

Book banning in Indonesia: A blast from the past

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When I heard the news that the Indonesian translation of my book, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Soeharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia*, was banned, I was perplexed.

What year was it? Was Soeharto still in power? In the midst of the remarkable progress in legal reform since Soeharto's fall in 1998, book banning has become anachronistic. The Dec. 23 announcement by the Attorney General's Office (AGO) is like some antique brought out from a dusty storeroom.

Indonesian citizens have gained a sense of self-confidence in the face of officialdom. University rectors, historians, lawyers, journalists, students, among others, have condemned the banning.

The typical comment today is that the banning insults the intelligence of citizens to judge books for themselves. To borrow a phrase from Benedict Anderson, who was banned from the country for decades for his writing on the Sept. 30 Movement, Indonesia has a new society and an old state.

As a historian, I am impressed by the long-term continuity of Indonesian laws on censorship. The AGO announcement banning my book cites Law no. 4 of 1963 – a presidential order (penetapan) of President Sukarno's that harkened back to colonial-era laws.

Its preamble states that it was designed to “safeguard the path of the Indonesian Revolution.” That was Sukarno's language. Is the AGO today banning publications for the sake of “the Indonesian Revolution”? Are we still out to crush Malaysia?

If the AGO is committed to Sukarnoism it should praise my book. However much I dislike his authoritarian Guided Democracy, I have great respect for Sukarno's intelligence, basic decency, and anti-imperialist foreign policy.

I think my book works nicely as an elaboration of his all-too-brief, three-fold analysis of the Sept. 30 Movement: the cunning of imperial and neo-colonial subversion, the foolishness of the PKI leaders, and the presence of many individuals who were “not right” (apparently meaning Soeharto and his associates).

My book endorses his simile about the mass violence carried out in the name of repressing the Sept. 30 Movement: It was like burning down a house to kill a rat.

The key task of the Reformasi period has been to overcome the legacy of two authoritarian polities and create a government based on the rule of law.

Two outstanding achievements have been President B.J. Habibie's canceling of the notorious Anti-Subversion Law of 1963 and the late President Abdurrahman Wahid's closing of Bakorstanas, an intelligence body with sweeping, undefined powers originating in the emergency of October 1965.

Reformasi has wounded Law no. 4 of 1963 but has not yet killed it. The laudable press law of 1999 eliminated its application to newspapers, magazines, and serials, while leaving untouched its application to other printed materials.

So we have the strange situation now where the AGO is forbidden from censoring or banning the press but has been left free to ban books, pamphlets and posters.

The former head of the Constitutional Court, Jimly Asshiddiqie, has stated that Law no. 4 is "out of date."

My publisher and I have no idea why my book was banned. Right now we're in Kafka-land: Declared guilty without being told what the crime is.

The AGO's press statement claims that my book "disrupts public order." How it does that goes unexplained. So far the AGO hasn't even provided the text of the "letter of decision" (Surat Keputusan).

The AGO spokesperson mentioned that his office had catalogued 143 objectionable passages in my book. It would be edifying for me, other scholars of Indonesian history, and the general public to see the full report.

In most democratic polities that allow for the banning of books (in the name of suppressing pornography for instance), the banning is usually done through the courts. Prosecutors have to publicly explain their case against a publication and persuade a judge or jury that it is indeed in violation of the law.

Authors and publishers present their counter-arguments. The German laws against Holocaust denial work in this way; prosecutors there do not unilaterally ban books. While I am opposed to any kind of book banning, I will admit that an open, transparent procedure in the judiciary is preferable to a secretive, arbitrary procedure inside an inscrutable bureaucracy.

Many books have been published in the last ten years that have been critical of the Soeharto regime's version of the events of 1965-1966. Except for some textbooks in 2007, none have been officially banned. I do not think my book is special enough to deserve the AGO Prize.

My book actually endorses part of the Soeharto regime's version (on the role of the PKI's Special Bureau) even while it rejects other parts (such as the claim that every PKI member should be held responsible for the Sept. 30 Movement). My book is a work of scholarship that

brings out new primary sources and critically evaluates the fullest possible range of sources. It should be useful even to people who disagree with my conclusions.

Some publishers want their books to be banned so they can use the AGO for free advertising. To ensure that no one thinks we will profit from the new interest in my book, my publisher and I have decided to withdraw the copyright on it.

The entire text of the Indonesian translation is available online to be downloaded for free. My publisher, the Indonesian Institute of Social History, has stated that there should be no barriers to knowledge except narrow-mindedness – and I suppose a slow internet connection.

The AGO banning of my book does a disservice to the great advances in legal reform that Indonesia has achieved since 1998. It gives the international community the wrong impression of the country.

If I were an Indonesian – to modify the title of Ki Hajar Dewantara’s famous essay banned by the colonial state in 1913 for “disrupting public order” – I would believe, along with Ki Hajar, Indonesia’s “Father of Education,” that the nation’s progress lies in reading more books, not banning more books, and in the self-assurance and free-thinking of its people, not in state-imposed intellectual conformity.

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