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Cold War Tropes and Cultural Politics in Indonesia, 1950-65

Stephen Miller

Cold War anti-communism and the tropes that accompany it continue to be a part of Indonesian politics in the 21st century.¹ These tropes are not only part of public discourse in Indonesia, but also infuse discussions of Indonesian history, both inside and outside of the country. They dehumanise the victims of the political genocide of 1965-66 and also distort and obscure our view of the politics of the period between the recognition of Indonesian sovereignty and the emergence of the New Order regime under Major-General Suharto.

This was a time when different visions of the new republic's future were considered, debated, and struggled over, including an intense struggle in cultural arenas. It was also the period of the most intense Cold War competition between the "West" on one side and "Communism" (i.e., Stalinism) on the other. In Indonesia both sides of this struggle comprised broad and diverse fronts. Not only this, both sides, generally in complete sincerity, presented themselves as champions of "democracy" or "justice" against the "oppression" of their opponents (whether this was presented as an opposition to imperialism, or an opposition to Stalinism, amongst other possibilities).

In the context of the ongoing influence of Suharto's anti-communist regime and the collapse of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it has continued to be common to present one side of this conflict as naively representing a struggle for freedom in opposition to Russian-style authoritarianism. This essay is to counter any naive presentation of the role of the more liberal elements of the cultural anti-communism before 1965-66.²

Given what we now know about the cultural Cold War, and especially given the actual historical outcome of the wider political struggle in Indonesia – one of the bloodiest political genocides in history and the establishment of a regime clearly more authoritarian than its predecessor³ – this seems like an attitude that is not only unsustainable and arguably ethically problematic, it also distorts our understandings of key elements of Indonesian history. The events of 1965-66 and the regime that they instituted were a culmination of prior developments. Basically, the repression and bloodshed of 1965-66 did not fall from the sky.



Fig. 1: Members of the Lekra National Secretariat workshop in the early 1960s. Jane Luyte and Oey Hai Djoen, the key patrons of the secretariat are standing in the back row, second and third from left (Photo courtesy of Oey Hai Djoen).

While participants may have sincerely felt that they were fighting for "democracy," "freedom," or other just causes, it is clear that they were also part of manoeuvres that did not prioritise these ideals, and arguably led to authoritarian outcomes in Indonesia (and elsewhere). There is plenty of evidence for this. Charles Coppel recognises the key alignment of the Cultural Manifesto with the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF).⁴ The role of the army in developing and supporting the Manifesto was obvious to many contemporaries (for instance, in the army's material support for the pro-Manifesto All-Indonesia Writers' and Artists' Conference in 1964). The "conceptor" of the Manifesto has admitted that he worked covertly with the army intelligence during this period.⁵ In a 1993 paper responding to a liberal anti-communist, Sitor Situmorang, the leader of the radical nationalist Institute of National Culture in the 1960s, presented the period as one of diverse and competing poles of power, in which artists across the political spectrum, not least those who were Lekra-aligned, could and did suffer suppression before 1965.⁶

While we still need further research into anti-Left repression from 1950-1965, it is clear that there was regular repression throughout the period. This included jailing prominent figures, such as the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer and the poet Agam Wispi. It is also clear that the success of the Left (e.g., cultural groups like Lekra and the women's organisation Gerwani), like that of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) itself, was the result of its ability to attract and organise members on a voluntary basis. The PKI was never a party of state, nor were any of its "fellow traveller" organisations (such as Lekra) state institutions. People joined freely

for a variety of reasons, but clearly among them was a belief that these organisations would contribute to the creation of a society with less inequality and more social justice. And it can be argued that in areas such as the arts, women's rights, and labour, such organisations did have at least some positive influence.

Cold War tropes not only misrepresent the politics of culture; they also tend to distort our view of the art works produced by artists and cultural workers sympathetic to the PKI. If, instead of seeing the cultural Left primarily as championing Stalinism, we understand it as a part of a popular movement, it becomes easier to see and understand key elements of cultural activity around Lekra. For example, it makes sense that critics should develop a vision for Indonesian cinema inspired by Italian neo-realism and progressive elements of classic Hollywood,⁷ rather than focusing on pat ideas of "Socialist Realism." The focus on the reportage literature of amateurs, rather than on sympathetic established authors like Pramoedya or Utuy Tatang Sontani,⁸ also makes sense if literature is seen as integrated with the building of a mass movement. Similarly, Lekra's enthusiastic and early engagement with popular arts, such as folk theatre and dance, is best understood as part of efforts to build grassroots political engagement.

This is not to say that many leading figures (and ordinary activists) did not hold and perpetuate illusions in the authoritarianisms of Stalinist countries. Rather, it is to say that there was not a monopoly of authoritarian politics on one side. The power of the PKI and other organisations, like Lekra, relied on their ability to attract voluntary support, and they never held any significant institutional

civilian or martial power (a fact underlined by the ease with which they were swept away by the emergent Suharto regime and its supporters). Presenting them as primarily authoritarian, therefore, misrepresents what these organisations meant to their members, misrepresents key features of anti-communism, misrepresents the struggles of the 1950-65 period, and, in the process, comes dangerously close to justifying the repression of 1965-66.

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Notes

- 1 Stephen Miller (2018). *Zombie Anti-Communism? Democratization and the Demons of Suharto-Era Politics in Contemporary Indonesia*. In Kate McGregor, Jess Melvin & Annie Pohlman. *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies* (pp. 287-310). Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2 For an articulate elaboration of such an approach by a figure close to Budiman, see Goenawan Mohamad and Harry Aveling (ed. and trans.) (2011). *The 'Cultural Manifesto' Affair Revisited: Literature and Politics in Indonesia in the 1960s*, a signatory's view. Monash Asia Institute Press.
- 3 See Jess Melvin (2018). *The army and the Indonesian genocide: mechanics of mass murder*. Routledge; Kate McGregor, Jess Melvin & Annie Pohlman. *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies* (pp. 287-310). Palgrave Macmillan; John Roosa (2020). *Buried histories: the anticommunist massacres of 1965-1966 in Indonesia*. The University of Wisconsin Press; amongst many others.
- 4 On CIA-backing for the CCF, see (amongst others) Frances Stonor Saunders (1999). *Who paid the piper?: the CIA and the cultural Cold War*. Granta.
- 5 See Keith Foulcher (1986). *Social commitment in literature and the arts: the Indonesian "Institute of People's Culture", 1950-1965*. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, p. 125-126; Bodden, M. (2012). "Dynamics and tensions of LEKRA's modern national theater, 1959-65". In J. Lindsay and M. H. T. Liem (Eds.), *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian 1950-1965*. KITLV Press.
- 6 Keith Foulcher (1994). "The Manifesto is not dead": *Indonesian literary politics thirty years on*. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.
- 7 Stephen Miller (2015). *The communist imagination: a study of the cultural pages of Harijan Rakjat in the early 1950s*. PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, Australia.
- 8 Foulcher (1986); Miller (2015).

Indonesia, positioning the status of Indonesia's ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalised groups at the centre of academic and community discourse. In a rare example of such a focus in his own academic work, a few years later, Arief wrote a short chapter titled, "Portrait of the Chinese in Post-Soeharto Indonesia" for Charles Coppel's *Festschrift Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*.² In it he examines the proposition that 1998 had led to some positive changes in *pribumi* (native Indonesian) perceptions of the Chinese, who were slowly abandoning one-dimensional stereotypes. Likewise, he argues that there was a shift in the "self-perception" of the Chinese themselves, who now felt emboldened to emerge from their "cocoon," as Arief described it, and assume their rightful place as citizens. Nonetheless, after what he saw as the initial phase of "euphoria," Arief went on to observe that a "correction" was underway within a community wary of a backlash: "Chinese Indonesians are still trying to find their place in Indonesia, but now, within a still unstable society undergoing a slow transition towards democracy, this is not a simple process and its outcome cannot be predicted."³

A few months after the New Order collapsed, I distinctly recall huddling in and listening attentively to Arief's advice on the significant barriers still before a researcher embarking on investigations like those I was

planning – namely, to examine the position of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese and especially the recent violence ushering in the reform era. Despite the hopefulness of the early post-New Order mood in Indonesia, he advised me to keep a low profile and consult with only trusted sources, which included many of his own close contacts. As a fledgling fieldworker and outsider seriously nervous about tackling the task ahead, I clearly remember him conveying this rather frightening set of instructions with his characteristic smiles and giggles. A cool, calm approach to a problem he'd faced with courage so many times himself. It was a reassurance that I very much needed at the time, and one that I often remembered with appreciation throughout my time in the field. Not to mention the doors opened to me by the mere dropping of his name!

Arief's presence as a senior academic in Melbourne at this critical time in Indonesian history certainly played a large part in generating a high level of energy and dynamism within the wider Melbourne, and indeed Australian, Indonesianist academic community. At this time, Arief was at the centre of a renewal of connections across institutions, which led to a number of seminal events and collaborations, beginning with one of the earliest major conferences held after the fall of the New Order. Titled, *Democracy in Indonesia? The crisis and beyond*, the conference was held at the ABC's Southbank studios in Melbourne in December 1998, convened by Arief, Damien Kingsbury,

and Barbara Hatley from Monash University. The conference included speakers – both scholars and activists – from Australia and Indonesia, and the event resulted in the book *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia* [Fig. 1].⁴ In his own chapter in the book, Arief's observation of this moment in Indonesia's history reflected his consistently optimistic outlook;

"Even though there are many uncertainties and difficulties facing Indonesia over the short term, it is not too unrealistic to hold an optimistic hope for the more distant future."⁵

In the early 2000s, the University of Melbourne's standing as a centre for Indonesian studies and related activity was also greatly enhanced by an influx of Indonesian students, largely due to the opportunities offered with the expansion of Australian and Indonesian government scholarship programs, but also significantly due to the pull of Arief himself. The energy, dedication, and deep knowledge of Indonesia available to those who were lucky enough to find ourselves in Melbourne at this time provided a rare opportunity then (and even rarer today) to immerse ourselves in and embark on deep study of Indonesia.

An emblematic figure in Indonesia, Arief represented an intellectual and social activism that fuelled many young adult Indonesians in this *reformasi* period, further enhanced

when Ariel Heryanto arrived at the university a little while later. Arief initiated a series of Friday seminars on all manner of topics related to politics and society, which generated a dynamic and vibrant discourse between students and scholars, Indonesians and Australians, a spirit of exchange and inquiry that continues until today.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.insideindonesia.org/friend-or-foe-2>
- 2 Lindsey, Tim and Helen Pausacker (eds.). 2005. *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- 3 Budiman, Arief. 2005. "Portrait of the Chinese in Post-Soeharto Indonesia." In *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*. Singapore: ISEAS, p. 101.
- 4 Budiman, Arief, Barbara Hatley, and Damien Kingsbury (eds.). 1999. *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia*. Clayton, Australia: Monash Asia Institute.
- 5 Budiman, Arief. 1998. "The 1998 crisis: change and continuity in Indonesia", In *Reformasi: Crisis and change in Indonesia*, edited by Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley and Damien Kingsbury, Clayton Vic., Monash Asia Institute: 57.