Preman Nation:
How to survive watching the Act of Killing while living in Indonesia

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From the Eyes of the Survivors

On a balmy night in November 2012, I watched The Act of Killing with about 50 survivors of the 1965 killings gathered from all over Sulawesi in the dusty town of Palu, Central Sulawesi. The morning before, these survivors, now aged 70 and above, boarded two rickety buses to visit some 13 sites around the town, where the detainees were forced to work on various projects, from building a dam, road works, erecting the first tower for television broadcast. Lucky for us, we had a poor copy of *Jagal* (lit. "Butcher" the Indonesian title of this film) that resulted in a lot stopping and starting. In those moments, lights back on to fiddle with the CD player, the spectators took time to look at each other and reassure themselves that they have not been transported back into time.

For victims and civil society groups long engaged in efforts to grasp some truth and justice watching the film is an act of self-flagellation. With every scene, the untreated wounds deepen and fester. And yet, our eyes our riveted, as we watch a truthful parody of our own nation's history. At the end of the film, one of the survivors, Asman Yodjodolo, detained, tortured and forced to do hard labor for 13 years, commented: "*This is the truth according to the perpetrator.*"

Perhaps one reason why the film is difficult to watch for survivors and their advocates in Indonesia is because the perpetrator's truth is already the dominant view. With the fall of Soeharto in 1998, there was a short-lived political will to acknowledge our bloody past. In 1999, the Upper House of Parliament (MPR) issued a decree regretting the "fractured protection and promotion of human rights, demonstrated by various human rights violations, in forms that include violence, discrimination, and abuse of power" during the New Order. A year later, the MPR called for the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission. Fast-forward 13 years, a law to establish a truth commission was passed in 2004 then annulled in 2006.[2] Efforts to rewrite school curriculum to reflect different views of the events around 1965 was stopped by the Attorney General in 2006, who then conducted a criminal investigation against the authors of the text book.[3] The most recent slap in the face, was a statement by a senior minister and head of the military denying any wrongdoing, in response to a four year investigation by the National Human Rights Commission that concluded that "gross human rights violations" took place during this time.[4]

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[2] Law 27/2004 on the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission contained problematic sections requiring victims to forgive their perpetrators in order to qualify for reparations. The Constitutional Court found this unconstitutional but instead of striking down those specific articles struck down the whole law. The absence of a national truth commission is also blocking the establishment of local truth commissions legislated under special autonomy laws for Papua (2000) and Aceh (2006).

[3] http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2006/09/18/pki-reinstated-1965-tragedy-culprit-school-textbooks.html

[4] http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/10/02/govt-denies-1965-rights-abuses-happened.html

For survivors of 1965, The Act of Killing is an important window to remind the Indonesian public, younger generation, and international community about what took place. But it is a bitter pill to swallow, served in a context of a steady diet of discriminatory hemlock. In a video clip uploaded by a civil society coalition working to push for official acknowledgement, Asman asks, "*Is it not appropriate for me to speak about my truth?"*

Command Responsibility Or a Country Full of Psychos?

An important, but easy to miss, moment in the film is when Medan newspaperman and Pemuda Pancasila elder, Ibrahim Sinik, is questioned by a voice behind the camera about the relationship between the killings and the military. He says, "Kodim (the local military command) and us, there was no relation… only when we have abducted the members of Pemuda Rakyat that we have beaten up… when we tried to hand them over to Kodim, they didn't want them. What did they say? 'Just throw them into the river.'"

It is a sliver of a connection, a throw-away sentence in the midst of boasting about the men underneath his control, how the wink from him can decide the fate of a detainee. For those already sensitive to the relationship, seeking for evidence of command responsibility, it is a critical piece of the puzzle. As Kaharudin Yondose, another survivor who was imprisoned for 16 years, said: "*I like this film because it has revealed history –who was right and who was wrong. The Pancasila Youth were cruel. Those* preman *were used by the military."*

However, for many viewers, it is a moment that passes too quickly. The film in its mad romp depiction of mass murder from the eyes of its perpetrators befriends Anwar Congo and his genocidal side-kicks. It makes for interesting cinema, an artistic inside-the-mind view of a *genocidere*. But what about the people who sat down and made decisions, planned and ordered the killings, resourced and commanded the killers. We catch a glimpse of the broken political system, that is oiled and fueled by corruption, but little effort is made to posing the question on the military's responsibility. Without this, the film is in danger of depicting the mass killings (and remember that it is estimated that another 1 million were detained and tortured for a decade) as if it was the spontaneous work of mad men. A version of history that the Indonesian military promotes.

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The film makers were able to capture, in its gory and pathetic details, Indonesia's upside down reality –where killers remain triumphant (and in power), basking in the glory of their kill, celebrating their acts of terror with wanton abandon. An embedded camera (and microphone) follows a rally and meeting of the Pancasila Youth, and their not so youthful and foul-mouthed leaders. That such an organization can still exist, 15 years into Indonesia's reformation is evidence that, indeed, Indonesia is still a *preman* nation.

The film covers all the elements of our preman nation: 1) extortion and corruption from the market stalls to the halls of power; 2) elections determined by purchase

power (remember Herman's failed venture into politics --if small fry thugs can find their way into local elections, imagine the big fish!); 3) women exists for the sole purpose of sexual gratification and/or servicing men; 4) leaders busy lining their own pockets and not too concerned with people's welfare; 5) when you have a difference in opinion, use violence to shut-up your opponent; and finally, 6) total impunity, from the most ordinary crimes to crimes against humanity.

"*There are dozens or even hundreds people like him."* Ever the communicator, newspaperman Ibrahim Sinik succinctly explains an important detail. The mass killing was carried out by thousands of Anwar Congos all over Indonesia. And unfortunately, this was not the only bloody chapter in our history. From the farthest corners of the country –from Aceh, East Timor to Papua, the Jakarta riots of 1998 and the murder of human rights defender Munir --thugs are used to quell dissent. I personally have met some younger, beefier versions of Anwar Congo in Indonesia's newer conflict zones. Befriending Anwar, albeit cinematically, brings up traumatic memories of more recent unaccounted violence. However much soul-searching and gut retching we endure from Anwar, I don't buy it.

Genocidal Glee

Weli, a woman survivor, who was detained in a woman prison for 3 months, was quite blunt, "*I don't understand this film. The story goes in circles."*

Perhaps from a Western eye, the ever presence of Herman Koto in his various state of dress (or undress) is a way to sell a story about a forgotten genocide. It is effective, as the audience violently flip-flop between disgust and amusement. However, the scenes at the lake and waterfall, with inexplicable dancing women and Anwar in black (and later Herman in drag) are more problematic. Anwar's demented dream that victims come down from the heavens to thank him for murdering them is offensive. I realize this may be the aim of the film-maker, to make us squirm in our seats. But in a country where the dominant version of history blames the victims of genocide, an Indonesian audience may miss the irony.

Putu Oka Sukanta, former political prisoner and renown poet, who was also at the Palu viewing thought that the film "*accurately depicts the character of the New Order and those in power*" but added that when he participated in a showing of the film on campus in Bali, many of the young students laughed at the wrong places. The not so subtle irony lost in a mind-frame overfed by decades of propaganda. The film never addresses the key pretext, that the evil (and atheist) communists were planning an overthrow of the status quo, thus the people rose up to fight back. By not mentioning the survivors (of killings and decades of detention) a big part of the picture is blacked out.

For the survivors not much has changed. Public acknowledgement of these atrocities their suffering is almost non-existent. The two dozen discriminatory laws and regulations against ex-political detainees and their families enacted by the New Order are still in intact. Despite the fact that many of the survivors are now speaking and writing about their experience, the dominant, narrative, is still one of the perpetrators. And yet, some attention is better than none. Thus Rafin Pariuwa, another survivor who also endured forced labor and ilegal detention for 12 years, echoed the feelings

of others: "*People now know what actually happened. We were innocent. Like the victims in the film. Fortunately we have this film. The perpetrators have spoken.*"

Truth Denied, Fighting Forgetting

The problem with The Act of Killing is that it simply knocks you out. Working on accountability in Indonesia is a balancing act, trying to keep some embers of hope alive while being realistic about the political context. The findings of an investigation by the National Human Rights Commission, announced last year, is an important official breakthrough. The commission found that the crimes that took place from 1965 constitute a systematic pattern of abuse, reaching the threshold of crimes against humanity. They referred their findings to the Attorney General, who then promptly rejected them. Without domestic and international pressure, the Indonesian government prefers to keep things as is.

When horrific stories are not given space in our public consciousness, they fester. They grow, spill into the next generation and find expression in surprising ways. The Act of Killing is one of those surprises. A young American film maker finding his way to Indonesia's unrepentant killers, reminding the world about a distant genocide.

In Indonesia there is a growing civil society movement, with survivors playing a key role, to "fight forgetting." We are, piece by piece, collecting the thousands of stories of repression that have been denied. A national network made up of more than 45 organizations, Coalition for Truth and Justice (http://kkkp.org) has been working for more than 6 years. This year the coalition is conducting its own truth-seeking process, organizing public hearings across Indonesia, collecting testimonies gathered by its members into one database, and producing a final report –in the absence of an official truth commission. A small boat in an ocean of impunity.

After the Act of Killing

For capturing this reality in Indonesia and broadcasting it to the world, I am very grateful. But watching this film is like rubbing salt into a festering wound. In the absence of the needed antibiotics (and major reconstruction), we are hoping against hope that all this salt rubbing will come to some good. The question is can this film be a catalyst for real change? Can the film lead to a social media campaign inside and outside of Indonesia that can turn the tides? Victims, civil society and academic researchers in Indonesia continue to work on small bites of truth and solidarity with survivors. But without any international push, the government is unlikely to move. [More recently, several UN mechanisms, the Universal Periodic Review process and the CEDAW Committee have asked about commitments to establishing a truth commission and the 1965 issue, respectively.]

Stripped naked, we look into the mirror and see our blemished selves, every ugly scar and pore. From an insiders view, there is little room for hope. That is the devastating impact of this film. Perhaps they should add a caution: "Hope depriving scenes. Viewer discretion advised."