

THE PROBLEM OF CHILDREN

One of the most serious social tragedies resulting from prolonged political detention in Indonesia is the effect upon the children of detainees. Even in a family where only the husband is detained, the effect upon children is often very serious, economically, socially and psychologically. Large numbers of children have been compelled to leave school, either through lack of money or because they have been stigmatised as children of political prisoners. A certificate of non-involvement in the September 1965 coup is required when entering a new school or taking a school-leaving examination, and many local authorities would not issue such a certificate to children whose parent is in prison, or would only do so for a specially high fee. Even children now in their early teens who were only seven or eight years old in October 1965 have to produce a certificate of non-involvement.

There is absolutely no kind of social security in Indonesia and families deprived of their main wage-earner and marked by the stigma attached to political detention, face grim economic and social realities. In the few cases where detainees' wives can make a living of their own or can get assistance from relatives, conditions may be somewhat alleviated, but the majority are much less fortunate. The rate of divorce among detainees' wives must be fairly high, though among my personal acquaintances, I have been struck by a wonderful sense of loyalty on the part of the women despite the bleak prospects they face. Many children who are lucky enough to be able to continue with their schooling have to take part-time jobs.

The conditions of children who have both parents in prison are even worse. In some cases, relatives are willing to take the children in and give them homes, but in many cases this is not so. I have repeatedly heard of even close relatives being too scared to help children in such circumstances, which is only an indication of the fear and stigma attached to political detention in Indonesia. For about seven months, Mrs. Tarni Njoto, the wife of the Deputy Chairman of the PKI who was murdered in 1965, was held in detention with all her seven children, aged from 11 years to a few months because her sister and brother-in-law in Djakarta were too scared to take them in. I have heard of many cases where, with both parents under arrest, a large family of children has had to fend for itself without any external assistance at all. This frequently means that the older children have to make many sacrifices, including giving up their educational plans, in order to look after their younger brothers and sisters. Not infrequently, where the oldest child is a girl, a soldier from a nearby army unit takes advantage of her and intimidates her into marrying him for 'protection'. The human tragedies caused by such circumstances in Indonesia must be truly countless, besides the deep sense of resentment among the innumerable children affected.

I can give the following examples, which are all cases that I heard about personally from the parents:

1. Sri Suharti, a law graduate, and her husband, were arrested together at their home. They have five children, the oldest being about fifteen years old and the youngest about two at the time of their arrest. There were no relatives or servants in the house and so the children were left there alone without adult protection. A few days after the arrest, the oldest children discovered where their parents had been taken, and went to see them. The mother was desperate to know what advice she should give. She told the children to try to make their way to Surabaya, East Java (about eight hundred miles away) and go and stay with their grandmother. That was about three years ago. Since giving them this advice, she has heard nothing more from the children or about them, and only assumes (to try and set her own mind at rest) that they did go to Surabaya and are now living there in safety with their grandmother.

2. Alwi, a journalist, whose wife had left him, was arrested at his home, and had to leave two children there alone, the oldest aged eleven and the youngest two years younger. For months he had no contact with them and only heard from a neighbour in the same detention camp whose wife once came on a visit, that his daughter, the eleven-year-old, was selling food on the streets to look after herself and her brother. About seven months after his arrest, Alwi managed to get a message to his children through another detainee's wife, telling them where he was. A few days later, the girl came to see her father; when they met, she collapsed in his arms and wept solidly for about twenty minutes. I witnessed the scene with more than a hundred other detainees, mostly men. I doubt whether there was a dry eye in the whole camp.

3. Ismudjati was arrested together with her husband and had to leave her one-and-a-half year old child with the kampung administrative chief (rukun tetangga). A lieutenant at the camp where she was held took the child, then threatened he would keep it if she did not succumb to his advances. She was forced into a liaison with him and eventually married him. She has since been released, and now lives with her new husband, while her former husband, in Salemba Prison, is neglected and forsaken. Clearly, she offered less resistance than most women would do in similar circumstances but she became vulnerable because of her child.

4. Sri Ambar was arrested at the end of 1966; her husband was already in prison at the time. She left three children at home. She was brutally tortured during interrogation when asked to name persons who had come to her house. When she refused, two daughters were taken from the house, and interrogated in the same connection, but without results. The younger one was then brought in and tortured in front of her mother in an attempt to make the mother speak. After that, the child was taken away, and has never been heard of since. Sri Ambar has made repeated attempts to find out where her daughter is, but without success. An older brother of hers who is an army colonel made desperate efforts to find the child who, he heard, had been taken by an army officer to his home at Tjirebon. Shortly after making these efforts, the colonel was also arrested. Sri Ambar has since advised other members of her family to stop looking for the child for fear of further difficulties.

The elder of the two daughters arrested was released after being held in detention for some months.

5. Sukarni was arrested for associations with Gerwani. Her husband had been murdered in an incident that occurred shortly after the September 1965 Affair said to have been caused by left-wing elements (at Pondok Gede). The post-coup regime regarded the murdered men as heroes and buried them in the Hero's Cemetery in Kalibata. When Sukarni entered prison, she brought one small child with her and placed other children with relatives. The relatives never visited her and, for a very long time, she had no news of her other children.

One day in 1969, she, together with several other prisoners, was carrying garbage out of the prison for disposal when she looked towards the crowds in the busy street in front of the prison. Suddenly, she screamed: "Toto, Toto!" The prison commander who was guarding the prisoners asked her what the matter was. She cried: "That's my son, Toto, over there, picking up fag-ends." The commander saw the boy immediately and began to run towards him shouting his name. The boy, seeing a soldier running towards him, took to his heels and fled. Many startled bystanders joined in the chase and the commander soon caught up with the boy and dragged him back to the prison. Only then did the child realise that his own mother had been calling him. He was dressed in rags and filthy from head to foot.

Sukarni embraced him fervently and carried him into the prison.

I did not witness the scene myself as it happened before I entered Bukit Duri, but many people have described it to me. By the time they entered the prison compound, everyone had rushed out to see what was happening, political detainees, guards, criminal prisoners and prison officials. It was a heart-rending scene; Sukarni was torn between joy at finding her child, and bitterness and anger at seeing him in such wretched conditions. Nothing could more poignantly have depicted the tragedy of so many families torn asunder by political developments for which they are not in the slightest degree responsible.

After bathing the child and dressing him, Sukarni discovered that he had been staying with an uncle who had found the responsibility of looking after him too burdensome, and had made his life a misery. The child had run away from home, and had been living on the streets for weeks, begging, collecting fag-ends and sleeping under railway carriages in sidings. He remained in prison with his mother for some time until the commander spoke about him to the visiting Catholic priest. The boy was nearly ten and had already missed years of schooling. A place was found for him in a Catholic home where he has been living ever since. Toto was restored to a decent life by pure luck. How many children are there who live on as he did, with no escape from the wretchedness of life in a society that cares nothing (or is too afraid to care) for children of political detainees?

December 1971