

The Phantom of Suharto?

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In 1998, on the eve of his resignation, President Suharto said quite bluntly that he had no problem with leaving office. But if he had to step down immediately, chaos or even bloodshed and civil war would be the outcome, a situation which no one, not even his handpicked successor, B.J. Habibie, would be able to overcome.¹ This statement is remarkable, not least because it stands at a juncture between two different eras (for Indonesians, eras are often measured by presidents), that of himself (formed during the Cold War) and the one that came after him (the post Cold War era). Today, I would like to reflect on this statement of Suharto for there are at least two elements in his statement that deserve attention.

Suharto, the Communist, and the Cold War

The first important element in Suharto’s statement is that he emphasizes the condition of chaos and disorder, indicating that there is a need for him to remain in power to prevent (further) chaos and disorder. When used by Suharto, however, this indication can be seen as a reminder to young Indonesians (many of whom have grown up and benefited from his regime) that he and his army have successfully “saved” the nation from the (continuing) threat of communism and have maintained order ever since he came to

power in 1966 (after killing hundreds of thousands of people identified as communists). The nation-building project of Suharto was indeed built upon the idea of *stability* against what he conceived to be the destabilizing forces of the communists and the Sukarnoists, and of *national unity* against what he called the separatist forces in the region. These two ideologies (anti-communism and anti-separatism) are connected to the geopolitics of the Cold War that had demanded a united anti-Communist block of Indonesia under the supervision of the military regime of Suharto. After killing more than half a million communists, or suspected communists, Suharto assured Washington that, along with other countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia would be a bulwark of resistance to any perceived communist threat in the region. Since then, a centralized state intelligence apparatus was installed to operate at a local level, the aim of which was to regulate the public life of Indonesian citizens and install in the minds of the public, a fear of communism. Monuments, printed and visual media were disseminated to remind the public of the role of Suharto and the military in saving the country from communism and disintegration, while books dealing with 1965/1966, with the regional revolt and the role of Indonesians of Chinese descent in Indonesian history were banned.

After 1966, the imagined threat of communism became the basic paradigm behind the rule of Suharto's New Order. As the basis for the construction of national identity, it replaced the rhetoric of Sukarno's "anti-colonialism." However, it is important to note that, under Suharto, the source of the "communist threat" was believed to exist *internally*, within the territory of the state. The government often warned the public of the threat of communism as it encountered voices of dissidents even though none of these voices held any communist ideology.

Twenty years later, however, this idea of the “communist threat” has begun to lose its coherency even though it is still seen by the state as essential for its social and political legitimacy. For many Indonesians, especially those who have grown up in the 1980s, communism in Indonesia no longer had any clear image of its own.

“Communism” is simply a term located behind the normal appearance of the hurly burly development of the nation. In other words, communism existed in the minds of the younger generation of Suharto as a “phantom” without any real appearance of its own outside the mediation of the state. As time passes, this state-mediated formless phantom has been conceived as capable of taking many different forms. In the 1980s, “communism” was seen as interchangeable with the Security Disturbing Movement (GPK), separatist Aceh, the East Timor, the *massa*, the underclass, the Chinese, “radical” Islam, (and later on, the “Arabs”), and so on. What is important for us here is not only that the existence of this series of domestic “phantoms” is inseparable from the politics of the state but that the state has made its appearance in and through the phantoms it created.² In a strange way, the state and the phantoms (it created) appeared interchangeably at any time, anywhere, and everywhere both in reality and in imagination.

To clarify this, let me give one illustration. In 1980s, at the height of his military power, Suharto ordered the killing of what were identified as “petty criminals” of the urban underclass (the Gali, who were largely the military-supported gang members pushed out of the state’s patronage when no longer useful). After the killings, the bodies of the Gali were displayed on both the streets and in the newspapers. Suharto called this method of representing the killing and the victim as “shock therapy,” a technique to

remind Indonesian citizens that they should behave and never act anything like the Gali.³ The state is there to protect and save them should they encounter, or began to act like, the Gali. The effect of this state terrorism is significant for it provoked a sense of identity and fear among Indonesians of various backgrounds. Indonesians were fearful of the military who did the killing, but they were also afraid of the Gali who were killed, and they were especially scared of the possibility that they would become like the Gali or be seen as one.⁴ This kind of fear has registered in the minds of Indonesians, giving rise to a series of fears of the possibility of being seen as the Gali. Since the Gali are simply one among the series of phantoms, the fear of becoming a Gali spreads to the fear of becoming other phantoms. The fear of becoming a Gali is thus interchangeable with the fear of (becoming): separatists, Aceh, East Timor, the communists, the underclass and so on. So when Suharto mentioned chaos, bloodshed and civil war, he had in mind the resurrection of these phantoms created by his regime and feared by Indonesians.

One of the oldest phantoms is, of course, the communist, which has continued to live in the minds of both the state and civil society.⁵ Many Indonesians without any knowledge of the term “communism,” nevertheless know that the word might pose a threat to their well being. It continues to live even after the collapse of Suharto’s regime for, as a phantom, the “communist” could be associated with other phantoms. Anti-communism therefore survives for it lives in the minds of many Indonesians alongside other sources of fear.

The civilian government, the Military and the Ideology of Anti Terrorism

The second element of Suharto's warning concerns the limits of civilian governance in Indonesia. He warns that no civilian government, not even Habibie's, could guarantee the nation's security. Thus, without Suharto and his military governance, Indonesians would find themselves in an uncertain and potentially vulnerable position. Suharto's statement is important especially when it is understood within the context of the attempts of the military to regain their social and political legitimacy following the collapse of the regime.⁶

Suharto was forced to step down but his "prophecy" that chaos, bloodshed and civil war would follow has to some extent come true, though none of the recent unrest in Indonesia has been associated with communism. In East Java, approximately 120 people accused of witchcraft were killed by civilians between December 1998 and the end of February 1999. Clearly this was the time after Suharto left office. Many seem to believe that the incident was provoked by the Army, though there is no evidence to show that that was the case. In East Timor, in 1999, under the UN-sponsored referendum, massive violence took place involving elements of the Indonesian military. Serious political violence and killings have also occurred in many different parts of Indonesia, in Aceh, Borneo, Moluccas, Western New Guinea, and several bombing incidents have taken place at major cities in the islands of Java, Sumatra and Bali. All these have happened after Suharto resigned; and most importantly, they have taken place when Indonesia is being ruled by a civilian government. Are these catastrophes meant to undermine the civilian government? Are the unreformed military, Suharto (who is living comfortably in Jakarta) and his "crony" old guard behind the tragedies? Are these incidents part of the attempts of the military to return to power after undergoing an institutional crisis

following the departure of Suharto? Or are they simply an expression of the power vacuum created by the resignation of Suharto in which rival political groups fight against each other for position and a bigger share in the country? We are not sure whether in fact there has been a “puppet master” behind the show but it is clear that the unrest and social instability that has followed the collapse of Suharto’s regime could not be seen as a sign of the “democratization” of post Cold War Indonesia. Instead, they are signals that hint at the weakness of the civilian government.

Within the context of this social turmoil, let me mention a little about the civilian governments of Habibie, Wahid (Gus Dur), and Megawati. The brief governance of B.J. Habibie was important for at least two reasons. First, it made the military aware that most Indonesians blamed only Suharto for the national catastrophe, and though the military has lost much of its legitimacy and popular trust (because of its human rights abuses and inability to maintain law and order during the last phase of the Suharto regime), relatively few critical voices were raised against them. Although the image of Suharto as a national hero has gone, the state continues to honor the military, to tighten the idea of national integration, to hold the Indonesian Communist Party as responsible for the 1965 event, and to blame an international conspiracy for the independence of East Timor.⁷

Second, Habibie’s governance revealed the fact that many Indonesians (including the middle class) disliked Habibie and the source of the dislike was laid not so much on Habibie’s ties to the Suharto regime, but on the popularity of the two –by then- most prominent opposition leaders: Abdul Rachman Wahid (Gus Dur) and Megawati Sukarno Putri.⁸ The popularity of both Gus Dur and Megawati left the military, seeking to maintain interests it enjoyed under Suharto, with only one option, which is to give both

Gus Dur and Megawati a chance to manage Indonesia, not so that order can be created and the country saved, but to show that they are totally incapable of doing precisely those things. Once these two figures are shown as being unable to integrate and restore order in the country, a path would then be opened for the return of the military. The logic behind this “arrangement” is to show the Indonesian public that power, in the final instance, needs to be with the military. We know that Gus Dur was humiliated in public during his presidency, and it is very hard to believe that he would regain political support even from his own party. Consistently, the next person that would have to go would supposedly be Megawati, though up till now, Megawati proves to be stronger, largely because, unlike Gus Dur, she is much more conservative, and much more willing to listen to the military. If we go back to Suharto’s statement then it is very hard not to imagine that the bombings and violence at many places in Indonesia today are connected to the attempt to weaken the profile of the civilian government and the efforts of the military to regain social and political legitimacy.

However, the military’s will to power is not simply a quest for a return to the Suharto era. Some of the conservative military personnel are perhaps still thinking to return to the situation as it was under Suharto (-this includes generals, who are willing to use their own sources of money to fund widespread violence in order to maintain interests they have enjoyed for many years). But many are also trying to articulate a new institutional framework which would allow the military to gain social and political legitimacy within the civilian government. How far this institutional will has been achieved remains an open question, but the continuing violence in post Suharto Indonesia

and the instability of society under the civilian government have all contributed to the possibility of the return of the military in Indonesia.

Finally, what are the possible implications of the US ideology of anti terrorism for post Cold War Indonesia? After decades of living through state terrorism, Indonesians tend to comprehend any form of “terrorism” as connected to the political class in the country. Many believe that the Bali bombing, for instance, has its source within the country and is one among the series of chaos, bloodshed and civil war envisioned by Suharto, and that the Bali event had little to do with the global terrorist network. Regardless what the truth is, it is in the interests of Megawati’s government, the military and the U.S. to insist that the Bali blast was inseparable from the AlQaeda. Megawati has reportedly taken millions of dollars from Washington to assist the security forces, some of which has been used for the military to fight in Aceh against the “separatist” movement. The Indonesian military has also been receiving financial support, new equipment and all kinds of training from the U.S. military.

Thus, the ideology of anti terrorism has clearly brought the Indonesian military back into the life of the civilian government. As indicated, the military (especially the conservative segment of the army) has been looking for a chance to regain social and political legitimacy. The ideology of anti terrorism has given the military a much better chance to resolve its institutional and financial crisis and, most importantly, to map out a political strategy, which is to make civilian government share, if not take, responsibility for any atrocities that would be committed by the military personnel. The ideology of anti terrorism thus undermines one of the key struggles of the Indonesian reformation, which was to dislodge the military from all political power. It would legalize and justify the uses

of violence, terror and intimidation which have long been practiced by the military. Finally, the “terrorist threat” would be added to the repertoire of the state to control the imagination of the public. The “terrorists” would appear as a phantom that coexists with other state-mediated phantoms: the communists, the separatists, the underclass, the masses, the Gali, the witches, the Chinese, and the Arabs and so on.⁹ Together they would be seen as responsible for the country’s chaos, bloodshed and civil war, and yet, through them, the authority and the legitimacy of the military state could be redeemed.

Notes:

¹ This report can be found in Kees van Dijk’s *A Country in Despair: Indonesia Between 1997-2000*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2001: 203.

² The ex-chairman of the intelligence apparatus of the Suharto regime provides us with a way to understand the creation of the internal others:

“What is fun about the world of intelligence is when we use the technique of ‘psywar.’ As an intelligence agent, we invent stories (-categories), and circulate them to the public through print media, radio, and television. We made the stories as if they are true stories. Normally, after we throw a story to the public, people will discuss it and they tend to add more stories into it. Finally, the story will come back to us as a report. Now what is really funny, is that once we receive the report, we are amazed by the fact that we ourselves begin to believe that the story we created is indeed a true story. Ha-ha-ha. We get terrified and begin to think: “Oh my god, I am afraid that the story is a true story.” (Sutopo Yuwono, *Jakarta-Jakarta*, June 5-11, 1993). I am indebt to Ben Abel for this citation.

³ See *Soeharto: My Thoughts, Words and Deeds*, Jakarta: PT Citra Lamtoro Gung Persada, 1991.

⁴ See: James Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998:110.

⁵ The ideology of “anti-communism” continues to play a significant role in the context of post Suharto Indonesia. Gunawan Mohamad, in a recent article, indicates that in a recent opinion poll conducted (by the magazine he edits, *Tempo*) in over 1,000 high schools, that almost 60% of student respondents said “no” to the question whether communism should be allowed to be taught to students as “knowledge.” Almost 60% were opposed to the distribution of books on communism in Indonesia. 80% still thought that Suharto’s propaganda film on the September 65 events was basically true. Three decades of Suharto’s anti communist campaign have indeed produced a deep sense of fear of communism in the national psyche. Ex-president Wahid’s (Gus Dur) apology over the event and his invitation to the Indonesian public to start a dialogue about 1965 and the misrepresentation of communism was received by protests even from members of his own community – the NU. See: Goenawan Mohamad, “Remembering the Left,” *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History* (edited by Grayson Lloyd and Shannon Smith), NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001: 130-131.

⁶ The argument of this section is based on a comprehensive report and insightful analysis of the current situation and struggle of the Indonesian military by the editors of “Current Data on the Indonesian Military Elite: January 1, 1999 - January 31, 2001,” *Indonesia*, 71, April 2001: 135-156.

⁷ See: Gerry van Klinken, “The Battle for History After Suharto: Beyond Sacred Dates, Great Men, and Legal Milestones,” *Critical Asian Studies*, 33, 3, 2001: 328.

⁸ Why these two people have been so popular are inseparable from the aura of their forefathers.

⁹ Once incorporated into the series of the state-mediated phantoms, the “terrorist” would easily make its appearance as the “separatist.” Commenting on the Swedish government refusal to hand over its citizen, Hasan Tiro, an exiled leader of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a senior researcher at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) indicates: “The Indonesian government has to declare to the international world that GAM, led by Hasan Tiro, is an international terrorist group whose revolt has caused thousands of civilian casualties.” *Jakarta Post*, 6 May 2003.