

Introduction: Restaging the PKI within the broader Indonesian Left

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Abstract

This introduction proposes three interventions in thinking about the long history of the Indonesian Left and the position of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) therein. While not trivializing the atrocity of the 1965-1966 massacre, this volume proposes to interpret the PKI prior to the mass killings as a party-in-motion and a dynamic, living organization. In rethinking its history, the PKI was central, but it did not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it developed in a political landscape of the Left which it helped shape but that was much more heterogenous. Furthermore, we reposition the party-in-motion on a global stage, enmeshed in a wide array of global networks and ideologies. In that effort, the international and global connections are simultaneously analyzed in very local and situationally specific Indonesian environments, alongside people and organizations traditionally found on the conceptual and organizational margins of the PKI. In the second part of this introduction, the chapters in this volume are introduced and situated within the broader existing literature on Indonesian communism and the politics of the present.

Keywords: Partai Komunis Indonesia, Indonesian Left, global history, social movements, communism

The year 2020 marks the centenary of Asia's oldest communist party: the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party). Founded as the Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia (Communist Union of the Indies), its inception can conceivably be traced to the foundation of its precursor, the Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging (Indies Social Democratic Association) in 1914. On 23 May 1920, the party adopted the name, Partai Komunis Indonesia, in line with the establishment of communist parties worldwide.

Throughout its history, even in years of serious repression and prohibition with its leadership being dispersed in exile and behind prison bars, the Party, or the threat of its reemergence, played a potent role in co-shaping the Indonesian political stage. Together with nationalist and Islamist power blocks, it dominated Indonesian politics for a long time, and it occupied a central position within the Indonesian Left. Also, internationally, especially in the first two decades of the Cold

War period, the PKI was a formidable party. In the early post-independence years, it took pride in being the world's largest communist party, apart from parties in the USSR and PRC that held the reins of government. In 1960, it claimed a peak membership of approximately 3 million.

Despite these attributes, the pivotal years that historians typically use to determine the stages of the PKI's history are moments of "dark defeat": 1926–1927 marking a failed insurrection against the colonial government, 1948 indicating a defeat within the Indonesian Revolution of a coalition of leftist opposition groups against troops of the Republican government, and most notably in 1965–1966.¹ In the latter years, a series of US-backed, army-orchestrated, and militia-perpetrated massacres killed between 500,000 and 1,200,000 people after a coup directed by sections of the top ranks of the PKI leadership failed, resulting in General Suharto's rise to power.² Historiography about the Indonesian Left typically follows the temporal frames of the PKI's defeats, and thereby drags the history of the entire Indonesian Left down with the PKI's demise.³

While not trivializing these dramatic turns, especially the still unrecognized atrocities of the 1965–1966 massacre, this volume, which is the result of a series of scholarly conferences and seminars that took place between 2018 and 2023, steps away from the typical historiographical trajectory of 'rise and fall' of the Party and thereby of the Indonesian Left as a whole. It proposes an understanding of the Party not as an institute but as a "party-in-motion",⁴ a living organization embedded in a much larger, dynamic, and heterogenous left with a local syncretic

¹ As Enzo Traverso describes, "dark defeats" are political defeats "from which a generation cannot recover": Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 50. See also John Roosa in this volume.

² John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-1966 in Indonesia* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020); John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement & Suharto's Coup d'état in Indonesia* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018); Jess Melvin, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: The Mechanics of Mass Murder* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Katharine McGregor, Jess Melvin, and Annie Pohlman, *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

³ For instance, Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965); Donald Hindley, *The Communist Party of Indonesia: 1951-1963* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1964); Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959-1965* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974); Olle Tornquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism: The Destruction of the PKI in Indonesia* (London: Zed Books, 1984).

⁴ The term "party-in-motion" is a term derived from the Indonesian word "bergerak" which was especially popular during the "pergerakan" (movement) era in the first decades of the twentieth century. The early period of Indonesia's communist movement was situated within this era. See Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java 1912-1926* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 339–42.

appeal, a socially differentiated national impact, and a global resonance. It was also a party-in-motion in the sense of being a vehicle for the innovation of political culture, ideology, and strategy in conjunction with partners, rivals, and constituencies both domestically and abroad. Here, we take inspiration from Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking After Empire*, reminding ourselves that the PKI's story is not characterized only by a paradigm of insurgence and defeat, but instead primarily by its "worldmaking" project, as was happening elsewhere throughout the twentieth century but especially in the 1950s.⁵

While reflecting on the meaning and interpretations of the dark defeats to the Party—most notably in Chapter 7 by John Roosa and Chapter 8 by Alex de Jong—the contributions in this volume describe how individual actors such as Roestam Effendi and Tan Malaka, newly acknowledged historical agents such as women, organizations such as Sarekat Rakjat Perempoean, Lekra, and Gerwani, and alternative anti-authoritarian movements like the Saminist movement, navigated in different ways the rise, development, dominance, and severe defeats of the Party, as well as how these processes are rendered (in)visible in the archives or how they were perceived exogenously. The PKI, like its politically influential counterparts in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, was a central actor on the national stage and ideologically innovative in its own right.⁶ But its recurring trajectory of rise and fall played out variously in its constitutive movements, sectors, and intersections; it did not conform seamlessly to the trajectories of alternative movements and networks within the Indonesian Left. An example of this dissonance includes the further radicalization and popularization of the communist movement in the period of 1923–1926 when most (male) main leaders had been banished from the Indies and when women and rank-and-file members took the baton of leadership.⁷ Another example is the attempt by escaped PKI activists, after the suppression of the 1926–1927 PKI revolt, to reestablish a revolutionary organization known as the Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI) in Bangkok. While previous scholarship paid less attention to an arguably fragile project in comparison to the pre-1926 PKI, it proved to be formative for figures like Tan Malaka, Djamaluddin Tamin, and Subakat.

Therefore, this volume serves as a starting point to acknowledge the broader landscape of the Indonesian Left. The PKI did not emerge in isolation. As a first point, we contend that the Party developed in a heterogenous political landscape of

⁵ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 4–9.

⁶ Thiti Jankajornkeiat, "Peripheral Dialectics: History and Theory of Left Internationalism in Postcolonial Indonesia (1943–1966)" (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2022), 2–21.

⁷ See Rianne Subijanto, *Communication against Capital: Red Enlightenment at the Dawn of Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025); John Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics: Indonesia in the 1920s and 1930s* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 333.

the Left that it had helped shape. The suppression of the PKI since 1965 has hinged the narrative of the Left on the Party. The new generation of scholars represented in this volume—some of whom grew up in the anticommunist New Order era—seeks to uncover the richness of the Indonesian Left in all its contradictions and ambiguity. “Kiri” (left) in Indonesia carries historical, ideological, political, and emotional references to socialism, Marxism, and/or communism without being affiliated solely with the PKI. Even during the early years of communist activism, popular mobilization was never monopolized by the PKI. The generation of 1920s revolutionaries organized under the banner of the *pergerakan merah* (red movement), a united front consisting of various left organizations and labour unions. Likewise, in post-independence Indonesia, the PKI worked in tandem with other affiliated but autonomous organizations such as Lekra and Gerwani. This is not to say that the Indonesian communism lacked ideological purity. Instead, this ought to be interpreted as a constant search for effective strategies based in grassroots mobilization. It was not a party membership nor a sophisticated understanding and interpretation of Marxism that united the people in the movement. It was rather the demands which they voiced that united them. In the 1920s, the *pergerakan merah* was driven by a shared commitment to anticolonial and anti-capitalist causes. Following independence, successive generations of the Indonesian Left pursued decolonial projects for the new nation within the shifting landscape of the Cold War. While the PKI occupies a central place in the history of the Indonesian Left in the twentieth century, the movement’s story extends far beyond the Party itself.

Secondly, the chapters in this volume aim to reposition the party-in-motion—including the PKI itself, auxiliary movements that merit interpretation in their own light, and alternative leftist movements, on a global stage. Institutional party-focused histories of the PKI often tended to focus on the Parties’ activities in networks provided by the Comintern, and later, the Cominform.⁸ Some works contain comparative analyses of the PKI in relation to other Asian communist movements.⁹

⁸ One such example is Jeremy Friedman, *Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022). While providing an excellent comparative overview of ill-fated struggles to implement socialist visions in Indonesia, Iran, Angola, Chile, and Tanzania, Friedman’s approach emphasizes the importance of the USSR and PRC’s relationships with various “local” actors at the expense of endogenous ideological developments and political obstacles.

⁹ Ruth T. McVey, “Indonesian Communism and China,” in *China in Crisis, Volume II: China’s Policies in Asia and America’s Alternatives*, ed. Bingdi He and Tsou Tang (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Justus van der Kroef, *Communism in South-East Asia* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980); Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno*; Hindley, *The Communist Party of Indonesia*; Tornquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism*; Larisa M. Efimova, “Towards the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the USSR and the Republic of Indonesia, 1947–48,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 26, no. 76 (2007): 184–94.