

PERSPECTIVE

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The Further Erosion of an Indonesian Political Taboo

*By Max Lane**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 16-17 September 2017, groups opposed to alternative perspectives on the events of 30 September 1965 (G-30S/PKI) and its aftermath, mobilised to disrupt a seminar held in Jakarta.
- These were the same groups that mobilised against ethnic Chinese Christian former Jakarta Governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama in late 2016 to early 2017.
- The mobilisation reflects the political polarization that currently exists between conservative hard-line groups, and politically progressive groups.
- Although the seminar was stopped, it did nevertheless further the erosion of old political taboos standing in the way of alternative views reaching wider national audiences.
- Resistance to the erosion of the G-30S/PKI taboo will continue, even if President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s government’s stance on the opening up of public discussion about 1965 remains ambiguous.

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THE SEPTEMBER EVENTS AND THE EROSION OF THE TABOO¹

During the month of September until October 1 each year, there are often official government events relating to what is often officially called the “abortive communist coup”.² October 1 is Pancasila Sanctity Day, which commemorates the defeat in 1965 of what was depicted in the Suharto era as an attempted seizure of power by the subsequently-banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Since the fall of the New Order in 1998, human rights groups, student activists and other organisations have also been holding events throughout the month of September, but with a focus on discussing the mass killings and the politics of what happened. There have been many articles published that discuss alternative assessments of what happened on September 30, including those who argue that the PKI – at the very least its membership – knew nothing about the conspiracy.

In short, September is a month where this issue is automatically and unavoidably high up on the political agenda.

In 2017, one of the events organised was a seminar looking at the history of G-30S/PKI. Organised by a coalition of interested organisations and individuals called Forum 65, which includes representatives of survivors from the 1965 repression, prominent human rights lawyers, academics and activists, the seminar was to take place in the Legal Aid Institute (LBH – *Lembaga Bantuan Hukum*) building in Jakarta. The LBH building has been a site for critical and dissident discussions and activities since the 1970s and operated as a haven for such activities all through the Suharto period.

As a small closed seminar, it did not need a police permit. However, participants arriving at LBH in the morning found that the police had cordoned off the building and were refusing people entry. At the same time, groups of people protesting the seminar appeared outside the LBH building carrying the banners of the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement (PMII – *Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia*), the *Laskar Merah Putih* (Red White Militia) and GP Anzor (*Gerakan Pemuda Anzor*, Anzor Youth Movement). The PMII and Anzor are connected to the long established Nahdlatul Ulama organisation, which has recently emerged as a critique of the more hardline Muslim groups. Although the PMII and Anzor were withdrawn from the protests on the instructions of higher levels of leadership, the police continued to refuse to allow the seminar to proceed, and even carried out a second

¹ Over the last few years, the official history of the alleged abortive communist coup of 30 September 1965 (G-30S/PKI) and the anti-communist purge of 1965-67 that followed have started to be questioned publicly. The gradual erosion of this political taboo has been outlined in Max Lane, “50 Years since 30 September, 1965: The Gradual Erosion of a Political Taboo”, in ISEAS Perspective, ISSUE: 2015 No.66, published in November 2015: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_66.pdf. This process has continued since then, all the while intersecting with the complex political and ideological atmosphere that has been evolving under Joko Widodo’s presidency.

² For a narrative analysis of these events, I draw on John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder. The September 30th Movement and Suharto’s Coup d’État in Indonesia*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

raid in the afternoon.³ This was the first time in the history of the LBH, since the 1970s, that police had entered the building.

To protest the closure of the seminar and the invasion of the LBH premises, activists organised a cultural event – poetry reading, music – at the LBH on September 17. About 200 people are reported to have attended, including some of the elderly survivors of imprisonment from 1965. This event received an even more hostile response than the seminar the previous day. Messages quickly circulated on right-wing social media networks that a meeting of the PKI was taking place at the LBH, that the song “*Genjer-Genjer*” – associated with the PKI via New Order era propaganda – was being sung and that the PKI was actually meeting. Much larger numbers of demonstrators from hard-line Islamist groups arrived at LBH hurling rocks at the building, pushing to enter and shouting death threats. The police formed a barricade outside to prevent this large crowd from entering, and detained 22 of the protesters. Eventually, the participants of the cultural activity were evacuated by police bus.

The disruption of the seminar and the show of terror against those no longer willing to abide by the taboo was clearly a successful intervention by these forces – even if only in the immediate term. To understand the further dynamics of this event, it is necessary to look at how the event intersects with immediate political (electoral) developments, and the extent to which it actually stopped or slowed the erosion of the G-30S/PKI political taboo.

A NEW APPROACH TO ELECTORAL MOBILISATION

In the lead up to the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, polarisation in approaches to electoral mobilisation became very apparent. Sectarian and racial issues were used to oppose the candidacy of then incumbent ethnic Chinese Christian Governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama, and to support the candidacy of Anies Baswedan, nominated by opposition leader Prabowo Subianto’s Gerindra party and the Islamist-oriented Prosperous Justice Party (PKS – *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*). A part of this campaign against Purnama was a very large mobilisation – estimated to be up to 500,000 people – organised by a coalition of hard-line Islamist groups that called for Purnama’s arrest and jailing for blasphemy against Islam. This was the “*Bela Islam*” (“Defend Islam”) mobilisation of December 2, 2016.⁴ The speeches at this event, held in Jakarta’s Merdeka Square, with President Widodo present, also opposed (political and social) liberalism and warned of the rise of the PKI.

This mobilisational perspective – combining opposition to political liberalism, anti-communism, sectarianism, and racialism and xenophobia to one extent or another –

³ The most comprehensive English language narrative of this event is Saskia E Wieringa, “When A History Seminar Becomes Toxic”, <http://www.insideindonesia.org/when-a-history-seminar-becomes-toxic>.

⁴ A.S. Hikam, “Has Jokowi handed a strategic victory to radicals?”, *New Mandala*, <http://www.newmandala.org/jokowi-hands-strategic-victory-radicals/>

deployed in a systematic and ongoing way is a new phenomenon on the mainstream national political stage, at least post-1965. In the case of the Jakarta gubernatorial election, it was successful, where, despite Governor Purnama having high approval ratings, Anies Baswedan won a convincing victory.

The forces that mobilised against the LBH event on 17 September were drawn from the same milieu. The spokesperson who “claimed responsibility” for the anti-LBH mobilisation was retired General Kivlen Zen, who, along with FPI (Front Pembela Islam – Islamic Defenders Front) leader Rizieq Shihab, was also a key figure in the anti-Ahok demonstrations. Furthermore, the mobilisation against the LBH was not simply an attack on alternative analyses of the events of 1965 and its aftermath. It was (and is) also a part of an attempt to consolidate the organisational and mobilisational base of this perspective. It is therefore likely that similar mobilisations will occur again if the appropriate opportunity arises. In the meantime, it also creates an atmosphere of anxiety at the lower levels of the police, such that the police will act pre-emptively against events that might provide a pretext for further protests.

Complicating this polarisation is the ambiguous stance of the Widodo government on these issues. As outlined in my earlier ISEAS Perspective article,⁵ the Widodo government did organise in April 2016 in Jakarta a national-level seminar on 1965, which included participants from among former political prisoners as well as academics who have been critical of the New Order narrative, as well as the National Commission on Human Rights (KOMNASHAM). The seminar concluded that the Indonesian State must be held responsible for the mass killings and repression of 1965 and afterwards.⁶ However, this seminar has yet to release any results, even two years after the event.

The Widodo administration’s overall response to the emerging new approach appears to be through manoeuvres that make it appear “even-handed”. Thus, on the one hand, the government had promulgated a decree that gives it the right to ban organisations alleged to be opposed to Pancasila and has used that to announce a ban on the hard-line (though so far peaceful) Islamist organisation, Hizbut Tahir. On the other hand, and at the same time, Widodo has spoken to military audiences on several occasions and announced he “would clobber” the PKI if it raised its head again and that young people should also be taught about the PKI’s violence – without any reference to the violence against the PKI.⁷ The Widodo government’s formal position, to date, is to uphold the New Order narrative.⁸ However, the government does not aggressively enforce this narrative: it is a post-New Order government, not a continuation of the New Order. This non-enforcement of the official narrative is the central, even if implied, complaint of those pursuing the new, aggressive approach.

⁵ See footnote 1.

⁶ <http://jakartaglobe.id/archive/ago-rejects-komnas-ham-report-on-1965-massacres/>

⁷ LBH also argued that Widodo’s frequent statements about “gebuk PKI” (clobbering the PKI) has helped legitimise attacks such as those at the LBH. See

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20170918124636-20-242430/lbh-kaitkan-pengepungan-dengan-gebuk-pki-ala-jokowi>

⁸ See <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/10/01/08241591/jokowi-pimpin-upacara-hari-kesaktian-pancasila>

The formal ideological position of the Widodo government is to uphold “Pancasila”. What this may end up fully meaning awaits the activities of a new Pancasila unit in the President’s office. However, at a minimum, it is a form of rejection of an Islamic state or of a political format where one religion has formal superiority over any other.

INEFFECTIVE AGAINST EROSION OF THE TABOO

The hard-liners’ “success” in preventing the LBH seminar from happening (at least as scheduled) was echoed to an extent by a campaign by the head of the then Chief of the Armed Forces, Gatot Nurmantyo, to promote the screening of the 1984 New Order propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* among the armed forces. However, despite these efforts, it is clear that there was no impact on the ongoing erosion of taboos surrounding G-30S/PKI. If anything, September 2017 saw a boost of activities that discussed alternative views on the events of 1965. The mobilisation against the Forum 65 seminar itself also provided a publicity boost for even more public discussion of alternative viewpoints.

Throughout September 2017, media outlets such as the Indonesian edition of Rolling Stone⁹ as well as the websites such as Rappler and Tirto.id¹⁰ all carried a range of articles that canvassed alternative perspectives on a diverse range of historical aspects intended to demonise the PKI and make it an object of historical interest. These also included articles referring to the Indonesian Army Hospital autopsy from 1965 on the bodies of the generals allegedly killed by PKI militia at the Lubang Buaya site which clearly stated that they were not tortured as New Order’s popular narrative would have it.¹¹ Among the younger readers of Rappler, Tirto.id, Rolling Stone, and those plugged into Twitter and Facebook, this is now a familiar fact.¹²

This erosion of taboos has also been further facilitated by the release of documents from the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta from the 1965-66 period, which included material that acknowledged the role of the military and some Islamic organisations in the anti-communist mass killings. This material was also widely circulated on the social media.¹³

⁹ The erosion of the taboo also seeps into popular culture. See for example the Rolling Stone article on the group Melancholic Bitch, some of whose songs critique the New Order film on 1965, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*: at

[http://www.rollingstone.co.id/article/read/2017/08/28/140513825/1093/melancholic-bitch-merilis-single-terbaru-quot-bioskop-pisau-lipat-quot-](http://www.rollingstone.co.id/article/read/2017/08/28/140513825/1093/melancholic-bitch-merilis-single-terbaru-quot-bioskop-pisau-lipat-quot)

¹⁰ To review the diverse range of articles referring to the PKI on Tirto, see: <https://tirto.id/q/pki-6m/1> and for Rappler see: <https://www.rappler.com/previous-articles?filterMeta=G30S%2FPKI>

¹¹ Such reports were very widespread, even on local regional newsites. Here is one report from the widely accessed Detik website: <https://news.detik.com/berita/1523011/indoleaks-rilis-hasil-visum-pahlawan-revolusi>

¹² At this point, the size of the readership amongst youths is hard to determine.

¹³ The US National Security Archive published Indonesian language guides to this archival material that made circulation on news sites and social media very rapid:

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/kedutaan-besar-mengikuti-berjalannya-pembunuhan-massal-di-indonesia-pada-tahun-1965>

Evidence of the boomerang impact of the 17 September mobilisation was the treatment of the issue by TV One's Indonesian Lawyers' Club (ILC) programme. This programme airs every Monday or Tuesday night. It takes the form of a panel of political actors, mainly drawn from political elite circles, as well as commentators who are asked to comment on trending current affairs topics. On September 19, it aired a programme titled "The PKI: Ghost or Real?"

For a television programme owned by conservative Golkar tycoon, former Yudhoyono-era minister, and known Jokowi-critic Aburizal Bakrie, it would not be any surprise to find panel members included who defended the New Order era narrative on 1965. Indeed one of the panel members was Gen. Kivlen Zen himself. There were also representatives from active Islamist groups, as well as a representative from LBH. However, also present at the panel was Ilham Aidi, one of the sons of the executed Chairperson of the PKI, D.N. Aidi, as well as a representative of the organisation of 1965 victims, Bedjo Untung. Their presence and ability to present their point of view to a national TV audience is in itself a manifestation of the ongoing erosion of the taboo against presenting alternative viewpoints.¹⁴

Apart from these two figures who many would perceive as being directly associated with the PKI, another outspoken panellist providing an alternative perspective to the New Order narrative was Sukmawati Soekarnoputri. A daughter of Sukarno, she is also the leader of a small political party, the Indonesian National Party – Marhaenis (PNI – Marhaenis). She argued on the programme that the actual mastermind of the events of 30 September 1965 was Suharto and that it should be called G-30S/Suharto. She was interrupted by Kivlen Zen who tried to contradict her, but she simply stated her refutation of his position without being intimidated.¹⁵ Again, the ability to present such a perspective on national television is ground breaking in itself. The issue is not the particular influence of this programme in society, but that it is a clear example of the taboo on discussing alternatives eroding – even on mainstream national television.

CONCLUSION

As long as the current government – and the Indonesian state as a whole – no longer has the will or the capacity to enforce, by force or totalitarian control, the effectiveness of the old taboo on an open discussion of what happened in 1965 and its immediate aftermath, the erosion of taboos surrounding G-30S/PKI will continue. However, resistance to this will also continue, especially while the forces most opposed to the erosion of the taboo share perspectives on other issues related to the new approach to electoral mobilisation. Those in opposition to the opening up of discussions on 1965 will continue to use sectarianism, racialism and xenophobia as their tools and view the emergence of alternative histories as evidence of overt "liberalism", which they also oppose.

¹⁴ For this programme see: <https://sketsanews.com/video/video-indonesia-lawyers-club-pki-hantu-atau-nyata-fullpart-ilc-tvone/>

¹⁵ See this exchange here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMZeTfbJ7JM>

Meanwhile, the Government and the parties supporting the government are likely to continue their ambiguous stand. It is likely that many in the broad political establishment are reluctant to open a Pandora’s box where the questioning of the New Order’s political narrative may lead to the questioning of many other historical ambiguities.

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