



Policy Brief

Ivory Tower on Dirt: The Impacts of Regime Changes on Academic Freedom in Indonesian Universities

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The 1965 alleged failed communist coup (G30S) has overarching and deep impacts on various aspects of Indonesian society, including the higher education sector. This research aims at shedding light on how the 1965 issue has badly affected the academic life and cultural, structural and institutional dimensions of Indonesian universities.

In the aftermath of the incident, in its counter-coup and anti-communist campaigns, the Indonesian military – mainly the army – disbanded sixteen higher education institutions allegedly affiliated with the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Indonesian Communist Party); dissolved student and academic staff organizations connected to the Indonesia community party (PKI); expelled hundreds of academia and university staffs and thousands of students allegedly involved in or supported the G30S movement and the PKI; and forbade and strictly censored all kinds of elements or subjects deemed as propagating leftist/communist principles, such as books, films, archives, newspapers, and other documents. Altogether, these policies created a ‘culture’ of impunity, anti-communist phobia, and discriminatory conditions against victims, survivors and their families.

For universities and academia, the policies brought about the loss of a generation of scholars and intellectuals of 1950s, the elimination of the critical thinking tradition and socialist ideas from the curricula and learning process, the establishment of structural censorship and a screening institution on campus, the expansion of militarism and the militaristic institution inside campuses, and the restriction of academic freedom practice among academia, lecturers and students. In short, universities operate fully under government’s cooptation, which caused them to lose their independence. Instead of promoting academic freedom and critical thinking, the universities develop into “market-friendly” institutions, which emphasize financial benefits and are lacking in social commitment.

Current developments show that the 1965 episode is still a very sensitive issue in Indonesia despite efforts to investigate and bring new research findings on the 1965 issue, which continuously influence academic spheres. Moreover, actions by conservative groups, which use the 1965 issue for political purposes, gain support from politicians, religious leaders, and even bureaucrats. In the meantime, the Indonesian governments – with the exception of the Abdurrachman Wahid’s presidency which showed a concrete policy to cope with the issue - did almost no substantial policy to come to terms with this historical conundrum.

Due to such a political swung into conservatism, which gave advantage to right wing groups, progressive efforts to unravel the 1965 related socio-political problems have thus suffered a setback. Religious vigilantes who vehemently oppose and criminalize human rights activists and academia who try to raise awareness about the 1965 issues receive ‘unofficial’ support from the military and

politicians. In worst cases, they also attacked public discussions, movie screenings, and even lectures in universities, while the university's authorities were in most cases powerless or hesitant to counter such actions. On the political level, these groups' promotion of anti-communist sentiments was taken up and used by pragmatic politicians and political parties to advance their political agenda. Such a strategy, for example, has become common during the elections at regional and national levels and thus poses a challenge on the quality of Indonesian democracy

Considering those situations, it is important that the Indonesian government take 'concrete' steps to overcome the political legacy of the 1965 issue, among others by creating a comprehensive and systematic scheme of a reconciliation program. This includes promoting a continuous open dialogue between various parties that were involved in the 1965 episode, putting forward the humanistic aspects and values as basic principles; annulling the 'legal frameworks' that had been used for socio-political exclusions and the stigmatization of the 1965 victims and their families; rehabilitating the survivors' civil rights as part of 'normal citizens of Indonesia'; and accepting and/or encouraging multidisciplinary research that aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of what happened in 1965.

As part of its commitment to support research and truth-seeking efforts about 1965, the Indonesian government also needs to allow public access to documents or archives related to this historical episode. Developments concerning this aspect include the Indonesian government's recent issuance of Bill no. 14, 2008 on the opening of public information (*Undang-Undang No.14 Tahun 2008 tentang Keterbukaan Informasi Publik*), which guarantees access of public information.

Based on above consideration, it is highly recommended that:

1. The Indonesian government must have a commitment in creating legal guarantee and political protection of the practice of freedom of expression and academic freedom, as part of democratic praxis, among/within Indonesian academic institution and civil society organizations, especially in connection with the efforts to address the 1965 issues and its legacies.
2. The Indonesian government, in particular, should protect and support academia and activists who are actively promoting research, publications and public education about the 1965 episode and its related issues. This includes the protection of academia/activists working on the 1965 issues from any kinds of physical and non-physical threats to their individual and familial safety and careers, including the stigmatization of being 'communist supporters'.

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