

Published in Jakarta Post April 17, 2000

Open Letter to Indonesian Reformists on the 1965-66 Catastrophe

Dear Indonesian reformists,

(cc. your Western supporters)

This, of course, is primarily for You to settle. But as I'm part of that rather hypocritical West which contributed to the catastrophe and, like Indonesia, has to come to terms with it, and since I'm one of those who have spent decades researching the background and the implications, I like to convey a few thoughts, for whatever they might be worth.

The background, as we all know, is that one of the World's most devastating but bottled up act of human rights atrocities and falsifications of history have been brought to the fore. The massacres, that is, of at least half a million Indonesian citizens of radical inclination in the mid-60's, the imprisonment and (until today) institutionalised harassment of many more persons, including elderly and grandchildren; and the nothing but absurd accusation that they were all collectively responsible for a series of elitist and military manipulations and struggles over central power in late-1965. Even more remarkably, in a way, is that the first powerful person who realised, finally, that this could not continue to be swept under the carpet is not of the democratic West but the former leader of one of the Muslim organisations that also contributed to the mayhem – Your blind but clear-sighted president Abdurrahman Wahid, Gus Dur, who already has a tough job containing the military that carried out much of the killings and most of the repression. He may be criticised of much, Gus Dur, but this, I believe, is integrity. This is as brave and important as

the students' struggle against the Suharto regime. And this, thus, calls for the support of every democrat.

However, I understand, several of You don't agree with this. And aside from unfortunate statements (from even Amien Rais) about the need to prohibit atheism – as if religion in general and Islam in particular had to be forced upon people – I also hear more respectable arguments about the need to leave the past behind, not cause more conflicts, and focus on the urgent social and economic problems. Yet, I think, nothing could be more wrong. Just as in Germany after the holocaust (or Soviet Union after Stalin, or Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, or South Africa after apartheid) it is necessary to account for and come to grips with the past in order to go ahead. For what would otherwise be the basis for that reasonably equal citizenship and democracy in Indonesia that I trust You also strive for and which even the most instrumental investors (not to talk of ordinary people) hold out as preconditions for stability and socio-economic progress?

This (and that's very important to stress) is not at first hand about the details of what happened in late September and early October in 1965 in terms of manipulations, provocations, coups and murders, or about how Suharto managed to get Sukarno to give up, or even about all the killings and suffering. Of course, that must also be examined, and there are ample of experiences (including from the dark sides of European and South African history) – of how to carry out (and how not to carry out) impartial research, promote truth and reconciliation, and come forward with compensation to the victims. But what's really at stake is not what's dead and buried, but what continue to prevent human dignity, democracy and development.

The massacres of 1965-66 turned violence into established state policy. And it's that practice which has to be totally uprooted. Because thus it continued. Including, of course, in East Timor and Aceh, but also through Suharto's 'shock therapy' in the early-80s in the form of 'mysterious' killings and displaying of criminals, real or imagined. For three decades the military, the various militias and the death brigades did the dirty job. But the civil establishment and the mob-fearing middle class contributed also to the conscious exacerbation of conflicts and antagonisms. Thus people became so afraid – both of the military and of each other (including of those who have reason to take vengeance) – that the military almost managed to make itself indispensable, by virtue of its 'protection against instability'. So isn't the only way to put an end to this state-sponsored terror to expose and deligitimise the roots of it, the massacres?

Further, that continuous political violence and stigmatisation – that element of fear, trauma, dependence of patronage and branding as non-touchable – continue to prevent large parts of the population from really participating as first class citizens in building the free and democratic society that (I trust) You also subscribe to. So isn't that a basic civil rights problem, then, – which has to be tackled officially and publicly by Your new democratic government, if it is not to negate its own basis of legitimacy? Not just for the sake of the victims but also to build the safe and stable democracy that frightened middle classes long for, no matter if Muslim or not.

The falsification of history is almost equally devastating. The educated middle class and the students, of course, are aware of some of what really happened. But doesn't democracy presuppose widespread free and qualified knowledge among the population at large? And wasn't the lack of that widespread knowledge one of the major arguments behind the Indonesian middle class' reluctance in the 50's to accept

the massive popular mobilisation of the communists? So why prevent now, then, an equally massive and popular educational discussion about what really happened – now that there isn't even a single powerful communist in sight who could 'abuse' it?

More than that. Don't You agree that democratisation require a thorough and free historical discussion of previous progress and problems in Indonesia? Including of what really caused the decline of the parliamentary democracy in the late-50's, of what made the most modern and (yes!) in many ways most democratic political party, the reformist communist party, to rather (unfortunately) rally behind Sukarno's 'guided democracy', or of what caused the rhetorically democratic middle-class, and its liberal democratic Western allies, to totally crush what remained then of the Indonesian democracy?

It's equally hard, of course, to question the established truths in Indonesia about the PKI and other leftists, as it was for former East German Stalinists to realise that their Berlin wall wasn't 'against fascism'. But isn't it also indisputable, that whatever thoughts and studies are repressed tend to be attractive? So why not allow Marxism or Communism, as long as it can't be proved that they are a threat against democracy? Or was Nehru wrong in his reply to Nasser, that one should put communists in parliament rather than in jail?

At any rate (and as I already stated, in Jakarta Post 23/8/96, when the Suharto regime motivated its mid-1996 crackdown on the democracy movement with the need to fight communism) – the basic rationale for old-time communism is no more! This is not just because the West won the cold war. This is also because no matter what we think of third world capitalism, it is no longer held back (as under colonialism) in countries like Indonesia. So the basic rationale for the old communist argument

(against social democrats) about the need for authoritarian shortcuts to progress simply is no more! It's way past and gone. And so what remains for some 'to be afraid of' is rather social democratic oriented mass organisations, within and outside parliament, on the basis of popular interest in political and social equality. But that, of course, is not what You (like Suharto) would try to get rid of by branding communism.

In conclusion, therefore, and unless the arguments above are invalidated, it's difficult to characterise Your opposition against accounting for and coming to grips with the massacres in 1965-66, and the continuous repression of radical Indonesians and their relatives and children, as anything but non-democratic. You may say that it's not yet the right time to handle this the most serious human rights atrocities in post-colonial Indonesia. But I must insist, then, in asking what kind of development you like to achieve first, and how long time that would take and what would even make it possible, before it's time for a human democratic order in Indonesia? To me it sounds exactly like the old modernisation rationale for authoritarian 'enlightened' government.

Also, You may add, a majority of Your democratically elected parliamentarians are against the proposition of coming to grips with the 1965-66 catastrophe. Implying that Your resistance is fully democratic. But as in the case of the democratically elected xenophobic neo-rightists in Austria, the very basis of even minimum democracy isn't only about procedures and majority decisions. It also includes, and can't survive and develop without, the creation, upholding and improving of all citizens' equal rights and chances to participate in the democratic mechanisms. So since resistance against accounting for and doing away with all the consequences of

the 1965-66 catastrophe is a clear case of undermining those rights, it's nothing but non-democratic.

In my understanding – but do correct me if I'm wrong! – the only thing that's left to dispute among democrats, then, is that foreign intervention (as in the case of Austria) might be an even more serious threat against democracy. But that's not at stake in Indonesia. Here it's clearly something that rests with the integrity, consistency and strength of the Indonesian democracy movement itself. People like this author are just critical but concerned students. And though the West must also come to terms with its contribution to Your catastrophe, it's rather unlikely, I'm afraid, that it will even come forward with decently substantial support enough to make up for it. So the transition to a 'democratic human order' rests with You.

Yours sincerely,

Olle Törnquist; 13/4/00

(Törnquist, who is Professor of Political Science and Development Research at the University of Oslo, wrote his PhD thesis (Zed Books 1984) on the theoretical and political causes for and implications of the destruction of the PKI, and has since focused on problems of democratisation in comparative perspective.)