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The Missing New Indonesian Left

Fifty years ago, when I began to do research about Indonesia, the main question among concerned activists and scholars was how the world's largest peaceful popular movement, with the Communist party (PKI) and President Sukarno in the forefront, had collapsed and been eliminated. Now, finally, most of what happened is beyond doubt. (Törnquist 2020 & 2021 for reviews and further references.) In brief, the West, led by the U.S., had in the late 1950s lost faith in the weak middle classes, and added support of the military as a bulwark against radical popular demands. The new strategy was legitimised by Professor Samuel Huntington's (1961, 1968) argument that there was a need for a "politics of order" to foster not just economic but also "political development". The result, however, was "middle class coups" throughout the Global South. In the pioneering Indonesian case, this came with a twist. PKI Chairman D.N. Aidit had found no other way to counter the military threat but to encourage in secret a "30th of September Movement" among critical officers to arrest the leading generals, expose their manoeuvres and back up Sukarno with a revolutionary council. This failed and played into the hands of General Suharto and his henchmen, who took command, ignored the President and instructed the military, other organs of the state and loyal civilians to annihilate not just the officers' movement but also whoever was deemed supportive. A secret conspiracy by a party leader and some dissident officers was thus made the pretext for an extremely violent campaign (involving the killing of between 500,000 and 1 million people) against the party, related mass organisations, and the activists' families and relatives – and probably none of them were aware of Aidit's plot.

But while this is now clear, another mystery remains unresolved. Why has not the uneven but thorough expansion of capitalism in Indonesia since 1965 – and partial democratisation since 1998 – produced the revival of a notable leftist dimension in social and political life? There is not even a small social democratic party in parliament – in contrast to other places, such as Spain, Germany, and parts of Latin America, who have experienced similarly brutal and extensive repression.

It was inevitable that this puzzle be addressed when applying a long historical perspective, from the second anti-colonial period through to the third liberal wave of democracy, in a concluding book, *In Search of New Social Democracy* (2021a). And when posing the question

in retrospect, it was clear that although many of the challenges for progressives since 1965 were similar to those in other southern countries – including politically driven uneven development with a fragmented class structure, elitist democratisation, disjointed civil groups and social movements, as well as populist dead-ends – two background factors were unique. One was the character of the subjugation and killings; another was leftist loss of memory about the background. I shall argue that a major cause for the absence of a new Left in Indonesia is the rejection in the late 1950s, and later on its oblivion, of the previous focus on equal civil and democratic political rights, and the struggle for social rights based on these bedrocks too.

Colonial genocide

Traditional targeting

A major controversy about the killings is whether they constituted a genocide or not. The first of two main counterarguments is that the mass murders were not centrally coordinated but mainly due to local conflicts and carried out by angry mobs (e.g. Abdullah et al. 2012 and Sulistyono 1997). This is now refuted. As documented by Jess Melvin (2018) in particular, there were central command structures and immediate orders of annihilation. From case studies with long historical perspective, by John Roosa (2020) and others, it is also clear that while there were various kinds of frequently intensive conflicts over the years, there were no serious incidents of mass terror and mass murdering – until propelled by the military.

The second rebuttal is trickier. The UN definition of genocide from 1948 only mentions killings of groups based on nationality, ethnicity, race or religion, not of political enemies such as by Stalin, and not necessarily of people resisting western colonialism. However, for genocide to remain a useful concept, it needs to be acknowledged that the definition was politically negotiated, remains analytically dubious and needs to be improved by the common knowledge that national, ethnic and religious groups are often politically delineated, and that this heterogeneity applies to non-religious people too. In fact, the organisationally modern and ‘industrial’ genocides in the North were rooted in Europe’s own previously mainstream colonial classification of various kinds of ‘natives’ who were thus subjects rather than citizens and deemed less worthy humans who may be removed if necessary. (Lindqvist 1996) This is almost exactly how the Indonesian military, immediately after the failure of the 30th of September Movement, undermined the radicals’ ideological hegemony with fabricated lies

and by demonising them as uncivil and anti-religious national traitors who had to be annihilated. (Roosa 2020)

Despotism with indirect methods

While the Indonesian identification of the victims was thus in line with Europe's own colonial practices, Jakarta's methods of governance differed from the organisationally modern and 'industrial' slaughters, such as the Holocaust, through extensive state apparatuses and the leaders' own parties and militias. The Indonesian military leaders were certainly in command of the killings but could not rely on similarly extensive and coherent machinery and on civilian organisations of their own. This generated regional differences with regard to timing, the numbers killed and the contribution of 'external' vigilantes and militias. For example, the central dictates come with early military direction of the slayings in Aceh; late killings of different numbers of people in South Sumatra and Riau; firm military detentions but few killings in West Java; brutal central military intervention along with local anti-communist groups in the progressives' own bastion of Central Java; extensive military and civilian participation in vast killings in East Java; and delayed central military direction of slaughter in the nationalist stronghold of Bali.

Yet these differences do not suggest that the military were backseat drivers overwhelmed by local conflicts and angry civilians 'running amok'. The new historical studies combining documents and interviews with observers, perpetrators and surviving victims (Törnquist 2020, 2021 for reviews) point instead to a clear pattern with two components. The first component was central dictates supplemented by interventions when local commanders and governors were not trusted, as in Central Java, or when following Sukarno's instructions to avoid killings, as initially in Bali, South Sumatra and Riau. The second component was the combination of this central command (plus special forces) with colonial-like indirect rule through local communal leaders and their anti-communist vigilantes and militias, often Muslim, as in East Java, but also right-wing nationalist in character, as in Bali. Only in West Java did officers manage to sustain direct professional rule, akin to modern crackdowns, carrying out mass detentions but abstaining from extra judicial slaughter.

With regard to indirect rule, there was also a clear sequence. The initial pogroms and killings were in the open and, while facilitated by the military, often involved anti-communist vigilantes and militias. They 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, again assisted by the vigilantes and militias. At times, the local progressives preferred detention to mob violence, hoping for decent treatment by the authorities. However, the most extensive massacres thereafter were by non-public executions of 'disappeared' detainees, carried out by the centrally directed military, assisted by militias. This was avoided in West Java but otherwise applied generally, such as in East Java, where Muslim task forces were particularly active, in Central Java, and later on 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.

Political implications

In conclusion so far, the Indonesian selection of the victims was thus similar to the one applied in Europe and was inspired by colonial ideas. But in terms of method, Suharto and his henchmen lacked modern statist organisational and 'industrial' means of repression and killings or parties and militias of their own. Thus, they rather combined colonial state despotism with local indirect rule. As Gerry van Klinken has drawn my attention to, this was akin to when the Dutch contemplated more modern forms of governance in the 1920s, but needed help to suppress the liberation movement and therefore returned to governance by central despotism allied with the affirmation of strongmen and local leaders of communities mediating unequal citizenship and control of their 'subjects'. (C.f. van Klinken 2020)

Back in Indonesia from the 1960s, there were two major implications for the progressives. Firstly, that since the primacy of colonial-like governance is dividing and ruling through competing ethnic and religious identities, loyalties, leaders and their vigilantes and militias, achieving popular unity for common causes and interests is very difficult. Secondly, that while modern dictatorial regimes tend to crumble along with their state apparatuses and organisations, as in Germany, Chile or the Soviet Union, much of the indirect governance redolent of colonialism has survived its demise. The same applied after the Indonesian genocide. When in firm control from the late 1960s, Suharto certainly tried to combine his own despotism with modern central governance. But in face of critique from the late 1980s, he revived elements of indirect governance with Muslim leaders. And similar practices have proliferated during the elitist democratisation from 1998.

In short, just as it was particularly difficult for the progressives to withstand repression and killings, reviving the Left after 1965 was equally formidable.

Leftist amnesia

Abandoned anti-colonial strategy

Yet, colonial-like despotism with indirect rule had been fought earlier. The unique insight of the modern anti-colonial movements was that it *is* possible to unify people with a focus on joint interest in equal citizenship and democratic political rights, which can also serve as a common framework for class-based social rights. The best case is probably the Indian state of Kerala from the 1930s and onwards – where struggle for civil rights against the most oppressive caste system in India was combined with demands for national independence, democracy and land reform. This historical achievement is still today the foundation for citizen action and efforts at inclusive development. (Törnquist and Harriss 2016; Törnquist 2021a) But Kerala was not alone. In the 1950s, another successful case was the campaign of the principled sections of the Indonesian freedom movement for direct civic and political rights, via people’s own democratic organisations rather than ethnic and religious communities. This was how the reformist communists and left nationalists expanded in the 1950s, adding the struggle for social rights and becoming the largest peaceful popular movement in the world. In 1957 when communists won a democratic general election for the first time ever, in Kerala, their likeminded Indonesian comrades were winning local elections in Java and parts of Sumatra. Subsequently, however, these priorities were altered when the Communists supported Sukarno’s left populist Guided Democracy, defined by a strong presidency, postponed elections, a dethroned parliament, consultative all-party governments (aside from the excluded critical parties), top-down appointed “functional groups” in consultative councils, and accommodation of the military, which was also granted emergency powers. The rationale was to promote anti-imperial campaigns against the West, which, it was thought, necessitated a strong nation state with direct rather than indirect citizenship via religious and other communities – but excluding democratic mediation via people’s own organisations and movements.

Progressives rightly criticise Indonesian and Western forgetfulness of how their “politics of order” from the late 1950s strengthened the military, fostered their political and economic power and led to genocide. But there is also leftist amnesia with regard to its own unfortunate history. In the following, I shall argue that the substitution of Guided Democracy for the previous emphasis on civil, political and social rights was fatal for the progressives. Firstly, it lessened their chances to employ democratisation to reduce the military and civil adversaries’ increasing control of public assets and resources – which possibly, in turn, made Aidit opt for

the conspiratorial 30th of September Movement. Secondly, it rendered it next to impossible for the mass movements to stand up against the colonial-like repression and killings. Thirdly, the oblivion of this history kept preventing the rise of a new Left. Let us turn to the details.

Insufficient “war of positions”

Numerous scholars and activists, including Geoffrey Robinson (2018) in his outstanding comprehensive history of “the killings season”, have found it difficult to accept that the Communist party 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. John Roosa, whose path-breaking analysis of the 30th of September Movement documented Aidit’s involvement (2006), has recently (2020) responded 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 proposed to contain military power and, more precisely, quell the leading generals. 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.

Dead end

There is much to this, but the problems for the party and progressives were more fundamental. In David Hindley’s view (1962), the Communists had been “domesticated”, and in my analysis of its strategy (1984), the anti-imperialist campaign it led, for example, precluded the workers from staging even limited strikes and containing the military in the many nationalised

companies. And there was not much of democracy left to prevent the military, top bureaucrats and their business associates from capturing public assets and resources. Similarly, the radical peasant actions for the new land reform law had to be called off in late 1964 because of insufficient local unity to withstand opponents. There was little left of the previous unifying focus on equal civil and political rights as a framework for social rights. 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. Meanwhile the military was in control of the campaign against Malaysia. As shown by Melvin (2018), they could even make use of the command structure to crack down on the Communists.

In short, 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 lacked sufficient power in the “trenches” and “permanent fortifications” to rein in the military and their allies through democratic means.

Dynamics of oblivion

In what way did this continue to be important? How does it matter today? The miscalculations were certainly swept under the carpet during the salad days of Guided Democracy. More interestingly, after the genocide, the dominant Maoist critics suggested armed struggle (Hearman 2018 for a fine case study) rather than a return to democratic priorities. In spite of their own quick failure, they were also unwilling to interrogate the signs that anti-imperialism was insufficient to undermine the military and others who captured public assets and resources. Neither, of course, were the Maoists interested in problematising their thesis that radical struggle for land reforms, such as in Indonesia, would unify the rural poor. These deadlocks affected other leftist leaders too. Generally, the Left was in disarray and unable to provide any innovative guidance. (For this and the following, Törnquist 1984a, 2021a)

In addition, in the 1970s, new dissenters certainly focused on corruption, but were more in favour of Singaporean than democratic alternatives. And when they subsequently joined a new generation of students in critique of the transnational corporations that had flooded the country, the insights from the 1950s of how to come to terms with the remnants of colonialism and indirect governance were deemed obsolete. Because in the view of the new

Latin American theories of dependency, capitalism was deemed hegemonic and it was necessary to focus on socialism – along with NGO support for ‘the victims’ and human rights. From the late 1980s, innovative younger socialists certainly concentrated more on resisting the political, state and military bases of capitalist expansion – as well as on mobilising people outside the NGOs and university campuses. But the perceptive and brave activists were more interested in opposing Suharto’s regime than reclaiming the demoted primacy of broad democratic movements with social rights in the forefront. Even though old adversaries like liberal Marxist intellectual and renowned publisher, Goenawan Mohamad, joined forces with nationalist Marxists, Joesoef Isak and Pramodya Ananta Toer, to stress its urgency. And the lacuna remained in spite of efforts at investigative journalism and participatory studies of substantive democratisation (which I had the privilege of taking part in).

Hence, the fragmented progressive groups which tipped the balance with massive demonstrations towards the end of Suharto’s rule, were neither able to develop a popularly anchored economic policy as an alternative to the authoritarian neoliberal management of the Asian economic crisis that hit Indonesia particularly hard, nor propound a realistic alternative to elitist democratisation. While some progressives therefore joined the elitist mainstream, others returned to activism in civil society and unions, typically lobbying and horse trading with politicians, or linking up with auxiliary public commissions such as for human rights and against corruption. Mass-based democratic politics for citizens’ rights remained a blurry distant dream. Until, that is, there was an opening to, firstly, negotiate labour and welfare reforms with popular local politicians in need of support to win elections, such as Jokowi, and, secondly, to build broad alliances with parliamentarians such as for the national health scheme. Yet there was no real effort at a transformative series of reforms, or at democratic institutionalisation of the new participation and negotiations. So when it was necessary from the mid-2010s to weather the resurgence of conservative strongman-populism along with Muslim identity politics, no viable progressive alternative to elitist transactions, accommodation of military leaders and indirect governance through pragmatic Muslim leaders existed. (Törnquist 2019)

One step back to move ahead

The analysis suggests, thus, that as the third wave of democracy has now petered out, and authoritarianism along with indirect rule and identity politics is on the offensive, it is more important than ever to recall the historical insights on how to counter it. The focus must be broad alliances for equal civic, political and social rights, by democratic means – to generate

real political clout rather than relying on mouthing empty slogans in defence of democracy and human rights. Just as the mainstream amnesia about the genocide has to be revealed, the other precondition is that the Left's oblivion of its own history is also addressed. It takes time, but it is not too late. The suppressed Left in Europe did not return to the fore after the Second World War until it revisited its history – recalling past insights and lessons, and certainly adding studies of new conditions. In Germany, for one, it took until the 1960s until new progressive movements blossomed and paved the way for 1989. (For a brilliant reportage, see Schwarz 2020) Similarly, the more recent critiques of Blairite neo-liberalisation of social democracy, and the new democratic socialists in the U.S., have gained steam by revisiting the 1930s' breakthrough of Keynesianism and social citizenship with New Deals and welfare states. There are no fixed models from before to bring alive. Old nationally confined social democratic models, for example, must be internationalised to counter neo-conservative nationalism. But just as the Renaissance from the 14th to the 17th centuries overcame the dark Middle Ages by reappraising classical insights, critical history is now imperative.

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