Indonesia's Political Prisoners

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 100,000 political prisoners in Indonesia today. For those who believe (as at least one Victorian academic does) that this total is insignificant when compared to the total Indonesian population, the proportional equivalent in Australia would be approximately 10,000. Many of the prisoners have already been held for several years without trial, and new arrests are being made daily.

So far as the military authorities are concerned communism is a troublesome spectre. In the months following the "abortive coup" of October, 1965, they slaughtered, or presided over the slaughter, of between 300,000 and 1.5 million "communists" in an attempt to eradicate it.1 While in most places the killing spree seems finally to have run its course, there are still occasional reports of massacres. For example, early last year H. J. C. Princen, Deputy Head of the Human Rights Institute, claimed that since November, 1968, about 1,000 people had been massacred in the Purwodadi region of Central Java by two Army divisions. The government denied the allegations but refused to implement Princen's suggestion that an independent tribunal be appointed to investigate his claims.2

1 There is still no conclusive evidence as to the exact number killed. The numbers given in the text are the lowest and highest estimates I have heard. The Economist, Aug. 20, 1966, pp. 727-8, reported that, according to a team of 150 university graduates from Indonesia, the number killed was likely to have been about one million.

2 See M. Bondan (ed.), Indonesian Current Affairs Translation Service (hereafter called ICATS), Djakarta, March, 1969, pp. 140-150, in which reports are quoted from Pedoman, Angkatan Bersendjata, Harian Kami, Indonesia Raya, Sinar Harapan, Nusantara, Kompas and other newspapers.
The armed forces newspaper claimed that the allegations were nothing more than fabrications by an international political guerrilla movement, to which most of the notable Western social scientists concerned with Indonesia were alleged to belong (e.g. one of them, Dr. Benedict Anderson, "is a blood brother of Perry Anderson, editor of the New Left Review"). Generally, however, the mass slaughter seems to have been replaced by a means of suppression more in keeping with the rest of the 20th century: political detention camps.

Indonesian statistics are not noted for reliability, and the political sensitivity of this issue makes a clear picture even harder to obtain. Nevertheless, the evidence given, even by the government's own spokesmen, is considerable. For example, in March, 1969, Major-General H. Achmat Tahir, Special Deputy of the Indonesian Department of Defence and Security, stated that there were then about 80,000 political detainees in Indonesia. The Head of Public Relations of the Prosecutor-General's office, M. Simatupang, stated in February, 1969, that the total number of political prisoners was about 100,000. In October last year General Panggabean, then Deputy Commander of the Command to Restore Security and Order, stated that the number of those whose cases had not yet been settled - i.e., who had not been brought to trial - was 71,905 persons. Finally, in April last year, an intelligence officer of the Department of Defence and Security said that there were more than 150,000 political prisoners in Java alone.

Details on the location and number of detention camps are, as one might expect, not so readily available. In the populous area of Central Java, where a "state of war" was officially in force until January this year, the Minister for Information, Budiardjo, has admitted that there are 16 internment camps with about 400 persons in each. In an interview last year the Chief-of-Staff of the Sumatra Co-ordinating Command, Major-General Muskita, was asked the number of political detainees in Sumatra; he refused to give a figure, but when the number "20,000" was mentioned he replied: "There are that many". (It is not uncommon, incidentally.

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5 Nusantara, 21/2/69, p. 1. (ICATS, Feb. 1969, p. 82.)
7 Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs, Jan.-June 1969, Sydney University, p. 100. The statement originally appeared in the Jakarta Times, 19/4/69.
9 Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs, op. cit., p. 102.
for regional statistics to contradict those given by the central government.)

Classification of prisoners

Political detainees are divided into three categories. Those who are officially alleged to have had some knowledge of the "abortive coup" plans are classified as Group A. When Tahir gave the total number of detainees as 80,000 he stated that 4,452 of them were Group A. The government has stated that it intends to bring all Group A prisoners to trial.

Another 14,458 prisoners (again, using Tahir's breakdown) are classified as Group B: that is, the government admits that it has no direct evidence that they were involved in the coup attempt, so it intends to imprison them indefinitely without trial.

Early last year the government began looking for a suitable island on which it could confine Group B prisoners, and after a few months the island of Buru, in the Moluccas, was chosen. In August last year 2,500 prisoners were taken there, among them one of Indonesia's foremost writers — Pramudya Ananta Tur. In the first quarter of 1970 it was planned to send a further 5,000 prisoners there, as well as an unspecified number of detainees from Gerwani — the former Communist Women's Organization.

Although Buru was originally given the euphemistic label of "resettlement project", and the prisoners theoretically allotted land of their own, in practice they are still detained under constant guard in barbed-wire-protected compounds, and while conditions probably are a little better than in the camps in Java, even the influential daily Harian Kami stated that it was pointless pretending that the Buru camps were anything other than concentration camps.

A further 24,059 prisoners are classified at Group C: they are not accused of complicity in the coup attempt, but simply of having been associated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Official government policy is to release all Group C prisoners, and

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12 Ibid., p. 134.
13 Kompas, 13/2/69, p. 1. (ICATS, Feb. 1969, p. 82.)
some have already been set free. Their freedom, however, is far from unconditional. Every released Group C prisoner is given a guide book containing an oath of loyalty which he must take with him wherever he goes. He is not allowed to change his address for at least six months, and he must report regularly to the authorities. Any infringement of these conditions results in his being imprisoned again — as a Group A or B prisoner. A recent visitor to one village in Java reports that former Group C prisoners, of whom there are many in the village, are chronically unemployed because anybody who gives them work — or any sort of assistance — is automatically regarded as politically suspect by the all-powerful local army commander.

Finally, of the 80,000 detainees mentioned by Tahir, the biggest group, comprising about 33,000 persons, had not yet been classified; that is, they had not even been formally accused, let alone tried. (Other accounts show this group as containing even more detainees.)

Conditions & effects

Since most Indonesians are desperately poor, it would be ludicrous to expect to find good conditions in the country's prisons. Yet the evidence available suggests that conditions in the political prisons are unnecessarily barbaric. One account states that the amount allocated for feeding political detainees works out at 7.7 rupiahs per detainee per day — enough for one cupful of rice. Allegations of torture have also been made: for example, H. J. C. Princen claimed last year that the army leaders behind the mass-murders in Purwodadi used torture by electricity to obtain confessions.

But it is not only the detainees themselves who are suffering. Thousands of families — many of them poor to start with — have been deprived of breadwinners. Hundreds of women have been forced into prostitution; in one town in Eastern Indonesia, according to an informant from that town, army officers are systematically forcing wives of detainees into prostitution under threat of further harm to the detainees themselves. Often the wives of prisoners never learn why their husbands have been arrested, under what classification they have been grouped, or even where they are being detained. Moreover, in many cases the relatives of detainees are automatically regarded as being politically suspect.

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18 Barbro Karabuła, Letter from Indonesia, Eastern Horizon, 7(5), 1969, p. 43.
19 Pedoman, 1/3/69, p. 2. (ICATS, March 1969, p. 140-1.)
There are other, bizarre manifestations of the processes at work. An owner of a Djarkarta art-curio shop specialising in Balinese carvings almost went out of business because most of the artists who supplied him were either killed or imprisoned. The shortage of teachers in Java has become more acute as a result of the disproportionate number of teachers detained there. Many masters of Java’s oldest and most famous art form, the puppet theatre or "wajang", have been imprisoned, and those still performing are carefully censored. Use of the PKI “complicity smear” has become notorious. Once somebody is accused of being a communist he has no recourse to anything — unless he happens to be friendly with a higher officer. There have been numerous cases of people successfully avoiding having to repay their debts by accusing their creditors of being “PKI”.

It is impossible at this stage to predict the political consequences of the present policy of political suppression. In any case, this issue cannot be separated from others which affect the mass of people, such as the bloodbath following the “abortive coup” and the pro-Western economic policy of the Soeharto government. One thing appears to be certain, since it is noted as often by supporters as by critics of the government: there is today widespread dissatisfaction in many rural areas — dissatisfaction arising out of the suffering and social dislocation which followed the fall of Soekarno, with an apparent decline in educational opportunities, with (in some parts of Java) economic schemes that benefit mainly rich overseas corporations, and with the failure of the Soeharto government to even begin putting an end to the corruption which attained such spectacular proportions under Soekarno. But the dissatisfaction is inchoate; it is shared by politically powerless, leaderless, dispersed and relatively uneducated people, who are likely to remain that way for some time to come, since the government response to any clear expression of dissatisfaction would almost certainly be an intensification of suppression.

I believe only one prediction is in order: however successful the present economists and technocrats may be in curbing inflation and restoring “order” to the economy, and however firmly the army’s firepower may enable it to rule (so long as it remains united), the suffering generated by the killings and the detention policy — and this is not being quietly forgotten — together with the continuing hardship of life in the villages at a time when more and more people throughout the Third World are refusing to accept their poverty as just, suggest that the seeds today are being sown for massive future conflict. To try and predict the form and consequences of this conflict would, in my opinion, be foolhardy.