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Feelings at the Margins

Dealing with Violence, Stigma and Isolation
in Indonesia

Campus Verlag
Frankfurt/New York

Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>
ISBN 978-3-593-50005-8

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Cover design: Campus Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt-on-Main

Cover illustration: Dawn Breaking over the River Nyuataatn, East Kalimantan/Indonesia

© Michaela Haug 2004

Printing office and bookbinder: CPI buchbücher.de, Birkach

Printed on acid free paper.

Printed in Germany

This book is also available as an E-Book.

For further information:

www.campus.de

www.press.uchicago.edu

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Keeping Hope in a Marginalized World— Testimonies of Former Political Prisoners in Yogyakarta

Baskara T. Wardaya

Many studies that discuss the issues of Indonesia during the tumultuous year of 1965 focus on the murders of the army generals that occurred on October 1 of that year, and the alleged *coup d'état* that followed. These studies are particularly interested in answering the question of who actually was the *dalang* (puppet master) or mastermind behind the murders (Anderson and McVey 1971; Fic 2005; Roosa 2006).

There are fewer studies addressing what happened *after* October 1, 1965, namely the mass killings and imprisonment of Indonesians who were accused and suspected of being members of the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia; the Indonesian Communist Party). Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in the next two and a half months, while many others were imprisoned and/or executed summarily without necessary legal procedures—making it a national (if not international) tragedy. Still, studies of this period are far fewer in number than the studies of the alleged coup.

Even fewer studies have been conducted on the survivors of the tragedy. Many of these survivors are those who were imprisoned under extremely harsh conditions but managed to survive until they were released. Upon their release, these survivors were allowed to return to society as “free” people, but in reality they were marginalized and discriminated against.¹

The scarcity of studies on the survivors was in part because during the rule of President Suharto, which began shortly after the killings of 1965, Indonesians were not allowed to discuss the events of 1965 openly outside the parameters that had been set up by the government. Now that the Suharto government is gone—he was forced to step down in 1998—more studies on these survivors are needed in order to understand the events of 1965 and its impact more comprehensively.

1 A few works have focused on the survivors, such as Ita F. Nadia (2009) and Hersri Setiawan (2006).

This article is an attempt to look at the impact of the 1965 events more broadly, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of some of the survivors. It will look at how the 1965 tragedy caused damage in their lives; how they feel about it; what expression and language they use to express their feelings; and how they cope with the situation, especially with the marginalization and discrimination that they have to bear.

The Background

On October 1, 1965 six top military generals of Indonesia were kidnapped and killed in a military operation. Another high-ranking military officer was also killed because he was mistaken for another general. The military operation was conducted by the self-declared G30S (Gerakan Tiga puluh September), or the September 30th Movement, led by three prominent Indonesian Army officers, namely Lieutenant Colonel Untung Samsuri, Colonel Abdul Latief and Brigadier General Soepardjo.

In the wake of the event General Suharto, head of Indonesia's KOSTRAD (Komando Cadangan Strategis Angkatan Darat; Army Strategic Reserve) took control of the military leadership. Supported by his close associates, Suharto announced that the PKI was the mastermind behind the kidnapping and murders (Suwarno 2009). The fact that the three main leaders of G30S were actually Army officers with close relations to General Suharto was disregarded.

Following the announcement, about three weeks after the event, a series of mass arrests and killings of people who were accused of being communist began to take place. During the last two weeks of October 1965, widespread killings occurred in Central Java. More massive bloodbaths took place in East Java during the month of November, followed by similar mass murders in Bali in December 1965 (Cribb 1990; Robinson 1995; Suryawan 2007). There were also similar killings in other parts of the country, but most of them were smaller in scale and many occurred after 1965. In total, about half a million Indonesians perished during this period.

Along with the killings, thousands of people who were suspected of being communists were arrested, interrogated and sent to prisons in different locations throughout the country. Many of the prisoners died of summary executions, tortures, maltreatment and hunger. In 1969, thousands of

male prisoners were moved to the remote island of Buru, located in the eastern part of the country. Meanwhile many women prisoners were sent to the infamous prison of Plantungan, located in Central Java.² Family members of those who were killed and imprisoned were stigmatized as communists and traitors to the nation's five principles of Pancasila.³ They were considered "dangerous" people who should be avoided and discriminated against.

The Official Narrative

In telling the above events, General Suharto and his "New Order" government created their own narrative. According to Suharto's official narrative, the main culprit of what happened on October 1, 1965 was the PKI. It says that the PKI masterminded a "rebellion" (even a *coup d'état*) against the government on the morning of October 1, 1965, by kidnapping and murdering six Army generals along with another high-ranking officer. Because of this gruesome act of violence, according to the narrative, the people of Indonesia were enraged and in the next several months they spontaneously launched a counter attack against the communists. They "ran amok" and killed thousands of members of the PKI. In the aftermath of the killings, the government caught and arrested suspected communists who survived the massacre and put them in jail.

In the chaotic situation of 1965–1966, still according to this narrative, President Sukarno officially appointed Major General Suharto to take control of the country and to use any means necessary to restore order, including a ban against the communist party. Suharto "succeeded" in carrying out the order. He was even able to start a "better" government that eventually replaced the "incompetent" government of President Sukarno.

This narrative has suggested that due to Sukarno's multiple mistakes (along with the mistakes of his supporters) it was justified that Sukarno be detained under house arrest until his death in 1970. While the Sukarno government was dubbed *Orde Lama* or the "Old Order", Suharto and his

2 For a personal account on the experience of living as a woman prisoner in Plantungan Prison, see Sumiyarsi Sivirini (2010).

3 These five principles are: belief in one God; humanity; unity; democracy; and social justice.

supporters called their own government *Orde Baru* or the “New Order”, suggesting that this was a much better and capable government. The new government considered itself a “total correction” to all the errors made by the old and unfit government of President Sukarno.

During the rule of the Suharto government, this kind of narrative prevailed and was rarely contested or challenged. Even worse, this narrative was often elaborated with invented details that in essence legitimized the rule of the “New Order” and justified all kinds of atrocities and repressions against the people (McGregor 2007).

An example of this was the elaborate story of the “Flower Fragrance Party” (*Pesta Harum Bunga*). It was said that the “party” took place on October 1, 1965 near an unused well in the Lubang Buaya (which literally means “crocodile hole”) district where the bodies of the generals were dumped. According to this story, members of Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, a women’s organization associated with the PKI) held an “orgy” of violence where they mutilated the private parts of the generals and danced around the dead victims’ bodies while wearing skimpy dresses. Regardless of whether or not this was an accurate description of events (the story has never been proven true), this kind of elaborated story was important for the “New Order” government to perpetuate an impression (and later a “memory”) of how the PKI-associated Gerwani were cruel and sadistic. Moreover it became some kind of “warning” or reminder to the people that any political involvement of a women’s organization could result in such cruel and even sadistic practices. This warning, in turn, was useful as a means of justification for controlling women organizations throughout the country since 1965, especially by limiting women’s political aspirations and activities.

At the same location where the orgy of violence allegedly took place, the “New Order” government built a grandiose monument called *Monumen Tujuh Pahlawan Revolusi* or “Monument of the Seven Heroes of the Revolution”. The monument is intended to demonstrate the bravery and dedication of the generals who died on October 1, 1965, and how the PKI and Gerwani were terribly immoral and violent. It is important to note that according to the depiction on the monument, the brave and dedicated ones were all military personnel, while all the violent, immoral and sadistic villains were civilians. For the militaristic “New Order” government, this kind of monument is necessary at least for several reasons: (a) that there is a close association between the word *pahlawan* (hero) and the military; (b)

that in the October 1, 1965 military operation launched by the G30S, the Army was merely a victim of the PKI's conspiracy and cruelty; (c) that the massacre and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Indonesian citizens in the wake of the military operation were justified; (d) that the dethroning of President Sukarno was also justified, because he associated himself with the PKI; (e) that the discrimination against former political prisoners and people who are associated with them is right and encouraged. The same government made other efforts to justify its version of narratives about the 1965 tragedy, such as producing an anti-PKI film called *The Treason of the September 30th Movement/PKI (Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI)* and compelling the public (especially students) to watch it every year.

The Marginalization

Under such circumstances it became very difficult for the former political prisoners of the 1965 tragedy and their families to live normal lives. It was almost impossible for them to enjoy life as free citizens and/or equal members of society. They were considered dangerous, former "traitors" to the nation and were part of the so-called "latent danger of communism." They had to be closely watched, lest they start another "rebellion" or a *coup d'état* against the Indonesian government.

As a consequence, they were denied jobs, put under constant surveillance, and required to regularly report to the local authorities or neighborhood leaders, while their identity cards were given the special code "E.T.," indicating that they were *Eks-Tapol* or *Eks-Tahanan Politik*, meaning former political prisoners. Their rights as legitimate citizens were ignored. At the same time their voices were silenced. They were not only denied the rights to write and speak in public, but were also not allowed to write anything related to the 1965 tragedy, especially writing stories that would be different from the official narrative of the government. The "New Order" government of President Suharto firmly controlled any possible discourse about what happened in 1965 and related events thereafter.

Following the fall of President Suharto from power in 1998 there were hopes that the situation would change for the better. The hopes were never realized and the marginalization of former political prisoners and their

families continued. An honorable attempt by the late President Abdurrachman Wahid on March 15, 2000 to apologize to the victims was met with much criticism and opposition. To this day the victims and former political prisoners of 1965 continue to suffer marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination.

Aim and Context of the Study

This study aims to explore the ways in which the former political prisoners express their feelings and deal with marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination. Some of the subjects of this study are members of an association of former political prisoners in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, called Sambung Roso, which literally means Connecting Feelings.⁴ This is a forum in which members regularly meet and help each other as fellow political prisoners of Indonesia's 1965 tragedy. Different from other associations of former political prisoners, Sambung Roso has no political agenda. Its focus is more on maintaining *persaudaraan* (friendship or brotherhood) among themselves while helping each other in times of need. Other subjects belong to a similar group called Kipper (Kiprah Perempuan or Women's Activities). Just like Sambung Roso, Kipper is also a non-political forum of former political prisoners who try to help and support each other. While members of Sambung Roso are men, members of Kipper are women.

I came to know about Sambung Roso and Kipper partly because I often joined their meetings and visited their families. I also often invited them to participate in the academic forums dealing with Indonesian history held by Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta where I work. Members of Sambung Roso and Kipper belong to different religions: Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. Most (but not all) of the subjects in this study, however, are Christian. This is in part because when I asked members of Sambung Roso and Kipper to write down their experiences and feelings

⁴ There are other associations of former political prisoners and their families such as Pakorba (Paguyuban Korban Orde Baru; Association of the New Order's Victims); LPRKROB (Lembaga Perjuangan Rehabilitasi Korban Rejim Orde Baru; Forum for the Struggle for Rehabilitation of the New Order Regime's victims); and YPKP 1965 (Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan 1965/1966; The Foundation for Victims of the 1965/1966 Killings).

regarding their status as former political prisoners, the ones that submitted their writings were mostly Christians.

It is interesting to see that despite the accusation that they were communist, in reality each of the members of Sambung Roso and Kipper belongs to an organized religion. In the case of members who are Christian, some of them were already Christian prior to 1965, while others became Christian during their imprisonment. Part of the reasons why they became Christian was because during their imprisonment the church (especially the Catholic Church) helped them and the families they left behind. It should be noted that even among members of Sambung Roso and Kipper who are in favor of the PKI's ideas in the past, there is no notion of contradiction between supporting the ideals of the communist party and their faith as religious persons. For them, fighting for justice and working for the people's welfare is part of their faith in God and their love of their nation, Indonesia.

The Suffering and the Coping Strategies

In dealing with post-1965 difficult situations, these former political prisoners have tried their best to adapt themselves to the harsh circumstances and to develop coping strategies in order to survive. There are several strategies that have been adopted, such as joining a religion, deepening their personal faith in God, or forming various associations of former political prisoners. In the testimonies below we can see examples of how some former political prisoners in the Yogyakarta area describe their experiences, feelings, emotions and coping strategies regarding the marginalization they suffer.⁵ The testimonies presented here are based on the written (that is handwritten) testimonies of the subjects. Before writing their testimonies they knew that the testimonies would be used as materials for public presentation in academic forums. In order to keep their privacy, the names of the subjects being used in this study are not their real names.

⁵ Similar testimonies can be found in Baskara T. Wardaya (2013). Some of the subjects in this study (with different pseudonyms) are also featured in the book.

(1) Agnes Sumaryanti⁶

Agnes Sumaryanti lived in Yogyakarta. While studying in high school she joined the IPPI (Ikatan Pemuda Pelajar Indonesia), an association of Indonesian youth and students in which President Sukarno was an honorary member. After finishing high school she joined the PMKRI (Perhimpunan Mahasiswa Katolik Republik Indonesia), an association of Indonesia's Catholic Students, specifically university students. In December 1965 Sumaryanti was arrested on the accusation that she was a member of Gerwani, the women's organization closely associated with the PKI. She denied the allegation but nonetheless was arrested. After four months of detention and interrogation she was released because there was no proof whatsoever that she was a Gerwani member or a communist.

Following her release, Sumaryanti continued her studies while working part-time as a schoolteacher. Life went on as usual. But to her surprise, two years later in 1968, she was again arrested. The local authorities said that since Sumaryanti had been arrested before, she must be a communist. Several military personnel took her by force from her boarding house. She was handcuffed, brought to a military post, interrogated about something of which she had no knowledge, and was humiliatingly tortured. "I was often interrogated and was forced to take off all of my clothes so that I was totally naked," she said. "I was then forced to kiss the genitals of each one of them [the interrogators]. ... I was laid on the floor, face down, and they stepped on my body. Then they shaved my hair... I fainted."⁷

At first she was imprisoned in Yogyakarta, but in 1971 she was transferred to Plantungan, a women prison and former lepers' colony located on the northern coast of Central Java. She was kept there for the next six years before she, along with about 450 other prisoners, was transferred to Bulu prison located in Semarang, the provincial capital of Central Java. In Bulu prison the women were indoctrinated (in the form of what was called *Santiaji* programs) and were told, "to repent (*bertobat*) from being rebels, prostitutes and atheists". Thanks to Amnesty International, the non-governmental organization concerned with human rights issues, Sumaryanti

6 See Sumaryanti's fuller testimony (with a different pseudonym) in Wardaya (2013), 147–152.

7 Written Testimony, March 2010. See a slightly different translation in Wardaya (2013, 148).

and all the other prisoners were released from prison on September 27, 1978.

In coping with the situation, Sumaryanti tries to be mentally strong. She relies on her faith. She deeply believes that God will always strengthen and help her: "I remain optimistic that God is full of love for each of His creations. That is why I always believe that solutions will be provided for all of the problems that I have."⁸ That is why, she said, "I will do anything in order to get my life back".

Another way for Sumaryanti to cope with the situation is looking after her children. She has worked several jobs with the main purpose of providing the best possible education for her children. She simply ignores negative comments that come from her cynical neighbors. For her, "in the eyes of God, all jobs are honorable." The important thing for Sumaryanti now is not crying over her misery but to work hard: "Now I don't need to cry over my situation anymore... This is not a time to sit back and fold hands. It's time to work hard."⁹

Not happy with working hard just for her own interests and the interests of her children, Sumaryanti wants to turn her unfortunate situation into efforts to work for fellow former political prisoners. She writes:

Then I began to think of the fate of those who are also marginalized like myself. [I realize] that my children are beginning to settle down. Now it's time for me to speak up. I decided to start speaking up about all the lies that had misled this nation. I did this so that all the cruelty that has been done to my nation will not happen again. The dark picture of my beloved nation's past was enough. I want to see my homeland peaceful and prosperous, in which the law is upheld, justice realized, and all the children of this nation become bright and dignified. I know this is not easy. But I have to do this, because this is an obligation that I get from the people who have been oppressed like me...¹⁰

With almost no fear she began to speak out publicly about all the injustices that she and other political prisoners had to endure during their years of imprisonment. Sumaryanti often spoke at different forums discussing issues related to the 1965 tragedy. She has also appeared in several documentary films.¹¹

8 Written Testimony, March 2010.

9 Written Testimony, March 2010.

10 Written Testimony, March 2010. See Wardaya (2013, 152).

11 Such as the documentary called *Perempuan Yang Tertuduh* (Lembaga Kreativitas Kemanusiaan, Jakarta, 2007).

Summaryanti expects that the international community will pay attention to the survivors of the tragedy and help them: "I hope the international community can help lessen the burdens of the 1965 tragedy, financially and spiritually. For us, who are already 60 years old or older, please help us by sharing our living costs."¹²

She also pleads for the children of former political prisoners: "For our children and grandchildren, please help us with jobs and education". She repeats her request to help survivors of the 1965 tragedy by saying: "We, the victims of the 1965 tragedy who are already nearing the end of our life, are never tired of hoping in God's generosity. Please be the extension of God's loving hands."¹³

(2) Rahmono

Rahmono, another former political prisoner, was born into a farmer's family in the district of Sleman, Yogyakarta. A few years after completing junior high school, he entered a teacher's training school in 1962. On November 19, 1965 he was called to the office of the village leader. To his surprise, upon arriving at the office he was asked to get into a military truck. He was then sent to a local military detention center and forced to "confess" that he was member of Pemuda Rakyat: a youth organization that had close associations with the PKI.

In February 1966, Rahmono was transferred to an island prison off the southern coast of Central Java called Nusakambangan. He spent three years on the island. After that he was transferred to the notorious prison-island, Buru Island. There he spent ten years in very harsh prison conditions. In 1979, along with other prisoners, he was released, but his identity card was given the sign "E.T." indicating that he is a former political prisoner.

Upon his release Rahmono got married and built a family. Due to his history, he started everything basically from scratch. After years of hard work he was happy to be able to own a simple home. Although Rahmono was lucky enough to survive the massive earthquake that struck Yogyakarta in 2006 killing more than 5,000 people, unfortunately his home did not, like many other houses it collapsed.

12 Written Testimony, March 2010.

13 Written Testimony, March 2010; see Wardaya (2013, 152).

Reflecting on all the difficulties and sufferings that he has been through, and realizing his status as a former political prisoner, Rahmono says all he can do is, "cuman nrimo" or just accept whatever happens to him. In the past he regularly received financial aid for the poor from the government, but without any apparent reason the aid was canceled. He never protested the cancellation because he thought the reason must be because he is a former political prisoner; he was afraid of causing a larger problem for himself and his family.

Responding to the situation Rahmono turns to God. He hopes that "God will give His blessings to some people or humanitarian institutions so that they will open their hearts and be willing to help me".¹⁴

(3) Fransiskus Sumbogo

Fransiskus Sumbogo was a teacher in a vocational junior high school in Yogyakarta. In the morning he taught in the school and in the afternoon he delivered milk to his father's customers, because his family owned a small business selling cow's milk. During his spare time he also gave private lessons to the son of a Chinese Indonesian family. The father of the family was an expert in acupuncture. From that man, Sumbogo learned how to do acupuncture.

In 1965, Sumbogo was arrested on the accusation that he was a communist. First he was imprisoned in Yogyakarta, and then he was moved to the town of Semarang and Nusakambangan prison-island, before eventually being moved again, along with others, to Buru Island. In 1979 he was released. Upon his release he opened a simple store selling household goods. He also practiced the acupuncture skills that he had learned before his imprisonment. In order to enhance his skill he took acupuncture lessons at Bethesda Hospital in Yogyakarta.

Expressing his emotions after the imprisonment, Sumbogo says he "rumaos tersingkir" or feels marginalized. Responding to that kind of feeling, he tries "to remain strong in this situation, to be grateful that I am still alive. And this is because the blessings from God, who is Lord Jesus Christ Himself."¹⁵

14 Written Testimony, March 19, 2010.

15 Written Testimony, January 2010.

At the same time Sumbogo feels bad because many of his fellow former political prisoners suffer from stress and from lengthy sickness without getting any proper help. Some have even died in very miserable ways as marginalized persons. He hopes that there will be help for them, especially in the form of access to "Jamkesmas" (Jaminan Kesehatan Masyarakat), a public health program run by the government.

(4) Theresia Sumirah¹⁶

Marginalization and stigmatization are not only suffered by former political prisoners, but also by members of their families. An example of this is Theresia Sumirah of Yogyakarta, the daughter of a former political prisoner.

Sumirah's father was arrested in approximately August of 1966. The reason was that when asked by a neighborhood official to participate in a traditional arts performance (*ketoprak*), he refused because he had some other business to do. The neighborhood official felt offended and threatened Sumirah's father by saying that he would make an announcement to the neighborhood that he was a communist. Two weeks later the official returned accompanied by a policeman. The two arrested Sumirah's father. He was put in the Yogyakarta prison of Wirogunan for four years, before he was transferred to the Nusakambangan prison-island where he served the next nine years.

While her father was in prison, Sumirah's mother and siblings suffered terribly, including her youngest sister who was only six months old when her father was arrested. The mother had to divide the children among her relatives so that they could survive. Luckily the Catholic Church in Yogyakarta helped the family, but that assistance was not enough. To help support her family, Sumirah worked as a domestic helper for another family since the age of fourteen. A few years later she was asked by her mother to marry a man she hardly knew, which she did. Only after the wedding did she know that her husband was a former political prisoner. "So both my father and my husband are former political prisoners," she said. "My heart, which had suffered from my father's imprisonment, now suffered even more because of this [situation]." Sumirah and her family lived very poorly,

16 See Sumirah's fuller testimony (with a different pseudonym) in Wardaya (2013, 136–146).

and she became the subject of many offenses by her neighbors and relatives.

Feeling that the pressures were too much to bear, in 1988 Sumirah decided to move to Kalasan, a district east of Yogyakarta. Unfortunately, even there she became the target of attacks by her new neighbors once they knew that her husband was a former political prisoner and that her father was also a former political prisoner. When her oldest son was just four months old, a neighbor threw a chicken nest filled with fleas at her house. As a result, the boy soon suffered from flea infestation and became ill for a long period of time. On another occasion, when the boy was a little bit older, a neighbor submerged him in the nearby river with an intention to harm him.

The treatment of the boy and his younger brother by the neighbors was particularly cruel. This was despite the fact that they did not have anything to do with what happened in 1965. The boys were often set up as if they committed a crime (such as stealing a bike), and then were beaten up by the neighborhood kids. At one incident one of the boys' torturers was actually a local religious leader, who happened to be the grandfather of a local military personnel.

Feeling that the rejection and suffering in Kalasan was too much for her family to bear, Sumirah decided to move back to her old neighborhood. But in the old place she was again the subject of animosity and maltreatment from her neighbors and from her own relatives.

One of the strategies that Sumirah found in dealing with her situation was to join a Catholic organization called KKIT (Kerabat Kerja Ibu Teresa, or the Colleagues of Mother Teresa of Calcutta). In this organization she says she finds peace, respect and friendship. Being among fellow members of the KKIT, Sumirah says, "I feel that I am regarded as a human being and that I am capable of helping others".

Outside of KKIT, the treatment that she received from people has been very harsh, Sumirah continues, but "I am always patient in dealing with all it". She always has hope, and the most important factor in keeping that hope alive is her faith in God. Sumirah writes,

I always believe that God is all knowing and merciful. God will never ignore His servants. God asked me to carry a small cross, and I was able to do it. Then He asked me to carry a bigger cross, then an even bigger one ... My strength always comes from God. I surrender all my problems and the problems of my family to

God, and God gives me strength. The offenses, tortures, false accusations, humiliation... I can bear them all with patience.¹⁷

(5) Ahmad Basuki

Ahmad Basuki was a traditional artist specializing in Javanese singing and *ketoprak*, a traditional Javanese performance. In 1965, without any clear reason, he was arrested and sent to prison. First he was detained at the Fort Vredenburg prison and then he was moved to the Wirogunan prison, both located in Yogyakarta. "I was arrested, put in prison, without any clear reason. No trial, no nothing. Just put in the prison," he said. "The food was bad. Everything was robbed from me and I was *ora diuwongke* (not considered a human being)." Not until 1969 was he released.

During his imprisonment Basuki tried to cope with the situation by being *sabar* (patient) and maintaining his innocence. Upon his release he opened a store, selling various kinds of bread. He seems to do well in the business, but remains very concerned about his fellow prisoners. He is not happy with Indonesia's current socio-political situation, which he feels is unjust toward former political prisoners as well as to the people in general. He expresses those concerns by composing Javanese traditional poetic songs and often recites the songs at Sambung Roso gatherings. He feels fortunate to be a member of Sambung Roso and hopes the best for the association. In one of the songs he expresses his description of Sambung Roso, originally in his mother tongue Javanese, translated below into English:

*A Song for Sambung Roso*¹⁸

Sambung Roso, an association of brothers

Always one in how we feel

Only yearns to work together in unity

In living as brothers

Who have gone through the same

17 Written Testimony, April 2010; see Wardaya (2013, 140). Sumirah is one of the subjects in the documentary *40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy* by Robert Lemelson (2009).

See: <http://www.40yearsofsilence.elementalproductions.org>.

18 Written on January 17, 2010.

Experience of the past.

*Let's unite our hearts (and will)
Working together
To make our life better
And not continue to be victimized
By the greedy political leaders.*

*In Indonesia today
there are many crooked leaders
They only look after their own interests
Without thinking of the needs of the people
Who live difficult lives
And who are confused everyday.*

*These leaders are very corrupt
They rob the people without feeling guilty
Stealing people's money
Immune from any legal procedures
My hope is
This terrible situation will end soon.*

Ahmad Basuki also writes songs that incorporate his views and comments on the current situation of Indonesian politics. In one of his songs he writes, again originally in Javanese:

*Pangkur*¹⁹

*For whom is actually this country
For the people or just for the government
Because that is what it seems
If this country is for the people
Certainly the people would have been happy, just and prosper
But if the people are only for the government
Then it is only the leaders who prosper.*

*Whom do members of the Parliament represent
Do the people really feel that they are represented*

¹⁹ Written on February 21, 2010.

*If things go as they should be
If members of the Parliament really represent the people
The situation would be better
The Parliament represents the people
Fighting for the suffering people.*

*For whom are actually those co-ops
For the people or just for the co-ops themselves
If those co-ops are for the people
Certainly the people would prosper
But in reality the people are there for the co-ops
As a result it is only the officials who get rich.*

*For whom are the just laws
I believe the laws should be for the people
But the laws are confusing
Never taking side with the people
The leaders on top are very greedy
Laws and justice
Are being sold and bought.*

(6) Petrus Sumarwan

Sumarwan was an English teacher who lived in Yogyakarta with his wife and four children. In 1965 he was suddenly arrested with no warning whatsoever. Without any necessary legal procedures he was incarcerated in the Wirogunan prison in Yogyakarta on the grounds that he was a communist sympathizer. During the first few years Sumarwan's wife regularly visited him in prison, along with their children, with the hope that he would soon be released. About six years into his imprisonment, when his release hadn't come, his wife told him that she couldn't wait for his release any longer. She wanted a divorce and to remarry. For Sumarwan the request came like thunder out of the blue. He was surprised and saddened but could not do anything. He had to swallow the bitter pill.

In coping with the situation Sumarwan wrote poems. He wrote the poems in Indonesian and then translated them into English. They were writ-

ten in small notebooks with the Indonesian and English versions of the poems side by side.

Below is an example of his poetry with an English translation by the writer himself:

At the Crossroad

1965

*Without any thunder or storm-clouds as warning
It came suddenly like a big tornado
Striking this Land of Peace / Without mercy
Plates and bowls flying
Making us tremble full of goose bumps
Many people fell to the ground
CUT INTO TWO
BROKEN
GROUNDED
CAST AWAY
And ...
At gunpoint
Your father was taken to prison.*

1968

*Old walls with rusty bars
Separating happy families
But because of her faith
Your Mother waited faithfully
She was holding to The Cross
So that she didn't slip
All of you grew up in her hands
Without work there wouldn't be any fruit.*

Ages changed

Time passed

In every second events come and go

Promise and the fidelity in keeping the promise

Someone's background is being evaluated

Everything developed

Moved

Changed

Tested by time.

*That was also how it was with your Mother's heart
 Growing to different directions
 The earth where she stood began to shake
 The rope where she leaned broke off
 Her smile was not as nice as before
 But for the sake of your unity and future
 Your Father tried to understand as best as he could
 I tried to patch the cracks
 Connecting things that were separated
 With a lot of courage and patience
 Even when this heart felt like it was cut by a knife.*

1971

*But history said things differently
 Your Mother was hard-hearted
 She was hard-headed
 Promises flew high
 What the heck
 Didn't care
 Fidelity was replaced with lust.*

And now

*July the thirtieth
 Your Father and Mother were at the crossroad
 Your Mother opted for the blind alley
 She sacrificed her faith
 The Cross was put away
 She was too brave to make the decision.*

Joko, Rini, Totok and Bambang²⁰

*My beloved children
 Let everything go
 Humans are merely actors
 In this world theater
 Let there be no hatred or grudges.*

20 Pseudonyms for his children.

*Nothing to regret
 Even though your Father is not Palgunadi
 Who found Dewi Angraini
 Who remained faithful until death did them apart.*

MY MESSAGE

*No matter what
 She remains your Mother
 Respect her and take care of her
 Even though she was unfaithful just like Banowati.²¹*

Some Reflections

As we can see from the testimonies, there are various ways by which Indonesian former political prisoners of the 1965 tragedy cope with their marginality: forming a social association, deepening their faith in God, joining a church group, working for their children's education, working for the interests of fellow political prisoners, or expressing themselves through writing songs and poems.

The difficulties they have had to face are immense, yet it is amazing to see how they cope with their situations and hope for the best. Faith in God is very important for people like Sumaryanti, Sumbogo and Sumarwan; it helps them to persevere despite all obstacles. In the case of Sumaryanti, faith in God motivates her to work hard not only for the sake of her own interests but also for the interests of fellow former political prisoners. In many cases faith is the reason for Sumaryanti and others to survive in the face of stigmatization, discrimination and marginalization.

The testimonies show that when viewed through the eyes of the victims, what happened in 1965 in Indonesia was very different from the official narrative created by the Suharto government. The expressions of feelings, emotion, and the strategies of coping with the situation demonstrate that at the personal level the events of 1965 are not just about an attempted *coup*, or military heroes, or the immoral Flower Fragrance Party, or people's revenge. It is more about ordinary people who lived far away from Jakarta and were falsely accused of doing something that they did

²¹ A figure in the Mahabarata epic that is known for being good-mannered but unfaithful.

not. It is about the years of suffering and humiliation that was endured because of such accusations. It is about people whose voices have been suppressed for many years. By letting them speak and by listening to their voices we can see how serious and deep is the suffering of the victims of the 1965 tragedy. These people have suffered greatly even though they had nothing to do with communism, let alone with the PKI.

As long as stories and the expressions of feelings of people like Agnes Sumaryanti, Fransiskus Sumbogo, Rahmono, and Theresia Sumirah are repressed, and as long as only the official government narrative is being told, people's understanding of Indonesian history—especially with regard to the 1965 tragedy—will remain incomplete, one-sided, even distorted. The official narrative could easily justify or even promote all kinds of injustices against members of society, including practices of marginalization, discrimination and enduring political stigmatization.

It was evident that President Suharto's "New Order" government did not only politicize history by practicing what might be called "politics of remembering", but also implemented what could be called "the politics of forgetting." It selectively determined which events of the past could and should be remembered, and which ones ought to be forgotten. For the sake of its own interests, the government was often willing to create certain "historical events" that were easy to remember and that in turn could be used to influence people's thinking and attitudes, as shown in the case of the fanciful story of the Flower Fragrance Party.

Another impact of the government's domination in history narration—with all its efforts to politicize what is remembered and forgotten about the past—is the emergence of the so-called "amnesia of history". Because history writing and discussion were so limited and heavily controlled by the government, many Indonesians have become oblivious to many events of the past, including those that are important to remember and learn. Even if they remember certain past events, the memories they have regarding those events are usually only partial and largely in accordance with the government's narrative. Even worse than that, the amnesia is not only related to events that occurred way back in the past, but also to practices of violence and human rights abuses that took place in more recent times, such as those that have taken place since the fall of the Suharto government in 1998. Many Indonesians willingly ignore the background of many abuses, the motives and the identity of the perpetrators, or even the continued suffering of the victims.

It is very rare (not to say never) that persons from high level positions are held responsible in a fair system of justice for acts of violence that they either initiated or that are within their realm of responsibility. This situation is potentially upsetting, but after a while it seems that people have gotten used to it and think of it as something "normal". Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why nobody has ever been held responsible for the mass killings and detention that occurred in 1965 and after. This means that if today or tomorrow similar acts of violence or human rights abuses happen again, there is no guarantee that someone will be prosecuted or held responsible. This especially applies to violence that involves religious or military elements, or a combination of both.

It is important to note that the collective memories that are partial and manipulated are still being used even today, many years after the fall of President Suharto and his government. During the national election of 2004 and local election of 2005, in various locations throughout Indonesia, banners were prominently displayed warning people of the "latent danger of communism"—forty years after the PKI was said to be annihilated. This is an example of how the memory of the 1965 tragedy is still being manipulated and used as a political tool. Another example was a letter sent by a cabinet Minister banning the use in the 2004 school curriculum of history as a subject, because the government feared that the use of the curriculum would encourage students to question the official version of the 1965 tragedy.

Indeed, alternatives to the Indonesian government's official narrative on the 1965 tragedy are badly needed, and these alternative narratives must include the voices of former political prisoners and their family members.

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