

Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-1966 in Indonesia. John Roosa (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 2020).

Studying the mass killings in Indonesia in the mid-1960s remains important. In his new book, John Roosa, proceeds from his path-breaking 2006 study of the September 30th Movement to the multitude of mass murders, addressing several of the remaining puzzles.

Thanks to Roosa's (2006) previous publication, it is now beyond reasonable doubt that the country's Communist Party – which by peaceful means had become the third largest in the world after the Chinese and Soviet – had entrusted its Chairman D.N. Aidit to handle urgent issues related to an increasingly antagonistic military. Along with a few confidants, Aidit secretly fomented an officers' movement to arrest the most hostile top generals, expose them to President Sukarno and back him up with a revolutionary council. The actions backfired, however, and General Suharto and his henchmen took command. They ignored the President and instructed the military, other state organs and loyal civilians to annihilate both the officers' movement and all its possible supporters. Thus, a secret conspiracy by a party leader and some dissident officers was made the pretext for an extremely violent campaign against a party, related mass organisations – probably the world's largest people's movement at the time – and the activists' families and relatives, and probably none of them were aware of Aidit's scheme.

The mass killings themselves, of about half to one million people, have been studied by other scholars. Thanks to the best of this new research – recently reviewed in this journal (Törnquist 2020) – there are now four definite conclusions. Firstly, that the massacres were not, in the first instance, because of local conflicts or even the work of anti-communist groups, as often suggested by mainstream Indonesian scholars and political actors. Rather, the conflicts were animated by and the task forces directed by the military, which also took an active role in the killings. Secondly, that the regional differences in the nationwide

military campaign were related to the relative strength and position of the military and their “civilian” partners, as well as the various actors’ success in fomenting local conflicts.

Thirdly, that the central state direction and targeting and demonisation of a very wide group of people as “enemies of the nation” and less worthy humans, mean that the killings qualify as genocide. Fourthly, that these dynamics – and their legacies – need to be analysed in the broad historical context of violent anti-colonial struggle, the Cold War and anti-imperial resistance, as well as persistent political amnesia.

However, as my 2020 review article concluded, there are also three remaining issues. What was the political economy and political agency that made possible the conspiracies in Jakarta in September-October 1965 and the subsequent suppression? What enabled the combination of militarily-propelled violence and the participation of the militias and the vigilantes? And what explains Indonesia’s exceptionalism in terms of the absence of a major new leftist dimension in its contemporary politics, even when compared to other countries who have faced severe repression? John Roosa addresses some of these issues in his new book.

Roosa begins with the question of what made Aidit participate in the officers’ movement. Numerous scholars and activists have found it difficult to accept that the leader had to engage in a conspiracy, given that the party, and radical nationalists in general, seemed to have benefitted from Sukarno’s Guided Democracy. Roosa responds by referring to the party’s own review of its history – the first version of which was ready just before the crackdown, but only published in 2014 – and advises reading it through a Gramscian lens. From this perspective, according to Roosa, the party focused on a “war of positions” to occupy the “trenches” and “permanent fortifications” to gain political and cultural hegemony – in contrast to a “war of manoeuvres” such as general strikes and insurrections to win definite victories. According to the party history, the adherence to Guided Democracy had

served the progressives well. It had been possible to mobilise huge numbers of workers and peasants and to make headway within the state – in Sukarno’s so-called *NASAKOM* forums and among teachers as well as administrators and even soldiers. Sukarno’s *NASAKOM* front comprised representatives of the nationalist, religious and communist parties and movements that adhered to Guided Democracy, which in turn was supervised by the President and the military. The PKI was well aware that it influenced Sukarno’s ideology and priorities. Roosa accepts this but says the trouble was how the Communists would contain military power and, more precisely, quell the leading generals who considered a “war of manoeuvre” of their own. Gramsci, Roosa claims, had no answer; and Aidit tried – but failed – to proceed by way of the party’s special bureau, which initially was aimed at gradually achieving predominance within the military, in a similar way as when parties and unions were active in workplaces.

There is much to this, but the problems for the party and progressives were more fundamental. In Hindley’s view (1962), the Communists had been “domesticated,” and in my analysis of its strategy, the anti-imperialist campaign it led, for example, had not enabled the workers to even stage limited strikes and contain the military in the many nationalised companies (Törnquist 1984). Similarly, the radical peasant actions for land reform had to be called off in late 1964 because of insufficient local unity to withstand opponents. A few months later, the risk of military intervention prevented Sukarno from favouring leftist-nationalists and communists, and marginalising conservative members of his *NASAKOM* front. And the military was in control of the campaign against Malaysia. (As Melvin (2018) shows, they could even make use of the command structure to crack down on the Communists.) Worst, the focus on equal citizens’ rights and democracy as a unifying framework for class struggle and democratisation of the state apparatus – which until 1958 had been almost as successful in Indonesia as in the Indian state of Kerala – had been jettisoned in favour of Guided Democracy. So, the Communists’ and the broad progressive

movement's political and cultural hegemony was only on the level of general ideology and rhetoric, and short of sufficient power in the "trenches" and "permanent fortifications" to contain the military and their allies through democratic means. When the September 30th Movement failed, the military even managed, as Roosa shows, to block the progressives' (including Sukarno's) access to media, undermine their ideological hegemony and replace it with fabricated lies, demonising them as traitors.

Roosa's main contribution, though, is his careful oral history approach in case studies of the second unresolved issue about the dynamics of the military co-operation with militias and vigilantes. The author stands on the shoulders of previous research showing that the military was responsible for the killings. But he applies a longer historical perspective. And his cases complement other, previous studies of especially Aceh, with early and firm military direction of the murders, of West Java, with equally firm military direction of detentions but few killings, and of East Java, which witnessed the extensive participation of both the military and civilians in vast slaughters. Roosa himself turns to the massacres in Central Java, based on central military intervention in the progressives' own bastion, and in Bali, a Sukarnoist stronghold, along with some leftists, but also of conservative nationalists and the site of later military intervention. He adds the cases of South Sumatra and Riau, with radical oil and plantation workers and military officers and anti-communists, but which saw very different numbers of people killed.

Despite the variations, there are crucial similarities, and the differences point to the dynamics of the shared triangular relation between the central and local military and anti-communist groups. If one, like Roosa, applies a long historical perspective, it is clear that there had been various kinds of frequently intensive conflicts in the different provinces over the years, but no serious incidents of mass terror and killing – until propelled by the military. Another common pattern is the sequence. The initial pogroms and killings were in the open

and, while facilitated by the military, often involved anti-communist vigilantes and militias, who were thus given prime attention by many observers. The progressives were unprepared and without any instructions other than to stay calm and rely on President Sukarno's ability to resolve the crisis. Meanwhile the military focused on large-scale detentions, assisted by the anti-communists. At times, the local progressives preferred detention to mob violence, hoping for decent treatment by the authorities. But internment, rather than summary execution, only happened when provincial military and political executives were loyal to the president and professionalism – most clearly in West Java, initially in Bali and for somewhat longer in South Sumatra and especially Riau. Thereafter the most extensive massacres involved the secret executions of “disappeared” detainees, carried out by the military and, under their active supervision, by militias. This was the case in East Java, where Muslim vigilantes and militias were particularly active, was apparent at an early stage in Central Java but was delayed in Bali – where it took until December 1965 for the central military to intervene and organise perhaps the most horrendous killings in the country, in co-operation with right-wing nationalist militias.

Roosa's supplementary historical sequencing and contextual analyses of the triangular relations between the central and provincial military (along with some governors), and the vigilantes and militias are careful and convincing. It remains to be thrashed out what this suggests in terms of the roots and dynamics of genocides and what the implications are for the renewal of human rights and progressive politics. Obviously, on the one hand, the most massive killings were associated with military leaders who in addition to their central orders practiced indirect citizenship via communal groups, including religious vigilantes and militias. This was along the same lines as colonial despotism combined with indirect rule and suppression of subordinates and “less worthy” people. On the other hand, cases of restraint were related to military and pro-Sukarno civil officers who upheld professionalism and

defended direct citizenship under Guided Democracy. But, as drawn attention to in my previous review article, the latter was not enough to repel the forces of reaction. This was because the old focus of progressives on not just elections but, also, fundamentally, on equal citizens' rights and democratic mediation via civic parties and organisations, which had served them so well until the late 1950s, had been given up (see van Klinken 2020). Thus this political and social dimension could not be used as a shield and possibly needs to be reinvented today as a political precondition for human rights.

In this respect, an additional quality of Roosa's readings of the communists' strategy and, in particular, the relations between the central and provincial military (plus some governors) and the vigilantes and militias, is that they may also serve as vital inputs in further discussions about new progressive politics.

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