

Straightening History: Political Prisoners and Human Rights in Indonesia

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the attempted 1965 coup, many dissidents, leftists, and suspected Communists were either ‘eradicated’ or incarcerated in prisons all over Indonesia. Since their release, these political prisoners continue to face state-enforced discrimination and stigmatisation. The marginalization of ex-political prisoners by both the state and local communities has continued through Indonesia’s democratic transition following President Suharto’s downfall in 1998. This is compounded by the presence of right-wing groups who continue to harass them, labelling them as neo-Communists inimical to the Indonesian body politic. Through direct engagement with former political prisoners, I aim to understand rehabilitative efforts through support groups. In preliminary interviews, many eks-tapol refer to the need to ‘straighten’ history. This discourse highlights their need to be recognized as ‘whole’ citizens of Indonesia. I explore the state’s struggle to address this dark chapter in Indonesian history, what it means to ‘straighten’ history and how eks-tapol engage with support groups to re-define their position within the community, denoting a strengthened sense of dignity and humanity. It is hoped that this research will contribute to efforts to understand and protect the rights of eks-tapol and other victims of political persecution in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Oral History, Human Rights, 1965, Indonesia, Southeast Asia*

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a two-day-long symposium discussing one of the darkest periods of Indonesia’s political history began, it faced protests from a little-known group, the Anti-Communist Front of Indonesia (Fron Anti-Komunis Indonesia, henceforth FAKI), in front of the meeting’s venue. FAKI and its supporters were intent on stopping the symposium, accusing the participants of trying to revive Communism.¹ Despite tremendous political pressure, the symposium’s organisers, comprised of civil

1 Refer to Deutsche Welle, “Fobia 1965: Tidak Mudah Melawan Kegamangan”, (16 May 2016).

servants, academics, civil society groups, and former political detainees, continued as planned, concluding with a set of recommendations forwarded to the government.² However, open discussion of the events of 1965, where between 500,000 to 1 million suspected leftists were detained, disappeared, and killed, continues to be taboo. Just a year before in October 2015, the authorities threatened to cancel the internationally renowned Ubud Writers Festival in Bali if the panel set to discuss the events of 1965 was not called off.³ The very fact that the symposium was allowed to convene was, in itself, a miracle. The very nature of Indonesian history was at stake. An Indonesian paper reported the symposium as an attempt to ‘straighten out’ (*meluruskan sejarah*) history after years of state-sanctioned silence.

To many Indonesians, especially those with a stake in its politics and government, the events of 1965 are at the core of the nation’s foundational myths.⁴ The open discussion of Indonesia’s past that took place during the symposium was considered a brazen attack on the pillars of the Indonesian state. The National Forum was met with a counter-symposium that argued against ‘reconciliation with the PKI,’ warning president Joko Widodo not to apologise to the Communist party. Since the Communist Party of Indonesia, or *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI) was destroyed after 1965, this pronouncement explicitly targeted its ‘remnants’. Thousands of former political detainees continue to live precariously in Indonesia, facing both official and social stigmatisation. This research highlights former political prisoners’ continuing efforts to redeem their names and ‘straighten history’.

In the face of continuing vitriol, many political detainees and victims openly challenge the dominant narrative of the events of 1965, attempting to carve out a unique space for themselves. This research aims to understand the framework within which former political prisoners become imbued with a sense of solidarity and purpose. This paper looks at how the ‘straightening history’ discourse allows these ex-political victims to regain their humanity after years of state-sanctioned discrimination. In their campaign to ‘straighten history,’ these ex-political detainees serve as ‘memorials’ to Indonesia’s continuing silence over its authoritarian past.

I ‘embedded’ myself within a support group founded by a former activist in the early 2000s. This group acted as an advocacy platform for aged political prisoners and their families. The Joint Secretariat for 1965 (*Sekretariat Bersama 65*, henceforth Sekber 65) was unique in that it did not adopt ‘antagonistic’ methods but instead worked with local government to provide essential services which ordinary citizens take for granted.⁵ My engagement with this group and its ‘manager’ Winarso, or Mbah Narso, began as a project investigating the impact of the 1965 killings in

2 Refer to BBC News Indonesia, “Apa isi rekomendasi tim perumus Simposium Tragedi 1965?”, (18 May 2016).

3 For more information please refer to The Guardian, “Indonesian writers’ festival forced to cancel events linked to 1965 massacre”, (23 October 2015).

4 Please refer to Deutsche Welle, “Pemerintah Indonesia Tolak Minta Maaf Atas Pembunuhan Massal 1965”, (18 April 2016).

5 Baskara T Wardaya, “Reconciliation without politics?”, *Inside Indonesia* (2015).

Indonesia in an outreach program designed for undergraduates.⁶ I chose several interlocutors from this organisation as part of my research schema given my familiarity with both Mbah Narso and members of this ‘family’. My research relies primarily on formal interviews conducted with both male and female former political prisoners, all hailing from Central Java.⁷ Perhaps the most enlightening parts of my experience is the time spent travelling throughout central Java in meeting with its members. During this exploration I developed more comprehensive insights into the role the organisation played in creating a ‘*komunitas*,’ a concept popularised by Victor Turner regarding the transformative nature of small ‘liminal’ groups.⁸ In this paper I posit that victim support groups such as Sekber 65 provide protective environments for marginalised former political detainees to rise above the stigmatisation they continue to face.

This research would not have been possible had it not been for the fall of the New Order’s following popular demands for reform in the late 1990s. Hersri Setiawan and Pramoedya Ananta Toer were amongst the first former political detainees to write of their experiences.⁹ Compendiums have since emerged, detailing a greater breadth of former detainee experiences over a broader geographical spread. These were followed by works authored by second generation descendants.¹⁰ In recent years this trend has established a sub-genre within ‘1965 studies,’ focusing mainly on victim support groups and encompassing different themes such as civil society, oral history, and, more recently, memory studies. Detailed scholastic analyses provide insights into how these organisations provide a platform for former political detainees to challenge the status quo.¹¹ Although the transitional justice agenda has stalled in Indonesia, I posit that the existence of Sekber 65 and other civil society groups has slowly ‘gnawed’ away at the impunity which surrounds the 1965 killings.¹² My research moves beyond the ‘traditional’ transitional justice framework, expanding

6 For a description of the organisational makeup of Sekber 65 see Annie Pohlman, “Reports by Human Rights and Victim Advocacy Organisations in Indonesia: Reconciling the Violence of 1965” (2013) 32:3 *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 143–165.

7 I engaged with Sekber 65 activities over the period of 2015–2016 through field research. During this period I spent time with Mbah Narso and his team members. The interviews I conducted, including those I selected for analysis, took place in the month of July 2016. The names of the interviewees have been anonymised and pseudonyms have been provided.

8 Victor W Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press., 1977).

9 Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Mute’s Soliloquy: A Memoir* (Hachette Books, 1999).

10 Baskara T Wardaya, ed, *Truth Will Out: Indonesian Accounts of the 1965 Mass Violence*, translated by Jennifer Lindsay (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013); Soe Tjen Marching, *The End of Silence: Accounts of the 1965 Genocide in Indonesia* (Place of publication not identified: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

11 Andrew Marc Conroe, “Moments of Proximity: Former Political Prisoners, Postmemory and Justice in Indonesia” (2017) 41:3 *Asian Studies Review* 352–370; Annie Pohlman, “Testimonio and Telling Women’s Narratives of Genocide, Torture and Political Imprisonment in Post-Suharto Indonesia” (2008) 5:1 *Life Writing* 47–60; Sri Lestari Wahyuningroem, “Towards Post-Transitional Justice” (2019) 3:1 *Journal of Southeast Asian Human Rights* 124–154.

12 Sri Lestari Wahyuningroem, *Transitional Justice from State to Civil Society: Democratization in Indonesia* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

on existing analyses of victim support groups, such as Sekber 65.¹³ I believe further research into such groups will yield a much-needed perspective on how former political detainees move beyond ‘victimisation’ to achieve what Ana Dragojlovic terms ‘redemptive hope’.¹⁴

II. A MUDDLED PAST

According to Indonesian scholar John Roosa, “...for historians who have tried to make sense of the course of modern Indonesian history, a matter of some frustration is that the most enigmatic episode happens to be one of the most significant.”¹⁵ The paucity of information about this event continues to challenge and confound researchers. Nevertheless, it is clear that these events contributed to the removal of Sukarno as president, paving the way for his former general Suharto’s 32-year reign. This came at a significant cost with the deaths of nearly 500,000 to one million leftists, communists and dissidents. Suharto consolidated his power, and was declared the president of Indonesia in March 1966. He proceeded to purge what remained of Sukarno’s ‘old order’ and, “...in one of the worst bloodbaths of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of individuals were massacred by the army and army-affiliated militias, largely in Central Java, East Java, and Bali, from late 1965 to mid-1966.”¹⁶ The new President solidified his rule and tightened his grip by framing himself as a ‘saviour,’ protecting Indonesia from being ‘sovietised.’ Suharto’s ‘New Order’ regime was built on a vehemently anti-communist credo. The New Order regime transformed the PKI into a personification of evil, accusing them of having masterminded and conspired with the G30S movement.¹⁷

Throughout its existence, the New Order’s propaganda reinforced the state’s meta-narrative that the New Order provided the necessary stability for Indonesian people to focus on development (*pembangunan*).¹⁸ Thus, the state maintained, “...the Communist bogeyman as the target of its two mainstays of power—terror and development—and in doing so set up a structure which gave the military easy access to power. The terror of the 1965 killings became a warning against any criticism of the government.”¹⁹ If, in the past, Indonesians were divided into nationalists, Muslims, socialists or communists, there was now only Indonesians and their anti-

13 One such group is Dialita, made up of wives, daughters and even female political prisoners forming a choir which has recently gained an international reputation. For more information Arya Dipa, “Dialita, 1965 survivors choir, to accept Gwangju human rights award”, *The Jakarta Post* (17 May 2019).

14 Ana Dragojlovic, “Materiality, Loss and Redemptive Hope in the Indonesian Leftist Diaspora” (2012) 40:117 *Indonesia and the Malay World* 160–174.

15 John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto’s Coup d’Etat in Indonesia*, 1st edition ed (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) at 3.

16 *Ibid* at 4.

17 *Ibid* at 7.

18 Ali Moertopo, *Strategi Politik Nasional* (Jakarta: Jajasan Proklamasi, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 1974).

19 Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 2d ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

thesis: the PKI. During the 1965 killings, groups of discontented youths, villagers and religious students were encouraged to participate by army, largely by promoting the narrative that, "...best way to prove you were not a communist was to join in the killings, and so many potential suspects were recruited to murder."²⁰

In the early days of Suharto's presidency, the state apparatus continuously relied on 'horror stories' of *organisasi tanpa bentuk* (OTB) or formless organisations lurking in the shadows, waiting to destroy the nation.²¹ Therefore, former members of the PKI and its affiliated groups were to be quarantined from the general populace as the government feared that they would 'infect' the rest of the population. In the period following the events of September 1965, more than one million people were imprisoned throughout Indonesia's own *gulag* archipelago. After 'screening' sessions (interrogations), often involving torture, these political detainees would then be forced into categories ranging from A to C and even X depending on their perceived level of involvement with the PKI.²² The process was often arbitrary and elastic enough to incriminate anyone, even on the flimsiest of suspicions. Even after their release, the *eks-tapol* continued to be monitored by the state. Many were unable to find jobs and were banned from seeking employment in the media, legal sector, civil service, military or any other occupation which would give them access to the public. Their national identity cards were clearly marked with the initials ET, for *eks-tapol*. The New Order state created an entire underclass of politically tainted individuals through official policies of stigmatisation. This serves several important goals for the re-calibration of Indonesian politics and society.

In Erving Goffman's work on stigma, he states that, "...the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively if often unthinkingly reduces his life chances...we construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents..."²³ The New Order's political stigmatisation de-humanised these former political detainees and created artificial boundaries between themselves and 'normals'. The state used this to delineate the bounds of what they considered 'acceptable' behaviour, creating a standard from which to 'discipline' its citizens. The state's use of nomenclature frames these political prisoners as untrustworthy citizens in need of constant observation. Moreover, political prisoners and their descendants are seen as disruptive to society in that they could engage in 'vengeance.' According to one scholar, "...the avowedly anti-Communist youth organisation Anzor has warned that prisoner release would encourage the PKI to seek a comeback and take 'retaliatory steps.' Hence, Anzor urged that the detainees be kept in isolation but be

²⁰ *Ibid* at 163.

²¹ Military publications detail how members of the PKI 'blend' in seamlessly with the rest of society to subvert the state through 'criminal' actions via 'formless organisations.' See "Bahaya Laten di Indonesia" Markas Besar Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia; Pusat Sejarah dan Tradisi ABRI Jakarta 1995.

²² Douglas Kammen & Faizah Zakaria, "Detention in Mass Violence" (2012) 44:3 Critical Asian Studies 441-466.

²³ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Simon and Schuster, 2009).

provided with land to help them begin a ‘new life’.²⁴

The New Order modernisation policy, fueled by stigmatization, made it easy for the government to blame any form of dissidence on the ‘formless’ organisations working in tandem with the PKI. This strategy was utilised when a group of villagers resisted the government’s plan to flood a vast agricultural area in central Java to build a dam in the mid-1980s. While compensation was provided, it was in the eyes of the villagers’ pittance. The authorities had to resort to physical threats and labelling them as PKI agents’ intent on subverting state policies. Referred to as *di-pki-kan* victims were literally ‘*pki-ed*’.²⁵ Even after the fall of Suharto’s New Order, being ‘made’ PKI continues to be a tool incited by politicians to sully the name of their opponents. Victims of this strategy even including the former Jakarta governor, Basuki Purnama, and president, Joko Widodo.²⁶

III. THE FIELD, CONTEXT AND SETTING

In a neighbourhood committee meeting, the *Pak RT* (the neighbourhood committee chairperson) was discussing plans for the upcoming National Day celebrations with fellow residents in a central Javanese city. The *Rukun Tetangga* is the smallest administrative unit in Indonesia, comprising of 20-30 households. This was an environment where everyone was familiar with each other, taking turns to participate in night patrols to ensure the security of the neighbourhood. These *Rukun Tetangga* units are therefore, tightly knit communities. My friend and contact, Mbah Narso took me to one such meeting. As we found our places an intense discussion was already underway regarding the finer details of the events to be held on the day. Midway through the discussion, Mbah Narso offered to pay for refreshments and provide his organisations offices for the committee to use in the run-up to the National Day Celebrations. It was only later that I realised this was part of his effort to convince the local community that his organisation, a support group for ex-political detainees, was a ‘team player’. According to Mbah Narso, “we are doing this, engaging with the community around us, just to tell them that there is no need to be suspicious of us and that we are open. We are telling them that there is no need to be afraid of us.

I had been following Mbah Narso’s ex-political detainees’ support group for nearly two years, engaging with and joining them in many of their activities. Ex-political detainees (*eks-tahanan politik* or *eks-tapol*) have long lived in a state of fear and anxiety, stigmatised by both the state and the communities within which they reside. Mbah Narso’s unwavering attempts to build trust with his neighbours is indicative of the wariness which some Indonesians have of *eks-tapol*, accusing them of coming from ‘unclean environments’ (*lingkungan tidak bersih*).²⁷ While

24 Justus M van der Kroef, “Indonesia’s Political Prisoners” (1976) 49:4 Pacific Affairs 625–647.

25 Stanley, *Seputar Kedung Ombo* (Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 1994).

26 Hendi Johari, “Isu PKI Buat Jokowi”, *Historia - Majalah Sejarah Populer Pertama di Indonesia* (2019).

27 For a more detailed explanation please refer to Hersri Setiawan, *Kamus Gestok* (Galangpress Group, 2003).

maintaining networks of *eks-tapol* throughout nine central Javanese regencies, Mbah Narso and his team have been targeted and harassed by intelligence officials. Notwithstanding, Mbah Narso remains unfazed given his experience as a political activist which led him to form Sekber 65 in the first place. He had previously been sheltered by *eks-tapol* when pursued by the authorities for his involvement in the reformasi movement opposing the New Order government.

Founded in 2005, Sekber 65 is responsible for advocating for the rights of *eks-tapol*, gathering at least once a month in spite of increased attention from intelligence operatives and extremist groups. The organisation serves as a foci for *eks-tapol* to voice their concerns and demands, and acting as an informal support group for members to share their stories and experiences. Sekber 65 has been a very active advocate for policies supporting access to healthcare and other forms of financial assistance. One of the unique characteristics of Sekber 65 is that it serves also as an educational platform for the events of 1965, working with student organisations to raise awareness of this chapter of Indonesian history.

In early 2015, a planned seminar was disrupted by a religious group on the pretext that a seminar was suspected of raising the specter of the PKI.²⁸ Mbah Narso has alleged that members of his support group, most of whom were in their 60s to 70s, had been physically intimidated by protestors during the running of their events. Many quarters, especially within the government, have grown increasingly wary of the pro-active nature of Sekber 65, sometimes threatening ‘action’ beyond just physical threats. Why is it that even half a century after the destruction of the PKI, the vilification of these former political prisoners continues? From the perspective of a state that has built its entire ideological superstructure on widespread human rights violations, the presence of these groups is proof of the state’s past crimes.

As both witnesses to and victims of the state’s violations, the stories of ex-political prisoners has the potential to become a form of *testimonio*. A literary genre developed in Latin America, *testimonio* or ‘testimony’ places authority in the hands of marginalised groups, forcing society to acknowledge the alternative narrator as if in a juridical setting.²⁹ Annie Pohlman expounds this concept expertly in her work with women political prisoners. She states that their *testimonio* serves “...to inform people about and involve them in the struggle by survivors in Indonesia to have human rights abuses perpetrated by the New Order regime acknowledged and redressed”.³⁰ As such, the practice of *testimonio* in the Indonesian context has the power to unravel the knots created during the New Order era.

During our interactions, former political detainees consistently exhibited a powerful desire to share their stories, even with the apparent risks accompanying this. They believed that if their stories were not told, their impending mortality would erase all memory of their experiences. Thus, my research has several characteristics. I consider my interviews with former political detainees as accessing a ‘hidden’ archive detailing the mass human rights violations of 1965. This fieldwork also

28 Please see *Seminar Sekber 65 Dibubarkan*, by TimloNet.

29 John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (U of Minnesota Press, 2004).

30 Pohlman, *supra* note 11.

involved positioning myself ‘alongside’ them, participating in their meetings and observing their interactions with each other. In this sense, I began to acknowledge how, “... ‘reflexive’ interaction with the people and society where one works—recognising that the ‘other’ with whom one interacts in a field setting is a full and dignified human being, with his or her own voice and initiative”.³¹ Utilising this agency and initiative has allowed them to rise above the challenges they faced both in the present and their past. Therefore ‘narrativity’ has become an integral part of their survival strategy. I posit that *testimonio* has an ‘affirmative’ effect on these ‘stigmatised’ individuals.³² Their stories are often told, re-told and re-experienced within a ‘community’ amidst strong ties formed with those sharing their struggles. Bound together through shared ideals and having suffered state-imposed stigmatisation, these groups are in a sense ‘liminal’.

In the context of Victor Turner’s interpretation, these groups would be seen as having entered a condition which is “...neither here nor there. They are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. Thus liminality is frequently likened to death.... to invisibility...”.³³ Returning to society after more than a decade of detention, these *eks-tapol* often face the challenging prospect of suffering from ‘social death.’ Reduced to being pariahs, their post-detention realities are often significant reversals of their younger lives as energetic activists. With new obstacles to securing employment former political detainees face economic strain and are treated with disdain and distrust from the communities they live in, sometimes even their own families. Nonetheless, being in a liminal group allows them to build a sense of solidarity, and thus rising above the very conditions which have them so ‘liminal’ in the first place. I explore this phenomenon in the next section.

IV. STORIES AND NARRATIVES

Ibu Nuara or ‘auntie’ Nuara stated that, upon her release, even her family was saying ‘all kinds of things about her’ (*macam-macam*).³⁴ She relates how she was accused of being a member of *Gerwani*, and being directly involved in the orgiastic bloodletting of the seven military officers in Jakarta. Denying that she has even been a member, Nuara recalls, “...I was in Purwokerto on that day. How could I then have been in Jakarta to be involved in that event?”³⁵

31 Robert W Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2011) at xvi.

32 Beverley, *supra* note 29.

33 Turner, *supra* note 8 at 95.

34 Ibu Nuara is a member of Sekber 65 who has regularly attending meetings organized by the organization. Her name has been changed. The honorific titles used in this paper include *pak* which is equivalent to ‘Mr.’ or *ibu* which means ‘madam’. For a number elderly persons the term *mbah* or ‘grandfather’ is often used.

35 The New Order is predicated on the myth of a group of women from the PKI-affiliated Indonesian Women’s Movement or Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Gerwani) having murdered and tortured 7 military officers on the night of the September 30th 1965. The women who were arrested during this period were particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, especially from captors who

“Several years before 1965 I was working in a factory in Jakarta. Our pay was meagre and we were also not given our rice rations. So, I brought this issue up with the management of the factory. Then we made demands for higher wages, rice rations of 10kg as well as access to the polyclinic. However, our demands were not met and then we went on strike for an hour. One hour caused huge losses for the factory. But our actions worked. There were negotiations with the assistance of SOBSI [Sentral Organisasi Buruh Serikat Indonesia or the All Indonesia Organisation of Trade Unions]. They were giving us their support. All the workers at the factory were members of SOBSI except those who were in management. Later, in 1965, I received a letter from my relative asking me to return to my hometown in central Java. My grandmother was sick. When I arrived home, I was arrested by the police and was then brought to the police station. My entire family was in tears. During my interrogation I was told to confess to being a member of Gerwani and that I was Lubang Buaya. A few weeks later I was then transferred to Semarang where I was placed in a prison together with common criminals. The criminals were given much better treatment than me.”

Nuara recounted how she was only given a small amount of food to survive on of which was mostly stale and rotten. On her transfer to another prison back in Jakarta the quality of the food did not improve and her rice would have nails, sand and pebbles in. “I was told that when the guards went out to buy food for me, the food vendors would ask the guards, ‘who is this food for?’ and the guards would answer, ‘we are buying food for pigs.’”

Released more than a decade later in 1979, Nuara returned to a family that looked upon her as a blemish. The status of *eks-tapol* in society not only affects the detainee themselves, but also their relatives. Thus, *eks-tapol* relatives were effectively banned from securing employment in the public sector or enrolling in a state university given their relation to someone from an ‘unclean environment.’ For many political prisoners who were detained during their youth, finding a willing life partner was difficult given the stigma placed on them. As such, ex-political prisoners were often forced to marry those with similar backgrounds. In Nuara’s case, a friend had introduced her to a potential husband who was also an *eks-tapol*. This ‘stigmatised’ category of people was not only forced to carry the burden of history but became ghosts, or ‘vectors’ of a ‘virus’ even school children were afraid of.³⁶ According to sociologist Erving Goffman, stigmatisation is a socio-constructive process which

insist that they be ‘inspected’ for markings on their body identifying them as Gerwani members. This included tattoos of sickles and hammers and other suspicious ‘indications’. For more information on this see Saskia Wieringa’s (2002) “Sexual Politics in Indonesia” Palgrave-Macmillan

36 It was compulsory for school children in the early 1980s to watch a movie entitled *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* or the “Treachery of the G30S/ Communist Party of Indonesia” directed Arifin C. Noer. This film is part of the government’s propaganda to indoctrinate school children with its version of history.

affects groups with “...radical political behaviour”.³⁷ The stigmatisation process could be “...transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family...by definition, of course we believe that the person with stigma is not quite human”.³⁸

Former political detainees often had to navigate their social identities in what Goffman considers ‘discredited’ and ‘discreditable’ forms of societal stigmatisation. The first category refers to visible physical signs while the latter points to the concealed ‘brands’ imprinted on them by the state. Living amongst ‘normals,’ stigmatised individuals are perpetually moving back and forth, navigating whether “...to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where”.³⁹ This became a necessary survival skill for fear that their background would bring about consequences which could also affect those close to them.

Despite the harrowing accounts of their experiences in detention, many detainees also recount tales of personal courage and self-sacrifice. One particular *eks-tapol*, Ibu Nuraimah, who was a natural singer and performer was arrested for her involvement in Lekra or *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*, the Institute for Peoples’ Culture, a PKI affiliated organisation.⁴⁰

“I was taken to Plantungan and I think my captors were trying to scare me by showing me how they were beating people and making them suffer. There was this handsome man and they buried him with only his head exposed above ground. They also tried to rape me but I resisted and told them that I was not a loose woman. We were living in horrible conditions and there was always very little food for us. I would devise ways to escape from prison to bring back food to the people inside. One day the guards suspected that I was going in and out. So when he accused me I asked him what evidence he had. He searched me and could not find any civilian clothing on me. I had managed to trick them. What I did was to hide my clothes outside of the prison walls in a spinach farm which was outside.”

By doing this, Ibu Nuraimah could ensure that she and her jail mates had enough to eat without having to depend on the food they were provided within the prison. She recounted how, during her time in prison, the waters of Begawan Solo overflowed its banks causing a great flood in Solo. This made things even more unbearable. “We had to eat rice which was wrapped in leaves and everything went bad because of the massive floods” Nuraimah added. One of the more extraordinary things Ibu Nuraimah described was the many ways the prisoners found to entertain themselves:

“I was given these hand puppets by the wife of this doctor. Then I

37 Goffman, *supra* note 23 at 4.

38 *Ibid* at 50.

39 *Ibid* at 57.

40 Tempo, a magazine published in Indonesia has put together a volume on Lekra entitled, *Sezi Tempo: Lekra dan Geger 1965* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2014). Nuraimah’s real name has been changed to protect her identity.

became the puppeteer. I would then use these puppets to tell the story of our suffering inside. For rhythm and music, we would then use plates, pots and pans. The guards would say to me, ‘wow you are gutsy, doing all these things while inside’ but I was brave and told them I was singing this for myself. And these songs were all in Bahasa Indonesia and they were about our struggles.”

Upon her release a few years later, Nuraimah became involved with the production of a movie but the project fell through halfway. She then turned to selling rice crackers to make a living before marrying a serviceman from the airforce. He was later fired after his superiors discovered that he had married an ‘untouchable.’ She continues to live in a dilapidated house with large cracks in the wall.

V. STRAIGHTENING HISTORY

Facing numerous challenges upon their release, Mbah Narso always reminded me that Sekber 65 was a place that provided support for the *eks-tapol*. Not only were they able to organise and make demands on the government, but Sekber 65 was also a place where they could narrate their experiences. Part of their stigmatization, the state had silenced their voice and narrative. During the New Order the state considered itself the protector of its citizens from the latent dangers which sought to lead its people astray. The state, as described by Suharto’s chief ideologue Ali Moerthopo, had saved the nation from a ‘...dangerous historical process which not only threatened the peoples’ of the archipelago but also the culture of the archipelago. The New Order has returned the process of Indonesian history to its authentic source which is the Proclamation of Independence and the constitution. The New Order has placed it on the correct path forward which is development”.⁴¹ According to the New Order, Indonesia’s history is a relentless teleological process which would lead to ‘development’ as defined by the state. Those stigmatised by the state are effectively left out of the narrative, forcibly forgotten. Nonetheless with the many oral historical projects that have emerged, many of their stories are coming to fore.

What has eluded researchers however is the development of a framework to give greater clarity to the stories emerging from the once hidden ‘spaces’ of the lives of these *eks-tapol*. Conversations with these former detainees often reveal a historical consciousness which they want to ‘release’ as quickly as possible, perhaps conscious of their imminent mortality. They often feel that if their stories are not told, their names will forever remain sullied and any opportunity to ‘cleanse’ themselves or *meluruskan sejarah* (to straighten history) would be lost. According to historian Asvi Warman Adam’s conception, ‘straightening history’ is not so much a ‘correction’ but rather a ‘complication’ of Indonesia’s official historical narrative. He states that the “...straightening process needs to turn what used to be ‘uniform’ into something more diverse”.⁴² This can be seen as an attempt at freeing many of the political victims of the New Order from being ‘captives of history’.⁴³ On the other hand, anthropological

41 Moerthopo, *supra* note 18 at 300.

42 Asvi Warman Adam, *Pelurusan sejarah Indonesia* (Ombak, 2009) at 16.

43 *Ibid.*

studies often point to the fact that human beings are ‘storied’ beings and it is a deeply human trait to be able to ‘tell their stories’.⁴⁴ The events of 1965, and the subsequent incarceration of these *eks-tapol*, created a huge gap in the narration of their own lives. Thus, I believe that in wanting to tell their stories, any attempt at ‘straightening’ is to push for ‘recovering’ their voice.

A conversation I shared with Pak Naon exemplifies this perfectly.⁴⁵ With a loud and boisterous personality, Naon was on the verge of becoming a teacher before he was swept up in the events of 1965. Transported from prison to prison in Java, he eventually landed in Buru Island where “...we would sing the *Internationale* so that we would not be afraid.” Buru island was a penal colony designed specifically for political detainees, but the infrastructure itself was built from the ground up by Pak Naon and his fellow prisoners. His account of his time there was often punctuated by memories of mistreatment by soldiers and paramilitary personnel placed there to guard them:

“There was once this time when vegetables were being stolen from our patch right outside the barracks we we’re living in. So we decided to smear these vegetables with faeces so that we could figure out who the thief was. The next morning the people in the barracks were called out to assemble and they were then given a good beating. It was then we knew that the thief was one of the soldiers.”

There was, however, no hint of sadness when he spoke of his time there. Upon his release, with the last batch of prisoners in 1979, trained as a preacher. After completing his training, he found a preaching position in a local church. Notwithstanding, he was soon began facing difficult questions from his parish.

“I went to a seminary in Batam to train as a preacher. But I am a jobless preacher now. I went in front of my parish and told them that I was an eks-tapol. Then the members of the church asked, ‘so how many people have you killed?’ They labelled me as a PKI preacher and they were uncomfortable with that. So they thought that I was a murderer because their impression was that all communists were murderers. And because of that I was fired and that’s why I am jobless. So now I live on faith.

At one point in time I was a member of several committees within Sekber. But my friends have often asked me, ‘why are you in Sekber? It’s like you are begging for money?’ What I am doing in Sekber is not begging for money, I am demanding my rights. Our demands are consistent.”

Pak Naon began to talk about ‘reconciliation and the need to ‘straighten’ history:

“We want the government to acknowledge the fact that there were

44 Kay Schaffer & Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das & Margaret M Lock, *Social Suffering* (University of California Press, 1997).

45 His name has been changed in the interest of privacy

severe human rights violations which occurred during 1965-66. That's the first thing, that history be straightened. And the government should apologise just like how Gus Dur apologised. We only want the government to prepare laws on reconciliation. We want compensation. We also want our good names returned to us because I don't want to be identified as a traitor."

Much of Sekber 65's programs have been geared towards the 'rehabilitation' of the names of the *eks-tapol* and 'returning' the rights they had previously been denied. This would encompass health care, welfare and assistance programs often given out to people who fall under a specific income range. More importantly, Sekber also seeks to return their 'humanity' to them not only in the eyes of the state but also, from Pak Naon's narrative, in the eyes of the community.

Pak Nug, another political detainee, had a much more nuanced perspective.⁴⁶ Showing us his identity card collection which he has kept over the years, he points out the ones where there were two letters clearly marked out. "That's ET or *eks-tapol*."

"Usually when people reach the age of 60, they are given a permanent identity card which you don't have to renew. For me I was only given my permanent identity card only when I was 72."

Pak Nug showed me the letters of good conduct he had obtained from the government. "This letter has a part where my status of being an *eks-tapol* had been cancelled out. But if you look further down, there is another section which says that I had been detained before. So isn't that strange?" Pak Nug also had to continually report to the authorities and he would often receive phone calls from the city's administration asking him what his family thought of him.

"They keep on asking me again and again the same questions. They already know where I live and what I do but they keep asking and asking. I think they just want to know where I am."

However, Pak Nug does not express any form of anger towards his captor, despite spending more than a decade in the same penal colony as Pak Naon in Buru.

"When I joined Sekber I was one of its secretaries. During 2012 our committee came together and planned out what we wanted in terms of reconciliation. We wanted to pursue justice in a non-judicial way. We were working towards that direction. So we thought that there was no need to take these perpetrators to court. We thought we would just make peace with them as we are part of the Indonesian nation. I also believe that the perpetrators are also in themselves victims. They are victims from having to carry out the orders of Suharto. My friends in Sekber and I are victims of the perpetrators, so we are all victims. However, I still have many friends who are still traumatised."

Pak Nug then talks about how Sekber 65 can be used as a platform where *eks-tapol*

⁴⁶ This is also a pseudonym.

are given an open space to discuss and narrate their own stories. Pak Nug adds that he regularly photocopies articles on human rights and asks the group read to read the article as a form of communal healing to help them recover from their experiences.

1. Breaking down the stigma

We arrived at the meeting place in Wonosobo after spending the night in a car coming in from Jogjakarta. Sekber 65's members were already there in a makeshift area with tables and a podium, ready for the speakers with attendees numbering around 50. They were made up of mostly of aged *eks-tapol* from different parts of central Java. Most of the people there were talking to each other, happy to be amongst familiar faces. There was, however, a smaller group of younger-looking people who stood apart from crowd, interacting only amongst themselves. It seemed that they were trying their best not to be seen and yet so obviously were. There was a woman amongst them, but the rest were young men with short-cropped hair, fiddling with their mobiles, one carried a small camera. As the event began, a congress where Sekber 65 discussed its plans for the rest of the year, different speakers, including Mbah Narso and his team members, took turns to speak.

Later, asking Mbah Narso who they were and why they weren't mingling with the rest of the crowd, he whispered "intel". This was to denote that these were individuals from the state's intelligence services. Their presence, it seems, was expected. They would often show up at these gatherings to observe, photographing those present, myself included. Mbah Supar, who had organised the event stood up and began walking towards them. He asked them to come to speak to those gathered but an individual, who seemed to be in charge, politely declined, surprised by the 'brazen' way in which Mbah Supar approached them. Mbah Narso, in observing this, merely said that these officers were 'playing coy' in being *malu malu kucing*. Supar's intention was, at least according to him, to allow the 'officials' to address those there. In truth, however, it served as a way of challenging, and perhaps even embarrassing them. The act of approaching the same apparatus who had been responsible for Mbah Supar's incarceration and placing them in 'public view' served to reverse the roles between the 'powerful' and those who had been 'discredited'. In the presence of other members of Sekber 65, his gesture may have seemed minor, but it challenged the 'gaze' of the state that has always considered them a threat. As such, Mbah Supar's gesture doubled as a statement signalling that their meeting was both legitimate and 'open'. This directly countered the government's narrative that framed them as suspected 'enemy agents' conspiring to undermine both the state and its Pancasila ideology.

VI. TRAUMA, HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

The anthropological work of Arthur Kleinman and Veena Das, points out that marginalised communities often rely on a particular kind of language to deal with the

circumstances meted out to them.⁴⁷ Whether it be Tamils in Sri Lanka or the peasants living rural Thailand, a community of resistance is usually formed after a specific language is created to contextualise their lives. This language is an intrinsic element in the attempt to ‘remake a world’. For those in Sekber 65, the language of reconciliation, or more importantly that which allows history to be ‘straightened,’ provides the necessary tools to make them whole again. Pak Nug’s use of the term ‘reconciliation’ not only serves to humanise himself, but also the perpetrators. Pak Saon’s ‘straightening history’ narrative universally reinforces humanity, negating the New Order’s meta-narrative which creates monsters, rebels and murderers. This act of resistance is at once creative and important for a more comprehensive understanding of Indonesian history. Thus, their testimonies ‘broaden’ Indonesia’s ‘parameters’. Whilst the emergence of these once-taboo narratives signals both the democratisation of Indonesia and its history, the counter-narrative found in these stories can also bring out the glaring contradictions in the New Order’s discourse of state-dominated development and the impact it has had on marginal groups. More importantly, analysis of these stories by the *eks-tapol*, in their struggle to ‘remake their world’ and to ‘straighten history,’ should be expanded to understand the complex processes of how communities deal with historical injustice and large scale human rights violations. This should go beyond merely ‘broadening’ history, which may suit the purposes of academics and historians. Understanding the dynamics of groups like Sekber 65 can provide an example for how similar groups in the rest of Southeast Asia could possibly ‘straighten out’ the history of their communities.

The mass killings and detentions of 1965 initiated an almost prophetic like *zaman edan* or ‘age of madness’ affecting the very structure of Indonesian society, through what Hilmar Farid refers to as a form of ‘primitive accumulation’.⁴⁸ He states that contemporary Indonesia’s ‘original sin’ began when the “...army-directed mass violence resulted in the separation of a large number of people from their means of production and subsistence”.⁴⁹ One could even posit that the deep roots of Indonesia’s ‘original sin’ impedes every official effort in seeking truth, justice and reconciliation as Indonesian society as a whole is ‘implicated.’ To do so would be to admit that the violence of 1965 was indeed constitute a mass human rights violations, or even genocide. This would place the Indonesian nation on its head. However, this raises the important point that for those who did not come to enjoy the ‘fruits’ of Indonesia’s economic success, the New Order’s ‘development’ narrative process tore apart the social relations which existed between themselves their families, friends, colleagues and loved ones. But human creativity allows for the constant construction or re-construction of ‘webs of significance’ to be found within the framework of ‘*communitas*,’ to which I now return. According to Edith Turner, “...*communitas* can only be conveyed through stories. Because it is the sense felt by a plurality of people without boundaries, there are numberless questions as to its form, provenance and

47 Arthur Kleinman & Mamphela Ramphele, *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, Veena Das, Margaret M. Lock & Pamela Reynolds, eds (University of California Press, 2001).

48 Hilmar Farid, “Indonesia’s original sin: mass killings and capitalist expansion, 1965–66” (2005) 6:1 *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 3–16.

49 *Ibid* at 4.

implications”.⁵⁰ There are already several of these ‘plural’ groups in existence, one example being Dialita, a choir made up of female former political detainees as well as YPKP 1965 which regularly visits to places suspected of being mass graves.⁵¹ More importantly, Turner adds that such *communitas* occurs, “...through the readiness of the people—perhaps from necessity—to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence on structures to, and to see their fellows as they are”.⁵² Organisations such as Sekber 65 allows these aged activists an opportunity to circumvent the strictures of stigma the New Order state created for them.

In a story related to me by Mbah Narso, I was told that even for some ex-detainees who have passed on, their *arwah* continue to return for their monthly meets. “I was so surprised when they told me this. Once at one of our meetings they were sitting down together. One of the members of this group then suddenly became very surprised. One of the deceased members of their group could be seen sitting next to another member whom he had been very good friends with when he was alive. When the person who saw the deceased revealed this to the rest, rather than being afraid they instead became even more lively and excited,” Mbah Narso said. For many ex-detainees being part of a community is essential in light of their experiences of stigmatisation and exclusion. During their youths, many had been very active and some were being trained to be teachers, doctors and active citizens. The events of 1965 came with such force that almost at once their status as citizens, and even members of their community, were robbed from them. Mbah Narso added that, “there was even once one of them felt as if this friend of theirs who had passed away, was riding pillion at the back of their motorcycle as they were on their way to a meeting.” Unlike ghosts and demons conjured up by the New Order state’s propaganda, the *arwah* of these ex-detainees are still, perhaps, attempting to reclaim their humanity, even in the afterlife. On several occasions the organisation has come under severe pressure from right-wing fringe groups for their activities to be stopped by the authorities. Despite this, Mbah Narso stated clearly that the ex-detainees and their family members would continue to meet and organise under the banner of their support group.

VII. CONCLUSION

My research for this paper began as a journey, trying to understand how former political prisoners utilise close-knit support groups, such as Sekber 65, to ‘remake’ a world torn asunder by both violence and state-enforced stigmatisation. It is only

⁵⁰ E Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, 2012th edition ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) at 1.

⁵¹ See Dipa, *supra* note 13. On YPKP 65 and their efforts in searching for mass graves see Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan 65’s website <https://ypkp1965.org/>

⁵² *Supra* note 45 at 2

through the close contact I had with Sekber 65 that I was able to discern the fine-grain internal dynamics of the group which afforded the individuals within it to frame a ‘*communitas*.’ This group not only provided them with necessary psychological support, but also assisted these aged political prisoners to break down the barriers built around them, to engage and to create a presence in the world again. This has allowed them to ‘straighten’ history. While it is essential to push through with formal processes of truth, reconciliation and justice, the state is currently limited by its choice profile. Therefore, it is essential to show the strategies undertaken by such groups to achieve some sort of closure, demonstrating profound resilience in rising above their past. As such, these groups form an ‘integral’ part of not only civil society in Indonesia, but also as a ‘community of memory.’ This study also presents the potentiality of showcasing these groups as living archives who force both the state and society to acknowledge the state’s ‘original sin.’

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