

PERSPECTIVE

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The 1965 Tragedy, China, and the Ethnic Chinese: Interview with Lieutenant General (Retired) Agus Widjojo (Part II)

*By Johannes Herlijanto**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to Lieutenant General (Retired) Widjojo:

- The 1965 tragedy in Indonesia left a vengeful scar that has yet to heal.
- A multi-directional apology by all parties involved in the violence is needed for reconciliation. These parties include both the Indonesian state and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).
- Nevertheless, quite a few officers in the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) misinterpret the idea of reconciliation and the multi-directional apology to be an admission of abuse of power by the government. They fear that the act of apologizing will provide space for the resurrection of the PKI.

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INTRODUCTION

Besides his daring ideas for reforming the military in Indonesia, General Agus Widjojo is also known for his views on how Indonesians should deal with the 1965 tragedy. That tragedy included the coup attempt that took place in the early morning of 1 October 1965, which the Indonesian government believes was masterminded by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Six military generals and one junior military officer were kidnapped and killed then, and the forces that allegedly launched the coup attempt were subdued by the Army under the command of General Suharto, then commander of the Army Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad). Subsequently, an anti-communist purge took place in many parts of the country, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians.

Although General Widjojo's father, Major General Sutojo, was one of the six military generals killed during that coup attempt, he has been a strong advocate of reconciliation. This issue was discussed in a national symposium on the 1965 tragedy, which was organized by a committee chaired by General Widjojo. While he was subsequently made governor of the National Resilience Institute (Lemhannas), it is important to note that the symposium was an individual initiative undertaken by General Widjojo before that appointment. The symposium was considered controversial because it was seen by some to be providing room for the Indonesian communists to regain ground. As a result, allegations were made that General Widjojo was a communist sympathizer.

In this second installment of the interview with General Widjojo, he takes up issues related to the 1965 tragedy, the rise of China and the position of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

INTERVIEW SECTION

Johanes Herlijanto (JH): What are your views on the 1965 tragedy?

Agus Widjojo (AW): This tragedy has left a vengeful scar, which until now has not been resolved. The question is, how can this nation continue to live with a grudge that is carried on till now and into the future. Whereas we have seen other nations try to overcome their own tragedies, and though they have not entirely succeeded either, but it shows how our civilization is still stunted and unwilling to be reconciled with the past [in order to] seek a solution to start life on a clean slate, and move into the future as a nation that has made peace with its past. Well, if this cannot be resolved, the grudges will carry on. The deep suspicions will continue. Everything that originates from and materializes in the form of vengeance, as well as the tendency to be suspicious [of each other] and to believe that we are the only ones who are right – and this is wrong – will certainly create barriers to the nation's ability to move forward maximally.

JH: What is your opinion on the pressure on the government to apologize?

AW: We must see the concept as a whole. If it's an apology, it does not mean that the government apologizes to the PKI. The symposium was based on the concept of reconciliation. That a tragedy that breeds violence and causes vengeful resentment in a

nation cannot only be accounted for from one side only. All parties involved, to some degree, have responsibility for the occurrence of such acts of violence. I am involved in a group called Forum Silaturahmi Anak Bangsa (Forum of the Children of the Nation). I sat down with the child of Aidit; I sat down with the daughter of Njoto; I sat with the grandchild of Daud Beureueh; I sat with the son of Agus Salim; I sat down together with the son of Kartosuwiryo.¹ I sat with them [children of PKI leaders] not to be permissive of what the PKI did in killing seven army officers, but I sat there and said: “Hey, PKI, you also need to take some responsibility, your hands are also bloody. You are not just a victim. Your hands are bloody too.” Why is it that when people talk about 65, it's always 1965 from October to now, but rarely talk about before 65? Well, that's what I forced them to do. “Let's talk about before 1965, your hands also have blood on them.” But people don't understand this, and simplistically think that I only said that the government must apologize to the PKI. Under a reconciliation concept like that, with people acting here, killing there, all hands were covered in blood. Therefore, the apology that I propose is multi-directional in nature. The PKI must also apologize, because in 1948, they also killed many *pamong praja* [civil servants] in East Java. In 1965, it is clear, at least 7 army officers were killed by them. So the PKI must also apologize.

Then on the other side, there is also the view that the state never did anything wrong. This is also difficult [to accept]. How could those people be held captive in Buru Island in large numbers for so long without the direct involvement of the state? Only state power could do that. You can imagine how the families left by the victims for so many years suffered, and what became of them. The state also needs to apologize, because there were wrongdoings. This is not to declare who was right or who was wrong, but to set boundaries and make peace with the past once and for all.

So I would say that reconciliation requires very difficult conditions. Every group, every individual, has to make peace with themselves, and with their past. And this could not [yet] be done. Our society is not ready yet. Each side has its weaknesses. The PKI felt that they were the only ones who were victims. They rarely wanted to talk about what happened before 1965, when they also committed murders. But the government also said that they had not done anything wrong. How can they never be wrong? They once violated human rights, such that people were detained without trial and without the right to defend themselves for years, and not counting what happened to their families. This is a human rights violation. Well, if we want, let's take this as a lesson, because reconciliation is not to find who is wrong and who is right. Reconciliation is like rewinding a film to see what went wrong, and what resulted in the tragedy of 1965. By looking squarely at it, we learn our lessons, so as to become better, making sure it does not happen again to our future generations, our children and grandchildren. That's actually the concept of reconciliation.

¹ D.N Aidit was the top leader of the PKI in the 1960s. He was regarded as one of the leaders responsible for the 1965 coup attempt allegedly masterminded by the PKI. Nyoto was also a top PKI leader in the 1960s. He also served as a “state minister” at the time the coup attempt was launched. Daud Beureueh was a former governor of Aceh Province, who from 1953 to 1963 led a rebellion against the Indonesian government, and joined the Darul Islam rebellion centred in West Java. Agus Salim was a Muslim leader who became foreign minister of the Republic of Indonesia soon after Indonesian independence. Kartosoewirjo was the leader of Darul Islam, a secessionist group that launched a rebellion in West Java between 1949 and 1962, with the purpose of establishing an Islamic country.

JH: What do you think of the TNI's attitude toward this idea of apologizing?

AW: They are not yet able to do it. The TNI has never been taught to think critically. They are still prescriptive. Still very prescriptive, doctrinaire, and sometimes these doctrines get misused. Now, for example, the issue of the PKI was deliberately exacerbated. Watch out for the danger of the PKI! Where is the danger of the PKI? 15 million of them? If there are 15 million PKI members, how can they not be visible? Go ahead and report it. All the legal requirements to lock down the PKI are still in place in Indonesia. Why do we have to be afraid?

I was once asked when I opened a course in Lemhannas, "Pak, how about the danger of the PKI, which is said to have 15 million members now?" "Have you seen it?" "No." "Where did you get the information from?" "Social media." "Well that can be wrong; prove it." And others said: "I've seen it myself." "Well, if you've seen it, then just report it to the *aparatus* [state apparatus]." "Now all these sickle and hammer pictures?" Come on, these are mostly made up — those are pictures in Hanoi, sickle, hammers, bus stops, T-shirts, souvenirs. These days they are also novelties. So all these get exaggerated only to generate mobilisation — mobilisation to unite. Well, who are the opponents of the PKI?— those hardline groups who are using religious sentiments to rouse militancy in black and white perspectives.

JH: You were appointed governor of Lemhannas just three days before the 1965 symposium, and there was some resentment being expressed. Did that have any effect on your position in Lemhannas?

AW: Well, there is and there is not. One, because they only speak through social media, these people do not want to communicate directly and in person. They only shout "Destroy him, destroy him!" Whatever I say, their response is "Destroy him." Earlier today, we just had a discussion about social media. They don't care if the country becomes ruined, or if society becomes divided. This is not communication. They don't care about communication, or discussion. So even if we invite them for discussion, they'd keep repeating, "Destroy him!"

Two, there were actually two things that initially were posed as attacks against me. Firstly, it was the reconciliation. The Army still sees that (reconciliation) to mean to apologize to the PKI, which in turn will give space for the resurrection of the PKI, but without directly asking for my clarification. The second is actually about territorial reform.²

As an example, one day, I received a report that there would be a student demonstration. About 100 people were participating. [They shouted:] "Bring down Agus Widjojo." Even the statement on the banner reads "Do not send your sons to Lemhannas because it is a Communist institution." They were then handled by the public relations officer, because I was having a meeting. After the meeting, I went out and the public relations officer asked

² The territorial reform proposed by Agus Widjojo is aimed at evaluating the existence of territorial commands below the resort or sub-regional command (Korem) and their function in the current political context. See Widjojo Op. Cit., pp. 440-447.

me, “Pak, are you willing to listen to them?” “Yes, but not all 100 of them. 10 people only, [as] representatives.” So right, we had ten people. I asked them, “Where are you from?” “We are university students, Pak.” There were UBK (Bung Karno University), Pancasila University, and UKI (Christian University of Indonesia). “What faculty?” “From the law faculty, Pak.” “Good...because law is the pillar of democracy. Law is the reference on which we will lean when there is difference, because the law is our deal, which governs the differences between us. Good. So what is it now?”

“Territorial.” I explained the concept. They were grinning and sniggering. “Why are you laughing? You must be smart and understand the concept,” I said. I explained again. Then they finally said, “Pak, we feel like we just received a lecture for one semester. Can we invite you for a seminar?” “Sure, when?” Then one of them said, “But how come this [what you told us] is different from what we received from your friends?”

“Er, which friends of mine were you listening to?” “There are, Pak, in one of the Army institutions. So from the leaders to the officers, how come their stories are different from yours?”

“Well, which one do you believe? Which one makes sense?” Then I gave them my book, “Read this.” From then on, they often dropped by, asking for *sangu* [gifts in the form of money or food, etc.] [Laughs]. And later they also send WA [WhatsApp messages], “How are you, Bang?” So they call me Bang (elder brother) now. “How are you Bang, hope that Abang will be successful, blah blah blah...” So if you engage in conversation, they can understand. The important thing is communication, but they have been listening to the wrong sources. So that’s the main problem.

Now let me take another example. I held the symposium in Arya Duta. There were criticisms saying “That’s opening the way for the resurrection of the PKI.” I even got accused of being a Communist, that I was not a real son of my father — my father was one of the Army officers killed in the Lubang Buaya. Then what did they do? They **also** conducted a symposium in Balai Kartini. Who did they invite? Habib Rizieq.³ Now can they say anything? No, they can’t. They were demonstrating their own stupidity. So I just stayed quiet, I did not need to do anything else. They dug their own holes, hurting themselves, and demonstrating their own stupidity. What can they do? They invited Habib Rizieq, while the title [of the symposium] was “Upholding Pancasila from Communism and Other Ideologies.” What are other ideologies? They invited Habib Rizieq. There were photos. Habib Rizieq, sitting together with the PPAD (Army Retirees Association) officials during the symposium. What can they do? They cannot say anything now...

JH: In recent years, the rise of China has become a topic widely discussed in Indonesia and in the Asia Pacific region. How do you see this rise, from your own personal perspective and from the perspective of TNI officers that you know? Is China considered a threat, as per public perception?

³ Habib Rizieq Shihab is the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), a hardline Muslim vigilante group that became popular soon after it was established in 1998.

AW: What is clear is that the Chinese economic slice is getting bigger and bigger. The question is, with a bigger slice, what will it be used for? The tendency for countries that feel that they are becoming increasingly capable is that they will have the wishful thinking and desire to extend their influence. So how is China going to expand its influence in the context of the world today? Will China expand it through peaceful means, or through military power? We see, for example, the development of the concept of the Maritime Silk Road through the “One Belt One Road” initiative. That actually is a non-offensive, non-military way to extend its influence to other countries. So we need to see how China will use its economic advantage, and whether it will cause disturbances to other balancing forces in the region [Asia Pacific]. We also have to see how countries in the region are going to persuade China not to transform its economic ability into military power, and convince China to make more contributions to world peace as a responsible global citizen instead.

JH: When speaking about China, people also talk about the ethnic Chinese who, during the New Order period, were often referred to as “the Chinese Problem”. What is your view on that?

AW: We have to think smarter. Really, what do we actually define as a problem? We have to be able to make a concrete definition about what we mean by a problem, and whether this is really a problem that creates trouble for us, lest we regard it as a problem just due to *sentimen Cina* (the Chinese sentiment). Because they are a minority, and because there is hatred, this *sentimen Cina* gets fueled. We need to look carefully, what are the problems caused by the ethnic Chinese?

JH: What do you think about their political and economic position?

AW: Because they have been granted the instincts for trade and they also have a strong ethnic loyalty implemented in trading, they could multiply their trading or economic ability, exclusively. This is what usually causes friction with citizens from other ethnicities. This is probably what needs to be better managed by the government.

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