

Indonesia — The Presence of the Past

***A festschrift* in honour of Ingrid Wessel**

**Edited by Eva Streifeneder
and Antje Missbach**

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The 1965 Massacres in Indonesia

Issues still unresolved

Robert Cribb

Since the fall of the Indonesian president Suharto in 1998, it has become possible, though still not easy, to conduct research on the events which marked the beginning of Suharto's long rule. Suharto came to power by a rather slow process in the aftermath of an apparent coup on 1 October 1965 in which a number of senior generals, including the army commander, General Achmad Yani, were kidnapped and killed and in which a Lieutenant-Colonel Untung, commander of the presidential guard, sought to seize power in the name of a Revolutionary Council. Although Suharto, then commander of the army's strategic reserve, KOSTRAD, quickly crushed the coup, his accession to political power as Indonesia's president was much slower. He did not extract a formal mandate from President Sukarno to 'restore security and order' until March 1966 and did not become acting President until 1967. Although some observers attributed this gradual assumption of power to a characteristic Javanese civility, in fact the transition from Sukarno's Guided Democracy to Suharto's New Order was amongst the bloodiest political events of the twentieth century. It is now most unlikely that we will ever know just how many people perished. In Western scholarship there has developed something of a convention to say that around half a million people died, while estimates within Indonesia have gone as high as three million. Amongst those who have examined these events closely, however, there is a clear consensus about the identity of the victims. They were members and associates of Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party, PKI), which had been regarded before the killings as the largest communist party in the non-communist world and which had itself claimed three million members.

The fall of Suharto removed the police state atmosphere that made most people reluctant to talk at all about the events of 1965 and after, but Indonesian anti-communism remains remarkably strong. Still in place is a repertoire of laws and regulations that discriminate against any person regarded as *terlibat* ('involved'), directly or indirectly in the 1965 coup. This flexible term refers to any kind of engagement or public endorsement of leftist activity from that time. In addition, under a regulation known as *bersih lingkungan* ('environmentally clean'), family members of those who were *terlibat* face a range of discriminatory practices, including exclusion from government employment. It has been

rent population have experienced such discrimination. The hostility to communism does not lie only in government circles. Radical Muslim groups, in particular, have publicly and repeatedly urged vigilance against a possible resurgence of communism and in 2000 bookshops in Jakarta and Central Java experienced 'sweeping' by Muslim vigilantes in which supposedly leftist books were taken from the shelves and burnt in the street. Both Indonesian researchers working on aspects of the killing and activists trying to bring the issue of the killings on to the public agenda have faced harassment from the authorities and from private vigilantes. Nonetheless, there has been a determination on the part of many survivors to tell their story and several organisations have been involved in the systematic gathering of information about the killings. We lack the abundant memoir literature of the Cambodian genocide, and there is still no Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Indonesia. Nonetheless, at very least, our understanding of the Indonesian massacres rests now on a steadily expanding empirical base.

This empirical base increasingly points to the central role of the Indonesian army in the killings. A conclusion of this kind probably seems unremarkable; particularly we are familiar with the case of East Timor where, even if the number of victims may be disputed, there is no shadow of doubt that the perpetrators were overwhelmingly members of the Indonesian Armed Forces. In the case of the 1965-66 massacres, however, many reports have indicated a high degree of non-military engagement in the killings. There are powerful reasons why this should have been so.

One of the strongest traditional features shared by Indonesia's many societies was a tension between hierarchy and fluidity. Leaders rose and fell according to ability and fortune and Indonesians have traditionally been strongly conscious of the fluidity of power. Neither states, nor cities, nor institutions show any pronounced longevity; rather Indonesian history has been a dynamic process in which established elites have been toppled and old institutions bypassed by new ones. Of course Indonesian elites have employed ideologies of stratification to protect their position, but there has always been a powerful appeal amongst the Indonesian people for ideologies emphasising justice and opportunity.

In 1965, the Indonesian Communist Party stood for groups who felt excluded and oppressed by the ruling elites. These elites were not for the most part remote oligarchies of the kind found, for instance, in the Philippines. Rather, they were a multitude of local elites, partly based on the old, quasi-aristocratic elites who had been the lynchpin of Dutch colonial rule, partly consisting of parvenus, men who had come to local power and fortune out of the turmoil of the Japanese occupation (1942-45) and the Indonesian Revolution (1945-49). Although the PKI had, of course, an ideology of radical social change, the vast bulk of its followers had no real Marxist revolutionary consciousness. They wanted an end, rather, to the abuse of power by local officials, an end to the

monopolization of official positions, to corruption, to arbitrary confiscation of property, to compulsory labour services and to enforced respectfulness to officials. They wanted justice – in the sense of fair treatment – and opportunity to seek prosperity and power themselves without encountering unfair and restrictive practices that kept elites in power. For these reasons, the PKI was not just a party of the very poor, but also a party of aspiring power holders, men and women who saw it as the vehicle which would open opportunities for them in independent Indonesia. This fact, of course, made the party vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy and opportunism: it was not a rigidly class-based party and its campaign strategy in each region tended to reflect the character of local tensions between established and aspiring elites. This perception of opportunism and hypocrisy emerged perhaps most strongly in the party's campaign in the early 1960s to implement land reform laws which had been passed by parliament but which were being thwarted by local elite interests. The party's 'direct action' (*aksi sepihak*) to implement the land reform laws conspicuously failed to target landowners affiliated with the party. Their numbers were small, of course, but their presence was a standing rebuke to the class-based claims of the party. Nonetheless, it was the only organization which regarded the post-revolutionary stratification of Indonesian society as a problem and it accordingly attracted extensive support. In the 1955 national elections, the party won 16 percent of the national vote and was one of the four main parties in parliament, though it was excluded from the coalition government by the hostility of the Muslim party Masjumi. In regional elections in Java in 1957, the party won a third of the vote.¹ If such a result had been repeated or exceeded in the national elections scheduled for 1959, the PKI would have been too large to exclude from government. Fear of such an outcome was perhaps the most important reason why conservative forces supported Sukarno's suspension of the parliamentary system in 1957 and the transition to what he called 'Guided Democracy'. Under Sukarno's new system, three ideological streams – nationalism, religion and communism – were to be represented in the state (though not necessarily in government) with approximately equal standing and no further attempt was to be made to test levels of public support by means of elections. Guided Democracy deprived the PKI of a likely election victory, but opened the opportunity for promoting its ideology. Sometime before the emergence of so-called 'Euro-communism', the Indonesian Communist Party had developed a doctrine of the dual nature of the state, arguing that the state was not necessarily just a tool of the ruling class, but rather could be captured gradually from within without any form of armed revolution.² The party's activities at the centre, therefore, had two strong charac-

¹ Donald Hindley (1964) *The Communist Party of Indonesia 1951-1963*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 222-229.

² See Robert Cribb (1985) *The Indonesian Marxist tradition*. In: C.P. Mackerras and N.J. Knight, ed., *Marxism in Asia*. Croom Helm, London, 251-272.

teristics. Firstly, it undertook a sustained programme to recruit communists and other leftists into the state apparatus and to win the ideological backing of those already there. This campaign of course was an aspect of the PKI's position as a vehicle for those who felt excluded from power by the existing social order. Secondly, the party sought to establish the dominance of its own ways of thinking in public discourse. In this respect, it was greatly assisted by President Sukarno, who had a deep intellectual interest in Marxism and in shaping its ideas for application to the Indonesian situation, and who needed the PKI to balance the institutional power of the army. The result, however, was a political environment of exaggerated political correctness, in which revolutionary ideology fell with transparent insincerity from the lips of all political figures.

In 1965, thus, the PKI was both hated and feared by a large number of Indonesians. Violent clashes had broken out over the land reform attempts in East Java, and both contemporary accounts and the unreliable memories of people still alive tell of an atmosphere of enormous tension and antagonism.³ In the centre, at least, this tension was made all the more acute by the fact that President Sukarno seemed to be ailing. Although it was possible to identify potential successors who would have tried to sustain the forms of Guided Democracy, there was apparently a common elite perception that the departure of Sukarno would lead either to communist rule or to an army takeover.

In this strained environment, the coup of 1 October 1965 took place. In addition to the kidnapping and killing of six generals in Jakarta, the coup had involved the accidental killing of the daughter of the Defence Minister, A H Nasution, who had been on the list for kidnapping but who had escaped, and a parallel coup in Central Java. There was no immediate evidence that the coup had been the work of the PKI. The coup leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Untung, described it as a limited attempt to safeguard President Sukarno and the continuing Indonesian Revolution by forestalling a coup by the generals, which was widely rumoured to be planned for Armed Forces Day, 5 October.⁴ Very quickly, however, army sources began to link the coup with the PKI. The Revolutionary Council which Untung had declared was seen as a front for a seizure of power by the communists and Untung himself was portrayed as a communist dupe (though culpable enough to be subsequently tried and executed). In several ways, moreover, the Suharto group sought to invest the coup with an aura of unprecedented evil. Firstly, they described it with the word *pengkhianatan* ('treachery'). Whereas this word has lost a great

³ See Walkin, Jacob (1969) The Moslem-Communist confrontation in East Java, 1964-65. In: *Orbis* 13, 3, 822-847; Rex Mortimer (1972) *The Indonesian Communist Party and Land Reform, 1959-1965*. Clayton, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.

⁴ One of the best summaries of the state of knowledge of the coup is Crouch, Harold (1973) Another Look at the Indonesian 'Coup'. In: *Indonesia* 15 (April), 1-20. Nonetheless recent material has emerged which may

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deal of its emotional power in the West, in Indonesia it remains one of the most damaging accusations which can be made against an enemy. The name which Untung had given to his movement – *Gerakan September Tiga puluh* (September 30th Movement) – was transformed into an acronym, Gestapu, clearly meant to conjure up images of Nazi Germany. The accidental death of Nasution's daughter was portrayed as an act of cold-hearted brutality by the kidnappers. And above all, a story was composed about the events following the kidnapping of the generals. Three generals had been killed in the course of the kidnapping, but three more, together with Nasution's aide, were taken to Halim air force base south of Jakarta, where they were killed. The bodies of all seven were then thrown into a well. Quickly, however, this outline was embellished with stories that the generals had first been tortured and mutilated – their genitals cut off, amongst other barbarities – by women members of the Pemuda Rakyat (People's Youth), the PKI's youth wing.⁵ These young women were also said to have danced naked for assembled PKI leaders and air force officers ('the dance of the fragrant flowers') and to have abandoned themselves to an orgy with the audience.⁶ Finally, the army issued information that the PKI had been planning a much more extensive range of actions as part of its plan to seize power and that the party had planned extensive massacres of its enemies. Party members were alleged to have lists of victims, to have undergone training in methods of slaughter and to have dug holes in advance to receive the bodies of their victims.

These false reports, in the context of deep social conflict and the extremely tense environment of October 1965, have been described as kindling a wave of revulsion against the PKI which led to a massacre in which civilian militias played a major role. The essence of this account is that even if circumstances were extreme and even if public opinion was seriously manipulated by the army, the Indonesian people in general bear a moral responsibility for the slaughter comparable to that of the Hutus in Rwanda and possibly comparable to that which Goldhagen attributed to the Germans.⁷

This interpretation played an important role in the political construction of Suharto's New Order. The mass killing of communists was unusual amongst the world's genocides for never having been denied. Although it was seldom spoken of publicly, there was never any attempt by the Indonesian government or its apologists to deny that the killings had taken place or even to play down the numbers involved.⁸ Indeed, to the ex-

⁵ Anderson, Ben (1987) How did the generals die? In: *Indonesia* 43 (April), 109-134.

⁶ Drakeley, Steven (2000) *Lubang Buaya: Myth, misogyny and massacre*. Clayton, Monash Asia Institute; Leclerc, Jacques (1997) Girls, Girls, Girls, and Crocodiles. In: Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing state and society in Indonesia*. Leiden, KITLV Press, 291-305.

⁷ Goldhagen, Daniel J. (1996) *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York, Knopf.

⁸ Heryanto, Ariel (2005) *State Terrorism and Political Identity In Indonesia: Fatally Belonging*. London, Routledge.

tent that there was an official figure for the number of victims, it was one million, based on a never-released report by the security agency KOPKAMTIB. The reason for this absence of official denial was that it suited the political interests of the New Order to blame the killings on the Indonesian people in general. One of the central pillars of New Order legitimacy was the regime's claim to have brought order to a fractious society, to have ended the internecine strife which culminated in the 1965-66 massacres. Although this message was never expressed in quite such explicit terms with reference to the killings, the contrast between current order and past disorder were a central element in the public telling of history. The story contributed powerfully to the argument that the Indonesian people were not fit for freedom or democracy because they turned it against each other. Rather they needed strong rule to keep the peace.

The power of this account was demonstrated at the time of Suharto's fall in 1998. Suharto was brought down by a multitude of factors. In the first instance he was a victim of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, which demonstrated the hollowness of the economic development which had been another major pillar of the New Order regime. He was also brought down by his own age and evident frailty. Indonesian politics had in a sense been waiting for several years for Suharto's departure and it was clear that, even if he survived the 1997-98 crisis, he would not be around long enough to reward and protect those who backed him. In that respect, any significant crisis would have meant the end. There was also, however, a vast and pent-up impatience with the New Order, with its corruption, its arrogance, its repression, its abuse of power. To a remarkable extent, however, this indignation was constrained by the memory of 1965-66. Major opposition leaders were deeply reluctant to contemplate mass action against the crumbling regime because they feared an outbreak of apocalyptic violence like that of 1965-66, and they said so in public. The result was a relatively orderly transfer of power to Suharto's deputy, B J Habibie, and a widespread feeling that Indonesia had missed an opportunity to purge itself more thoroughly of the legacies of the New Order.

It is futile to speculate, of course, on whether Indonesians would have been better off with a more radical changing of the guard in 1998. Nonetheless, the fear of mass violence remains a poison in the veins of the Indonesian body politic. First, it helps to legitimise a drift back to authoritarianism. Violence has indeed been widespread in Indonesia since 1998, including virtual sectarian civil war in the provinces of Maluku, North Maluku and Central Sulawesi and pogroms against Madurese in the provinces of West and Central Kalimantan. Even though there has been serious speculation that the Maluku violence was deliberately provoked or at least exacerbated by sections of the armed forces, this violence contributes to a sense of nostalgia for the order of the

Suharto era, described wryly by observers as SARS (*sindrom amat rindu Suharto*, nostalgic-for-Suharto syndrome).⁹

The memory of 1965-66 also feeds a dangerous sense of insecurity amongst Indonesians of Chinese descent. This effect is paradoxical, even perverse, because Chinese Indonesians were not conspicuous amongst the victims of those killings. Despite a widespread perception outside Indonesia that Chinese were targeted, most evidence indicates that Chinese Indonesians suffered proportionately less than many other population groups.¹⁰ My own research suggests that there were killings of Chinese in the Javanese district of Bagelen and on the islands of Lombok and Roti in 1965-66. Chinese were also the main victims of the suppression of the Paraku-PGRS movement in West Kalimantan in 1969.¹¹ In some parts of Sumatra, Chinese shops were plundered and Chinese fled to the larger towns, but there were few if any deaths. Members of the Chinese Indonesian organisation BAPERKI, which was considered left wing and sympathetic to the PKI, were purged from government employment and from private companies and associations, but in this respect they suffered no more than members of other organisations with a left-wing taint.

Because, however, Chinese Indonesians have suffered mass violence on other occasions in recent Indonesian history, there has been a powerful tendency, even amongst those who recognise that the Chinese were not victimised in 1965-66, to see those killings as a chilling sign of what Indonesians are capable of. This tendency is pernicious both because it drives Chinese Indonesians, whose education and business expertise is an important part of Indonesia's human capital, to flee the country and to make a new future in other lands, and because it places a huge barrier of apprehension between Chinese Indonesians and their indigenous counterparts which stands in the way of national integration.

All this, then, built on a perception that the Indonesian people have blood on their hands for the massacres of 1965-66. But what if this picture were mistaken? As I interview people in Indonesia and abroad and as I examine both recent memoirs and newspapers of the time, I come to the provisional but strong conclusion that the Indonesian army played a central, determining role in the killings. There appear to have been several patterns to the killing. In a few regions, the suppression of the PKI took on the character of full-scale military operations. This was so in parts of Central Java, where whole villages were affiliated with the party and attempted futile resistance with bamboo palis-

⁹ A play on the disease known as SARS, Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which first appeared in Guangdong, China, in November 2002.

¹⁰ Coppel, Charles (1983) *Indonesian Chinese in crisis*. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 58-61.

¹¹ The Paraku-PGRS had been established during Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia as a militia force to conduct raids across the border into Sarawak. It was considered a left-wing organisation and was crushed in

ades and the like. It was also the case in South Blitar in East Java, where elements of the part attempted to set up a 'liberated zone' in 1967-69. In some regions, army units arrived in a district, obtained lists of alleged PKI members from local authorities, and then arrested and killed those on the lists, before moving on to another district where the actions were repeated. This was the pattern especially in more isolated parts of eastern Indonesia, where alleged affiliation with the PKI was sometimes based on nothing more than signing a petition for relief from some local form of oppression. In other regions, local military garrisons summoned or hunted down members of the PKI and detained them for periods ranging from days to months. Gradually, often at irregular intervals, a selection of the detainees were then taken away from the detention centres to be killed, often at a great distance from both their homes and their places of incarceration. This was the pattern in Sumatra and Sulawesi, and the process is grippingly portrayed in Garin Nugroho's film 'The Poet'. In still other regions, village communities were told to put their own affairs into order and were required either to hand communists over to the army for killing or to provide evidence that they had killed their own. This pattern has been reported especially from Bali. Elsewhere again – Timor, East Java, and North Sumatra – the army recruited the support of civilian killing teams. These teams were sometimes drawn from existing village militias, sometimes from the youth organisations of anti-communist political parties, notably the Muslim youth organisation Ansor. They were given rudimentary training and were lent weapons that they used to kill communists. Sometimes these militias took direct part in raids and military operations against communists, but often they simply killed people who were presented to them by the army as communists. There are many anecdotes that tell of people who were forced to take part in the killings to show that they were not sympathetic to the communists.

The 1965-66 killings were a complex event. Some victims were innocent (in the New Order's flexible sense of the word), and were killed because of mistaken identity or because of private jealousies. Some virulent anti-communists acted without significant prompting from the army, though they were emboldened by the clear promise of impunity which the army made to killers. Blood ended up indeed on the hands of many Indonesians, but it seems that in a large number of cases it was smeared on those hands by the Indonesian army.

If this conclusion is true, it has three implications. Firstly, it suggests that the military personnel who took part in the killings are much more vulnerable to legal prosecution than we have previously imagined. In fact many of the commanding officers who bear greatest responsibility for the killings, notably Sarwo Edhie, who commanded the elite RPKAD para-commando unit which spearheaded the killings in Central Java, East Java and Bali, are now deceased. Political circumstances make it improbable that any of the surviving soldiers – especially former President Suharto – will actually be tried. Indeed

recent revisions to Indonesia's constitution intended to strengthen the rule of law by prohibiting retrospective legislation have made prosecution technically more difficult. The consequence is that a resolution of the sense of historical grievance left by the killings is unlikely to be resolved, even if the Indonesian Truth and Reconciliation Commission does begin its work.

Secondly, it suggests that there may be a stronger connection than has previously been possible to suggest between the mass killings in 1965-66 and the killings a decade later in East Timor. Although the scale of direct killing in East Timor has been seriously exaggerated¹², it is clear that the Indonesian army brought to East Timor habits of general brutality and of retaliation with extraordinary violence which they probably learnt in 1965-66.

Thirdly, it points to a distinctive military *modus operandi* involving the coordination of violence by others. There is a strong general tendency in scholarship to take mass violence at face value, that is as the work of the masses. Depending on the attitude of individual scholars, this assumption may be either frightening (the state presides over a volatile society ready to turn upon itself) or encouraging (mass violence as a rare case of people's agency against an oppressive system). The role of elites has been seen either as exacerbating mass violence or as exploiting it after the fact. Careful studies by Brass of communal violence in India, however, have indicated the existence of an elaborate, elite-controlled structure of influence for creating communal violence in order to achieve particular outcomes in election politics.¹³ Until the beginning of the 21st century, election politics were not especially significant in Indonesian power politics, but there is a significant body of evidence that persistent violence against Indonesia's Chinese minority was less the outcome of deep-seated popular prejudice against Chinese Indonesians or of pent-up mass rage against them, than of a carefully calculated pattern of intimidation designed to keep Chinese separate from the rest of society and to intimidate them into making extra-legal payments to police and military for their own security. Anti-Chinese violence under these circumstances becomes a kind of periodic reminder to Chinese Indonesians of the continuing need to pay. Ironically the fact that Chinese were not major victims of the 1965-66 violence, when the military had a different political point to make, provides support to this hypothesis.

¹² For an attempt to calculate the number of casualties, see Cribb, Robert (2001) How many deaths? Problems in the statistics of massacre in Indonesia (1965-1966) and East Timor (1975-1980). In: Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer, eds., *Violence in Indonesia*. Hamburg, Abera, 82-98. The conclusions here with respect to the number of killings were broadly confirmed by the report of the CAVR, Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor, available at <http://www.easttimor-reconciliation.org/>. This report, however, convincingly demonstrated a very high death rate as a result of poor conditions in Indonesian-controlled settlement camps.

¹³ Brass, Paul (2003) *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Resolving the sense of unfinished business that arises from the killings of 1965-66 remains an immensely important issue on the agenda for contemporary Indonesians. To attribute a large part of the blame for the killings to the army is attractive to many Indonesians, because it relieves the rest of society from the consequences of having taken part in mass killing. For historians, however, this shifting of blame also shifts the question of analysis to the sources of military brutality. Paradoxically, this new question has still deeper implications for Indonesian society. To the significant degree that the killings implicated broad sections of Indonesian society, they were a consequence of tensions specific to circumstances of late Guided Democracy; they were part of a time of madness which might be dismissed as historically unique. The deeper their roots in Indonesian history, however, the more they raise serious questions about the nature of the Indonesian state and Indonesian society. Were there features of the Indonesian project that made some form of political genocide likely or even inevitable? Did the forces which turned the Indonesian army into the perpetrators of massacre leave an imprint on other sections of society? The killings continue to cast a dark shadow over Indonesian history.

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