

The killings of 1965-66

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Prisoners captured during the Trisula Operation

*Photograph taken at the Museum Brawijaya by
Vannessa Hearman*

In the course of little more than five months from late 1965 to early 1966, anti-communist Indonesians killed about half a million of their fellow citizens. Nearly all the victims were associated with Indonesia's Left, especially with the Communist Party (PKI) that had risen to unprecedented national prominence under President Sukarno's Guided Democracy. The massacres were presided over and often coordinated or carried out by anti-communist sections of the Indonesian army, but they also engaged wider elements of Indonesian society - both people who had reason to fear communist power and people who wanted to establish clear anti-communist credentials in troubled times.

The killings followed a coup which took place in Jakarta on the morning of 1 October 1965 in which six senior army generals were killed and a revolutionary council was formed, seizing power from Sukarno. For the whole of the New Order period, Indonesian authorities portrayed these events as a communist grab for power, which was to be followed by the wholesale slaughter of their opponents.

Sceptics, by contrast, doubted the PKI's involvement and even wondered whether the coup might have been a 'black' operation by conservative forces, intended to compromise the Party. Recent research, especially by John Roosa, who writes for this issue, has shown that the PKI leadership was closely involved in the coup, but that the aims of the operation were far more limited than a seizure of power.

The destruction of the PKI was part of a process that brought Suharto's military-dominated New Order regime to power. The new regime abandoned Sukarno's leftist orientation in foreign and domestic politics and embarked on a program of western-style economic development. The New Order never concealed the fact of the killings. Rather, it portrayed them as both a justifiable response to the alleged threat presented by the PKI and as an outcome of unrestrained populist politics in the 'Old Order'. The undefined memory of massacre was thus recruited to justify the New Order's elaborate structure of political and cultural control and restriction. The alleged evil intentions of the PKI were also used to justify an enduring and vindictive persecution of Indonesians who had been associated with the Left and who survived the massacres. More than a million passed through detention camps, and some were held for ten years or more. After their release, they faced continuing restrictions on their civil rights within Indonesia and their family members - including children not even born in 1965 - faced harassment and restriction.

One of the great achievements of the post-Suharto period is the fact that it is now possible to begin the complex work of better documenting the events that occurred in 1965 and in the years that followed. This process is slow and painstaking. It is made difficult by a diminishing pool of informants, the fading memories of those who are still alive, the decay of physical evidence and continuing prejudice in local communities. Groups trying to uncover detail of the killings have at times faced official harassment and many of the formal restrictions against former communists remain in place. Significant progress has nevertheless been made, drawing on rich veins of oral history and documentary sources within and outside Indonesia.

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For all this growing body of analysis, the killings themselves remain tantalisingly elusive. Direct witnesses were few, and perpetrators have for the most part remained stubbornly silent. The usual reluctance of killers to talk about what they have done is compounded by the fear of reprisals or claims for compensation. Many Indonesians, too, look back on a national history that is studded with difficult, controversial and divisive events and argue that Indonesians should instead look forward and focus on improving their future rather than dwelling on past crimes. On both sides of the Left-Right divide, moreover, there has been a feeling that a too-detailed investigation of the precise circumstances of the killings might reveal sordid, unpleasant details that would compromise the stark elegance of mainstream narratives both of communist victimhood and of communist evil. All but one of the contributors to this important edition of *Inside Indonesia* presented papers based on their original research at a conference on the same theme organised by Tony Reid, Doug Kammen, Kate McGregor and Vanessa Hearman and held at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore in June 2009. We would like to thank the conference organisers, who are editing a book based on the conference proceedings, for encouraging participants to also contribute to this collection. Many more researchers were involved in that conference than could possibly be showcased here.

This edition begins with an article by Brad Simpson, reminds us of the support western governments provided to the army and other anti-communist forces at this time. This is followed by Greg Fealy's account of Nahdlatul Ulama members' involvement in the events of 1965-66. Dahlia Gratia Setiyawan, Vanessa Hearman, Taufik Ahmad and Annie Pohlman follow with harrowing accounts of Communists' lives under attack, on the run and in detention camps in Java and Sulawesi, while Katharine McGregor describes the terrible pressures experienced by survivors and their supporters. John Roosa's dictionary, which offers readers insight into the mechanics of the coup itself, rounds the collection out. In these articles we get a glimpse of a terrible world that has now largely receded into memory. But the task of understanding the circumstances that could bring such misery and barbarity to a country which achieved independence with such hope for justice and prosperity remains a task for every generation.

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Indonesian Killings 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali.

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