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A ban that never was: Beyond the headlines

Ariel Heryanto, Canberra | Opinion | Tue, November 10 2015, 4:33 PM

Challenges to the New Order's official lies and propaganda surrounding the 1965 political turmoil and the subsequent killings of approximately 1 million citizens have a long history, dating back decades before the downfall of the New Order government in 1998.

These counter-narratives have taken on a wide range of forms, including artistic works of various media and materials.

Therefore, it is inaccurate and unfair to suggest — as some do — that certain films or novels in the recent past have broken the silence on the taboo of the 1965 killings. Such claims can spread widely across the globe, when presented in English, to audiences with little or no knowledge of Indonesia.

The progress of efforts, often greatly difficult, made by many Indonesian and non-Indonesian people, to unearth and expose this forbidden topic may feel slow for some. However, achievements have been substantial and the desire to seek some kind of response, including a state apology to the victims, reconciliation, retribution or rehabilitation, persists.

One of the latest and most significant achievements in these efforts is the upcoming International People's Tribunal on Indonesia 1965,

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in The Hague, the Netherlands, on Nov. 10-13. Regardless of the actual outcome and the future impacts of the tribunal, the fact that such an event can take place at all is extraordinary. It marks a new watershed and represents a most important step toward redressing the serious crime that took place half a century ago.

The Netherlands also hosted what appears to be the largest and most comprehensive among the many conferences in 2015 dedicated to commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1965 killings.

Held in Amsterdam, the two-day conference (Oct. 1-2) discussed new findings, insights and questions about the past killings, with a global comparative perspective and with a keen eye on the meaning of the past violence in the present day.

Sponsored by leading institutions — Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD), Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) — the conference featured a good combination of very senior and leading experts in the field of study as well as some of the best among the brightest younger generation scholars.

There was also a good balance of Indonesians and non-Indonesians. It was the most productive and inspiring gathering on the topic I have seen in decades.

If there is anything to be mildly regretted about the conference and the tribunal, it would be the fact that all these important events did not take place in Indonesia and it did not operate in Indonesian.

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After all, the issue matters first and foremost to the millions of Indonesian people. Under the ideal circumstances, Indonesians residing in Indonesia would enjoy the greatest space in most, if not all, engagements on the issue.

The reasons why the ideal is not the reality should be obvious to us all. Resistance to open and critical discussion in Indonesia, in 2015, remains strong among members of the ruling elite and some social groups.

Apparently, for the same reasons (distance, language and resistance), the tribunal in The Hague has not received as much coverage as it deserves in the Indonesian media, while the conference in Amsterdam barely got any mention at all.

Ironically, one recent gathering that has generated a flurry of media campaigns and controversy is the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF 2015). It is ironic, because the festival was never meant to be a forum for primarily discussing the 1965 killings. But the irony does not stop here.

The rest of this note will take a closer look at the case, as it throws some light on how the discourse of 1965 could have its unexpected twists and turns. Things are not always what they may appear to distant observers.

UWRF 2015 took place in an Indonesian town. However, being an international event, English was the language of the festival. Key speakers, participants, programs, topics of discussions and any potential impact arising from the whole event were never intended to be primarily for, or exclusively about, Indonesia.

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This year's UWRF enjoyed generous coverage in English mainstream media, especially in Australia, and on social media, for weeks and in two rounds.

First, before it opened on Oct. 28, there was a flurry of international outrage and condemnation directed against the Indonesian government and the Balinese local authorities. It followed the organizers' cancelations of a few items in the program that dealt with 1965 violence and land reclamation in Bali.

The decision was made, subsequent to, and in line with, verbal intimidation from local police who demanded that the festival refrained from discussing "politics", and stay focused on "culture".

No official ban was issued. When confronted with international pressure, the local police denied any responsibility for the cancelations. Notwithstanding this, "ban" and "censorship" have been used liberally in the titles of most media reports.

Not long after being relieved of the police threat, the UWRF faced a burst of criticism from local observers, activists and those whose panels had been canceled at the last minute. To many of the latter, the UWRF was too meek when threatened by the local police.

Second, soon after the festival was over, there was another series of media coverage and another irony. This time, instead of outrage and condemnation, we read jubilation and self-congratulatory notes from the festival's key participants.

As if to disapprove the criticism from local activists, central to their main message was that various panels in fact discussed the sensitive topic of 1965 and the environment.

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There were no disruptions or retaliation from the police. The heroic stories of “defiance” demonstrate not a triumph over a ban, but that there was never a ban in the first place.

Plenty of significant deliberations on the 1965 violence have been taking place across the archipelago, occasionally with real, or the threat of, violence and disruptions.

Most of these stories are accessible only to those who speak Indonesian or one of the nation’s ethnic languages. They remain outside the world’s radar, until someone tells the world, in English, in compelling ways.

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