

Dealing with Burdened Past: The Case of Indonesia*

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Mass violence and gross human rights violation rarely occur spontaneously. Nor do they happen merely out of the desires of one or two individuals. Mass violence and human rights abuses require certain conditions for them to take place. Such conditions, in turn, could come from inside or outside of any particular country.

The Cold War

In the case of Indonesia, internal conditions that caused massive violations of human rights in the past often involved military elements, whether directly or indirectly. Economic and political moves taken by the military frequently generated social conflicts in the local level, which soon would develop into broader acts of violence that disregarded peoples' basic human rights in a wider level. However, the military is not the only perpetrator in such conflicts and abuses. In the wake of the downfall of the President Soeharto's rule, for instance, civilian elements are also responsible for cases of human rights violations. Differences in terms of ethnicity, religious beliefs, or economic status often incite popular conflicts with deadly outcome.

With regard to external conditions, there are many factors coming from outside the country that contributed to human rights violations in Indonesia. In an increasingly globalized world, in which countries are rapidly interconnected, global events played great roles in what is happening in Indonesia, including the basic rights of its citizens. This includes what took place in the past.

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Take the Cold War, for instance. Growing evidence indicates that some human rights abuses in Indonesia since 1945 had close connection with the Cold War tension between the Capitalist bloc led by the United States and the Communist side under the leadership of the Soviet Union. Fear of the United States and its allies of the spread of communism compelled Washington to get involved in the suppression of communism in Indonesia. As a result, human rights abuses occurred. United States' support for the regional rebellion of the PRRI and Permesta against the Indonesian central government in the 1950s was an obvious example. During this period, many cases of human rights abuses took place due to the American involvement, such as the bombing of civilians. The reason for US support for the rebels was an assumption that the Indonesian central government was communist. Similar abuses occurred when the U.S. reversed its position and supported the Indonesian government after realizing that it was not communist at all. At the same time, the Soviet Union and later the People's Republic of China also attempted to influence the political and economic dynamics of Indonesia, as part of their efforts to pull the country to their side of the Cold War. Many cases of human rights abuses in Indonesia also took place because of their efforts and ambition.

It should be realized that although the rhetoric of Cold War antagonism tended to be political and ideological, in reality it was often the case that the central points of contention between the two opposing parties were actually economic. Both saw Indonesia as a potential country with vast territory and strategic location, and also rich in natural resources. Both sides wanted to influence or perhaps even control Indonesia's natural and human resources for their own interests and the interests of their respective allies.

In that conflict of interests what happened next in Indonesia was that the American side became increasingly dominant, while the influence of the Soviet bloc was marginalized and along with it that of Indonesia's leftist elements. At the same time any group within the Indonesian society that promoted neutrality and independence in the global antagonism of the Cold War was also marginalized. At the end of the day the capitalist side "won" the conflict and gained greater access to the Indonesian economic potentials. It also gained support from Indonesian elements (civilian and

military) that were ready to collaborate and to serve the interests of the West, and with it serving their own interests.

It is important to note that along with the marginalization of Soviet influence and the suppression of Indonesia's leftist elements in the second half of the 1960s, the so-called New Order (*Orde Baru*) government under the leadership of President Soeharto emerged and took control of the country. Thanks to the pro-capitalist attitudes of this new government Western countries could now operate in Indonesia with much greater freedom. Natural resources were exploited by Western multi-national corporations, sometimes by disregarding local population. One of the consequences of such development was the increasing number of violence and human rights abuses in areas that are rich in natural resources, such as Aceh in the northern part of Sumatra and West Papua in the most eastern part of the country.

Clearly, there was interconnection between the interests of domestic groups and the interests of foreign parties during the Cold War. And such interconnection turned out to be crucial setting and conditions for acts of violence against the people. It is therefore very important to look at the human rights abuses in the Indonesian history in a broader context. Without looking at it with such broader context many human rights abuses in the past would appear as if they were just individual cases, unrelated to each other.

Understanding History

Understanding past cases of violence in a broader context is important not just for revealing the interconnection of the abuses, but also for helping the Indonesian people in general to study their country's history. Of course we are not talking about studying history in its strict, academic sense. It is necessary to call for Indonesian people in general to realize the importance of studying their own past, be it in the local, national, or international level. This is important because how strong or weak a society is in its historical awareness would determine steps to be taken to direct its future. This awareness is equally important since during President Soeharto's rule the Indonesian society's understanding of history was often controlled and dominated by the government's version of the past.

With regard to the practices of violence, historical awareness is also important because it can help the society understand that many cases of human rights abuses in the past occurred within certain circumstances, especially social, political or economic. Hopefully, by understanding history people will realize that certain social-political-economic relations generated certain forms of violence.

In other words, it is hoped that the people would be “warned” that if similar social-political-economic conditions re-occurs, it is possible that similar human rights abuses would also occur. In order to prevent such possibility from materializing that condition must be avoided or at least minimized. A successful history education for the society would encourage people to avoid conditions that are potential for generating human rights abuses.

Means of Justification

On the other hand, if the opportunity for providing history education to the people fails, the “warning” will not be there, many cases of past violence would re-occur, and perhaps nobody will know when they will end. Experiences during the period under the New Order government demonstrated that narration of history could be easily dominated by the government and its supporters, and that such narration has contributed to the practices of injustice to members of the society.

An example can be found in how Soeharto and his supporters narrated the story of what happened around the 1965 Tragedy, a tragedy that later catapulted them to the country’s top political leadership. According to their version, what happened then was that the PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party) masterminded a coup d’etat in the morning of October 1, 1965, by kidnapping and murdering six Army generals along with another high-rank officer. Because of this gruesome act of violence, it was “justified” that the Indonesian people were enraged and in the next several months launched a massacre that killed at least half a million of fellow citizens accused of being communist.

In this chaotic situation, still according to this version, President Sukarno appointed Major General Soeharto to take control of the country and to use any necessary means to restore order, among others by banning the communist party. Soeharto “succeeded”

in carrying out the order. He was even able to set up a better government that eventually replaced the “incompetent” government of President Sukarno. This version of the story also gives impression that due to Sukarno’s multiple “sins” (along with the sins of his supporters) it was justified that the former president was detained under a house arrest until his death in 1970. While the Sukarno government was dubbed the “Old Order” (*Orde Lama*), Soeharto and his supporters called the government that they set up as the “New Order” (*Orde Baru*), which suggests that this is a better government. It considered itself as a “total correction” to all the errors made by the old and unfit government of President Sukarno.

During the rule of the Soeharto government this kind of the narrative rarely contested or challenged adequately. Even worse, this narrative was often elaborated with details that are in essence legitimizing the rule of the New Order and justifying all kinds of atrocities and repression that victimize the people.

An example would be the elaborate story of the “*Pesta Harum Bunga*” or Flower Fragrance Party that was said to have taken place on October 1, 1965 near the well at Lubang Buaya district (literally means “crocodile hole”) where the bodies of the generals were dumped. According to this story members of Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, women’s organization associated with the PKI) held an orgy by mutilating the private parts of the generals and danced around the dead victims. Whether it was true or not (the story was never proven), this kind of a story was important for the New Order to perpetuate an impression (and later a “memory”) of how cruel and sadistic the PKI-associated Gerwani was. Moreover it became some kind of “caveat” to the people that political involvement of a women’s organization could result in such cruel even sadistic practices. This kind of caveat, in turn, was useful as a means of justification for controlling women’s organizations throughout the country since 1965, especially by limiting their political aspiration and activities.

At the same location where the orgy allegedly took place the New Order built a grandiose monument, called the Monument of the Seven Heroes of the Revolution (*Monumen Tujuh Pahlawan Revolusi*). The monument demonstrates how brave and dedicated the heroes were and how the PKI and Gerwani were cruel and sadistic. Note that the brave and dedicated ones were all military personnel while all the cruel and

sadistic villains were civilian. For the New Order government this kind of monument is necessary at least for some several reasons: (a) that there is a close association between the word “hero” (*pahlawan*) and military personnel; (b) that in the October 1, 1965 military operation launched by the “September 30th Movement” the Army was merely a victim of PKI cruelty; (c) that the massacre of hundreds of thousand Indonesian citizens in the wake of the military operation was justified; (d) that the dethroning of President Sukarno was also justified, because he associated himself with the PKI. The same government made great efforts in perpetuating this kind of memory by using many other means, such as producing an anti-PKI film called *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (“The Treason of the September 30th Movement/PKI”) and compelling the public (especially students) to watch it year after year.

As long as this kind of story, monument, film, and other means that were produced by the New Order government to serve its own interests are not openly questioned or contested, people’s understanding of history would remain incomplete and distorted. They could easily justify or even promote all kinds of injustices including practices of discrimination and political stigmatization.

During the New Order rule, the government did not only politicize history by practicing the so-called “politics of memory”, but also implementing what might be called “the politics of forgetting.” It selectively determined which events of the past that should be remember, and which ones ought to be forgotten. And for the sake of its own interests the government was often willing to create certain “historical events” that are easy to remember and that in turn could be used to influence the attitudes of the people, as shown in the case of the fanciful story of the “flower fragrance party”.

Amnesia of History

Another impact of the government’s domination in history narration with all its efforts to politicize memory and forgetting of the past is the emergence of the so-called “amnesia of history”. Many Indonesians tend to forget or even altogether ignore many past events, although actually they were important to remember and understand. Even if they remember certain events, the memory they have regarding those events is usually only partial and as far as it is in accordance with the government version. Worse, the amnesia is not only related to events that had occurred way back in the

past, but also to practices of violence and human rights abuses that took place more recent time, such as those that took place since the fall of the Soeharto government in 1998. Many Indonesians tend to disregard the background of those events, the motives and identity of the key perpetrators, or even the suffering of the victims. In almost all of such cases, even if there are perpetrators that are brought to justice, usually they are military personnel or police officers from the lower rank.

It is very rare (not to say never) that persons from high level positions are being held responsible in a fair system of justice for acts of violence that they had caused or within their responsibility. This kind of situation was upsetting, but after a while it seems that people get used to it and think of it as something “normal”. Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why nobody has ever been held responsible for the mass killings and detention that occurred in 1965 and after. As we all know, almost no one from high government position or high military command that was put on trial for all kinds of atrocities done to the people of Timor Leste (East Timor) when it was under Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999. Neither was anybody from a prominent position charged for the countless human lives that were lost in the mass violence in Tanjung Priok (1984), the Moluccas (1999-2002), Aceh (1992-2004), or more recently in West Papua. And this could mean that if today or tomorrow similar acts of violence or human right abuses happen again there is no guarantee that someone will be prosecuted or held responsible. This especially applies to violence that has some religious or military element, or a combination of both.

It is important to note that the collective memories that are partial and manipulated are still being used even today, years after President Soeharto’s New Order officially ended in May of 1998. During the national election of 2004 and local election of 2005 in some places people still could see public display of banners warning the people of “the latent danger of communism”—forty years after the PKI was annihilated. This was an example of how “memory” is being manipulated as a political tool that is potential to become a divisive factor in the society, and at the same time potential to create circumstances conducive for human rights abuses. Another example was a letter sent by a cabinet Minister banning the use of the 2004 school curriculum on history subject, because the curriculum could encourage students to question the official version of the 1965 Tragedy.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Further impact of the amnesia of history is the lack of seriousness in the part of the government in dealing with the country's burdened past. Justifying itself as being "future-oriented", the government put little attention and effort to discuss openly problems of the past that still have great impact to the present. Thanks to pressure from the public commissions to investigate past violence were formed, but unfortunately they rarely produced reports and recommendations that are conclusive and effective, let alone favorable to the victims. Take for instance the government's promulgation of the Truth and Reconciliation Law (*Undang-undang Kebenaran dan Rekonsiliasi*) in 2004. This law was intended as the basis for the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Komisi Kebenaran dan Rekonsiliasi*) that would deal with the burdens and troubles generated by past injustice.

On the one hand, promulgation of such a law deserves every respect and support since it indicates government's willingness to deal with the problems of the past and to seek possibility for reconciliation between the victims and the perpetrators. On the other hand, if one looks closely at the law, there are a number of serious flaws in it, such as: (a) the law ignores the historical analysis in dealing with past human rights abuses; (b) the amnesty mechanism offered tend to disregard the victims; (c) there is a possibility that former perpetrators of the abuses will politicize or impede the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; (d) there is lack of public recommendation for preventing past abuses from re-occurring. Because of these fundamental flaws, creation of a fair and satisfactory Truth and Reconciliation Commission is considered to be very difficult if not impossible.

Despite the flaws there was initial public enthusiasm when the law was made public. Many parties regarded the law as a good sign that the government was eventually going to seriously deal with past injustices. Unfortunately the enthusiasm did not last very long. It soon became evident that the government was not really serious in dealing with the past and in forming a truth and reconciliation commission. Almost two years (2004-2006) since the law was announced the commission was never

created. The list of selected candidates has been in the hand of the President for a long time, but announcement of final list of the commission's members was never made.

Just and Democratic

Looking at the political and economic uncertainties of Indonesia today—marred with rampant corruption, collusion and nepotism—the country needs a system of government that is based on the principals of political ethics. This could be done by promoting political practices that pay real attention to the need and welfare of the people. For this the people themselves need to understand their own history as a nation. Understanding history is an important starting point for a political life that is not merely submissive to the will of the government or power elite. This understanding of history is necessary, as we have seen, because domination over the memory of history could be manipulated to create justification for many kinds of undemocratic political practices, including those that violated the rights of the citizens. It is hoped that if the citizens have deeper understanding of the history of their nation—including history of human rights issues—they will be willing to work together to prevent any form of government that is unjust and discriminatory, and to join hands to create political system that is increasingly just and democratic.