

# **Democracy and the Politics of Memory: Manipulating the Narratives of the 1965 Tragedy in Indonesia\***

Baskara T. Wardaya, SJ\*

In the early afternoon of July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, not long after the counting of the results of Indonesia's presidential election had begun, it became clear that the incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was going to win and be re-elected as Indonesia's number one leader for a second term. The imminent re-election invigorated hopes that things will change in the next five years as Yudhoyono had promised during the election campaign. At the same time, there was also a great deal of pessimism whether there would be any change at all in other important issues, such as issues regarding past human rights abuses. During the previous administration of President Yudhoyono issues on past human rights abuses were not adequately addressed, even though it was clear that the abuses were done systematically, causing a pattern of violence that victimized a great number of people. Systematic human rights abuses in Indonesia's past often had to do with the country's military, and it happens that the president is a retired military general who is not very eager to rock the boat.

Certainly, systematic human rights abuses rarely occur spontaneously. Nor do they happen merely out of the desires of one or two individuals. Rampant and systematic human rights abuses that happen in a particular country require certain factors for them to take place. Such factors can come from inside or outside of the country.

## **The Cold War**

In the case of Indonesia, internal factors that caused massive violations of human rights in the past often involved military elements, whether directly or indirectly. Economic and political steps taken by the military frequently generated social conflicts on a local level. Those would soon develop into broader acts of violence that disregarded peoples' basic human rights on a wider level. However, the military was not necessarily the only perpetrator in such conflicts and abuses. In the wake of the downfall of President Soeharto's rule in 1998, for instance, civilian elements were also responsible for cases of human rights violations. Differences in

---

\* Paper prepared for the conference "Toward a New Paradigm, Sustainable Human Development: What Perspectives?" held by Pax Romana, ISKA and Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta Indonesia, 20-22 July 2009. A earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference "Transitional Justice and Democratization—Dealing with Burdened Past in Asia", in Berlin, Germany, April 2006.

\* Historian, Director of PUSdEP (Pusat Sejarah dan Etika Politik/Center for History Studies and Political Ethics) Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Email: baskaramu@yahoo.com

terms of ethnicity, religious beliefs, or economic status often incited popular conflicts with deadly outcome.

With regard to external factors, many elements coming from outside the country contributed to human rights violations in Indonesia. In an increasingly globalized world, in which countries are rapidly interconnected, what went on internationally played a great role in what happened in Indonesia, including the implementation of basic rights for its citizens.

Take the Cold War, for instance. Growing evidence indicates that some human rights abuses in Indonesia since 1945 had a close connection to the Cold War tensions between the capitalist bloc led by the United States, and the communist side under the influence of the Soviet Union. The fear of the United States and its allies for the spread of communism in Southeast Asia compelled Washington to get involved in the suppression of communism in Indonesia. As a result, human rights abuses occurred. United States' support for the regional rebellion against the Indonesian central government in the second half of the 1950s was an obvious example. During this period, many cases of human rights abuses took place due to the American involvement, such as the bombing of civilians. The reason for US support for the rebels was an assumption that Indonesia's central government was communist. Similar abuses occurred when the U.S. reversed its position and supported the Indonesian government after realizing that it was not communist at all. At the same time, the Soviet Union and later the People's Republic of China also attempted to influence the political and economic dynamics of Indonesia, as part of their efforts to pull the country to their side of the Cold War. Many cases of human rights abuses in Indonesia also took place because of their efforts and ambition to have control over Indonesia, such as U.S. support for the regional rebellion in the late 1950's.

It should be noted that although the rhetoric of Cold War antagonism tended to be political and ideological, in reality often the central points of contention between the two opposing parties were actually economic. Both saw Indonesia as a country with vast territory and a strategic location, which was rich in natural resources. Both sides wanted to influence or perhaps even control Indonesia's natural and human resources for their own interests and the interests of their allies.

In the conflict of interests that followed, what happened next in Indonesia in the second half of the 1960's was that the American side became increasingly dominant, while the influence of the Soviet bloc was clearly marginalized. Along with it Indonesia's leftist elements faced a

decline too. At the same time, any group within the Indonesian society that promoted neutrality and independence in the global antagonism of the Cold War was also marginalized. At the end of the protracted international conflict, as we know it, the capitalist side “won” and gained greater access to the Indonesian economic potentials. The Western nations also gained support from Indonesian elements (civilian and military) that were ready to collaborate and to serve the interests of the West, and with it serving their own interests.

It is important to note that along with the marginalization of Soviet influence and the suppression of Indonesia’s leftist elements in the second half of 1965, the so-called New Order (*Orde Baru*) government under the leadership of General Soeharto emerged and took almost total control of the country. Thanks to the pro-capitalist attitudes of this new government Western countries could now operate in Indonesia with much greater freedom. Indonesia’s natural resources were easily exploited by Western multi-national corporations, sometimes by disregarding local interests. One of the consequences of such development was the increasing violence and human rights abuses in areas that are rich in natural resources. Examples of this are Aceh in the northern part of Sumatra, and West Papua in the most eastern part of the country.

Clearly, there was an interconnection between the interests of domestic groups and the interests of foreign actors during the Cold War. Such an interconnection turned out to be the crucial setting and condition for acts of violence against the Indonesian people. It is therefore very important to look at the human rights abuses in Indonesia’s history in a broader context. Without looking at it in such broader context many human rights abuses in the past would appear as if they were just individual cases, unrelated to each other.

### **Understanding History**

Understanding past cases of violence in a broader context is important not just for revealing the interconnectedness of the abuses, but also for helping the Indonesian people in general to study and understand their own past. Of course we are not talking about studying history in its strict, academic sense. It is necessary for Indonesians to understand their collective past, be it on a local, national, or international level. This is in part because how strong or weak a society is in its historical awareness determines the steps it takes to direct its future. This awareness is equally important since during President Soeharto’s rule the Indonesian society’s understanding of history was for the most part controlled and dominated by the government’s version of history.

With regard to the practices of violence, historical awareness is also imperative because it can help the society understand that many cases of human rights abuses in the past occurred within certain circumstances, especially social, political or economic circumstances. Hopefully, by a better understanding of history, people will realize that certain social-political-economic conditions could generate certain forms of violence.

On the one hand, it is hoped that the Indonesian people will be “warned” that if similar social-political-economic conditions re-occur, it is possible for certain forms of human rights abuses to occur as well. In order to prevent such possibilities from materializing, those conditions must be avoided, or at least minimized. A well-understood lesson of history would help people to avoid conditions that are a potential for generating human rights abuses.

On the other hand, if the opportunity for providing history education to the people fails, the “warning” will not be there. Many cases of past violence could re-occur, and if it occurs perhaps nobody will ever know how and when these cases will end. Experiences during the period under the New Order government demonstrated that the way history is narrated could be dominated easily by the government and its supporters, and that such narratives have contributed to the practices of injustice to members of the society.

### **Means of Justification**

A clear example can be found in how Soeharto and his supporters narrated the story of what happened around the 1965 Tragedy, a tragedy that catapulted them to the country’s top political leadership. According to their version, what happened was that the PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party) masterminded a coup d’état in the morning of October 1, 1965, by kidnapping and murdering six Army generals along with another high-ranking officer. Because of this gruesome act of violence, it was “justified” that the Indonesian people became enraged and in the next several months launched a massacre that killed at least half a million of fellow citizens accused of being communist.

In this chaotic situation, still according to this version, President Sukarno appointed Major General Soeharto to take control of the country’s security matters and to use any necessary means to restore order, among others the banning of the communist party. Soeharto “succeeded” in carrying out the order. He was even able to set up a better government that eventually replaced the “incompetent” government of President Sukarno. This version of the story also gives an impression that due to Sukarno’s multiple “sins” (along with the sins of his

supporters) it was justified that the former president was detained under a house arrest until his death in 1970. While the Sukarno government was dubbed the “Old Order” (*Orde Lama*), Soeharto and his supporters called the government that they set up the “New Order” (*Orde Baru*), which suggests that this was a better and more competent government. It considered itself a “total correction” to all the errors made by the old and unfit government of President Sukarno.

During the rule of the Soeharto government this narrative was rarely contested or challenged publicly. Even worse, this narrative was often elaborated with details that in essence legitimized the rule of the New Order, and justified repression and all kinds of atrocities done to people.

An example of this was the elaborate story of the “*Pesta Harum Bunga*” or Flower Fragrance Party it was said to have taken place on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965 near the well at Lubang Buaya district (literally: “crocodile hole”), where the bodies of the generals were dumped. According to this story members of Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, a women organization associated with the PKI), held an orgy by mutilating the private parts of the generals and dancing around the dead victims. Even though the story was never proven, this kind of a story was important for the New Order government to perpetuate an impression (and later a “memory”) of how cruel and sadistic Gerwani (or any PKI-associated group) was. Moreover, it became some kind of “warning” to the people that political involvement of a women organization could result in such cruel even sadistic practices. This kind of warning, in turn, was useful as a means to justify controlling women organizations throughout the country since 1965, especially by limiting their political aspiration and activities.

At the same location where the orgy allegedly took place, the New Order built a grandiose monument, called the Monument of the Seven Heroes of the Revolution (*Monumen Tujuh Pahlawan Revolusi*). The monument demonstrates how brave and dedicated the heroes were and how cruel and sadistic the PKI and Gerwani were. Note that the brave and dedicated ones were all military personnel, while all the “cruel and sadistic villains” were civilian. For the New Order government, this kind of monument was necessary at least for a number of reasons. It was to show that: (a) there is a close association between the word “hero” (*pahlawan*) and the country’s military institution; (b) in the October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965 military operation launched by the “September 30th Movement” the Army was merely victim of PKI’s cruelty; (c) the massacre of hundreds of thousand Indonesian citizens in the wake of the military operation was justified; and (d) the dethroning of President Sukarno was also justified,

because he associated himself with the PKI. The same government made great efforts to perpetuate this kind of memory by using many other means, such as producing an anti-PKI film called *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (“The Treason of the September 30th Movement/PKI” [1984]) and compelling the public (especially students) to watch it year after year.

As long as these kinds of narrative and associated means (such as monuments and films) were produced by the New Order government to serve its own interests are not openly questioned or contested, Indonesians’ understanding of history will remain incomplete and distorted. They may easily justify or even promote all kinds of injustices, including today’s practices of discrimination and political stigmatization.

During the New Order rule, the government did not only politicize history by practicing a so-called “politics of memory”, but also by implementing what might be called “the politics of forgetting”. It selectively determined which events of the past should be remembered, and which ones ought to be forgotten. And for the sake of its own interests the government was often willing to create certain “historical events” that are easy to remember and that in turn could be used to influence the attitudes of the people. The fanciful story of the “flower fragrance party” mentioned above is a case in point.

### **Amnesia of History**

Another impact of the government’s domination of history narration is the emergence of the so-called “amnesia of history”. Many Indonesians tend to easily forget or even altogether ignore many past events, although these events were important to remember and understand. Even if they remember certain past events, the memories they have regarding those events are usually only partial or distorted, or merely following the government’s version of history. Worse, the amnesia is not only related to events that had occurred way back in the past, but also to practices of violence and human rights abuses that took place during more recent times, such as around the time of the fall of the Soeharto government in 1998. Many Indonesians tend to disregard the background of those events, the motives and identity of the key perpetrators, or even the suffering of the events’ victims. In almost all such cases, even if there are perpetrators that are eventually brought to justice, they usually are military personnel or police officers from the lower rank.

In Indonesia it is very rare that a person from a high-ranking political or military position ever officially held responsible for acts of widespread violence that the person had instigated or had link with. Even if the person was ever brought to trial, the trial would be just some kind of

a show. When something like this happened some people would get upset for a while, but soon they would get used to it and would think of it as something “understandable”. Consequently, it is not difficult to see why nobody has ever been held responsible for the mass killings and detentions that occurred in 1965 and after. As we all know, almost no one from a high government position or high military command was put on trial for the atrocities done to the people of Timor Leste (East Timor) when it was under Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999. Neither was anybody from a prominent position charged for the countless human lives that were lost in the mass violence in Tanjung Priok (1984), the Moluccas (1999-2002), Aceh (1992-2004), or more recently in West Papua. And this could mean that if today or tomorrow similar acts of violence or human right abuses were to happen again, there is no guarantee that someone will be prosecuted or held responsible. This especially applies to violence that has a religious or military element, or a combination of both.

It is important to note that the manipulated collective memories are still often being used even today, years after President Soeharto’s New Order officially ended in May 1998. In some places people can still see public display of banners warning the people of “the latent danger of communism”—more than forty years after the PKI was annihilated. This was an example of how memory is being manipulated as a political tool that can potentially become a divisive factor in society, and at the same time can potentially create circumstances conducive to human rights abuses. Another example is a letter that was sent by a cabinet minister a few years ago banning the use of a school curriculum on history only because he thought the curriculum could encourage students to question the government’s version of the 1965 Tragedy.

### **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

A further impact of the amnesia of history is the lack of seriousness on the part of the government in dealing with the country’s burdened past. Justifying itself as being “future-oriented”, the government puts little effort in openly discussing problems of the past that still have a great impact on the present.

In 2004, thanks to pressure from the public, the Indonesian government promulgated a Truth and Reconciliation Law (*Undang-undang Kebenaran dan Rekonsiliasi*). This law was intended to be the basis for the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Komisi*

*Kebenaran dan Rekonsiliasi*) that would deal with the burdens and troubles generated by past injustices.

On the one hand, promulgation of such a law deserves every respect and support. It indicates the government's willingness to deal with the problems of the past, and to seek a possibility for reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of past abuses. On the other hand, if one looks closely at the law, there are a number of serious flaws in it. These are: the law ignores the historical analysis in dealing with past human rights abuses; the amnesty mechanism offered tend to disregard the victims; there is a possibility that former perpetrators of the abuses will politicize or impede the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; there is lack of public recommendations for preventing past abuses from re-occurring. Because of these fundamental flaws, the creation of a fair and satisfactory Truth and Reconciliation Commission is considered to be very difficult if not impossible.

It soon became evident that the government never meant to be serious in dealing with the past and in forming a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Almost two years (2004-2006) since the law was announced the commission was never created. The list of selected candidates has been in the hand of the President for a long time, but announcement of a final list of commission members was never made. To the disappointment of many, at the end of 2006 the law was suddenly revoked altogether.

### **Just and Democratic**

Looking at the desire of Indonesians for democracy on the one hand, and the political and economic uncertainties of Indonesia today—marred with rampant corruption, huge foreign debts, ever-increasing poverty, and widespread complaints on the 2009 legislative and presidential elections irregularities—the country needs a system of government that is based on political ethics and on openness to history. This could be achieved by promoting political practices that restrain from manipulating historical narratives to serve the interests of those who are in power. For this the government should encourage the people to understand their collective history as a nation. Understanding history is an important starting point for a citizenship that is not merely submissive to the will of the government or power elite. It is also necessary, as we have seen, because domination over the memory of history can be manipulated to justify many kinds of undemocratic political practices, including those that violate the rights of citizens. It is hoped that if citizens have a deeper understanding of the history of their nation—including past human rights abuses—they will be willing to work

together to prevent any form of government that is unjust and discriminatory. It is also hoped that people will join hands to create a political system that is increasingly just and democratic.

In the wake of the 2009 presidential election hopes are high that Indonesians will continue to urge President Susilo Bambang Yudoyono to pay a closer attention to these issues in his second term as Indonesia's President.