perpetrators still live in proximity and are part of the same social and cultural networks. In Bali, the scholars Degung Santikarma and Leslie Dwyer are bringing an ethnographic perspective to these issues through in-depth study in a village where large numbers of people were killed in 1965–66. They seek to understand how village life, ritual cycles, and family dynamics have absorbed and reflected the trauma and continuing secrets of those times. For the Balinese, recovery and reconstitution of the bodies of those murdered in 1965, and their consecration through the ritual cycle of Balinese cremation, is a need painfully felt, decades after the event. Santikarma speaks of the desire for an embodiment of the past that moves beyond the conventions of language used to describe it. And while cultural explanations may not be sufficient in accounting for the events of 1965, he suggests, it is through cultural frameworks of meaning that such traumas must be interpreted and resolved:

[T]he past, or historical memory, is not just a matter of active, intentional remembering or forgetting. The past soaks into the ground of the present, saturating it with meaning and shifting the landscape with its cultural and emotional weight. It can be buried or even burned, but its ashes change the composition of the soil.³⁶

For individuals who survived the trauma of 1965 and their children, the ending of stigmatized status in their immediate surroundings—in the eyes of family, community, and local authorities—may be a higher priority than seeking validation through a public or national truth-seeking process. And unless victims are empowered to tell their stories, a national truth commission would be a premature and flawed endeavor. This realization has motivated independent organizations such as ELSAM (Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, Institute for Social Studies and Advocacy) to assist local groups doing the work of truth-seeking through personal memory, in hopes of building a broader consensus on the unacceptability of political violence. Such local endeavors often start simply, with gatherings of victims or ex-prisoners who listen to each other's stories. In some cases, victims of

36. Santikarma, "Landscapes of Emotion, Embodiment and Ritual: Post-1965 Balinese Culture," paper presented at the Conference of the Society for Balinese Studies, Denpasar, Indonesia, July 11–13, 2000.

1965 violence have met with those with different experiences of rights violations—people, for example, from Tanjung Priok, or Lampung, or Aceh—and the commonality of these personal histories has been explored. Karlina Leksono, a scholar and activist who has spent much of the past several years working to end violence, has written about the voicing of personal memory as an essential element of any social healing or national reconciliation process:

When protracted and costly judicial processes are not likely, hearing the voices of victims represents the minimal step in preventing continued political amnesia; at the same time, it represents a process that allows peace with the past to be achieved, giving renewed meaning to the values of peaceful co-existence.³⁷

For at least some communities of victims of 1965, having their stories listened to may be the beginning of justice. Furthermore, the silence and amnesia engendered by 1965 continues to affect not just the “losers” but also the “winners” of that confrontation. This recognition enables a new empathy to emerge between individuals shadowed by violence and guilt. In a moving essay presented at a recent meeting of political exiles and other Indonesians in Belgium, Nani Nurrachman-Soetojo, the daughter of one of the six generals killed on September 30, 1965, spoke of personal memories, her ambivalence toward the official cult that memorialized her father as a martyr, as well as her own “moral responsibility for the future of [Indonesian] society without a legacy of hatred and vengeance.”³⁸

Conclusion

On March 25, 2001, in the village of Kaloran near Temanggung north of the central Javanese cultural center of Yogyakarta, a ceremony was organized for the reburial of the remains of more than 20 individuals killed during the violence of 1965–66. The remains had been exhumed from a mass grave in the district of Wonosobo in January by the YPKP, and through testimony of a living witness the remains were linked to a list of specific individuals known to have been arrested together. The reburial was to be conducted with the families of the slain in a multi-faith rite employing Islamic, Christian, and Buddhist prayers. According to local and international media reports, the ceremony was intended to “show respect for the fallen, whatever their alleged political leanings, and to provoke more open discussion of what Indonesians

37. “Berdamai dengan Masa Lampau: Antara Menghukum dan Mengampuni” [At peace with the past: Between judgement and forgiveness], unpublished paper presented at the Seminar on Resolving Serious Human Rights Violations from the Past: Between Truth and Justice, organized by ELSAM, Jakarta, April 11–12, 2000. The passage cited is my translation.

38. “Pergumulan Nalar dan Rasa: Rekoleksi Ingatan dan Refleksi Pengalaman atas Peristiwa G30S/PKI” [The struggle of reason and emotion: Recollecting memory and reflecting experience of the events of 30 September 1965], unpublished paper, September 2000.

did to each other in the 1960s in an effort to avoid such incidents in the future.”³⁹ Before the ceremony could start, however, a crowd of self-proclaimed Muslim anti-communists confronted the procession bearing the 1965 dead, seizing and breaking open coffins, and scattering the remains. Under the rubric of Forum Ukuwah Islamiya Kaloran, the intruders declared that the remains could not be interred in Temanggung, and called on a local legislator to demand that YPKP be disbanded to prevent a revival of communism in Indonesia. The burial ceremony’s main organizer, a former political prisoner, was chased from his home and went into hiding.

In addition to underscoring the persistence of anti-PKI sentiment in Indonesia, the Wonosobo case highlights the resistance within parts of the Muslim community toward re-examination of the events of 1965–66. With Islamist ideology on the rise in Indonesia, and the tendency for hard-line groups to take aggressive postures against communist “revival,” efforts for reconciliation and rehabilitation on the national level must be seen as fragile at best.⁴⁰

What happened in the village of Kaloran gives significance to all three dimensions of the historical memory of 1965 discussed above. First, despite efforts to open the history of 1965 to new scrutiny and analysis, public discourse on the topic is still dangerously polarized, with numerous non-formal, fluid “alliances” and “youth movements” proclaiming an anti-PKI stance.⁴¹ Second, despite endeavors toward careful facilitation of community-based approaches to reconciliation or commemoration, there was no mediating agent on hand in the Kaloran incident to prevent terror and violence—a role that might have been played by a credible national or regional truth commission body.

Third and finally, the Kaloran incident demonstrates the risks of evoking personal memories of 1965. In this literal unburying of a past that many still see fit to keep underground, unseen, and unspoken, Indonesian families claimed their connections to named individuals through a public rite. Their action asserted the legitimacy of personal memory in the face of official history. This claiming of the so-called communist dead as their own in fact runs counter to the hesitancy, silence, and fear that still prevents millions of In-

39. *South China Morning Post*, March 27, 2001.

40. At least one effort underway within the NU mass organization seeks to mediate long-standing tensions around the organization’s role in the violence of 1965–66. Under the rubric of Syarikat (Association), NU activists are conducting research and forging dialogues between survivors and perpetrators.

41. In addition to the Kabah Youth Movement and the Anti-Communist Alliance, the Front Anti-Komunis [Anti-Communist Front], which was inaugurated by National Assembly Speaker Amien Rais, and the Corps of Indonesian Muslim Students Alumni (KAHMI), under former official Fuad Bawazier, have registered strong opposition to the re-emergence of leftist political thought in Indonesia. See “Fuad Warns of Resurgent Communism,” *Jakarta Post*, February 19, 2001.

donesians from acknowledging their own memories. The exhumation of the Wonosobo mass grave is thus a profound challenge to the prevailing social memory of 1965.

It is tempting to hope that through systematic examination of the “1965 incident” and its aftermath, Indonesia could engender a process of reconciliation and conflict resolution that would mitigate the continued violence and new communalism being witnessed at present. In reality, however, a formal process of truth-seeking may not lead to social healing. The pervasive hold of the official mythology of the events of September 30, 1965, leaves scant room for recognizing the experience of individual victims. In the post-Suharto proliferation of laws and legislation on human rights, official investigations, and national commissions on corruption and the judiciary, advocacy for a concerted attempt to revisit the past must compete with many other priorities in Indonesia’s reform agenda. Nonetheless, the voices of ordinary citizens from all over the archipelago need to be given space in which to make their essential contribution toward understanding and resolution of this key episode in the Indonesian national story within local contexts. Most urgently, eyewitnesses and actors in the events of 1965 are an aging and increasingly small group, whose testimony needs to be preserved if the larger questions about Indonesia’s 1965 mass killings and continuing patterns of communal and political violence, and how to prevent their recurrence, are ever to be answered.