

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965–68 eds. Douglas Kanmen and Katharine MacGregor. Singapore and Copenhagen: NUS Press and NIAS Press, 2012, 305 pp.

The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia comprises a selection of papers presented at a three-day conference held at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in June 2009. Neatly edited by two of its convenors, Douglas Kammen and Katharine McGregor, this volume provides compelling reading by bravely tackling head-on what most innocent Indonesians would probably prefer to just gloss over for either fear or shame. Consisting of ten chapters generally organised around different geographical locations in which the macabre events amounting to the "ideological cleansing" of members and sympathisers of Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) in 1965–1968 took place, this book dwells on a particularly painful episode of modern Indonesian history which implicates directly or indirectly a slew of stakeholders whose influence on the national political landscape was to extend beyond those years. In putting forward their arguments, the researchers rely on extensive primary data, as collated from extensive interviews with both victims and perpetrators of the grim purges that transpired during the three-year period. Despite the obvious violations of human rights committed against Indonesian communists, their families and affiliated organisational partners during a military-dominated stint of unilateral exercise of coercive power, the Indonesian state has been stubbornly clinging on to its official narrative of a morally if not legally justified liquidation of political enemies whose vision, methods and discourse were arbitrarily deemed to be subversive to the revered principles of *Pancasila*.

As a result of an unholy alliance of power bases colluding to whitewash ghastly life-ending violence perpetrated by elites organically related to the state against fellow Indonesians whose crimes were simply the espousal of a rival ideology, one whole generation of Indonesians during Suharto's New Order regime (1966–1998) have been indoctrinated since their schooldays into believing in an official history which legitimises state terrorism. A quick check with an Indonesian colleague at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) reveals that even a respected professor of mathematics like him has only the faintest idea of what the so-called September 30 Movement – immortalised and sensationalised in the official narrative as GESTAPU aka *Gerakan Tiga Puluh September* and the *raison d'être* for the ensuing merciless killings, entailed. In addition to the exculpatory tones of the euphemistically-laden accounts projected by the state, the blurring of the truth behind the callous "revenge" attacks which effectively wiped out the communists – the purported villain behind GESTAPU, is aggravated by the regime's not one but three different narratives, as lucidly

shown by John Roosa in Chapter 2. One could only imagine how long this historical amnesia would have persisted if democratic reforms preceded by anti-Suharto unrest had not caught up with Indonesia in 1998. Even today, notwithstanding a praiseworthy apology for the brutal murders of Indonesia's own citizens issued by President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001), more substantial redress of grievances by surviving victims and their families have all but stalled during the administration of out-going President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014). As demonstrated by Katharine McGregor in Chapter 10, state organs since Susilo's ascendancy are powerless to even prevent disruptions of reburial ceremonies of the remains of victims of the massacres, let alone to make good the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the manner of other countries which have gone through similar tragedies. Familial connections play a part in making it difficult for Indonesia's ruling elites to exorcise the horrors of the country's shameful past: Susilo is son-in law of Sarwo Edhie, whose "reign of terror" as commander of the elite Resimen Para Komando Angkatan Darat (RPKAD) over Central Java in October–November 1965, as chronicled by David Jenkins and Douglas Kammen in Chapter 4, was estimated, on Edhie's own apparently remorseful admission, to have cost the lives of up to a staggering three million suspected communists.

The geographical breadth of official state propaganda promoting the heinous idea that indiscriminate extermination of lives and in some cases whole families was necessary for survival of the nation is stupefying, to say the least. From the pivotal bastions of communist influence in Central and East Java, the violence spread to such distant places as North Sumatra, South Sulawesi and West Bali, as recounted in the accounts of Yen-ling Tsai and Douglas Kammen in Chapter 6, Taufik Ahmad in Chapter 7 and Mary Ida Bagus in Chapter 9 respectively. One would have been forgiven for thinking that had a similar scenario been repeated in today's increasingly connected world in which the discourse on human rights has reached a lofty global pedestal, such gruesome deeds would not have gone unpunished. This is, after all, an age where levers of state control as were available to the power holders and brokers of the 1960s, have been weakened by large-scale democratisation of knowledge and information technology. While this may be true, the question may be raised of why and how the process of correcting previous wrongs has seemingly encountered insurmountable bottlenecks in Indonesia. Prospects for legal redress, for example in some form of pecuniary indemnification for surviving family members of victims whose lives have been forever stigmatised and in some cases ruined altogether, do not look like being even a distinct possibility. Victims of similar murderous rampages in such places as Nazi Germany, Guatemala, Argentina and Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina have fared better, by at least being acknowledged to have been undeserving victims of state-instituted violence. Recognition of such guilt has, in the Indonesian case, been half-hearted at best, coming as it is from the official corridors of power, and without

compensatory initiatives to boot. Is it because those at the receiving hand of the state in Indonesia are communists or at least presumed to be so, while we now live in a world dominated by global capitalism which defines international political economic orthodoxy? The complicity of Western powers in the Indonesian massacres, as powerfully documented by Bradley Simpson in his account of the international dimensions of this Indonesian holocaust in Chapter 3, has to be borne in mind in making sense of the tendentious slant and cavalier attitude of the international order. Since communism is to all intents and purposes a lost cause, empathy for its adherents is found desperately wanting, coming consistently from human rights groups which are prepared to shed ideological biases in their fight for justice for fellow human beings.

A topical though controversial issue to this day foregrounded by Chapters 5 and 8 especially is the association of religion with violence. Focusing on the situations in East Java and south Blitar respectively, the respective authors, namely Greg Fealy and Katharine McGregor and Vanessa Hearman, portray the culpability of religious personalities and organisations – Muslim, Christian and Hindu, in promoting the elimination of their supposedly atheistic foes. Disproportionate blame, however, has been laid on the otherwise traditionalist-oriented Nahdlatul Ulama (NU: Revival of Scholars), whose dastardly acts were actualised via its youth wing, the Ansor and its armed wing, Barisan Ansor Serbaguna (Banser). If one wonders how reputedly religious figures were prepared to condone summary executions of unarmed civilians, one needs only to open pages of history to find numerous evidence the nationalist, fascist or totalitarian state (mis)appropriating religion for political expediency and worldly causes. Religious figures and entities are in turn co-opted by the state, and speak to further the interests of political masters although ostensibly in the name of God. Political and religious elites mutually reinforce each other; the former deriving hallowed legitimacy, the latter gaining secular invincibility to apply edicts. No longer is the pleasure of an omnipresent God the objective of religious practices, but rather the satisfaction of one's material desires such as a religious state, towards which fighters are prepared to loot and murder if they find it necessary to achieve their worldly utopia. A contemporary example of such manipulation of religion for secular aims is the Al Qaeda offshoot the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which is causing disquiet in the Middle East with its lawless antics and genocidal tendencies.

Writing a review for *Kajian Malaysia*, a journal devoted to multi-disciplinary Malaysian studies, it would perhaps be incomplete not to mention useful lessons for Malaysia that can be gleaned from *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia*. Suppression of veritable accounts of historical events in favour of a state-orchestrated official versions erodes the legitimacy of political stakeholders and esteemed national figures and symbols in the long term. Malaysia has had its fair share of tragedies such as the 13 May 1969 riots and the Memali affair of 1985, both of which have seen multiple interpretations appear in

the public domain amidst contending versions of events proffered by different interlocutors and witnesses. For instance, upon recent disclosure by former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam, former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has confessed that he was in the country during the fatal showdown between security officials and villagers at Memali, unlike the previous general belief that he had left the country on an official visit to China. Rehabilitation of left-wing anti-colonial fighters has also been slow in coming, ostensibly delayed on the basis of not offending the sensitivities of surviving members of the armed forces who fought the communist insurgency. These are just two examples of official narratives being increasingly counterpoised by rational counter-narratives which in the Internet age would find an inquisitive audience in cyberspace. Do Malaysians want to wait until a group of mostly foreign scholars congregate to shed light on troubling aspects of our history and produce a volume with explosive ramifications as *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia*, just because Malaysian scholars themselves shy away from discourses which could potentially ruffle feathers in formal seats of power?

Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid
School of Distance Education
Universiti Sains Malaysia
afauzi@usm.my