

Freedom of Expression Under Fire in Indonesia

Indonesia continues to stifle discussions of 1965, but it's much harder to do in the age of social media.

By Vanessa Hearman

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I first read about the cancellation of a panel I was speaking on at the Ubud Writers and Readers festival in a news story. That day had been tense as panel organizers from the Herb Feith Foundation warned me that our panels could be cancelled due to police pressure on the festival. I was to host a panel of young activists writing on Bali and the legacy of the 1965 massacre.

I have researched and written about the events of 1965 for almost 10 years. Born in Indonesia, I myself had no knowledge about the killings until I started university in 1991 in Australia. In a way, this quest for knowledge has spurred me on to research and write about this past in conjunction with researchers based in Indonesia.

On September 30, 1965, a group of soldiers and officers calling itself the Thirtieth September Movement kidnapped and killed seven high ranking army men, including the Armed Forces Chief Ahmad Yani, in Jakarta. The army blamed this event on the Indonesian Communist Party, the PKI, and under Major General Suharto led a violent suppression campaign against the Left. This massacre claimed half a million lives, including an estimated 80,000 or 5 percent of the population in Bali.

Under Suharto's New Order regime, discussion of the massacre was banned. Books by leftist author Pramoedya Ananta Toer were banned. Those caught circulating the books were imprisoned. A 1966 parliamentary decree bans Marxism-Leninism, the PKI, and other leftist organizations. This decree, which then-President and Islamic cleric Abdurrahman Wahid discussed repealing in 2000, has been selectively used to censor discussions about the violence, in the guise of prohibiting the spread of communism.

It has never been easy to discuss, but since 1998 books, memoirs, and seminars about 1965 have by and large escaped censorship. This is remarkable when compared to the New Order regime. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the killings, however, and perhaps that is what makes 2015 unique in terms of the heightened attempts to censor discussion about 1965. Ironically the rise in censorship occurs under the presidency of Joko Widodo, whose election campaign mobilized the largest number of civil society activists and volunteers. We are yet to hear the president express his views on the bans.

The Ubud festival ban occurred during a troubling fortnight in which *Lentera*, an Indonesian language magazine published at the Christian university in Central Java, was also banned for discussing 1965. A Swedish citizen of Indonesian background, 77-year-old Tom Ijas, was deported on October 16 for visiting his father's grave in West Sumatra. Ijas was accused of trying to make a film about the massacre.

This year there have been public events and seminars in Australia, the Netherlands, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Indonesia itself on 1965. The Frankfurt Book Fair profiled authors such as Laksmi Pamuntjak and Leila Chudori, whose recent works have 1965 as their centerpiece. The authorities' fear seems to have spiked recently as a result of the increasing spotlight on 1965. There is evidence, though, that censorship no longer works as it did under the New Order.

The student magazine, *Lentera* (Lantern) ran an edition titled "Salatiga Red City" which discussed the anti-communist pogroms in the area, including the location of the killings and the impact on the university. Three students from the magazine were interrogated on October 16 and copies of the magazine were destroyed. Thanks to social media however, the magazine has been shared repeatedly on the internet in PDF format, to the extent that its Dropbox link ceased working and they resorted to Google Drive. The students also published a statement maintaining their right to publish little known facts about the slaughter in the area.

Ijas, meanwhile, was arrested on October 10 for allegedly filming without a permit. Authorities were concerned — Ijas' father's grave happens to be a mass grave with others, as his father was a victim of the 1965 purges. Ijas was a leftist who chose exile over returning to New Order Indonesia. Within hours of his arrest, Ijas' case was shared throughout social media, though that did not stop his deportation.

A statement protesting all three cases, including Ubud, was circulated via Twitter and Facebook on October 24. Within a day, more than 150 people from all over the world had signed on. Censorship is becoming more difficult these days. The Monash University Press books to be discussed at the Ubud festival are available in English translation as free electronic books.

The police intimidation of the festival has turned the international spotlight to the massacres. The Ubud Writers' Festival should have defended its freedom of programming, and in turn the democratic space opened up since the fall of the Suharto regime and our ability to speak at the festival. We need to continue to speak out against the violent or intimidatory suppression of freedom of expression in Indonesia. However thanks to social media and growing transnational activism on this past, Jokowi's administration cannot bury 1965 as the Suharto regime had.

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