



Fighting impunity through family stories: photography and Indonesia's 1965 killings

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Twenty years since the end of authoritarianism in Indonesia, justice for the crimes committed during the regime of President Suharto (1966-1998) remains elusive. One example is that of the 1965-1966 mass violence, during which approximately 500,000 Indonesian communists and members of affiliated organisations were killed. Another million were arrested and detained for lengthy periods of time, mostly without trial. These events were at the basis of the rise of the authoritarian regime; as such addressing this particular case is important to clearly break with the past.

While in the early years of democratisation Indonesia embarked on a process of significant legal and political reforms, including in the area of human rights and justice for past crimes, those responsible for past crimes have in general not been held to account. Therefore, the country has not been able to break with the culture of impunity instilled during the authoritarian regime. My doctoral research on the Indonesian Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) revealed a number of reasons that explain the organisation's limited effectiveness, which are also relevant to the broader challenges of human rights reform in the country. These include shortcomings in legal drafting, a lack of political will and the ongoing influence of powerful elites opposed to the pursuit of justice.¹

The role of photography

As a postdoctoral fellow at The University of Melbourne, I have continued my research on the dynamics of human rights in contemporary Indonesia. One of the most worrying trends of recent years is the rising intolerance against minority groups. A particularly striking example of such increased pressures is that in September 2018, the police – giving into demands of Islamist groups – broke up an event at one of the country's most renowned human rights organisations, the Legal Aid Foundation (LBH) in Jakarta.

The attack on the LBH illustrates both the Indonesian government's failure to resolve past human rights abuses and the limited

social support for justice endeavours. In the specific context of the 1965-1966 violence this is, amongst others, caused by the fear of communism that was instilled into Indonesian society by the Suharto regime. Twenty years on, these "ghosts of 1965"² remain a powerful tool to counter progressive groups. In this situation of increased illiberalism, there is an important role to play by civil society actors in raising awareness on human rights issues. At the same time, this task is also fraught with difficulties, including how to prevent their work from being censored.³

A few years ago, I became acquainted with Yogyakarta-based photographer Rangga Purbaya (1976) whose work is focused on opening a dialogue on the 1965-66 killings. At first sight, there is little that refers to the violence in his work: Rangga's photographs depict places, people and everyday objects such as notebooks, razors and wooden boxes. Upon closer investigation, however, the images allude to a broader narrative. The objects are old and worn, but because they have been kept with great care, it is evident that they are treasured. The places in the photographs are haunting: an empty street and a vertical cave surrounded by mist. The portraits, mainly of young persons, suggest various messages: some look directly into the camera, others avoid the lens. One young woman is pictured looking at old photographs.

The viewer again has to move closer, with titles and descriptions giving more clues. The image of the vertical cave is titled 'Starting Point' and adds that between 1965 and 1966 the place was a site of mass killing of alleged communists. The photo of the empty street is accompanied by a short story of a daughter looking for her father. We discover that the notebooks and razor belonged to someone called Boentardjo, who – as one can gather from statements accompanying the portraits – is a largely unknown figure, but also a source of pride and respected.

Family stories

Boentardjo Amaroen was Rangga Purbaya's paternal grandfather. Boentardjo was one of many who was disappeared in 1965 and presumably killed in circumstances that have never been uncovered. As so many

Indonesians of his generation, Rangga grew up unaware of his family's past.⁴ But in 1998, a few months after the fall of the Suharto regime, Rangga's parents told him about his grandfather. At the time, he was not sure what to do with the information ("to me, it was just a fact") and continued to focus on his studies and work. While his parents became active in victims' rights organisations, Rangga kept his family history at a distance. Ten years later, however, this changed when Rangga had to pick up his mother when a meeting she attended was threatened by a vigilante group known as the Indonesian Anti Communist Front (FAKI), not dissimilar from the attack on LBH Jakarta mentioned above.

Rangga explained his frustration: "I felt that what they did wasn't tactical, it wasn't strategic. Their events always had a high risk of intimidation. There was no back up plan when things went wrong. My mother was panicking, she was scared". And so, Rangga decided to make the story of his family – and the bigger story of the 1965 killings – central to his work for the first time. He researched his grandfather's documents, which had been kept by an aunt, and he spoke to family members, but many were reluctant to open old wounds. In general, Rangga found the younger generation more receptive and decided to tell the story of his grandfather primarily through them.

There are two main distinguishing characteristics of Rangga Purbaya's work. The first is that direct references to violence are absent. As Rangga explained, this was a deliberate choice he made as an artist, wanting to present something new. This aspect differentiates his work from other visual artists, who have portrayed the 1965 violence explicitly. At the same time, I see the absence of direct references to violence in his work also as a reflection of his position as someone born long after the events took place. The absence of violence almost automatically triggers a conversation between the viewer and the artist about the places, objects and people portrayed, eventually bringing us to Boentardjo and his fate, and the broader context of the 1965 killings.

A second characteristic of Rangga's work is the central place of the family. Family is, so he has found, a relatively easy way to talk about the 1965 killings. "I've decided to

Titik Awal (Starting Point) depicts Luweng Grubug, a vertical cave in Wonosari, central Java. Between November 1965 and January 1966, 1500 members of the Indonesian Communist Party and its affiliate organisations were killed here. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist, Rangga Purbaya.

address 1965 from a perspective that I know best: my family. It's easier than talking about people you don't know. Also, when I talk about my personal history, that of my family, people often become more open. Often, they start talking about their families, too".

Together, these two elements allow for a dialogue on family, collective history and loss, as well as hopes for the future. The creation of a conversation is one of Rangga's main objectives, who argues that interpersonal dialogue is crucial for reconciliation: "before we can reconcile, people need to be aware of what has happened, so they can see the event from various perspectives". His work also underlines that in a context of rising illiberalism, personal stories are both a powerful and gentle tool to continue discussions on past wrongs and directions towards a more just future.

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Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Setiawan, K. 2016. 'From Hope to Disillusion: the Paradox of Komnas HAM, the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 172 (1):1-32.
- 2 Kuddus, R. 2017. 'The Ghosts of 1965. Politics and Memory in Indonesia', *New Left Review* 104:45-92.
- 3 Indonesia has a vocal human rights movement. For a recent discussion of Indonesian civil society and the 1965-1966 violence see Kuddus, 2017.
- 4 All quotes of Rangga Purbaya in this piece are from my interview with him on 10 January 2018.