

Indonesian authorities ban discussion of 1965 coup at Bali writers festival

By John Roberts
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Indonesian police and government officials prohibited events dealing with the 1965 military coup at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Bali last week. They forced the organisers to cancel film showings and discussion panels referring to the massacre of between 500,000 and a million people during and after the CIA-backed coup led by General Suharto.

The victims of Suharto's putsch, which established a 32-year dictatorship, included members and supporters of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), trade unionists, workers, students and peasants.

This is the first time in the 12-year history of the international festival that such blatant censorship has been imposed. This year some 165 authors from over 25 countries were scheduled to participate in 220 events at some 40 venues. The government crackdown attracted international media coverage, although the 50th anniversary of the coup itself had passed on September 30 with only perfunctory mention in the media.

Local police chief Farman warned festival organisers in the days leading up to the opening that it was an offence under the 1999 criminal code, punishable by 12 years' imprisonment, to spread allegedly communist or Marxist ideas. Farman declared that if unacceptable events were not removed from the schedule, the festival would be shut down.

The authorities were clearly intent on preventing any discussion on the 1965 coup, which implicates every section of Indonesia's ruling elite in one of the great crimes of the 20th century, a massacre that is central to the ideological foundation of the Indonesian state as it stands today.

Among the events withdrawn from the festival's program were three panels on the mass murders, the screening of Joshua Oppenheimer's recent documentaries on the killings, *The Look of Silence* and *The Act of Killing*, and the launching by the Australian-based Herb Feith

Foundation of three books newly translated from Indonesian on the bloodbath.

In the cancelled panel "Bearing Witness 1965," former Balinese political prisoner Putu Oka Sukanta, author of *Breaking the Silence*, and Australian academic Katherine McGregor were to discuss the experience of creating the translated works and the harrowing testimonials of victims and perpetrators of the mass violence.

In an article on the censored material, another Australian academic, Vanessa Hearman, who was to lead one of the banned panels, referred to writings by victims of the massacres, discovered during the preparation of "Prison Songs." This was a presentation of songs composed by some of the 400 prisoners detained by the military in Bali's Denpasar Pekambangan prison without trial following the coup. Hearman described the songs, subsequently recorded by some of Indonesia's well known bands, as "moving, haunting and rousing."

In the face of the official intimidation, the festival organisers left the venues of cancelled events in place, with empty stages and seating, as a protest.

Some commentators attributed the crackdown to nervous local authorities, pointing out that researchers estimate that in 1965-66 some 80,000 Balinese—5 percent of the population—were murdered.

Action against such an internationally prominent event, however, indicates the involvement of President Joko Widodo's administration amid fears within the ruling elite as a whole of mounting economic and social tensions in Indonesia today.

Widodo himself set the tone for the crackdown when on September 30 he squelched rumours that he would offer an official apology to the victims of the 1965 violence. In a statement in front of the leaders of the Muhammadiyah, the country's second largest Muslim organisation, he declared he had "no thoughts" of doing so.

Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security

Luhut Panjaitan said while “reconciliation” was still being discussed, there were “no thoughts on apologising ... Don’t ever look backward.”

Like that of his predecessor, ex-general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Widodo’s regime has dismissed a 2012 finding by the National Commission on Human Rights that the army committed crimes against humanity during the massacres.

Other developments point to the involvement of Widodo’s government. It was directly behind the arrest of 77-year-old Tom Iljas, a Swedish citizen of Indonesian origin, on October 10. He was deported six days later for photographing his father’s grave, in a mass burial site in West Sumatra. Iljas was accused of making a film about the killings.

In Central Java on October 16, police questioned three students and destroyed copies of a student newspaper. The *Lentera*, the Indonesian language paper of a Christian university, had published an edition “Salatiga Red City,” which dealt with the anti-communist purges in the area. Copies were shared on the Internet before the police action.

This repression is occurring amid worsening economic conditions. Indonesia’s annual economic growth rate for the second quarter was 4.7 percent, the lowest in six years, after averaging 5.4 percent since 2000, mainly on the basis of mining and commodity exports. Youth unemployment officially stands at 20 percent.

On top of the slowdown in China and other key export markets, which is seriously affecting Indonesian business, further threats are looming from a possible hike in US interest rates, which could affect capital flows. There is also a falling rupiah (down 9.5 percent this year) and a likely rise in food prices due to an El Nino drought.

After a year in office, Widodo’s promotion during the 2014 election campaign as “a man of the people,” independent of the ruling oligarchies, has largely been discredited. He and his party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, led by former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, are an integral part of the political establishment that rests on the military.

The ruling elite that developed after 1965 was based on the lie that the army takeover of the country by Suharto was a necessary response to a PKI-instigated coup to topple Indonesia’s founding President Sukarno. General Suharto seized upon the assassination of six top army leaders on the night of 30 September, supposedly by a shadowy PKI-linked “September 30 movement.”

In reality, coup plans had long been hatched by the US

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which had cultivated its influence in the Indonesian military and been involved in previous plots from 1956 to 1958. Sukarno’s government, which leant on the PKI, right-wing Muslim groups and the armed forces, was seen by Washington and its allies as unstable, particularly in the context of the Vietnam War. When the opportunity came, the CIA provided lists of people to be eliminated.

The 1965 coup could only succeed because the PKI had joined Sukarno’s capitalist government and systematically tied workers and the rural masses to it, helping to suppress eruptions by workers and peasants in 1946 and 1957, and blocking any fight for an independent socialist perspective. The PKI followed the Stalinist “two-stage theory,” which insisted that in Indonesia and other less developed countries the working class had to subordinate itself to so-called progressive elements of the national capitalist class to carry out the bourgeois national revolution before any socialist revolution could be envisaged.

Suharto was only forced to quit, after three decades of military rule, amid the shattering impact of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. Far from his removal ushering in a new period of democracy in Indonesia, all the parties that dominate the Jakarta establishment today are either directly connected to the Suharto junta or collaborated with it. The Widodo government’s censorship of the Bali festival is another demonstration of that.

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