

Review: State terrorism and political identity in Indonesia



Fatally belonging

Ariel Heryanto

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State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging is a challenging read. This is not to imply that the book is impenetrable. It makes any number of points very clearly, the following of which made a strong impression on this reviewer. Firstly, unlike common understandings of state terror, and contrary to prevailing scholarly assumptions about the New Order regime's endurance, Indonesian experiences of *teror* are not characterised by coercion and the threat of armed repression. Secondly, *teror* resides at the very seams of culture, rather than on its underside. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, *teror* commences with stigmatised words and images, but this makes it no less terrifying, nor less physically violent, in the full process of its actualisation.

Heryanto is blessed with a capacity for compelling narrative. This reviewer ploughed hungrily through the chapters entitled 'The Yogyakarta case' and 'Law and state terrorism'. In them, the author presents his wry, empathetic renderings of events surrounding the 1989-90 trials of three young men charged with and convicted of subversion for their participation in a discussion group, and for their book collections. This case is discussed in detail, but Heryanto also presents numerous other examples that reveal the important role of stigmatised words and images in New Order political culture; not least, that of the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, which portrays the official version of events on 30 September, 1965, and was required viewing for Indonesian school pupils during Suharto's 32-year reign.

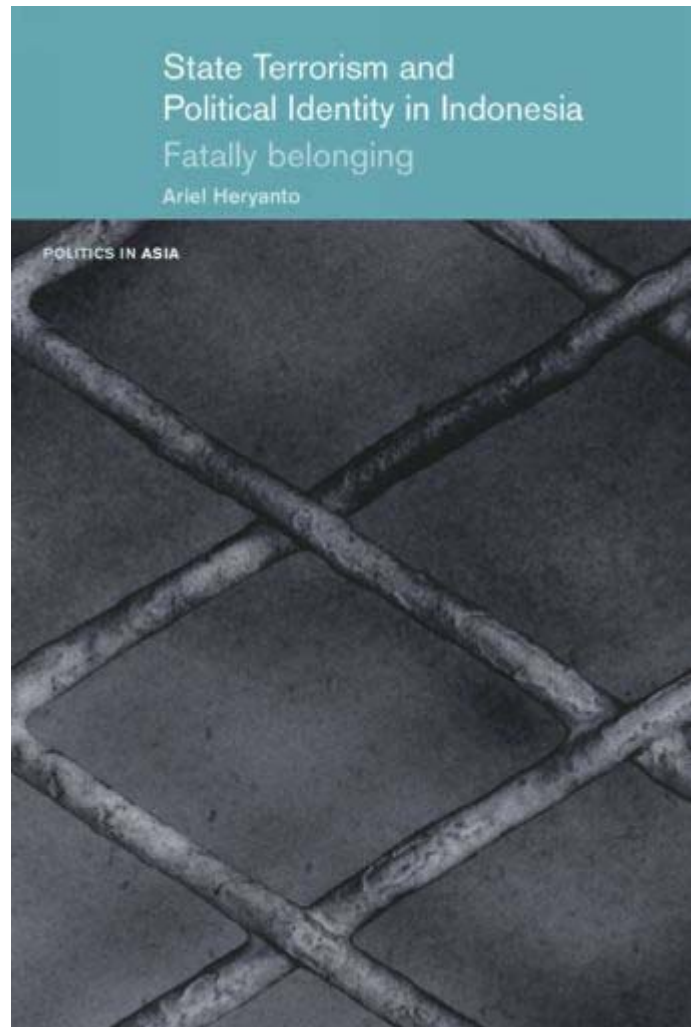
The central role of words and images in the workings of power in Indonesia remind us, Heryanto suggests, of other post-colonies. Clearly, Achille Mbembe's work on post-coloniality resonate strongly with him. But here too, as in many places throughout the book, he pauses to question, and cautions against essentialising and universalising the post-colony. Indeed, as one reviewer has noted, Heryanto is hesitant to draw conclusions. This is an understatement. He has a knack of unpicking theory, and herein lies the beauty of the book. Heryanto opts for gentle evocation by backlighting a series of texts and images, which he documents with precision and holds to be telling of New Order simulacral *teror* and its contestations. He guides the reader into Indonesian politics, as if into a jungle, demonstrates the value of exploring it from the perspective of popular practice, and gives her plenty of lateral to make her own sense of it. ii

When it was first published in 2006, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally belonging* was available only in hardback. It has now been printed in paperback.

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