

# ○ PUBLIC DEBATES ABOUT HISTORY

## COMPARATIVE NOTES FROM INDONESIA

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Since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, new debates have opened up in Indonesia about the nature and purpose of national history. The most controversial of a series of issues is the interpretation of the 1965 Coup and killings of communists that followed it. The debates involve questions of historical truth and of the narration of the past in terms of national ideology. Parallels with Australia's 'history wars' indicate the centrality of history to problems of national identity.

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The recent Australian arguments around Keith Windschuttle's denials that Aborigines were massacred in large numbers in colonial Australia<sup>1</sup> are part of an international trend in historiography. Debates in Great Britain, the United States, Germany and Japan, to quote only a few examples, have been waged in the media about public interpretations of history and the political consequences of those interpretations. At the centre of many of these debates is the question of how and if national histories should deal with responsibility for mass violence whilst also conforming to the demands of some for a positive narrative of national character. This article considers the currency of these debates within Indonesian historiography.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia presents an important example of this tension because its national historiography is only now dealing with major violent events in the recent past. Indonesian debates about history since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1988 have focussed on the 1965 coup attempt and the mass murders of 1965 and 1966, in which over 500,000 people perished. These debates have been about regime change, competing claims to victimhood, the necessity of reconciliation and the durability of anti-communism in Indonesia, but at stake has been a question as to who is authorised to present national narratives.

Between 1959 and 1965, under the direction of President Sukarno, Indonesian politics became increasingly radical and the PKI, the Indonesian Communist Party, increasingly influential. The New Order regime led by President Suharto (1966–1998) came to power following the army suppression of the 1965 abortive coup in which six army generals and one lieutenant were kidnapped and killed, and the daughter of another general fatally wounded. The army successfully blamed the coup attempt on the PKI and proceeded with a campaign to eliminate communism and leftist thinking in Indonesia. Anti-communism, together with emphasis on the Five Principles of the nation (*Pancasila*) and the 1945 Constitution, became transcendent bases of the state. The

new regime emphasised the centrality of these ideas through indoctrination programs that operated through educational and work-place institutions, and through media and education systems based on the concept of unquestioned authority dictating to a passive population.<sup>3</sup> Such programs and systems were combined with media censorship and frequent resort to violence against those perceived as enemies of the state, particularly those branded communist and thus in contravention of the first principle of the Pancasila, belief in one God.

The authoritarianism of the Suharto regime included attempts to control the making of history, contributing to a widespread malaise in Indonesian historiography. As with any such regime, the subjects of the New Order state did not necessarily believe what they were told, but were denied the means to practice a critical evaluation of the regime's claims as presented in the media, school texts, monument, museums and national rituals. New Order hegemony was supported not by a set of reasoned arguments, but rather by statements which were to be accepted, not believed. In the compiling of state-authorized facts, from trade statistics to text books, the dominant principle was one of 'as long as the boss is happy' (*asal Bapak senang*) (Vickers 2001).<sup>4</sup> With the fall of Suharto in 1998 the way was clear for a multitude of competing voices.

In this article we first examine and explain the growth and focus of post-1998 counter narratives about key historical events involving Suharto and/or the United States, narratives we see as a product of the impoverished state of critical historiography during the New Order. We then look at the link between debates over interpretations of the 1965–66 killings and subsequent attempts to set up a reconciliation process. We point to different positions and different interest groups concerned with interpretations of the killings, and how these different positions pose problems for the creation of a historiography that can deal with more nuanced reflections on the past in Indonesia. Finally we reflect on some of the similarities between the Indonesian and Australian public history wars.

## SUHARTO AND THE CIA IN INDONESIAN HISTORY

Early post-Suharto public histories commonly challenged the historical roles ascribed to Suharto, and circulated conspiracy theories about US interventions in Indonesian history. The lifting of censorship by Suharto's first two successors – President Habibie's general liberalisation, and President Aburrahman Wahid's abolition of the Department of Information – produced what one group has hailed as a 'flood' of leftist writing.<sup>5</sup> Historical writing has been a significant component of this liberalisation (Van Klinken 2001). Our survey of newspapers and publications, which backs up Van Klinken's findings, shows that the range of topics opened up has been huge. Chief amongst them are the so-called Coup of 1965 and the origins of the New Order.

Typical of the early post-Suharto public histories is Syamdani's *Historical Controversy in Indonesia* (Syamdani 2001). Syamdani's book consisted of fragments from newspaper articles and other writings, without any sustaining narrative. He made it clear, however, at the beginning of the book that he sought a true version of history: 'Bennito Crose<sup>6</sup> [sic] once said "Ogni vera istoria, istoria contemporanea", history which is true (*yang benar*) is the history of the present day (*masa kini*)'. The book challenges official New Order versions of four of the most hotly discussed historical topics of the post-Suharto period: the 'General Attack' or '*Serangan Umum*' – the 24-hour attempt to retake the Republican capital of Yogyakarta from the Dutch on 1 March 1949; regional revolts in Sumatra and Sulawesi during the late 1950s; the Coup of the 30th

September Movement 1965; and the signing of the document called SUPERSEMAR, 'The Decree of 11<sup>th</sup> March [1966]' (*Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret*) by which Presidential authority was handed over by Sukarno to Suharto. According to New Order historical orthodoxies Suharto was in the first case a war hero who bravely challenged the overwhelming odds of the colonial army; in the second he played a role with the Army in putting down these revolts; in the third he defeated what he and his propagandists presented as a 'Communist Coup', thus saving the nation from communism; and in the fourth he was legally ceded power by his predecessor.

The official view that the Communist Party of Indonesia organised the Coup was an article of faith of the New Order, presented for example in a state-sponsored film that was compulsory viewing for all school students each year on the anniversary of the Coup. The anti-communist view of 1965 was also enshrined in monuments and textbooks. The subsequent killings of communists or alleged communists, and the imprisonment of 1,500,000 others, was either never discussed or justified as an act of self-defence. The official New Order history included only a short section devoted to the crushing of the 'communist' coup attempt in which military historian Nugroho Notosusanto described a series of PKI provocations prior to the coup attempt and the suppression of the coup attempt. No mention was made of the mass killings (Notosusanto 1976).

The counter-claims put forward by Syamdani hold that Suharto aggrandised his roles in these events, and that the US Central Intelligence Agency repeatedly intervened against Sukarno's government. Syamdani's claim that the regional revolts were largely the work of the CIA has been supported by the research of Audrey and George Kahin (1995). In the case of the 1965 events, Syamdani claimed that the alleged Coup was actually manipulated by Suharto with CIA backing, an argument put forward by a number of western authors in the 1970s. The work of at least one of these authors was subsequently translated into Indonesian (Scott 2001; see Har-sutejo 2003). Although pre-1998 discussions at forums of historians had alluded to this theory, the regime censored its public expression.<sup>7</sup> It is in part because of this censorship that the Suharto-CIA version was so popular in the immediate post-Suharto era. On SUPERSEMAR and the hand-over of power from Sukarno to Suharto, it had long been rumoured that this was achieved by coercion, and from 1998 the rumours were fuelled by an announcement that the original document had been 'lost'. Syamdani focused on this loss, on the fact that there were several versions of the document, and on the 1998 testimony of a security guard that Sukarno signed it at gun point.

*Historical Controversy in Indonesia* was part of a leftist backlash against both Suharto and the United States, two popular targets of resentment. It was produced at a time when the Indonesian government was being forced to concede to the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, two organisations popularly equated with the US, in order to receive economic aid. There have been proven cases of past American interventions in Indonesian affairs: in the case of the regional revolts mentioned above; in assassination attempts against Sukarno in the late 1950s and 60s; and in the provision of lists of suspected communists for targeting in 1965. But Syamdani's account seems to exaggerate US intervention, discovering it at every stage of the transition from Sukarno to Suharto. The book can be understood as a counter nationalist narrative to New Order discourse. Like many other early post-Suharto accounts of history it revelled in the circulation of theories that were once forbidden. It is as if their very suppression by the New Order regime made these theories the more credible.

## RECONCILIATION

Goenawan Mohamad (2001) has provided a critical commentary on the re-emergence of the left after their suppression under the New Order, arguing that 'left chic', and by implication histories like Syamdani's, were an over-reaction to the New Order. His central point was to reject the pattern of past polarisation between the left and the right in Indonesia that had led to such tragic consequences as the 1965–66 killings. His comments importantly connected historical debates to the issue of reconciliation over these killings.

During his short term as president, Abdul Wahid recognised the need to promote discussions of the PKI in the public arena as part of a process of reconciliation. Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur, did this first by apologising for the massacres (on 13 March 2000), secondly by attempting to lift the ban on the PKI, and thirdly by mooted a South-African style Truth and Reconciliation Commission, something that had already been talked about at the time of the fall of Suharto. For many Indonesian intellectuals this is the only alternative to cycles of revenge.

Long-term political rivals from the polarised years of the early 1960s, Goenawan Mohamad and Indonesia's most famous novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, had very different responses to the issue of reconciliation. Pramoedya, 'an icon of the 1965 victims', rejected Gus Dur's apology, arguing that justice through legal processes was preferable to what he felt was 'mere talk by the people in power'. Goenawan's reply was to call for forgiveness and humility, because the grievances and crimes in Indonesia's past were too many to be justly resolved (Mohamad 2001 pp. 133–34).

Goenawan's discussion was premised on eliciting positive individual responses to the process of reconciliation, rather than a state or national solution to the problem of how to deal with the past. Pramoedya, the only writer to present an alternative historiography during the New Order period (Vickers 1991), was well aware that history and good intentions sit badly together and was sceptical of the capacity of a new narrative to heal past wounds. Even in the South African case, which Goenawan sees as more straight-forward, there are questions about a just historiography emerging from the Commission (Grunebaum-Ralph 2001).<sup>8</sup>

The reactions of the right to Gus Dur's apology show the complexity of the problem of reaching agreement on a new interpretation of the killings. As the former head of the large Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an institution directly involved in the 1965 killings, Gus Dur's moves to encourage reconciliation were brave. NU's 'youth wing', Ansor, at various times headed by close relatives of Gus Dur, killed more people in East Java than Suharto's military forces. Although Gus Dur won some support from the Yogyakarta division of Ansor, his own supporters turned against him on this issue. His initiatives gave ammunition to hardline elements in Muslim politics. The majority of the parliament continued to stigmatise the left in the political parties bill of 2003, which perpetuated the 1966 ban on the PKI (Decree MPRS XXV/1966) and tried to ban political participation by anyone deemed to be 'PKI' (Stanley 2000; McGregor 2002b).

In the National Assembly the rejection of any examination of 1965 was led by House Leader Akbar Tanjung, the Chair of Golkar, the political vehicle of the New Order. Tanjung was later convicted of corruption. His allies included a large section of Nahdlatul Ulama and various military and ex-military leaders. Rather than confront the issues of the killings, Tanjung and his allies either argued that history should be ignored ('we should look to the future' said Tanjung),

or they resorted to older readings of history. When the killings were discussed, Muslim groups attributed responsibility to the communists. They argued that in 1948, during a crucial incident in the Indonesian Revolution known as the 'Madiun Affair', Muslims had been victims of communist aggression. The only detailed account of 1948 communist atrocities against Muslims, produced during the New Order period (Maksum et al. 1990), documented how over 200 Muslims were killed by communists, without mentioning that Muslim militias and right-wing military killed at least 20,000 communists in the aftermath of the Madiun Affair. On the basis of such accounts, assertions of the brutality of communists were taken for granted.

During Gus Dur's attempts at reconciliation, 'anticommunist groups', apparently a combination of quasi-military groups and hired thugs of the kind employed by the New Order, carried out raids on bookstores and book burnings. Commenting on these, a sociologist who did not approve of the book burnings nevertheless repeated the Islamic line, 'What the PKI did in the past to our people [in 1948, but also with the killings of the Generals in 1965] was too traumatic for the families of the victims'.<sup>9</sup> Here we see evidence of the persistence of New Order narratives where they continue to serve the interests of different groups.

In line with the New Order version of history, the commemoration of suppression of the PKI, called 'The Day of the Sacred Power of the Five Principles' (*Hari Kesaktian Pancasila*) by the New Order, was salvaged as 'Commemoration Day for the Betrayal of the Five Principles' (*'Peringatan Hari Pengkhianatan (terhadap) Pancasila'*). Although this move was meant to undermine New Order interpretations of the day as sacralising the Five Principles, it was all too easily appropriated by the Islamic right. Islamic groups had always disapproved of the idea of Pancasila being 'sacred' (the standard, but not necessarily correct, translation of *sakti* which means something like 'mystical power or energy'), so they already saw the move as an answer to their lobbying. Further, as McGregor (2002a) has demonstrated, the New Order had already prepared the way for such an appropriation by cultivating a deliberately Islamic flavour to the celebrations in the 1990s. The day has been left ambiguous, with no clear agency of 'betrayal' identified. The majority of people brought up on New Order propaganda films such as the *Treachery of the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement* would still see the PKI as the betrayers, although the Muslim groups involved in protests around the naming also implied that the New Order had betrayed the memory of the PKI's killings of Muslims in 1948 (see further McGregor 2002a).

Indonesian academics have been reluctant to give the PKI the status of 'victims'. Two Indonesian academics who had written doctoral dissertations on the killings, Iwan Sujatmiko and Hermawan Sulisty, presented the PKI unsympathetically in discussions of their research for Indonesian audiences. Sulisty, who was close to Gus Dur, tended towards accepting the view of his NU sources (Sulisty 2000), while Sujatmiko explicitly argued that the destruction of the PKI was a logical consequence of their own revolutionary strategy... the fall of the New Order will not automatically permit [*membenarkan* (!)] former members of the PKI and their sympathisers to whitewash [*pamutihan*] the history of the PKI's destruction (Sujatmiko 2000). Their efforts to depict the PKI as a bunker [*kubu*] on the side of 'peace' and 'without fault' is at odds with the realities of the history of that time [*sejarah saat itu*].<sup>10</sup> Partly motivated by fear of the book burnings and threats to members of the media made especially by violent groups who claimed to act in the name of Islam, the majority of the media fell into line with this view.

Public intellectuals were right to problematise the status of the PKI, as Goenawan Mohamad so clearly explained in his response to Pramoeodya:

In an age when the victim is easily sanctified, one who thinks himself of a higher degree of victimisation will, with ease, also believe in the right to become the ultimate arbiter of justice. But, as with every claim to sanctity, this too could give rise to arbitrariness. Mandela knew this... [He has] humbled [himself] (Mohamad 2001 p. 134).

But a problem remains. Denying victimhood to those labelled PKI licenses some Islamic groups to claim the exclusive status of victims. As well as being the victims of Madiun, these groups also claim to be victims of the New Order, especially in 1984 when up to 500 Muslims were killed by the military in riots in North Jakarta known as the Tanjung Priok Affair. The status of Indonesian Islam as a ‘majority with a minority mentality’, to quote W.F. Wertheim’s summative phrase, makes the manipulation of Islamic victimhood one of the easiest tools for politicians to use (Wertheim 1987). So in 1996 modernist Muslim intellectual Adi Sasono could attack Gus Dur for being too close to Benny Murdani, the (Christian) military leader whom Muslims hold responsible for Tanjung Priok. Likewise in 1988 Suharto’s son-in-law was able to harness Muslim hardliners to manipulate theories of conspiracies by ‘the CIA (Amerika), Mossad (Jews), the Vatican and overseas Chinese’ to incite murder and rape of ethnic Chinese Indonesians (Hefner 2000 pp. 188, 201–203).<sup>11</sup> Islamic groups have been simultaneously urged to support their Islamic brethren in Maluku and Palestine, and to defend, ‘*membela*’, Islam against the threat to it from the West.

Islam in Indonesia is not, however, monolithic, despite claims by some leaders to speak on behalf of all Muslims. Different Muslims groups hold radically different positions in the historiographic debates. Those who were of the left have continued to produce accounts of the killings, of their imprisonment by the New Order, and of their continued suppression in post-New Order Indonesia (eg Moestahal 2002). From the side of Gus Dur’s followers in the NU has come an important attempt to keep the reconciliation process going. The NU journal *Afkar*, for example, published a special issue on the Coup and the killings that attempted to provide a more nuanced version of what happened on 30<sup>th</sup> September, to discuss the motivations of those members of NU who took part in the killings, and to explore the theological basis of the reconciliation process (Aziz 2003; Crouch 2003; Setiadi et al. 2003). A number of historians see as the best approach to the problem of reconciliation a view of both Muslims and leftists as victims of common New Order oppression, the position adopted by the organisation Syarikat<sup>12</sup> which was founded in 2000 specifically for the purpose of reconciling members of Ansor and the families of victims of the killings (Olliver 2004).

## THE PROBLEM OF ‘NATIONAL HISTORY’ AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The dominant view of history underlying these discussions is that it is a raw tool of politics. Over the last few years opposition to the standard New Order version of history has been about the only thing that historians can agree on. This opposition included demonstrations in which the authorised *National History* (*Sejarah Nasional Indonesia*) was burned.<sup>13</sup>

Megawati's Vice President, Hamzah Haz, always ready to play the Islamic card, called for the banning of the book *I Am Proud to be the Child of a Communist* (Proletariyati 2002) on the grounds that 'the title of this book is in opposition to state ideology which refuses the teachings of communism'.<sup>14</sup> Unwittingly, and with unintended irony, Haz identified the chief problem. With the removal of the authority of the New Order account of history, there is no longer a clear account of what constitutes 'state ideology', and what historical base that ideology rests upon.

Attempts to produce an officially-authorised history have as yet come to nothing. Juwono Sudarsono, who served in the last Suharto cabinet and then became Habibie's education minister, made the positive step of opening up the national education history curriculum during 1998. He organised consultative seminars during October of that year, aimed at allowing a variety of historians to contribute to overturning the New Order's curriculum, which as Juwono observed, gave priority to the military's role as principal actor in history. School teachers had asked for the correct answers so they could teach history, although they did not reflect on what the questions might be.<sup>15</sup>

Juwono and others complained about a history curriculum that was Suharto-centred. The discussions began with Juwono promoting the idea of an 'objective' history.<sup>16</sup> Or to be more precise, he used the key words 'objective, factual, more balanced, and in proportion' (*objektif, wajar, lebih berimbang, dan lebih proporsional*). These terms are common rhetorical markers in Indonesian polemics, having the main function of discrediting one's opponents. Juwono further identified the problem of concentration on 'historical figures' (*tokoh*) as a major barrier not only to history but also to the establishment of the supremacy of the law and the constitution.<sup>17</sup>

Media reports of the subsequent discussions included commentaries by the dominant school of history, that of Gadjah Mada University, represented by some of the nation's foremost social historians, but the Indonesian Historians' Society (*Masyarakat Sejarawan Indonesia*) quickly became the main body quoted, with their Head, Taufik Abdullah, being the person most often mentioned after novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Azyumardi Azra, Professor at the Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, attempted to bridge the gap between popular and professional history by suggesting that history is not the preserve of professional historians – 'informal historians' also have a role to play. History should not, he says, be taught as something that happened long ago [*'di masa silam'*], but rather be a 'living history' [English used] which is a form of 'contemporary history'. Living history is useful [*bermanfaat*] to broaden and enrich collective memory [*'ingatan kolektif'*].<sup>18</sup>

Memory was a major historiographical concern within the debates. Goenawan Mohamad (2001 p. 131) had already spoken of the issues around 1965 as being problems of 'the persistence of memory'. Azra's appeal to collective memory was repeated by most of the historians contributing to the debate. Taufik Abdullah worried, however, that collective memory would feed feelings of the need for revenge. Taufik repeated the dominant Indonesian historiographic focus on 'events' (*peristiwa* – cf Geertz 2001) while avoiding the complementary interest in great men. He argued that it is normal for society to remember and forget, but that the New Order used the recollection of events loaded with revenge to legitimate their power. His solution was to turn away from strategies of collective memory obsessed with legitimating power. Instead the government should order (*menata*) the collective memory of society through concentration on positive

events. His example was that regions should promote their own histories of the coming of Islam 'as an event full of wonder rather than conflict'.<sup>19</sup>

'Order' was an unusual term to use in this discussion. Most of the media commentaries on history consistently referred to the idea of 'straightening (*meluruskan*) history'. For example the major daily *Kompas* reports of the 2000 Papuan People's Congress, to discuss West Papuan independence, cited the late Theys Eluay's opening speech as being about how 'Papua's history had been twisted' (*'Sejarah Papua Dibelokkan'*).<sup>20</sup> The congress's leaders were said to wish to 'straighten' (*luruskan*) the history of Papua.<sup>21</sup> Syamdani's earlier mentioned book had a similar aim. He specifically elevated narratives that he felt were true (*'benar'*), as against Suharto's lies, *'bohong'*.

Syamdani is a journalist, so it would be unfair to expect him to meet standards of academic historiography. The same cannot be said for Asvi Warman Adam, a leading historian from the premier national research body the Indonesian Institute of the Sciences, LIPI. Adam constantly intervenes in media debates on history using his authority as a qualified historian. In 2004 Adam published a history of the Suharto period which claimed to achieve a just account of that era (Adam 2004). His monograph attempted both to give a definitive account of the New Order and to intervene directly in the current political situation, at a time when moves to prosecute Suharto for his crimes had stalled. Adam provided a series of mini-essays connecting the violence of the New Order with the current political situation in Indonesia. Sadly his book was poorly referenced; most of the few footnotes have titles followed by 'source that cannot be traced'. Although Adam's attempt to dismantle Suharto's self-made image may well please Indonesian readers in the current anti-Suharto climate, his work is marred by a lack of commitment to an even-handed treatment of the evidence. This position underpins Adam's *ad hominem* critique of Australian historian R.E. Elson's biography of Suharto, on the basis that anything that does not tear down Suharto must be defending him (Adam 2004 pp. 151–153; Elson 2001). The ploy of attacking a writer's background rather than addressing his or her work is a common one in these debates, a problem that is not unique to Indonesian public history.

Three decades of the New Order have left Indonesians cynical about truth and accuracy. Commentators argue that 'only Americans care about methodology anyway'<sup>22</sup> and that it is permissible for newspapers to publish fabrications and rumours without qualification – no Jews were killed in New York on September 11, the US bombed Kuta. Scholars working outside Indonesia have access to extensive library and archival collections on Indonesia, but inside the nation poor record-keeping, inadequate funding and a culture of closely guarding sensitive archives has made it very difficult for Indonesian historians to reconstruct the past independently.

An activist who worked outside the universities, Hilmar Farid (2002), has researched social history and written in a variety of media on historiography. In a paper on historiography published on-line, he pointed out that the term '*meluruskan*' means that history has been written 'crookedly', i.e. manipulated (*dimanipulasi*). While he agreed that there was already clear evidence that this was done by the New Order, he warned that historians understand that all historical writing is marked by omissions and weaknesses (*kekurangan dan kelemahan*) which result from processes of interpretation rather than deliberate falsification. To have a 'straight' (*lurus*) history you have to have an authority that establishes and fixes its straightness [*'adanya orotitas (kekuasaan) yang bisa menetapkan dan memastikan...'*] As Farid observed, however, the official New Order accounts

were based on 'outright factual errors' (*fakta-fakta yang keliru sama sekali*) and the concealing of facts which did not support their assertions (*dan juga penggelapan fakta-fakta yang tidak mendukung kesimpulannya*). So as well as countering factual errors, he notes, there is a need to look at what remains unsaid. Farid went on to argue that the procedures for countering New Order arguments are problematic, because they began from the *a priori* assumptions established by the New Order. His example was that when opponents of the New Order wish to counter the official account that the Coup was 'manipulated by the Communist Party' (*didalangi oleh PKI*), they look for evidence to prove their argument that the PKI was not the 'puppeteer' and ignore evidence to the contrary. In this Farid's argument lined up with Goenawan's, that we should also critically examine PKI claims to victimhood. While arguing for alternative directions in history writing, based on careful documentation and use of sources, he said those directions should be towards opening up new perspectives and questions. His warning about creating a new orthodoxy was important for its recognition that Indonesian historical discourse is not far removed from the authoritarian tendencies of the New Order. Here, and in his other activities, Farid argued that the whole of Indonesian historiography should restart, from the bottom up. In much the same vein the director of history at the Ministry of National Education called in 2001 for the public to be the ones who re-wrote the National History so that it would become more of a dialogue in society.<sup>23</sup>

Farid's vision of a total reconstruction of Indonesian historiography is the clearest presentation of a view that others hint at. Only the few Indonesian feminist historians have matched this call in their argument that all aspects of Indonesian history need to be reconsidered if the roles of women are to receive proper recognition. Most of these feminist historians operate outside the academic mainstream, especially through Forum Kerja Budaya (in which Farid is active),<sup>24</sup> but their calls were joined in 2002 by the Minister for Women's Empowerment, Sri Redjeki Sumaryoto.<sup>25</sup>

Indonesian history writing is poised at a critical juncture. As yet the committees convened by successive governments have not produced a new national history, although the promise is there. As Van Klinken observes (Van Klinken 2001 p. 325) historians from an earlier generation such as Soedjatmoko rejected the use of history to promote nationalism (see McGregor 2005). In the media commentaries on history, and particularly on the national history curriculum, there is an unspoken tension. On the one hand there is a recognition that without an agreed national history there can be no rejuvenation of nationalism, but on the other there is the desire for a general, pluralist, people's history. The end of singular narratives about the past may well represent a move towards the democratisation of history in Indonesia (Van Klinken 2001 p. 243). The pluralist view is unintentionally served by the on-going political conflicts manifested in history writing, because as yet no single authority has been able to claim 'ownership' of history.

In this new climate in which history is up for grabs, there are no standards, however, for verifying evidence. 'History proves' anything one wants. Historians are fighting to maintain the integrity, if not the credibility, of their profession.

## THOUGHTS ON COMPARISON

The Indonesian debates demonstrate a number of general tendencies common to other historical controversies, and which feature in the Australian 'history wars'. What is explicit in the Indonesian

debates is a core uncertainty about how to redefine national identity. In both the Australian and Indonesian cases there is a focus on the identification and deployment of facts in relation to truth, yet paradoxically media debates about history cannot present detailed evidence and other aspects of the framework by which historical judgements are made – it is impossible to hold a nuanced and dialectical discussion within the structures of television and newspaper presentations. Leading historian Richard Evans found this out when employed as a professional historian drawn into a legal case with much media attention, David Irving's lawsuit against his critics (Evans 2002). Media coverage of the Windschuttle controversies in Australia is the same. It is even more the case in Indonesia that there is no room for detailed examination of the nature of facts. In Indonesia participants in a public discussion of history subtly declare their position and make assumptions about others' writings on the basis of personality or background.

It is too easy to criticise Indonesian discussants on the basis of academic historiographical criteria. In the Australian case a person with a background of scholarship on the sociology of the media started a debate by writing a series of articles and a book on other people's footnotes. While it is unlikely that Indonesians would take a similar approach, the effect of the books that have been published on historical debates in Indonesia is similar to the effect of Windschuttle's first book on the historiography of Aboriginal Tasmanians. That is, rather than write a coherent, autonomous historical narrative, Windschuttle, like Syamdani and Adam, produced an anti-narrative, a fragmentary and negative collection of counter-facts. In both the Indonesian and Australian cases the net effect of the books was gained by their appearance of authority – they exist as books. Few of their popular audiences would read them with attention to the scholarly apparatus. To pay attention to Windschuttle's footnotes is then, to try and beat him at his own game, a mistake into which a number of Australian historians, lacking media experience, have been drawn.

A general tendency in historical debates is to identify victims. In the Indonesian discussions some of the participants have recognised that conferring victimhood on the communists was to give them moral legitimacy. So too in the Australian case; the net effect of Windschuttle's work is to deny the legitimacy of Aboriginal victimhood. Windschuttle and others who publish in the journal *Quadrant* and the opinion pages of *The Australian* seek to demonstrate that it is in fact they who are the victims of 'elite' left-wing totalitarian attempts to silence them.

The Indonesian debates link claims of victimhood to political legitimacy. In this they make the stakes of public debates about history clear. In the Australian case the Keating government had made moves towards reconciliation with Aboriginal Australia. By de-legitimising ideas associated with Keating, some of the participants in the Australian history wars attempted to confer legitimacy on the anti-Keating platform of the Howard government, hence the revival of debate in the pro-Howard newspaper *The Australian* in the lead-up to the 2004 Federal election. In the Indonesian case Gus Dur was not able to advance a reconciliation process, and reconciliation became a tool used by his enemies to bring down his agenda of social democratisation and demilitarisation of the state.

When a small and uncomplicated nation like Australia cannot achieve reconciliation over a process of colonisation that occurred nearly 200 years ago, what hope is there of finding a national consensus in a country of 220 million about events that occurred in the 1960s? We have only scraped the surface of debate in this article. The Indonesian history wars have a long way yet to run.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

*The Australian*  
*Bali Post*  
*D&R*  
*Forum Keadilan*  
*Gamma*  
*Gatra*  
*Istiqlal*  
*Kompas*  
*Jakarta Post*  
*Media Kerja Budaya*  
*Sinar Harapan*  
*Suara Pembaruan*  
*Tajuk*  
*Tempo*

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 'Historians at War', *The Weekend Australian* 14-15 December 2002; Macintyre et al. 2003; Gregory Melleuish, 'History locked in the past', *The Australian* 6 July 2004; Keith Windschuttle's writings at [www.sydneyline.com/](http://www.sydneyline.com/).
- 2 This article is the first fruits of an ARC grant on 'Rewriting the Nation: the Politics of Indonesian History', held by Professor Vickers at the University of Wollongong.
- 3 See Leigh 1991, Parker 1992, Parker 2002, Wandelt 1994, Kitley 2000.
- 4 See also Syamdani 2001 p. 8, citing Sartono 2001.
- 5 Tim Redaksi Wahana 'Yogya Banjir Bacaan Kiri', carried in the Jaringan Kerja Budaya list 13 Aug 2000.
- 6 As a number of reviewers have pointed out, editing and proof-reading by publishers were also casualties of the New Order.
- 7 A. Vickers, observations on a national history seminar held in Bali, 1994.
- 8 Gus Dur's authorised biography (Barton 2002) does not present the reconciliation moves as an important part of his all-too-brief presidency – they receive no mention at all.
- 9 'Anti-communist groups accused of communist practice'. *The Jakarta Post* 11 January 2002.
- 10 Iwan Gardono Sujatmiko, 'Risiko Kalah Total'. *Forum Keadilan* 27, 8 October 2000.
- 11 *Republika* is the main Islamicist newspaper: on 14 October 2002 their on-line version [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id) blamed the Bali bombing on the U.S., which fitted into readers' on-line discussions of the 'Masonic-Zionist' plot against Islam.
- 12 Discussion at a seminar given by Vickers on historiography, Universitas Gadjah Mada, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2004.
- 13 'Demonstran Bakar Buku Sejarah Nasional'. *Kompas* 3 October 2002.
- 14 Reported in a string under the title 'Prokontra penerbitan buku "Aku bangga jadi anak PKI"' posted by Andre to the *Sejarah Sosial* list, sent from 'Ranesi Hilversum, Rabu 02 Oktober 2002, Gema Warta', 3<sup>rd</sup> report, Kamis 03/10/2002, 'Waspres Larang Buku Aku Bangga Jadi Anak PKI' (unsourced media report).
- 15 *Kompas* 8 & 9 October 1998.

- 16 'Menghapuskan kisah heroik Soeharto'. *Gatra* 17 October 1998.
- 17 'Menghapuskan kisah heroik Soeharto'. *Gatra* 17 October 1998.
- 18 'Sejarah dan teks-teks nya'. *Kompas* 28 November 2001.
- 19 'Prof Dr Taufik Abdullah: pemerintah harus mentat ingatan kolektif masyarakat'. *Kompas* 3 October 2000.
- 20 Kompas Cyber Media, <http://www.kompas.com/> 30 Mei 2000.
- 21 Kompas Cyber Media, <http://www.kompas.com/> 19 Juni 2000. One of Syamdani's reports on the regional revolts is headed, 'Tolong diluruskan, PRRI bukan pemberontak!' (Syamdani 2001 p. 50).
- 22 Central Javanese sexologist Iep Wijayanato, paraphrased by Champagne et al. (2002).
- 23 *The Jakarta Post* 26 October 2001.
- 24 e.g. 'Perempuan bergerak'. *Tim Kerja Budaya* 3 August 2002.
- 25 'Akan dibahas, kontroversi sejarah pergerakan perempuan'. *Kompas* 13 December 2001.

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