

“Toward a Social History of Indonesia’s 1965 Upheaval: Reflections, Questions, and Challenges”

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ABSTRACT

My presentation will begin with reflections on the tensions, conflicts and silences palpable in Indonesian society in the wake of the violent events of 1965. Living and working in Bali and Jakarta during the 1970s and 1980s, I learned about the detentions, fear, stigmatization and censorship that existed below the surface of social and political order, and that limited public discourse around the ‘1965 incident’ throughout the New Order period.

With the emergence of a critical mass of NGOs in the 1980s, and as innovations in information technology of the late 1990s changed the media landscape, Indonesians pushed for more open discussions of human rights issues, including seeking justice for those affected by the purges of 1965 and other incidents of mass violence. More than a decade after the fall of Suharto, it is possible to assess both the progressive changes and negative developments for the history, images and public understanding of “1965”. The picture that emerges is somewhat hopeful but largely discouraging.

The presentation will review some of the ways in which 1965 as a realm of historical fact, and “1965” as a zone of social meaning, are inscribed in Indonesia at present. Among the nagging questions that emerge are the following:

- Why is official history unaltered?
- Is there any national consensus regarding past violence that supports truth-seeking about 1965?
- What kinds of events or expressions enable more open discussion of the lingering effects of 1965?
- Is there space at the level of communities for local conflicts related to 1965 to find expression and resolution?
- Do current debates about tolerance and pluralism represent a promising approach to deeper understanding of 1965 violence and its repercussions?

I will argue that the events of 1965 have had deep and lasting effects on Indonesian culture and society, and that currently available approaches –whether in the judicial, media, educational, cultural or civic action realms—may fail to provide a corrective or constructive vision to help mitigate the harmful and divisive influences of this dark chapter in the national story. To achieve that end, a new representation must be created to persuade Indonesians that what was lost through the seemingly-remote events of 1965 affects them directly and personally as Indonesian citizens today.