

**Indonesia Faces Up to 1965**  
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***An official commission finally looks at the massacres that ushered Suharto into power***

We hear a lot about the greatness that is just around the corner for Indonesia, and much of it rings true. There is a palpable sense of *becoming* in the air, as if the country has woken up from a long slumber and is finally finding its way. "There is just a bit more swagger in our step," one wealthy young businessman told me recently.

Much of this, of course, is down to a huge domestic market with sufficient buying power to insulate the country somewhat from the shocks that are battering Europe, the US and parts of Asia.

But there is more to greatness than rising GDP and tall buildings. Part of any nation's greatness is surely the ability to come to grips with its own history. By this measure, Indonesia's official blindness over the events of 1965 has fallen far short.

That may be changing. Last week, the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) declared after a four-year investigation that the persecution and murders of alleged communists after a botched 1965 coup was a gross human rights violation. The body noted incidents of murder, slavery, forced eviction, torture, rape and other abuses committed by the military in the name of fighting communism.

The commission shied away from naming names but it did say that military officers from the time should stand trial, if any of them are still alive. The agency at the center of the killings, the commission concluded, was the shadowy Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order (Kopkamtib), which then-Gen. Suharto himself commanded from 1965 to 1967 and used as a vehicle for his rise to power.

For some perplexing reason, most Western news agencies based in Jakarta ignored the report when it was released last week. They reasoned it was old news, one editor said. In the words of one prematurely cynical young foreign correspondent with little experience in Asia, "Nothing will happen anyway."

In my view, the report is a major step forward for Indonesia, marking the first time the country has come close to opening an official dialogue of any kind on a bloodbath that set villager against villager in an orgy of violence that reshaped the country's politics for more than a generation. It may not result in court trials but it should at least remove the cloak of silence from a national tragedy.

One of the report's authors, Nur Kholis, the vice chairperson of Komnas Ham, described for me last week a painstaking process over four years of going from village to village in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Bali, Java and elsewhere to meet with survivors and victims. The commission not only found evidence of mass murder but also documented cases of accused leftists who were rounded up and kept in conditions of slavery for nearly a decade at numerous prison camps. Indeed, it was not until this century that those who

were imprisoned at the time had their full citizenship rights restored.

It was all done, Nur Kholis recounted, with the cold precision of a military operation. There were lists of supposed communists in the hands of soldiers who would enter villages and oversee the killing. Often neighbors would point out neighbors who would subsequently be hauled away or simply executed. "We owe it to the victims," he said quietly. "They deserve some justice."

Nur Kholis and others hope that the report and its aftermath will begin a process of healing that the country has so far avoided. Coming as it did during the Cold War, with the escalation of US involvement beginning in Vietnam, the interest shown by the CIA and other Western powers in the events of 1965 has been well documented. With Indonesia now a rising power, perhaps the nation can finally come to terms with its dark history.

The details of the supposed communist "coup" attempt that led to the violence that killed hundreds of thousands of people – estimates vary from 300,000 to 3 million – have been obscured and covered up for decades, despite the horrors of the brutality. Officially, the coup attempt, which claimed the lives of six top generals in the early morning hours of Oct. 1, 1965, was blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party, which was close to Sukarno at the time. The subsequent massacres of alleged leftists – many of them no more than illiterate villagers – has never been officially explained. Suharto took full control of the country from Sukarno in 1967 – after the massacres were largely completed.

In a 1978 article in the *New York Review of Books* regarding 1965, Cornell University scholars Benedict Anderson and Ruth McVey cite an internal report made by the CIA on the events that swept over Indonesia that year.

"In terms of the numbers killed, the anti-PKI [Indonesian Communist Party] massacres in Indonesia rank as one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s," the CIA report concluded. "In this regard, the Indonesian coup is certainly one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, far more significant than many other events that have received much more publicity."

Despite the fact, about all that most people here seem to have been told is that Sukarno was followed by Gen. Suharto and the New Order regime and the whole thing was kind of messy. The events of 1965, beyond the deaths of the six generals, are not taught in schools here. The dead generals are treated as national heroes.

In ordering the Attorney General's Office to follow up on the commission's conclusions, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose own father-in-law served as a general in the armed forces during the time of the purges, set the legal process in motion and made good on his frequent talk of national reconciliation. In citing the need for a "just, factual, smart and constructive settlement," Yudhoyono noted the experiences of South Africa, Cambodia and other countries that have had to contend with a dark and violent legacy.

Indonesia is no longer the perilous place it was for the first five decades after independence. Government power now changes hands peacefully and democratically, which allows the economy and the people to prosper. The many problems the country faces are discussed openly in the media.

Coming to grips with history can be unsettling. But the Komnas HAM report could spur the kind of national introspection that will deepen Indonesia's understanding of itself. And out of that process, a measure of greatness might emerge.

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