

*From Conversion to
Reconciliation: Why
religion matters in
polarized society*

[Mission 21: Daring
Reconciliation!]

By: Martin Lukito Sinaga



MASS GRAVES at Jati Plumbon Forest, Central Java-Indonesia. One of the victims (part of 1965 anti-communism rally) is a primary teacher named Moetiah

What will be the meaning and process of reconciliation if the political frameworks were *against* it?

“Twenty year after Indonesia’s political transition in 1998, gross human rights violations that occurred during the New Order (1965-1998) have not yet being settled.

Indonesia is facing *impunity*, meanwhile the transitional justice agendas are disappearing from public discourse” (Atnike Sigiro, Head of National Commission for Human Right in Indonesia, 2023-now)

KKR (Commission for Truth and Reconciliation) Law has been declared **unconstitutional** and void by the Constitutional Court Decision Number 006 / PUU-IV / 2006. With the annulment of the KKR Law, the settlement of human rights violations can only be resolved by the Human Rights Court.

PRESIDENTIAL RECOGNITION:

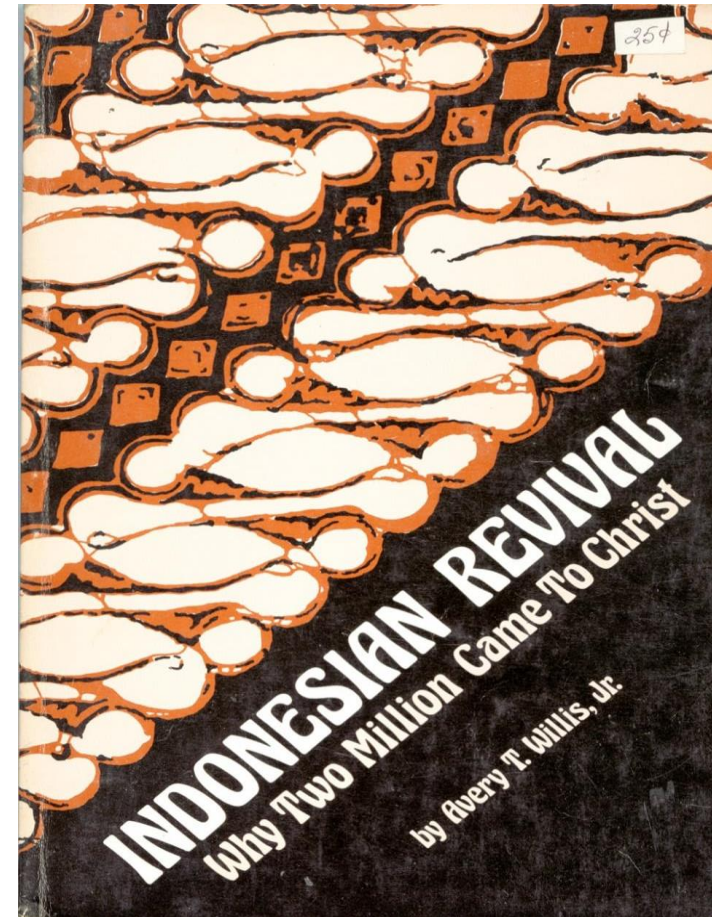
On 11 January 2023 the President of Indonesia Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, [expressed regret and acknowledgment](#) of the past gross human rights violations of Indonesia's dark history.

President Jokowi's statement came after he received a report made by a **'non-judicial' team** consisting of former government and military officials and human rights activists.

The past **human rights violations** acknowledged by the government are (1) the post-September 30 Movement mass killings in 1965-1966, (2) "Petrus" extrajudicial killings in 1982-1985, (3) Talangsari incident in 1989, (4) Rumoh Geudong and Pos Sattis incident in Aceh in 1989, forced disappearance of activists in (5) 1997-1998, and (6) 1998 May riots.

MEANWHILE, in the history of contemporary Indonesian, churches were flourishing. We can also say that the history of Christianity in Indonesia is often studied as a **history of conversion**—and rightly so...It enables them to move from marginality to responsibility.

As part of a consequence of the global “war against communism” (during 1960’s), millions of people scattered desperately, looking for shelters from torture and violence. It was estimated that around 500.000 Indonesians died in such a chaotic event in the aftermath of the so called “G/30/PKI” movement dated on September 30th 1965; it was allegedly seen as a movement to putsch the government. However, in many part of Indonesia, millions of peoples asked the church to baptize them into Christianity.



The church is for them “...a free space in which converts joined to declare their autonomy from the local social order without presenting it with an openly political challenge”

[Robert Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993)]



I visited one of the church of the converts in Nalen, near Salatiga-Central Java: The demarcation of the Christian identity shifted within this religiously plural hamlet. Relations between Christians and Muslims in the village took on new and surprising dynamics. A number of youths from four Christian homes chose to circumcise themselves. In reaction to these acts, the church’s minister visited these families and started in a friendly conversation. Without discussing circumcision or church doctrine, the families and the community learned and accepted that boundary, although a porous one, must be maintained to sustain the identities of both Muslims and Christians.

A WAY TOWARD RECONCILIATION (AND COME TO TERM WITH THE BRUTAL PAST)

When Muslims celebrate Ramadan festival of *Idul Fitri*, the community was invited to share the religious blessings. Yet, during Easter, the church conducted a village ritual called *Pajatan*. This ritual began with the cleaning of the cemeteries of the village ancestors. This ritual was considered an open practice as villagers of different religions would participate and join in the Easter meal that followed. During the ritual process, the villagers would discuss their various political preferences. Even when the village was visited by members of various political parties, campaigning on the occasion of the recent elections, the Easter *Pajatan* preserved the village harmony despite varying political and religious preferences.

Islam also received millions converts, like in Lamongan, Est Java-Indonesia



Leader of Islamic boarding scholl “pesantren Al-Fatah”, **Abdul Madjid**, repeatedly told me that “**Islam is not about black and white, it is generous**”. He recalled a social clashed between Islamic Movement and Communist Party members. Although he was the leader of Islamization movement, yet he still practices **Nyadran** (ancestor ritual to honour the death).

Nearby, a village called itself “Pancasila”, a name to moderate the claim and to remember the conversion of communist party members to Islam, Christian and Hinduism (in Lamongan-East java). This is as a step for reconciliation...

- **Church and Mosque as well as Hindu Temple erected side by side.**
- **The village has 4.600 members. And 75% are muslim, 18% are Christians and 7% are Hindu.**



Local Leader is joining a common village religious “ritual” called SLAMETAN

In the village called "Pancasila", the municipal leader, H. Khusyairi almost participated in 40 “slamatens” at the villagers' houses every year. There he communicates common problems, in a neighbourhood manner, and use this ritual a place to settle quietly many citizens issues. Also issued of the bitter past.

And especially: he succeeded in mobilizing the residents to work together to protect the water line whose source is 32 km outside the village.



***Syarikat*: From Conversion to Reconciliation**

- Indonesia is having a mixed attitude toward the memory of 1965 killings, a polarized society in remembering.
- **Abdurrahman Wahid**, once a President of Indonesia, was the first government official to deliver an apology to the victims. However, his apology was criticized by elements within the Indonesian government. In March 2000, Gus Dur, acting as president, raised the motion to revoke Tap MPR No. XXV/1966 on the disbandment of communism in Indonesia. The motion was rejected.
- ***Syarikat*** Masyarakat Santri Untuk Advokasi Rakyat (The Muslim Community for Social Advocacy), or ***Syarikat***, was established in 2000 under Nahdlatul Ulama/NU, an Islamic Social Movement once led by **Abdurrahman Wahid**. In 2003, the organization started to organize meetings between the victims and those involved in the 1965's massacre.

Syarikat is an Islamic Civil Society Movement

- It's aim is to reconcile survivors of the 1965's violence and to engage in alternative truth telling. Syarikat wants to achieve a better co-existence bond in Indonesia society, especially between the muslim and the children of the members of the banned Communist party (the anti-communist movement around 1960's was link with religious piety, and NU had erected the Youth Organization for "jihad" against the Communist)
- In 1999 NU Congress in Kediri –East Java- decided to reform itself and its attitude toward many victims by *repentance* (taubat) and ask God's *forgiveness* (istiqfar).
- Yet, the growing conservatism of religions limits Syarikat, it only reforms a deeply entrenched anti-communism in Indonesia

Conclusion: From Conversion to Reconciliation

- Most of the families of the 1965's victims came to religion (or converted to the state recognized religions) and this had made Indonesian as one of the most religious country on earth.
- The informal and communal reflection as well as “remorse” could be found in the heart and mind of religious communities. Yet to bring it into public has to deal with political refusal. For the time being, religions of Indonesia are remembering those bitter atrocities, but find it difficult to work out reconciliation.
- Nevertheless, religion, especially Indonesian Islam (like NU) is the most possible institution to bring a more reconciliatory future in Indonesian society