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Indonesia

“The Act of Killing”

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV463 - August 2013 -

Publication date: Wednesday 28 August 2013

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The Act of Killing has won widespread acclaim for the inventive way it gives an insight into the mental world of some of the perpetrators of one of the worst cases of mass violence in the 20th century and the continuing impact of this violence on Indonesian society. Because of its topic, it includes graphic descriptions of (sexual) violence. Watching it is a deeply unsettling experience but is essential for anybody trying to understand modern Indonesian society.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/congo2.jpg>]

The country's president at the time of massacres, Sukarno, was one of the leaders of the nationalist movement that in the late 1940s had won independence against Dutch colonialism. Of the three major sources of political power – the army, Islamic movements and the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) – the PKI gradually became his favorite in the 1960s. The charismatic populist and the Indonesian Communists drew closer and closer as Sukarno vehemently denounced western imperialism and the influence of western powers over the formally independent ex-colonies. He became an ally of Mao's China and started talking about a worldwide anti-imperialist front and 'Indonesian socialism'. Loyal supporting the popular Indonesian leader, the PKI became the largest Communist party outside the Communist bloc with millions of members and supporters. The autocratic Sukarno appointed prominent PKI-leaders to symbolic posts in his government.

Counter-revolution

The Indonesian elites and army leadership watched with growing unease. After bloody conflicts between the PKI and right-wing forces in the 1940s, the PKI had chosen a legal, peaceful strategy but it remained an opponent of the army. High ranking (retired) officers grew wealthy as entrepreneurs or plantation-owners where they confronted an increasingly confident, PKI-dominated labor movement. Religious leaders had their own reasons to oppose the PKI; they abhorred the left-wing 'atheists', even though many PKI-members were devout believers. Religious organizations owned large portions of land and opposed Sukarno's and PKI's plans for land reform.

The political situation grew increasingly tense as the 1960s progressed. The spark that lit the powder keg was a putsch on the 30th of September, 1965. A group of middle-ranking military officers abducted and killed a number of right-wing senior officers that were known to oppose Sukarno. Only hours later, the putschists declared a 'revolutionary council' that would replace Sukarno's cabinet. However, troops commanded by general Suharto swiftly crushed the '30 September Movement'.

In the following six months, Indonesian society was transformed as the country underwent a massive wave of violence. The PKI, its mass organizations and the left-wing of Sukarnoist nationalism were violently destroyed by a 'coalition for violence' composing of senior officers, big capitalists, religious movements and their militia. [1] Conservative estimates put the number of victims at between 700.000 and one million. Sukarno was swept aside, Suharto became the undisputed new ruler of Indonesia.

The 30 September Movement, or G30S in the Indonesian initials, is one of the great riddles of 20th century history. Indonesia's new rulers claimed it was a front of the PKI that tried to seize power. The Communists were said to have compiled kill-lists and to have prepared mass-graves. Especially singled out was Gerwani, the PKI-allied women's organization. The new regime concocted grotesque stories about how communist women had supposedly sexually tortured the captured generals. But the PKI didn't organize any actions in support of its supposed coup d'état and the number of communists that actually participated in the G30S was small.

The most convincing explanation of the movement is given by John Roosa. [2] The G30S didn't plan for a coup but wanted to impose a purge of the army leadership. However, after a number of botched kidnappings resulted in deaths, Sukarno couldn't support the movement. The declaration of a 'revolutionary council' by the movement was a panicked attempt to gain control of an escalating situation. PKI involvement was limited to a few leading members, among them secretary general D. N. Aidit, who acted without informing the rest of the leadership, let alone the party.

The G30S handed the army a dreamed for excuse to move against its opponents and seize power. Western powers supported the army's coup, donating money and weapons and signaling their approval of the bloodbath. Robert J. Martens, from 1963 to 1966 political officer at the United States Embassy in Jakarta, admitted handing a list with the names of 5.000 Indonesian leftists to the army, practically signing their death sentence. Martens reportedly later said; “It really was a big help to the army.... They probably killed a lot of people, and I probably have a lot of blood on my hands, but that’s not all that bad. There's a time when you have to strike hard at a decisive moment”. [3]

Present history

This history is only briefly dealt with in *The Act of Killing*. That is because this is a movie that is not primarily about the past of half a century ago, it is about the present, the continuing power of the perpetrators of '1965' and the kind of society they have made.

The film follows members of one of the militias that were part of the coalition for violence, the *Pemuda Pancasila*. In one especially disturbing scene, a group of former militia-members remember their youthful glory-days in the sixties, when they decided the value of human life, when they decided who would live and who would die. One man laughingly recalls the pleasure of raping teenage girls. The other men enthusiastically agree...

The movie focuses on three *Pemuda Pancasila* members. One of them, Herman, is followed as he makes an unsuccessful bid for political office. His motivation is the possibilities for fraud and corruption the job would provide. He is seen shaking down small business owners, members of the country's discriminated ethnic Chinese minority, together with his *Pemuda Pancasila buddies*. He relishes explaining how he would enrich himself if elected. This man claims to have murdered dozens of people in 1965 and after and shows an absolute lack of remorse. It seems possible he is too dumb to realize the enormity of his crimes.

Haji Anif is different. Of the three killers portrayed, he is the wealthiest. He has obviously done good for himself and became an affluent *pater familias* who takes his family on shopping trips to Jakarta's gaudy malls. He enjoys good relationships with powerful politicians – not despite the fact that he is a killer but because of it. After all, he is supposed to be one of the 'heroes' who 'saved Indonesia'. He too feels no remorse and explains why when he relates that morality and crime are relative. As Haji explains, when George W. Bush was president, 'Guantanamo' became legal: why would the permissibility of '1965' be any less dependent on political contingency? 'What do you mean, 'crimes against humanity?' It is history's winners who decide who are guilty and who innocent, what is a crime and what not. And since Haji is a winner, he has nothing to fear.

The 'star' of the film is Anwar Congo. Like his friends, he was a small criminal before 1965 but became a local 'hero' when as a *Pemuda Pancasila* recruit he tortured and killed dozens of people. The vain Anwar enthusiastically agrees with Oppenheimer's suggestion to make a film about his experience of 1965. This film was not supposed to be factual documentary (do Anwar and his friends even know what that is?) but would be a work of fiction that portrays their experience and feelings. The most surreal moments in *The Act of Killing* are scenes from this 'movie in the movie'. Just like Anwar was inspired by Hollywood movies in his killing techniques, the movie he wants to make is inspired by Hollywood. Different scenes see him playing a cowboy, a mafioso... As the process of making this movie

progresses and Anwar remembers his acts, a sense of what has done seems to dawn on him. After watching one of his own scenes, he wonders whether maybe he has sinned.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/congo.jpg>]

A former militia-member demonstrates his execution technique

A former militia-member demonstrates his execution technique

Myths

The anti-communist propaganda of the post-1965 'New Order' regime seems crude, contradictory, sometimes even counterproductive. If the PKI was really such an existential threat to the nation as the New Order propaganda claims, why was it absolutely no match at all for the army, supposedly heroic defenders of Indonesia? And what to make of the new rulers' insinuations that Sukarno was a sympathizer of the same movement that tried to dispose him? Indonesia expert Max Lane described the New Order's style of propaganda by comparing it to that of other anti-communist dictatorships: most dictators would claim that Communists were evil because they wanted to take people's possessions away or they would give a similar distorted picture of the goals of Communists. In the New Order's propaganda, the Communists committed evil acts because they were evil people, that is all. The complete obscurity of the political goals of the PKI was part of the general de-politicization of the population that was the New Order's goal. Unlike other right-wing dictatorships, the New Order didn't aim at mobilizing the population for its own ideology but at turning them in to an a-political, apathetic 'floating mass'.

Some times, the New Order propaganda just ignores all victims except those killed by G30S. For decades, each year Indonesian television showed the propaganda-movie *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The treason of G30S/PKI), a movie that portrays the communists as such bloodthirsty animals that watching it still helps Anwar get rid of feelings of guilt. A brief comment in *The Act of Killing* shows the effectiveness of this kind of blunt historical manipulation: one crew-member is surprised to hear that the PKI was ever a legal party... Commenting on the effect of *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, Indonesian academic Ariel Heryanto relayed how like in other countries kids played cops and robbers, in Indonesia kids would play 'communists and army' – but kids especially liked playing the communists who were fierce and strong, unlike the gentle soldiers who were most of all victims!

Another center-piece of New Order propaganda seems to have a similarly counterproductive effect. Near the monument for the officers murdered by the G30S, there is the *Museum Pengkhianatan PKI (Komunis)*, 'museum of 'communist treachery', with dioramas supposedly portraying revolts and coup-attempts of the PKI. No explanation of the motivation of the Communists is given, the museum doesn't even attempt to present a convincing narrative, as befits the complete de-politicization of the New Order. Leftist leader Amir Sjarifuddin Harahap for example is (of course) supposed to be one of the villains but it is hard to imagine that the museum's creators really thought that simply by omitting the fact, visitors would forget he was one of the leaders of the independence struggle and even prime minister of Indonesia. Since the army of course will not admit to executing prisoners like Sjarifuddin, leftists like him are all supposed to have defiantly refused to surrender, fighting until their death. The PKI's thinking will remain a mystery to the museum's visitors if they have no other information, but they will get the impression the PKI was a party with considerable support, capable of almost continuously launching insurrections and Communists appear as extremely dedicated, willing to do for their cause.

Another, orientalist reading of '1965', admits that there was massive bloodletting but is still compatible with the New Order myth of the army as a national savior. According to this version, the PKI had violated some supposed cultural taboos and the Indonesian population 'ran amok' in large numbers. This interpretation allows the army to present itself as the defender of peace and order and fits the 'official' histories of 1965 published by the army.

But mass killings on the scale of 1965 also leave behind millions whose family-members, friends and loved ones who were killed. Every day, they live with yet another, very different version of the memory of 1965. The reality of living among murderers who often have become rich and powerful constantly reminds them of what the ruling elites are capable of. The institutionalized impunity is a form of state terror, constantly reminding everybody who even thinks of resisting of what the rulers are capable of, of what lengths they will go to protect their privileges.

The contradictions and gaps in the official myth made it more versatile, capable of presenting different versions of 1965 to different audiences. And 15 years after the end of the Suharto regime, this versatile myth still holds power. Recently, 'Coordinating Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Minister' Djoko Suyanto rejected findings by the National Commission on Human Rights that 1965 was a gross human rights violation. As if echoing Anji Hanif's musings on the relativity of Human Rights, he declared; 'Define gross human rights violation! Against whom? What if it happened the other way around?' And; 'This country would not be what it is today if it didn't happen.' [4] In a few words, he showed the versatility of the New Order myth, implying there was no violation of Human Rights, that it anyway it was 'us or them', and that killings were necessary and justified. Incoherent yes, but powerful.

The Act of Killing explodes the propaganda of the post-1965 'New Order' regime by relating the views of the perpetrators themselves. The stories of Herman, Anjif and Anwar make the contradictions in the official myths about 1965 unavoidable and make the crucial role of terror in sustaining these myths explicit. Hearing it out of their own mouths, it is impossible to ignore the brutality they remember or to dismiss the testimonies as politically motivated. If even the militia members explain that they, and not the PKI, were the real monsters, then what can excuse their actions? Saving the nation? By raping children?

Fear

Despite popular stories of Indonesia as a success story of democracy and development, fear is a persistent element of Indonesian society. Ten years ago, while trying to make a documentary about a trade-union, Joshua Oppenheimer came into contact with this fear. People he spoke to didn't dare to be critical of the ruling powers since they knew what could happen. At first, Oppenheimer tried to make a movie that would relate the stories of survivors of 1965 but he found they were still too afraid to talk. The perpetrators didn't have this fear and after talking to many of them, Oppenheimer decided to structure his film around Herman, Anji and Anwar.

The Act of Killing shows the power of the perpetrators of 1965, their confidence that nobody will ever keep them accountable for what they did. It gives a rare perspective on an episode of mass violence from the perpetrators' view. Survivor accounts from genocides roughly divide members of the institution that organizes the killings in three groups. There is a small minority that refuses to engage in the killing and a much larger group who go along with instructions from above, *Mitl'Åxufer* who do what they are told. And there is a small group of people who enjoy their power and freedom to do as they please.

The Act of Killing gives a glimpse of the mental world of people in the third category. Most testimonies we have from the side of perpetrators are defensive accounts, trying to minimize the killings and/or their role in them. But the Indonesian *génocidaires* know they have won an irreversible victory, so they don't need to deny or disparage their actions, they are free to relate the enjoyment they felt as they raped, tortured and killed. In fact, there is reason to doubt the figures they volunteer about the number of people they have killed, at times it feels like they are boasting. *The Act of Killing* shows men for whom boasting can take the form of emphasizing their cruelty and possibly exaggerating the number of their victims. It should be emphasized that these perpetrators are men, routinely exhibiting extreme misogyny – obviously a powerful way to dehumanize many of their victims.

“The Act of Killing”

What has been obvious for decades for survivors of 1965, that the violence of 1965 was not 'spontaneous' or 'excesses', becomes an unavoidable conclusion for viewers. The film shows 1965 to have been an act of immense political terror. The result is a film that is truly shocking experience, causing at times physical revulsion. *The Act of Killing* is difficult to watch, as any attempt to really deal with crimes of the magnitude of 1965 inevitably is – and should be. It is essential viewing for anybody trying to understand mass violence or modern Indonesian society. Many of the Indonesian collaborators on the film need to remain anonymous and in the country itself, the film can only be shown in semi-underground conditions. The shocked, enraged and saddened responses of many young Indonesians to the film offer some fragile hope that the murderers' will not remain victorious forever.

[1] The term is from Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies* (Cambridge, 2010).

[2] John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* ((London 2006).

[3] Kathy Kadane, 'U.S. Accused Of Role In Massacre', *Chicago Tribune* (May 23, 1990). [Online](#).

[4] Margareth S. Aritonang , '1965 mass killings justified: Minister' *Jakarta Post* (October 01, 2012) [Online](#).