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The Politics of Amnesia

Wednesday night fifty years ago, history changed in such a way that few want to talk about it. In Indonesia, radical officers supported by the leader of the Communist Party (but not the Party!), attempted to arrest prominent pro-US generals to account for their conspiracy against anti-imperialist President Sukarno. Had they succeeded, the left would have gained the upper hand. For although Sukarno's people dominated politics, and the Communist Party - the world's third largest - had succeeded in initiating progressive reforms in exchange for 'Guided Democracy,' the price was high. The left was now no longer able to win free elections; the military had taken over the nationalised foreign companies; and trade unionism was restricted. Furthermore, uniting farmers behind land reform had proved difficult.

But this night *everything* was lost. One general escaped and the others were murdered. This allowed the notoriously corrupt and unremarkable general Suharto to take the opportunity to build broad unity behind disproportionate and senseless acts of revenge on Communists and leftist nationalists who knew absolutely nothing about the conspiracies. According to *The Times Magazine* this was "the West's best news for years in Asia." And before long, President Sukarno was disposed of in favour of Suharto's decades-long dictatorship. Genocide is a contested concept, but between five hundred thousand and one million people were murdered because they had modern leftist ideas in common. Innumerable people were detained, and persecution continued for decades. The military managed much of the pogroms on its own but mobilised religious and political militias too. The survivors and relatives suffer still.

That ill-fated night in Jakarta changed history elsewhere too. Indonesia became a model for the West's struggle against the left in the Global South. The argument was that in spite of modernisation, the liberal middle class had not proved able to win elections, create stable institutions and resist the left. Hence it was necessary to add 'politics of order' with military backing. This was the rationale for the support of, for example, the regimes in South Vietnam and the 'middle class coups' in Latin America; Pinochet's plan to overthrow Allende was even named 'Operation Jakarta'.

All this is well known, for those who want to know. Latin America has come to terms with its past. But in Indonesia, in spite of fifteen years of liberal democracy, nothing significant has

been done to uncover the truth and take legal action against the perpetrators who remain honoured for their crimes. The standing argument is that such processes would only create new conflicts, and that it is necessary instead to move on. Indonesia's allies are also reluctant to speak up about their previous support for repressive politics.

But is it possible to 'move on'? What happens when a country and its allies repress their history? The victims are of course denied their human rights. And the principle of legal certainty is also at stake, for the next time it may be others that the law fails to protect. Then there is the cultural legacy. The lies and hushing-up leave deep traces in people and society. Even most of those who know what happened feel they must be pragmatic. Indonesia has become a stronghold of postmodernist relativism where factual knowledge is subordinated to everyone's right to their own interpretation, as long as they have money and good contacts. Extremist groups are free to terrorise both victims and principled intellectuals. Adi Rukun, for example, who in the second of Joshua Oppenheimer's exceptional films about the genocide ("The Look of Silence") seeks out the local gangsters who killed his brother, not for revenge, but just to understand what took place, has been forced to go into hiding. Meanwhile, the West suppresses its own role in the repressive politics and focuses instead on teaching others about relatively uncontroversial aspects of human rights.

But the political amnesia is worst. Consider Germany today without having come to terms with Nazism; or South Africa with apartheid. Although Suharto's version of Indonesian history has faded, there is no clear alternative narrative. On the contrary, the absence of an unflinching understanding of the causes and consequences of the genocide means that vital knowledge needed to build the world's largest new democracy is disregarded. It is even neglected that the system behind mass murder and persecution has not disappeared with either the end of the Cold War or democratisation. The old use of the security forces as well as the mobilisation and legitimisation of militias, security companies and religious and political organisations to murder and oppress still applies. It is also conveniently forgotten that broad popular organisation was not 'premature' as a basis for modern democracy in Indonesia. In the early 1950s it was even possible to build the world's largest modern, peaceful and democratically oriented leftist movement. The disposal thereafter of democracy was only due to the political fashion of elitist leaders and experts at the time on both the left and the right. In the same way, it is often ignored that the easiest way to gain power and enrich oneself was not to develop capitalism or socialism but to claim allegiance to Sukarno's nationalism and use state and politics to control the nationalised companies and other public properties and

claim a share of the surplus produced by others. Therefore the military grew stronger while the country's economy deteriorated and the left was undermined. It is also overlooked that the middle class and the Western powers that criticised this supported instead Suharto's repression and his alliance of technocrats, financiers and military personnel – and that their extractive pattern of economic growth degenerated in more corruption and oppression. Finally, the absence of close examination into the consequences of the genocide prevents wide discussions about why democratisation has been limited by elitism, continued corruption and the fragmentation of civil organisations and social movements.

But how can the political amnesia continue? The bitter truth is that almost no one with influence *wants* to remember. Consider this: Conservative forces that wish to discourage criticism but can't always rely on the police and military, need militias, security companies and extreme organisations. Donors and others who say that democratisation must be based on the elite, or even that stable state institutions must come first, avoid, the history of popular-based democratisation. Few of the politically dependent businessmen and populists around President Jokowi consider the roots of exploitation and repression in the abuse of nationalisation and political regulation. The critics among the growing middle class and its international supporters neglect instead that their predecessors contributed to the genocide and dictatorship; and that their own contempt for 'corrupt democracies' resemble these old positions. The new pro-democrats in fragmented citizen organisations who invest in populist leaders forget that their own inability to form broad organisations is largely because the ideals and knowledge of democratic popular movements were crushed by the genocide.

In short, Indonesia's dilemma is its negation of history. But herein also lies hope for change. The potentially most revolutionary *and* democratic forces today are the endangered critical historians and the teachers who can disseminate critical knowledge. They must become more, and get full support!

Olle Törnquist, Professor of Political Science and Development Research, University of Oslo