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Introduction

The Massacres of 1965–1966: New Interpretations and the Current Debate in Indonesia

Annie Pohlman

The mass violence which spread across Indonesia following an attempted coup on 1 October 1965 claimed the lives of half a million people and irrevocably changed the lives of millions more.¹ Hundreds of thousands were killed or detained as political prisoners for their real or perceived ties to the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) or one of its many associated organisations. In the days following the October coup, the Indonesian military, led by General Suharto, incited anti-Communist hatred amongst the population through a pervasive propaganda campaign and then co-opted civilian militias and youth gangs to carry out the massacres and mass arrests.

Despite an up-surge in attention from researchers and community-based activists over the last fifteen years, these events, known collectively as the “Indonesian killings” or the “Indonesian massacres” of the mid-1960s, have remained a murky part of Indonesian history. As Robert Cribb wrote in the introduction to his ground-breaking edited collection on the massacres in 1990, “Detailed information on who was killed, where, when, why and by whom [...] is so patchy that most conclusions have to be strongly qualified as provisional” (Cribb 1990: 3). In the almost 25 years since Cribb’s assessment, there has been a number of critical studies into the killings which has improved our knowledge about the who’s, the where’s and the why’s (see Robinson 1995; Roosa, Ratih, and Farid 2004; Komnas Perempuan 2007; Kammen and McGregor 2012). Despite this, there are many factors, trends, actors and motivations which remain unclear.

1 The exact death toll of the massacres is unknown, with estimates ranging from one hundred thousand to three million. As Robert Cribb writes, “A scholarly consensus has settled on a figure of 400–500,000, but the correct figure could be half or twice as much” (2001: 232).

It was with this continued “murk” which surrounds and obscures the killings and other forms of mass atrocities committed in mid-1960s Indonesia in mind that a group of Australia- and Indonesia-based researchers gathered to assess and discuss the current state of knowledge about these events. The “New Perspectives on the 1965 Violence in Indonesia” conference was held at The Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, Australia, on 11–13 February 2013. With support from the ANU and from the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), we (a small group of scholars and PhD students based at ANU, the University of Melbourne and the University of Queensland) were able to bring together scholars and community-based researchers from Indonesia and from around Australia. We were overwhelmed by individuals and groups wishing to attend and had many more requests for funding and support than could be accommodated. As a result, a number of the presenters joined us virtually in Canberra via Skype and video-recorded presentations.

The three days of the conference involved presentations by researchers and NGO activists from some of the many victims’ support and advocacy organisations that have been established in Indonesia over the past 15 years, both in the regions and in Jakarta. These included research papers on particular aspects of the violence, ranging from trends in military and civilian cooperation during the killings, to the effects of this violence on women, to efforts by survivors and their advocates via official and grass-roots approaches for reconciliation. There were heated debates as well as strong points of convergence over all these issues, and the delegates finished the conference with a general call to work together to collect further information about the killings and to disseminate our findings.

Following the conference, we invited speakers to submit articles which reflected on the special issue’s theme of new perspectives on the 1965 violence. The papers assembled here are the result of that process and reflect a wide range of disciplinary stances, areas of geographical focus across Indonesia, historical contexts and thematic approaches to the study of the killings and other forms of mass violence from this period. While all the papers examine this theme, each of the contributions approaches this topic from an area of particular concern. The contributions range from analyses of the role of the state and civilian actors, to ethnic and religious factors, to gendered forms of violence, and to the ways of addressing this mass violence and its legacies in the many different regions of Indonesia. The variety of disciplinary approaches to this area of research is also widespread. Amongst the contributors there are

historians, political scientists, Indonesian studies specialists, community-based researchers and survivor advocates.

The contributions to this special issue are organised thematically. They focus on: the events which sparked the massacres, the 1 October coup and the military's propaganda which followed; the organisation and movement of perpetrators in particular regions; groups which became targets for violence during the killings and mass arrests; the impact of the mass violence on women and their children, as well as specific forms of violence more frequently perpetrated against women victims; and, lastly, the contemporary struggles by survivors and their advocates to achieve truth and justice for the mass violence of 1965.

The first contributor, Yosef Djakababa, the Director of the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies Indonesia (CSEAS-Indonesia), Jakarta, focuses his attention on those crucial events in Jakarta on the night of 30 September/1 October 1965 and the days that followed. As with the killings, the events of the coup and the Indonesian military's movements in the immediate aftermath remain shrouded in mystery. Djakababa's article does not focus on the coup itself but rather on the Indonesian military's propaganda campaign which began in the days after 1 October 1965. This propaganda, which was created and disseminated by the military to inculcate anti-Communist hatred and fear amongst the Indonesian population, was the catalyst for the killings. In particular, Djakababa examines what he terms the "initial purge policy" of the emerging military regime; that is, the stories made up about the coup itself in which members of the PKI and, in particular, members of the PKI-aligned women's organisation Gerwani, were demonised for their alleged roles in the kidnapping and execution of six top-ranking generals and a general's aide. Djakababa then discusses how the propaganda created for this initial purge policy became the basis for ongoing forms of myth-making over the following 32 years of the New Order.

The next two contributions by Mathias Hammer, from The Australian National University, and Jessica Melvin, from The University of Melbourne, focus on the killings themselves within two specific regions of Indonesia; Hammer examines Central Java, while Melvin discusses Aceh province. Both Hammer and Melvin have carried out extensive field research in their respective provinces, and the findings offered in their articles are some of the best examples of the new research being carried out on the killings of 1965.

Hammer's research asks us to consider the complex relationship between state and civilian actors in organising and carrying out the killings and mass arrests. Taking as his case study the district of Klaten in the

south of Central Java, Hammer presents the movements and organisational patterns of the Army's Para-commando Regiment (RPKAD, *Resimen Pasukan Komando Angkatan Darat*) that was sent by the newly appointed military leader Suharto into that province shortly after the coup. He identifies a number of factors and structural constraints which facilitated or hindered the movement of this regiment and their coordination with local actors who were co-opted by these state forces to instigate the killings and arrests. In his analysis, Hammer also presents some of the findings of his fieldwork in this area, including descriptions of how victims were denounced, detained and killed, and how the military and their civilian counterparts tried to monitor, investigate and audit the identity and number of victims.

Melvin's contribution brings forth other crucial questions for the theme of new perspectives on the violence of 1965. She focuses on the dynamics of violence in a particular province, Aceh, bringing to light the importance of examining how the 1965 killings were shaped by local factors as well as national events. Further, she draws our attention to violence against a particular group of victims within the killings, Indonesians of Chinese heritage. To examine this violence against ethnic Chinese Indonesians in Aceh following the 1965 coup, Melvin very firmly situates her argument within the field of comparative genocide studies. Drawing on a wide range of sources, and based on her extensive fieldwork, she charts three distinct phases of violence against the ethnic Chinese community in Aceh. While acknowledging the difficulties of both naming the 1965 killings "genocide" and the often contentious position of ethnic Chinese within the victimology of the Indonesian massacres, Melvin asks us to reconsider the genocide debate: were the 1965–1966 killings genocide and, if so, why does it matter?

Set against these contributions by Djakababa, Hammer and Melvin which examine the incitement to and organisation of the killings, the article by Annie Pohlman studies the killings and mass arrests from a gender perspective. Pohlman from The University of Queensland, Brisbane, focuses on women's narratives about what happened to these women and their children during the violence of 1965. Drawing on interview and secondary testimonial accounts from across Indonesia, Pohlman investigates individual women's testimonies about the violence perpetrated against women and their children, as well as the strategies that women created to care for and protect children. These testimonies reveal some of the many experiences of women caught up in the violence that followed the 1965 coup, including stories about how women lost children and the effects of this loss.

The final research article to form part of this special issue by Sri Lestari Wahyuningroem is an investigation into attempts to achieve some form of acknowledgement or transitional justice for the victims of the 1965 killings in Indonesia. Wahyuningroem, currently at The Australian National University, draws on her extensive experience in the field of transitional justice research and advocacy in Indonesia to discuss the wide-ranging work at the grass-roots level by NGOs, victim advocacy and other groups over the past 15 years since the end of Suharto's New Order in 1998. She juxtaposes these grass-roots efforts for truth-seeking and reconciliation with the inertia and apparent complete lack of will by political elites at the national level to investigate or redress crimes committed under the New Order, including the massacres of 1965–1966. Despite painting a somewhat bleak picture of the potential for reform and redress in Jakarta, Wahyuningroem gives us much hope for the chances of local reconciliation and ways of dealing with this dark past in Indonesia.

The final section of this special issue on new perspectives on the 1965 violence is devoted to research and advocacy work being carried out at the national and grass-roots' levels in Indonesia. Four of the NGOs which attended the conference in Canberra in February 2013 have chosen to submit short reports on their research and advocacy programs, some choosing to highlight particular aspects of their work, others focusing on giving an overall picture of their organisation. The four reports are by: ELSAM (The Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy); SekBer '65 (The 'Joint Secretariat' for 1965); SKP-HAM (Solidarity of Victims of Human Rights Violations); and Syarikat. These four organisations differ considerably by size and scope of operations, yet they each make valuable contributions to truth-telling and reconciliation efforts in Indonesia. These reports do not attempt to disclose the wide range of activities undertaken by these organisations. Rather, they give some insight into the work by dedicated individuals and communities who have worked for years on the ground to uncover the hidden histories of 1965, and thus these reports are an invaluable contribution to this special issue on new perspectives on this mass violence.

As the perpetrators, survivors and original eyewitnesses of the 1965 killings inevitably pass away, the urgency of the work by community-based organisations, advocates and researchers alike grows. As more of the work of truth-seeking and truth-telling is done, despite the considerable challenges faced by survivors and their advocates, more about 1965 will be uncovered and understood. Nearly 50 years after this dark episode in Indonesian history the contributors to this special issue ask us to

pause and re-evaluate our understanding of the mass atrocities of the mid-1960s. Moreover, their work, as with the work being done by other researchers and organisations, asks us to seek further; to find the answers to Cribb's who's, where's and why's.

Individually, the contributors to this special issue highlight particular aspects of the violence, the movements and actions of perpetrators and victims, as well as the legacies of this violence for survivors, communities and Indonesian society more broadly. Taken together, these contributions address some of the many complex realities of the violence of 1965 and its aftermath, elucidating some of the obscured and murky parts of this period in Indonesian history. But most importantly, the research presented here, as with the work being carried out at the grass-roots level across Indonesia, asks that we do more to uncover the many histories of 1965 and, in the end, demand justice for its many victims.

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Dr. Annie Pohlman is a lecturer of Indonesian Studies at The University of Queensland, Australia. Her research focuses on Indonesian history and politics, comparative genocide studies, gendered experiences of violence, torture, and testimony. She is co-editor of *Genocide and Mass Atrocities in Asia* (Routledge 2013) and author of *Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966* (Routledge, 2014). Personal website <www.slccs.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=181047&pid=19599>
E-mail: <a.pohlman@uq.edu.au>