

Silence on Indonesia's mass murders

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Indonesia is the guest of honor at this year's Frankfurt book fair. Various literary works are tackling the country's criminal past, just as when Argentina was the focus of the event five years ago. But while Argentine society has by now taken various steps to address the injustices of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship and has seen the start of domestic criminal proceedings, these kinds of legal responses to historical crimes are only just beginning in Indonesia.

The mass murder of an estimated 500,000 people during Major General Haji Mohamed Suharto's coup was one of the biggest crimes of the 20th century. Under the command of Suharto, who later served as president for over thirty years, the military destroyed the country's vast, millions-strong communist and trade union movement. This is why historian Christian Gerlach sees Indonesia as a good example of what he terms an "extremely violent society" in his book of the same name. He describes the Indonesian society as a formation "where various population groups become victims of massive physical violence, in which, acting together with organs of the state, diverse social groups participate for a multitude of reasons" – because it's not just the state and military involved but a country-wide mass movement. US director Joshua Oppenheimer depicts this chapter in Indonesian history in his breathtaking documentaries "The Act of Killing" and "The Look of Silence" in which he mostly gives former perpetrators a chance to tell their stories.

The capitalist states in the West looked favorably on Suharto's anti-communist attack, but weren't inclined to get involved themselves. There was very little protest in Europe and the USA and there still haven't been any national or international investigations or tribunals addressing the mass crimes in Indonesia. In the decades after Suharto came to power, the Indonesian state continued to resort to violence in occupied East Timor and indeed still does in West Papua.

Have these relations changed at all since then? In this age of globalized media we now generally get up to date information on distant massacres but of course the international reactions continue to vary depending on the political situation: those with powerful friends rarely find themselves on the defendant's bench. Protests – even from the left – remain selective, not to mention ignorant when you think of the more than 40,000 people killed in 2009 in the closing stages of the Sri Lankan civil war, crimes that don't seem to interest many here in Germany.

There are some non-governmental organizations, including my own, working on investigations and other legal action in response to the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed predominantly by high-ranking military figures. And unlike with Indonesia in 1965/1966, there are some international bodies, including the UN, putting pressure on Sri Lanka. After a comprehensive investigation and legal assessment, the UN Human Rights Commissioner issued a call earlier this month for the establishment of a special international tribunal to prosecute Sri Lankan civil war crimes. But it's unclear if this will actually happen. Unsurprisingly, President Maithripala Sirisena wants to retain control and

will allow only minimal international involvement. Sri Lanka hasn't signed up to the statute of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, so in order for that Court to act, the UN Security Council would have to refer the case to The Hague, a move for which there is clearly no political appetite.

The Sri Lankan situation has seen some movement: they may be small steps, but it is major progress compared to the silence on the mass murder in Indonesia. It is and remains an outrage that in this age of greatly improved human rights protection laws, the murder, torture and rape of thousands of civilians can continue to go unpunished.