

## Reconciling Indonesian History with 1965: Facts, Rumours and Stigma

### Summary of the conference and Research perspective

#### Summary

The international conference « Reconciling Indonesian History with 1965: Facts, Rumours and Stigma » was held at Goethe University, Frankfurt, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> November 2016. During the three-day conference, participants examined historical facts and events involving the Communist Party of Indonesia and its sympathisers, as well as reflected on the fear of communism and the consequences of such fears in past and present Indonesian society. The discussions and presentations of the final day of the conference, provided diverse reflections on how countries deal in general with the memory of violent events in their national history, and how this history is lived in the present by different generations and actors in Indonesia.

Panel 1, “Violent events in the Indonesian Communist Party 1926-1965”, reviewed violent moments in Indonesian history involving communists (individuals or group). If the implication of members of the Communist party is undeniable in the killings of the generals, the panel demonstrated possibilities for a more complex and nuanced national history. Times of violence have different causes and should be interpreted in their local contexts rather than framed within a standardising narrative aiming at proving the essential violent character of the communists in Indonesia.

Panel 2, “Cultural violence in the 1960’s”, focused on the Institute for People’s Culture (Lekra), a cultural organization affiliated to the Indonesian communist party, and to the black campaign which touched them after 1965. Presented papers demonstrated that the Lekra as an institution never encouraged or promoted the burning of books. This practice was common among diverse groups promoting anti-imperialism, including people affiliated with religious, nationalist and communist groups. Directly following the coup, Military media portrayed members of the Lekra as enemies of the state, – using a specific rhetoric intended to propagate rumours about Lekra members who had never been involved in the killings of the generals, and whose ties to the PKI and its political line also varied.

Panel 3, “Communism, atheism and religion”, addressed the relation between Islam and communism in Indonesian history since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, showing there have been periods of close political collaboration between the two groups, based on common economic and social programs. Papers also underlined the fallacy of long-standing accusations of atheism: being members of organizations affiliated with the PKI and believing in one God have never been mutually exclusive. This was clearly demonstrated through the case of Gerwani members. The panel finally addressed the association and confusion, between atheism, homosexuality and communism in contemporary Indonesia, underlying the political use of it.

Panel 4, “Land grabbing and the phantom of communism”, presented key studies and emphasised the significant role played by land reforms in the targeting of victims in the 1960’s. It revealed clear connexions between land issues and killings and insisted on the importance of this dimension in understanding the massacre as well as the difficulties encountered in the reconciliation process because of the economic dimension of land grabbing. The panel presented primary sources from 1966 which form precious new data.

Panel 5 “Film and stigma”, focused on how the official government version of the tragic events of 1965 have been represented in a film and how alternative narrations, which aimed at breaking stigma, have been circulating in more recent movies. It also explained how true stories and fiction about 1965 are attached to haunted places, and how such stories of ghosts provide an important means of mapping violence in the territory and filling in the silences/lack of data about the massacres. Both places and stories allow remembrance of the past outside the mainstream narrative.

Panels 6 and 7 “The impact on the young generation”, presented the influence of the events of 1965 on the third generation. It began by looking at the impact of stigmatization in terms of political mobilization, the potential threat of communism being constantly taken as argument to annihilate student movements. The role of history books in national curriculum was discussed, with an emphasis on the lack of revisions despite the continual emergence of new information, hence persistence of widespread rumours. The panel continued by exposing various ways in which the younger generation deals, outside of the classroom, with the memory of an event which is far from them although present through the stigmatisation of past victims. Reconciliation initiatives at the grassroots level, done by survivors, their family members and by young people have been particularly highlighted. A review of literary works over the last 50 years, taking 1965 as background, proved a certain sympathy among writers toward political prisoners although these ones are represented largely stereotyped. Other ways of remembering this period of history have also been present, ranging from a mobile museum which collects artefacts and stories of prisoners to performance and visual art works and websites, all intent on collecting and producing narratives which can explain the diverse aspects of the 1965-66 events, thus putting forward a counter to the single stream and restrictive State narrative.

The last day of the internationally attended conference was dedicated to a comparative perspective on national experiences of violent pasts with examples from Germany, Cambodia and France. Several points echoed the Indonesian case: the presence, at the highest level of the State, of perpetrators after the historical period of crimes (Cambodia, Germany, France), the correlation between psychological disorder/traumatism and the negation of these crimes/impunity (Germany), the importance of places of memory (Germany, Cambodia) and the need for proper tomb where descendants or the younger generation could perform religious rituals (Cambodia). The ongoing Indonesian national process of reconciliation was also presented, with a focus on the obstacles encountered.

Finally, three testimonials of personal experience related to the tragedy of 1965 were shared in order to see how historiography and memory interact. The daughter of one of the murdered general presented her personal journey to find peace – as well as her responsibility as mother and Indonesian citizen to make sense of this history. A political prisoner explained his mission for the recognition of State crimes, insisting on the need for “truth” – that is to say revision of the official narrative - in national history. To conclude, a high school history teacher shared her experience (method and difficulty) for teaching 1965 in class to the third generation, while curriculums undergo constant change and new sources and information continue to emerge.

## Research perspective

These three days of presentations and discussion have allowed an open forum to reflect on the events which took place in 1965-1966 and underlined several points:

- The need to think 1965-66 in a long term perspective, from the 1940's to the present, have been raised several times. This is the condition for understanding the scale of the event (intensity, number of victims, nature of the rumours and crimes). Consequently, it could be fruitful to include in the following studies the influence of Sukarno's Guided Democracy on non-PKI-affiliated groups and sectors of the society. If the tensions and dissatisfaction caused by Sukarno's policy are known, culture is the only field which has been explored in details through the LEKRA/Cultural manifesto opposition. A better understanding of the pre-1965 frustration by region and sectors would serve a better understanding of the repression.
- The importance of psychological impact, both for the perpetrators and the victims, appeared in presentation and discussion. While the mechanism of propaganda has been widely demonstrated, the psychological impact requires more in-depth study. An interdisciplinary approach would then be necessary.
- Related to psychology, emotions – such as hate, resentment and fear – are also important points of study in the future. History of emotion could be an approach to these phenomena. Oral history, from the perpetrator's side, is one source for such a work, which would need to be complemented by archival research on journal, newsletters, and symposium proceedings produced by organisations affiliated with religious and military groups. Localisation and inventory of available materials should be then the first step to take.
- Art works and other modes of creative expression have been particularly represented during the conference, both to give a space for different voices and as being a complementary approach, if not part, of the methodologies used in social sciences and humanities, like exemplified by the photography exhibition. We can only encourage more collaborative works associating artistic expression and research.

Elsa Clavé