

Out of the black hole

Written by Hilmar Farid |

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History is all about today. It helps us understand where we are and where we are heading. Indonesians are confused about the future because so much of their past has been covered up.

Globalisation, for example, is not an Indonesian idea, and as a collectivity, we don't know how to deal with it. But from history we learn that those who built this republic never intended it to become a place where the elite sell their own people. That is more or less what globalisation is - how to make use of Indonesian energies and channel them into the market. Those who drew up the constitution never thought like that, and no one can deny it is wrong, yet today it happens.

The school history textbooks don't help students to understand any of this. They are all about national heroes without any context, just like in the comics. If I were writing a history of the 1945 revolution, I would write about it as a liberating energy that came from the people. The 17 August proclamation was all about turning the entire colonial order upside down.

But then the story takes a turn. Those energies are shackled once more, this time from within the republic itself. It becomes a story of crushed creativity. Take the popular action to take over the Dutch colonial plantation landholdings, which started soon after the Japanese pushed the Dutch out in 1942. The newly independent central government quickly began to use Dutch concepts and Dutch laws to suppress it. It was ironic - they forgot they were reasserting an entire colonial order.

That is why people came out with the slogan 'The Revolution is Unfinished'. They were right. Rather than institutionalising this creativity and giving it space to develop, it was replaced with colonial era rules. Land ownership is the most fundamental thing. But the people who suppressed it put more value on order. They saw the revolution as disorder, a typically elite view. For the people who took over the land and worked it, there was no disorder. They were happy, they could grow things. The disorder was in the heads of the bureaucrats. They made an agreement with the Dutch to give the land back to its original owners, as it had been before 1942.

Things would have been different if the idea of order had been derived from the experiences of those at the grassroots. But all those efforts were undone, and on top of it was built another order, lacking popular consensus.

New Order

Indonesians have experienced this repeatedly. This is the story of the New Order. The New Order explained 1965-66 in a very simplistic way. There was the danger of communism, several generals were killed, and the communist party PKI did it. Extraordinary disorder followed, after which the military came along, cleaned up the mess, and erected the New Order. Millions of school children have learned this for over thirty years.

But when we go into the data, which is abundant, we get a very different picture. The generals were in fact killed by soldiers in uniform. There was no communist hysteria. A press already controlled by General Suharto spread much of this disinformation. The objective was to generate a lot of anger and direct it at the PKI. This then led to massive killings. People who know how the killings were done tell us they happened not in a disorderly fashion but systematically. Groups with known names would be checked out of jail to be executed. There was paperwork, a bureaucracy of murder. You certainly can't say this was communal conflict among naturally violent people.

What happened in 1965-66 was a complete overturning of the existing political system, economic structure, and cultural life. The prisons of the New Order were filled with the best and brightest of that generation. Once more, the energy of the people was crushed in a brutal fashion. Not only the exceptionally brilliant ended in jail. Farmers used to do their own research. They tried to educate themselves. Today there is nothing like that.

I'm told that Indonesia last year published only 22 scholarly papers in mathematics. In Vietnam, which only emerged from war in 1975, there were about 1,300. Of course the killings of 1965 alone can't explain this, but the New Order military had such an obsession to control everything that it managed to snuff out all initiative. A massive purge such as 1965-66 had never happened before. The New Order crushed not only the PKI but an entire nationalist generation, all those who came up in the 1940s and '50s. Many of them were not even involved in the PKI.

Many activists began to research the history of the New Order as soon as it ended in 1998. When Suharto resigned everyone agreed things had to change. But most thought only of combatting corruption and getting rid of the bad eggs. Why didn't they deal with land ownership, for example? Or labour reform, or the rehabilitation of political prisoners? The reformasi agenda was not radical enough. That is what drove us to try to understand what we were really up against.

We in Jaringan Kerja Budaya (JKB) had long been thinking about this. To us, the New Order was a cultural black hole. It was covered with a lid, and on that they erected what they called Indonesian culture. We wanted to know just how deep that black hole was, and what had been lost. We discovered that so many of today's issues had already been the subject of lively debate in the '40s and '50s. So many experiments, right here in our own country, were sucked into the black hole. Post-coloniality, for example - the question of how the colonial heritage influenced our culture. An economics of the people - this was not just a debate but actually put into practice. Organic farming - this too was a practice that was sucked into the black hole.

There's a famous hotel in Bali that was built in 1967. Apparently its foundations are in a mass grave of people killed in 1965-66. This literally demonstrates the black hole of the New Order, but it is also a metaphor. Those buried there belonged to a popular movement to build their own society on their own strength, without having to rely on foreign capital. On their graves was built this massive foreign-funded hotel, thus making Bali what it since became, a centre for the tourist industry.

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