

# The Politics of Amnesia

OLLE TÖRNQUIST

Fifty years ago, a failed uprising against pro-US army generals (though not against the country's president) in Indonesia became the scapegoat for pogroms and inaugurated a three-decade long period of authoritarianism. Indonesia became the model for the West in its suppression of popular movements in the global South. The elite in Indonesia and its international allies still do not want to talk about their violent methods. This amnesia and the refusal to understand the experiences of popular politics works to the detriment of democracy in the country.

Thanks to Teresa Birks for enlightened language editing of my rough translation of the original text in Swedish.

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The night between 30 September and 1 October, 50 years ago, history changed in such a way that few have the courage to talk about it. In Indonesia, radical military officers supported by the leader of the communist party and his aides (but not the party!), attempted to arrest prominent pro-US generals to hold them to account for their conspiracy against the country's anti-imperialist President Sukarno. Had they succeeded, the left would have finally gained the upper hand. For, while Sukarno's people dominated politics, and although the Indonesian Communist Party had become the world's third largest and had succeeded in initiating progressive reforms, these reforms were in exchange for leftist support of Sukarno's "Guided Democracy." And "Guided Democracy", in turn, had come with appointed rather than elected people in parliament and strong presidential and military powers. So even though everything had been justified in the name of anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism (against the Dutch, us and British interests in particular, as well as their Indonesian allies), the price had been too high: the left was now no longer able to win free elections; the military had agreed to nationalisation of foreign

companies in return for controlling them on their own; and trade unionism was restricted. Furthermore, uniting farmers behind land reform had proved difficult.

But on the night of 1 October, 50 years ago, everything was lost. One of the pro-US generals escaped and the others were murdered. This allowed a notoriously corrupt and unremarkable general by the name of Suharto to take the opportunity to not only stop the dissident officers' actions, but also 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, Sukarno was disposed leading to Suharto's more than three decade-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 has 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.

## A Model for the West

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 new argument (pioneered by political scientist

Samuel Huntington) was that in spite of economic and social modernisation, the liberal middle class had not proved strong enough to win elections, create stable institutions and resist the left. Hence, it was necessary to also impose a “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; Augusto Pinochet’s plan to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile 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 Indonesia remains silent, despite Abdurrahman Wahid’s, the country’s former president, attempts to apologise; some investigations; and current president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s intention to support the victims. In spite of 15 years of liberal democracy, nothing significant has been done to uncover the truth and bringing those responsible to court (without which there can be no genuine reconciliation)—they are instead 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 the repression and the adoption of similar models in other contexts. Even Sweden and Norway, for example, prioritise trade relations and do not pursue the issue in human rights dialogues.

But is it possible to “move on?” What happens when a country and its allies repress their history? First, of course, the victims are denied their human rights. In addition, the principle of legal certainty is at stake. For, the next time it may be others that the law fails to protect. Then there is the cultural legacy. The amnesia, the lies and the hushing-up leave deep scars. Even most of those who know what happened feel the need for pragmatism.

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. Freedom of assembly and expression are upheld selectively. 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 leave his hometown in Sumatra and go into hiding. In Java, in particular, gossiping and wangling are additional weapons against the weak. Meanwhile, the West has since long suppressed its own role in the massacre and focuses instead on teaching others about relatively uncontroversial aspects of human rights.

### No Alternative Narrative

But the still ticking bomb is political amnesia. Consider how Germany would be today if it had not come to terms with Nazism, or South Africa with apartheid. Indonesia and its partners have not even come close to the admissions that were made by the old Soviet Union and several of its allied communist parties of their Stalinist offences. Although Suharto’s

version of Indonesian history has faded, there is no clear alternative narrative. On the contrary, the absence of an understanding of the causes and consequences of the genocide means that vital knowledge needed to build the world’s largest new democracy is disregarded.

First, it is neglected that the system behind mass murder and persecution has not disappeared with either the end of the Cold War or democratisation. Informally, the Suharto regime’s method of not just using the security forces but to also mobilise and legitimise militias, security companies and religious and political organisations to murder still applies.

It is also not recognised—conveniently so—that, just as in India, broad popular organisation was not at all “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 deposing of democracy in the late 1950s was only

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due to the political logic and fashion of elitist leaders and experts of the time—both on the left and the right. In the same way, it is often ignored that exploitation and repression following independence in Indonesia grew mainly through political means. The easiest way to gain power and enrich oneself was not to develop capitalism or socialism but to claim allegiance to Sukarno's nationalism. Hence it was possible to use state and politics to control nationalised companies and public property and commodities as well as a share of the surplus produced by others. Consequently, the military grew stronger while the country's economy deteriorated and the left was undermined. That the majority of the Indonesian middle class and the Western powers that criticised this nationalism and corruption supported instead Suharto's repression and his alliance of technocrats, financiers and military personnel (in accordance with the thesis of the "politics of order") are also frequently overlooked; as is the fact that even though much of the appropriated rents were thereafter invested, the authoritarian and extractive pattern of growth degenerated into more corruption and oppression, before the rebirth of democracy. Finally, the absence of close examination of the consequences of the genocide prevents wide discussions

about why democratisation and the freedoms gained since 1989 have been limited by elitism, continued corruption and the fragmentation of civil organisations and social movements.

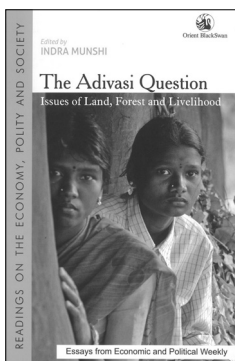
### The Bitter Truth

But why is this possible? How can the political amnesia continue? The bitter truth is that almost all sections of the national and international elite, regardless of political conviction, do not want to remember. Consider this: conservative forces that wish to discourage criticism and protest but can no longer automatically call on the police and military turn instead to militias, security companies and extreme religious and political organisations to do the dirty work. Donors and others who either say that democratisation must be based on pacts among the elite, or even that stable state institutions must come ahead of freedoms (as in Burma), ignore, of course, the historical experience of popular-based democratisation. Thus, they also neglect that their arguments come very close to those expounded in the late 1950s and early 1960s to legitimise authoritarian rule. Similarly, the politically dependent businessmen of today, as well as the national populists around Jokowi, are rarely interested in discussing the fact that much of the exploitation and repression in the country was rooted in the abuse of nationalisation and

political regulation. The growing middle class and its international supporters who criticised these practices neglect instead that their predecessors contributed to the genocide and Suharto's dictatorship; they themselves do not want to see the close relationship between these old positions, their own contempt for "corrupt democracies" and admiration of effective governance as in authoritarian Singapore.

Last, many of the new generation of pro-democrats with roots in fragmented citizen organisations still believe that they deposed the Suharto regime on their own and remain sceptical of "old politics." Having been confined to civil society and thus politically marginalised, they now tend to invest in populist leaders without learning from history and realising that the 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—or more pertinently its refusal to give history a long hard look. But herein also lies hope for change. The potentially most revolutionary and democratic forces in today's Indonesia are the endangered critical historians and the teachers who can disseminate critical knowledge of Indonesia's history. Their ranks must swell and they must get full support!



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## The Adivasi Question

Edited By  
**INDRA MUNSHI**

Depletion and destruction of forests have eroded the already fragile survival base of adivasis across the country, displacing an alarmingly large number of adivasis to make way for development projects. Many have been forced to migrate to other rural areas or cities in search of work, leading to systematic alienation.

This volume situates the issues concerning the adivasis in a historical context while discussing the challenges they face today. The introduction examines how the loss of land and livelihood began under the British administration, making the adivasis dependent on the landlord-moneylender-trader nexus for their survival.

The articles, drawn from writings of almost four decades in EPW, discuss questions of community rights and ownership, management of forests, the state's rehabilitation policies, and the Forest Rights Act and its implications. It presents diverse perspectives in the form of case studies specific to different regions and provides valuable analytical insights.