

In international memorandum: Joesoef Isak (1928-15/8/2009) Published in Jakarta Post Aug 21, 2009

When important persons from Indonesia's Soeharto period pass away, their contributions to the country is often commented upon respectfully by the leaders of today. So what if anything will they say of Joesoef Isak? Isak, of course, was of another kind. Being one of the 'tall men' (to use the Indian expression of their consistent founding leaders) who combined nationalism with international enlightenment, democracy with intellectualism, and individual integrity with popular organisation – Isak was also among the losers. As editor of the leading daily *Merdeka*, he had problems with the freedom of expression already in 1962. And as secretary-general of the Afro-Asia Journalist Association, he was first detained in 1965 and then imprisoned without trial from 1968 till 1977. Isak was deemed a threat against the state along with a million or so of other leftist nationalists (to whom he belonged) and related communists (who were often even killed); all of whom had done nothing to overthrow the then head of state, Soekarno, but were made scapegoats of a secret and ill-fated kidnapping to weaken the army leadership.

Remarkably however, it was also this 'traitor' who once released helped saving Indonesia's reputation. Isak helped showing the world that Indonesia was not only about repression, KKN (corruption, collusion and nepotism), authoritarianism and falsification of history. By publishing Pramoedya Ananta Toer's writings in particular in face of all kinds of threats, and by making this part of principled struggle beyond revenge for civil and intellectual freedoms and democracy, Isak with fellow ex-political prisoners and readers proved that there was another Indonesia worthy of international solidarity and respect. How far has Indonesia's democracy advanced by now? Will this contribution be recognised by today's leaders?

Remarkably, Isak even combined solidarity with the struggle that he was part of and retrospective critical analysis of the same. Thus he was crucial for the activists who wanted to understand the problems and move ahead in more democratic directions as well as for concerned scholars. Yet I for one could not even thank him by name in my book of PKI's theoretical and strategic dilemmas, as it was published in the dark early eighties. As of recent however, the importance of his critical analysis has become all the more clear in John Roosa's brilliant study of the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement.

Isak himself had no illusions of officially regulated truth and reconciliation, as in South Africa after apartheid or in Europe after 1945 and 1989; given that the power relations had not been sufficiently altered in the elitist democratisation after 1998. Such more substantive changes, he stressed in his homage to Pramoedya when the latter passed away in 2006, required that the uniform thinking of the past was combated and that the people, as Maxim Gorki put it, got to know their own history. Otherwise they would not be able to build a better future.

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