

How Long is Now?

Of Indonesian *reformasi* and its belated reclaiming of the Cold War history

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The title alludes to the mural along Oranienburger Strasse, Berlin-Mitte, on what was once a SS centre and Nazi prison, thereafter a public East German building, and after the fall of the wall a centre for dynamic artists – now abandoned. It is a glance back at Berlin's recent creative past – in prolonged waiting for the future. To me, the mural thus also encapsulates the dynamism as well as sad fate of the Indonesian students in Jakarta, who in the autumn of 1998 kept me lecturing and discussing into late at night, searching as they were for ways of reclaiming critical history of what had materialised from the late 1940s, and onwards. Including the history of why the then largest reformist popular movement in the world could be eliminated and some 500,000 people killed by both military and 'civil' militias in 1965-1966. The moment of transparency faded away. The future is not in sight. Why?

The internationally supported accord to abandon Suharto for freedoms and elections while saving the elite meant there were too many skeletons in the closets to allow for a public discussion. The hope that President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo would be less dependent on the powerful groups than his predecessors has dwindled. There has been full retreat in face of strongman Prabowo Subianto's drumming up of conservative Muslim populism.

Internationally, the argument in vogue is that liberal democratisation must be preceded by solid state-building. Democratic leftists have also not been eager to look into what happened in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Leaders like Nehru and Sukarno and the non-align movement belonged to the past. Maoists, moreover, even claimed that the reformist Indonesian communists and Sukarnoists had not been sufficiently revolutionary. Those who latter on regretted their sympathies did not want to be reminded but to try something else, like anarchism, civil society, new movements and discursive analysis. Indonesian pro-democrats concentrated on immediate issues like corruption, human rights and livelihood, which did not seem easier to handle by looking into the past.

Meanwhile most scholarship on the Indonesian massacres has focused on the elite struggles in late 1965 that became the scapegoat for the pogroms and massacres. The emphasis on the

human rights side of the matter is admirable, but insufficient as a guide to thorough historical analysis (Törnquist 2019). Three puzzles remain. First, what were the political economy and political agency that made possible the conspiracies and suppression? Second, what enabled the combination of militarily propelled violence and the participation of the militias and vigilantes? Third, what explains the failure of new left-oriented movements in politics and, instead, the return of authoritarian identity politics?

One example of the need for extended historical analysis is that Geoffrey Robinson (2018) in the most comprehensive study available finds it hard to accept John Roosa's (2006) path breaking thesis that some leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), but not the movement at large, played important secret roles in the 30 September Movement, which preceded the killings. The reason for Robinson's hesitation is the conclusion in mainstream research that the PKI was quite successful at the time and was gaining ground (see Anderson and McVey 1971; Mortimer 1974; Crouch 1978). This should have meant there was no reason for adventurous secret actions. However, a more critical analysis of the challenges facing the communists during the late 1950s and early 1960s suggest otherwise. The party wanted democracy but had supported the introduction in 1959 by President Sukarno and the army of "Guided Democracy" and the postponement of elections. This meant that PKI had to advance primarily by mass politics. Mass politics meant co-operation in Sukarno's anti-imperialist campaigns and nationalisations of foreign companies, actions in favour of his Basic Agrarian Reform as well as his formula of joint public governance by nationalist, religious and communist socio-political pillars – including co-operation with the military. This provided some space for communist organising and pressure politics, but it did not undermine the progressives' political contenders. The military gained control (including by way of martial law) of the nationalised companies and much of the state apparatus and effectively blocked communist efforts to intensify labour struggles in 1960-1961. Not everything went the military's way. It lost ground for about a year after the successful inclusion of West Papua within Indonesia. This allowed the party to launch contentious Maoist-oriented campaigns against so-called bureaucratic capitalists and for the implementation of the Agrarian Reform. However, the PKI's calculation that "bureaucratic capitalists" could be thoroughly undermined by intensified anti-imperialism was undermined by Confrontation with Malaysia and with British companies. The military too claimed nationalist high ground in this Sukarno-initiated campaign, securing control of nationalised companies and through the establishment of *de facto* martial law. Similarly, militant actions to occupy land had to be cancelled in

December 1964 due to uncontrollable conflicts, including among small farmers who were supposed to unite. In short, with parliamentary democracy stalled and intensified mass actions not generating the expected results, the PKI was in a political bind. This means there *were* reasons to contemplate alternative ways of weakening the military by disclosing through the 30 September Movement how they abused nationalism in their own interests, which might, then, give the progressives the upper hand (Törnquist1984; van Klinken 2019).

Another example relates to the unresolved issue of the military's role in the killings versus that of militias, vigilantes and others. There can be no doubt that the military was directing the killings and suppression and that more people were annihilated than the September 30 Movement or even the PKI. Therefore, the concept of genocide may well apply. However, the co-ordination of central powers and local militias and vigilantes, combined with political, religious and ethnic identity politics differ obviously from the paradigmatic top-down Nazi Holocaust. Hence, the very combination of military direction and civilian participation remains to be explained.

Robinson does not shy away from the question of how it was possible to develop a broad anti-leftist movement and participation in the violence – although the state's capacity to design and implement policies was limited, the military did not have a popular base or a party, and there was no hard-core ethnic, religious or even utopian framework for the repression. While pointing to the psychological warfare, his main explanation for the widespread violence is the militarisation of society, rooted in the struggles for national independence in the 1940s. The military itself was a product of militia groups, and by the 1960s there was a strong legacy of the territorial organisation of the military, militias and vigilantes. During the war of independence, some of these militias were leftist or politically independent while others were supported and trained by the Japanese, in brutal techniques and ruthless practices that were evident in the violence of 1965-1966. But this is not the full story.

There were differences between the freedom fighters whose ideas of independence were rooted in patrimonial leadership and citizenship mediated through ethnic and religious communities, and those who aimed at a secular modern nation-state based on democratic citizenship mediated by parties and interest organisations. The former sustained many of their militarised task forces and communal organisations, which were important in the killings and suppression of the mid-1960s. The primarily leftist freedom fighters, however, got together in the PKI and its mass organisations, as well as in leftist-nationalist groups. During the 1950s

they were remarkably successful by combining class struggle with the modern nationalist idea of equal and democratic citizenship and popular enlightenment. Guided Democracy, however, undermined these efforts. This became particularly crucial in 1965. President Sukarno's left-populism, supported by the PKI, certainly sustained the idea of a modern national state with direct relations to citizens – but the democratic mediation of citizenship via independent parties, movements and elections was derailed.

Meanwhile some military leaders like General Nasution had also linked up with Sukarno's Guided Democracy in support of the modern nation-state, against CIA-financed rebellions and corrupt generals like Suharto. But they were staunch anti-communists and short of popular following. So Nasution joined the less principled generals with Suharto in the forefront – who returned to the basics of the conservative freedom fighters in the 1940s of patrimonial leadership and citizenship mediated through the ethnic and religious communities that had been crucial for the Dutch indirect colonial rule.

Van Klinken's (2018) historical frame for analysing this vacillation between a centralist modern nation state position and a conservative position based on the notion of indirect rule involves observing the similarities with the 1920s debates among senior Dutch colonial bureaucrats about the character of the state and how it would be governed. In the 1920s, Dutch modernisers wanted direct governance through a modern state, which was not democratic but might pave the way for individual citizenship, resonating with the proposals of the supporters of Guided Democracy in the 1960s. Both the Dutch modernisers and the leftist-populist supporters of Guided Democracy lost out to those opting for indirect rule – in the general sense of complementing central despotism by affirming the position of local strongmen and ethnic, religious and local communities as supervisors of the subjects and as mediators between them and the state. The colonial regime found indirect rule to be most effective and cheapest form of governance to hold back the emerging modern nationalist movement. And the Indonesian military found the same indirect rule to be the best way of annihilating the modern leftist nationalists, communists and like-minded friends and relatives.

In other words, the massacres in the mid-1960s was a genocide drawing on the colonial type of governance, based on central despotism and indirect rule.

The remaining third question from the case studies is what explains the absence of a new leftist dimension in Indonesian politics. Robinson focuses on the importance of human rights

and seeks to break the silence on those tragic events of the mid-1960s. Indeed, the Indonesian dilemma is the continuing negation of history. But the focus on the human rights issues does not help us discussing why no new leftist dimension has emerged. Despite severe and long drawn out repression, this has happened in other contexts, including Franco's Spain and several Latin American countries, but not in Indonesia. Why?

It may be useful to recall, again, that Guided democracy marginalised the successful combination of struggle for popular class interests and democratic national citizenship against indirect rule. This was a crucial factor behind the catastrophe. The progressives could not draw on active citizenship and democracy, and the dominant actors returned to the pattern of indirect colonial governance when annihilating and suppressing leftist oriented people. Later on, Suharto promoted the rise of capital and consolidated his "New Order" by reversing from his indirect rule genocide and suppression to elements of centralised modernism, at the expense of local strongmen and religious and ethnic communities. Ordinary people were to be "floating", without any state-society mediation other than statist-corporatism and subordinated religious communities.

To counter this, dissidents turned more political, focussing on democratisation against Suharto's state-facilitated capitalism. But the popular masses did not come forward as expected. Obviously, the old emancipatory struggle for independence of active democratic citizenship, which had lost out by the end of the 1950s, had to be reclaimed. Even old adversaries like Goenawan Mohamad and Joesoef Isak along with Pramodya Ananta Toer came together to make this point. And studies on and with the democracy movement, about democratisation, citizenship, populism and identity politics were made with similar ends in mind. These efforts have still not gained sufficient ground. With today's rightist populism there is even a resurgence of indirect governance.

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