

WOMEN AND POLITICAL DETENTION IN INDONESIA

Following the abortive coup and counter-coup that brought General Suharto to power in Indonesia in October 1965, Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or Indonesian Women's Movement) was among the large number of mass organizations banned together with the Indonesian Communist Party, PKI, for alleged complicity in the abortive coup attempt.

Gerwani was by that time the largest women's organization in Indonesia, with a membership of more than one million. It was not an organization officially affiliated to the Communist Party, but described itself as "an organization of communist and non-communist women". It was very much part of the leftwing movement that the military quahed as soon as the abortive coup attempt had been foiled. In fact, of all organization, Gerwani was particularly viciously vilified in the anti-communist campaign that followed the coup and counter-coup, and the sensational slanders to which it was subjected without the slightest chance of rebuttal were to play an important part in inciting the massacres that occurred in many parts of the country in the last three months of 1965 and into 1966. To explain this, and in so doing to explain the circumstances of the arrest of quite a number of those women still in detention, it is necessary to refer briefly to the events of 1 October 1965.

The group of armed force military personnel that organized the attempt to remove the Army leadership established their headquarters at a paramilitary training camp in Lubang Buaya, located in an Air Force complex on the outskirts of Jakarta. This training camp had been in use for several months to train volunteers for the policy of confrontation with Malaysia. All political parties and organizations that were supporting President Sukarno and his policy of confrontation had been responding to a call for volunteers by running their own training camps. The camp at Lubang Buaya was being used by the leftwing organizations. A number of women and girls had attended courses there from the middle of 1965 up to the day of the coup attempt. In addition to those attending paramilitary courses, there were women helping with kitchen duties, health services and the like.

During the coup attempt, six generals who had been kidnapped were killed and their bodies were found in a disused well at Lubang Buaya. After the bodies were discovered, sensational reports appeared in the press that the sexual organs had been mutilated and the eyes gouged. To add to the horrors, it was said that these atrocities had been committed by the women at the camp. The women were said to have engaged in obscene dancing and to have prostituted themselves in a grotesque manner.

Even though President Sukarno, still formally Head of State, but rapidly losing control of the situation, sought a medical report on the state of the bodies which revealed that no mutilations had taken place, and that the eyes were damaged because the bodies had been immersed in water, the stories persisted. Newspapers carried lurid reports of confessions made by young girls during their interrogation by military officers.

Behind these sensational reports which had such a traumatic effect on Indonesian society, lies a story of torture and sexual abuse of these girls under interrogation, many of whom were politically very naive and easily terrified into making any confession to call a halt to the torture

and abuse to which they were subjected.

Gerwani was accused by the authorities of having mobilised these girls and of being responsible for the alleged atrocities. Yet despite the shrillness of these allegations, it is a fact that even now, over ten years after the event, there has not been a trial of any person who is alleged to have been directly involved in the Lubang Buaya events. Only a handful of women have so far been brought to trial and the charges against them do not relate directly to the alleged atrocities in Lubang Buaya. About 800 trials have so far taken place, many of which related to actual events in Lubang Buaya, but there has been no substantiation of the alleged atrocities through the testimony of witnesses who appeared at these trials. Hundreds of women and girls said to have been responsible for or indirectly involved in the events, are still in prison and can hope for neither releases nor trial.

Women on Trial

The major trial of women took place between February and June 1975. There were four defendants. The chief defendant was Sulami who had been third secretary of Gerwani. The other defendants were Sudjinah, who was on the staff of Gerwani and responsible for Education and Culture; Sri Anbar Rukmiati, head of the women's bureau of SOBSI (Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia), the trade union federation banned in 1966 and Suharti Harsono, who was on the staff of BTI (Barisan Tani Indonesia) the Indonesian Peasants Union. The latter two women were not members of Gerwani but of these other leftwing organizations.

The indictment against these four women concerned alleged participation, directly or indirectly, in the coup attempt of October 1965 and also in trying to restore the leftwing movement after its defeat and consequent banning of the organizations concerned in early 1966. However the allegations against them related mainly to their activities after the coup. They were alleged to have helped publish and distribute an illegal bulletin, Mimbar Rakjat. They were also alleged to have obtained false identity cards and been involved in providing assistance for the children of political prisoners.

The charges against Sulami were more complicated. She was accused of having recruited women to go to Lubang Buaya to do sewing and cooking in the camp. She allegedly had been asked to do this by a leading member of the PKI. According to the prosecution, this was enough reason for her to have known about the planned coup.

The public prosecutor at the trial was Mrs Nuraini Kadja S.H. She asked for sentences of life imprisonment for Sulami and 20 years for the other defendants. The defence counsel, who were in fact appointed a week after the trial commenced, were Yan Apul S.H. and Bahruddin Lubis S.H. Prisoners are not permitted to consult their defence lawyers while in prison and thus their counsel team have very little opportunity to prepare an adequate defence.

The trial was held at the Jakarta State Court over several months till June 1975. The defendants were found guilty of having committed acts of subversion and of trying to restore the banned mass organizations. Sulami received a sentence of 20 years imprisonment. Sudjinah's sentence was 18 years and the other two received sentences of 15 years. The time already spent in prison is to be deducted from the sentence.

The Women Prisoners

Just as accurate figures about the total number of prisoners are impossible to obtain, so too it is not possible to know precisely how many women are still under detention. The largest place of detention for women prisoners is Plantungan Camp in Central Java where there are an estimated 380 known to be held. About 68 women are under detention in Bukit Duri prison in Jakarta and a smaller number at the Bulu Women's Prison in Semarang. It is also known that there are a number of women under detention in West Kalimantan, who were taken during sweeps against people allegedly supporting guerilla activities in the region. But prisons and detention camps are to be found throughout the archipelago with any number of prisoners from two or three to several hundreds or perhaps even thousands. There are almost certainly many women among them but there is no way of knowing exactly how many. It is probably safe to assume that more than 2,000 women are being held without trial.

The Cases of Gerwani members

Gerwani leaders or lower ranking functionaries probably make up a fairly sizeable proportion of the women prisoners. Many members of the organization's central board are known to be in detention as well as local functionaries and members. Such was the fury vented against the Gerwani in the days after the coup that many members sought to conceal their identity as members, even by moving to other areas. Reports of the 'discovery' of such 'fugitives from justice' still appear in the Indonesian press. There must be many thousands of women in Indonesia still striving to conceal what was at the time a completely harmless association with a legal organization, for fear of arrest.

A typical case: Mrs Sundari

Mrs Sundari was active in her local branch of Gerwani in Jakarta at the time of the abortive coup. Her husband was also a member of a leftwing organization. Their home was a center of political activity and meetings of various political groups took place there. Shortly after the coup attempt, the Army swooped on their house. They alleged that a meeting had taken place there shortly before the coup and that political plans had been made at that meeting. They were probably suspected of having discussions of political activity in the event of a leftwing takeover. This alleged meeting was taken as enough evidence of direct involvement in the coup. Both Mrs Sundari and her husband were arrested in October 1965. She has been in Bukit Duri prison ever since and he is detained on Buru island, where there are 10,000 other prisoners.

Women who were at Lubang Buaya

Women who were at Lubang Buaya or who were alleged to have been there also comprise a considerable proportion of the prisoners. Generally speaking, these women, some of whom were girls in their early teens when arrested in 1965, are not politically educated people and have little notion of the political events that have so profoundly affected their lives. A number of them are illiterate.

A typical case: Walnijati

At the time of the attempted coup, Walnijati was an auxiliary employee at the Friendship Hospital in Jakarta. She was about 15 years old at the time. At the same time as working in Jakarta, Walnijati was attending training courses at the camp in Lubang Buaya. It is not known what her precise political associations were, but it is most likely that she belonged to one of the youth movements that came to Lubang Buaya for training.

During interrogations, Walmijati was very severely beaten and bruised. She repeatedly denied allegations that she had participated in the sexual atrocities that were said to have occurred at Lubang Buaya. Her family is poor and cannot afford to visit her in prison. After the beatings she suffered at the hands of the interrogators, she has become emotionally disturbed. She was arrested in October 1965 and detained in Bukit Duri prison. She has been there ever since and has not been tried.

Trade Union Activists

Trade union activists are also to be found amongst the prisoners. Women workers had for many years played a prominent role in the trade union movement. The leftwing trade union federation, SOBSI, had an active Women's Department many of whose members are now in prison.

A typical case: Mrs Pudjiati

Mrs Pudjiati is about 48 years old. She was born in Central Java and since her youth has been involved in leftwing movements in Indonesia. During the Japanese occupation and the Revolution against the Dutch, she was a member of Pesindo, the Indonesian Socialist Youth, which later became Pemuda Rakjat, the People's Youth Movement. She worked for many years at the Unilever factory in Jakarta and became involved in trade union activity during her time there. She was a well known activist in SB Unilever (the trade union in the factory) and was on several occasions arrested during demonstrations against increasing prices and in deputations in support of higher wages. These arrests took place during the time President Sukarno was in power. Pudjiati was also a member of the Jakarta Council of SOBSI, to which SB Unilever was affiliated.

Following the attempted coup, many trade unionists were dismissed from their jobs. SOBSI and its associate trade unions were banned and many union members were arrested. Their arrest and detention was related to their membership of leftwing organizations and not because they played any personal role in the coup. Pudjiati was probably arrested in 1966. She was detained in Bukit Duri prison and then transported to Plantungan Camp in 1971. She has been there ever since.

Other Cases of Women in Prison

Many of the women in prison are however simply victims of circumstance, people picked up on the streets without means of identifying themselves and unable to defend themselves against political charges; women whose sons and daughters were being sought by the Army; women who were picked up together with their husbands or sons for no reason other than that relationship. The wives of several of the leading members of the PKI and other mass organizations are being detained. Some did have political lives of their own; others did not, but that has made little difference to their chance of release.

Two typical case: Miss Tumirah

Miss Tumirah is in her mid 30s. She is an uneducated woman without political interests who, at the time of the coup, was doing domestic work or selling in markets. She was apparently picked up by the military authorities simply because she failed to produce an identity card. Her case provides an excellent and tragic case of the indiscriminate way in which arrests were made and the extremely poor provisions for the quick release of people against whom no possible charge could be made. She was arrested in the late 1960s and has been detained in Bukit Duri prison ever since.

Suhasih Suwardi

Suhasih was arrested in 1969 when she and friend were visiting the Army security authorities and making enquiries about their respective

husbands who had been arrested some time previously. They were asked to go somewhere with the authorities and soon found themselves in Bukit Duri Prison. They have been there ever since. Suhasih's husband is alleged to have given asylum to someone who was being sought after by the authorities in connection with the coup attempt. He was arrested and tried on these charges and is now serving a 12 year sentence. Suhasih was presumably arrested on the assumption that she knew that her husband had given asylum to this man and yet she had not reported her husband to the authorities for doing so. She is now in Bukit Duri prison.

The Womens' Prisons

i) Bukit Duri

There are some 68 women prisoners in Bukit Duri prison in Jakarta. The women all live in cells and sleep on beds made of concrete. If a prisoner wants mattresses and pillows she has to obtain these for herself. This involves acquiring them from relatives who may visit her. The meals in Bukit Duri consist mainly of rice with tempe (a Javanese starch based loaf). Tahu (soya bean curd) is also eaten. The prisoners are not provided with more nutritious foods, such as fish, eggs and meat. These essential foods for a balanced diet have to be obtained through visiting relatives or through any extra income that the prisoners may have acquired.

Some of the women make handicraft goods, such as baskets or batiks. These goods can be sold either through relatives or through the prison authorities. The money they obtain for these goods goes towards subsidising foods which the prison does not provide. However when the prisoners sell their handicraft through the prison officials they do not receive full reimbursement for their goods. The prison authorities take their own share which is often a large proportion of the whole income.

Prisoners are allowed to receive visitors once a month. For the large proportion of women this visit is very irregular as it is very expensive for relatives to travel to Jakarta if they do not live in the city and they have to obtain a permit before visiting. Even the food that the relatives bring has to be deposited at the prison gates.

The women are not treated too badly now in Bukit Duri, although in the early years of their detention they often suffered torture during interrogations. A prison doctor is supposed to visit once a week and some of the prisoners themselves act as nurses. One woman, Mrs Sutanti, is in fact a trained doctor and she works in that capacity within the prison.

Bukit Duri is a relatively small prison and most of the women in it have been together for over 10 years. Although many were moved to Plantungan Camp in 1971, there has otherwise been little change in their prison community.

ii) Plantungan Women's Detention Camp

Plantungan Camp was established in April 1971. It is located in Central Java not far from Semarang. The road leading to the camp is very inaccessible and although visits are technically permitted, they are very infrequent. In August 1971 there were about 360 people in the camp and in the period since then there have probably only been a few more additions to the community of women.

The prisoners are considered to be in category 'B'. That is that the authorities consider them to have been indirectly involved in the attempted coup, but no evidence to prove this can be found. They are liable to spend an unlimited time in Plantungan and will never be tried.

The women have to work out of doors from morning to night. They work in the fields and produce their own food. Their diet is largely made up of rice and vegetables. More nutritious foods can only be obtained through the families, but only about 10% of the women benefit from this. Food and clothing could be obtained by the prisoners selling some of their handicrafts they make in the prison. However it is the prison officials who sell this and they exploit the women's labour. The women do not get adequate returns for their handicraft work and so not many women are involved in this extra occupation.

General Conditions of the Women Prisoners

In general terms the conditions for the women prisoners are much the same as for the men, although where they are allowed to sell handicrafts and receive the returns for their work their position is alleviated somewhat.

A number of the women prisoners also have husbands who are in detention. The major concern of any prisoner is the fate of his or her family and this concern is inevitably greater in the cases where both parents are in prison. Because of this factor, many of the women in prison suffer far more deeply the hardship of separation from their children. There are many cases where women have lost all contact with both husbands and children. No prisoner is permitted to initiate contact with her or his family; contact is only established if the family outside takes the initiative and when both parents are in prison, this is much less likely to happen.

In some cases the women have the comfort of knowing that their children are being cared for by relatives or neighbours, but in other cases this is not so. Even close relatives would be reluctant about taking in the children of known communists because of the risks involved. The tribulations through which children must live bear particularly heavily on the mothers.

Torture

Many of the women now in detention are known to have suffered severe torture during their interrogations by military intelligence officers. The difference in sex between interrogator and victim leads inevitably to special abuses. The interrogation center is generally speaking a male world and many additional forms of torment are available in such a confrontation. This is not to ignore the fact, however, that some women have been used as interrogators and have shown themselves to be no less brutal than their male co-workers.

The tortures inflicted against women include beatings, attacks with knives or daggers, burning with cigarettes, being trampled on, pummeling breasts of women who are suckling babies, inserting implements into the vagina and giving electric shocks. Sexual assault is a particular hazard to which women have been subjected. The young girls arrested in connection with the events in Lubang Buaya were badly tortured and some of them have been permanently affected as a result.

A case of torture

The London Sunday Times reported on a case of torture in Indonesia on January 11th 1976. The case was of a Chinese girl who had been a member of one of the leftwing organizations before the coup and had been arrested in 1968. She was taken to the local military post and witnessed the torture of other women as well as undergoing severe torture herself. She was stripped naked and then beaten with a stick by the intelligence officer. Her hair was burnt and she suffered extreme pain. Then she was placed on a table and a stick was thrust up her vagina and her pubic

hair was burnt. Her case is a typical example of the torture that so many women underwent.

The Families

The wives and children of political detainees confront enormous difficulties in a society that has been stricken with a deep fear of helping or even befriending those related to people so severely condemned by the authorities in Indonesia. No form of state support is available to people deprived of a livelihood. In normal circumstances, the strong sense of familial responsibility compensates for this, but political prisoners have fallen outside the pale of the normal workings of Indonesian society as a result of years of official condemnation and practices. This has had a dire effect on many families.

A typical case: Mrs Ina Wolsen-Sunardi

Ina Wolsen is in her late 50s. She comes from a fairly poor family who were traders. She travelled a great deal with her family throughout Indonesia and eventually settled down in Surabaya, East Java, after having married Sunardi. Ina Wolsen became a member of Gerwani and was active in the movement for several years. However well before 1965 she had given up her interest in the movement and spent her energies on trading. In the early 1960s she moved to Makassar on trading business and was living there at the time of the coup. She returned to Surabaya several months later.

It was not until August 1968 that Ina Wolsen was arrested in Surabaya and immediately taken to Jakarta for questioning. Her arrest was probably related to her Gerwani background. After questioning she was taken to the Jakarta Military Command and then moved to Bukit Duri Prison in 1969. In April 1971 she was moved to Plantungan.

After her arrest she was never once permitted to communicate with her family - her husband and two daughters - and it is most likely that they do not even now know where she is being detained. This separation without communication has been very difficult for Ina Wolsen. It is a typical example of what happens to many other families who lose touch because communications are either prohibited or are made almost impossible.

The Consequences for the Families

Certificates of Non-involvement in the October 1965 events have, for many years been a requirement for entering schools, obtaining employment, moving from one district to another and many other actions. Even today, although the authorities have announced that the occasions when such certificates are required are being reduced (to exclude for instance access to the lower levels of school), the situation remains basically the same in most localities where application or non-application of centrally declared decisions is modified according to the whims of local commanders and officials. Foreign firms are known to be required to ask for the certificate when interviewing potential employees.

Few Indonesian women have regular employment or special skills that would equip them for this. The loss of the primary wage earner is a serious blow. Many have tried to make up the loss by selling cakes, dressmaking, setting up stalls or helping with domestic work. But all these forms of livelihood bring little remuneration and have left the families in a state of penury. Those who know where their husbands are being detained naturally want to take food to the prison, knowing how bad conditions are inside. This only adds to the burdens they must bear. One particularly heavy burden for these families is the cost of keeping children at school. Even elementary education is not free as

parents must contribute to the upkeep of the school and substantial entrance fees are levied at all levels of the education system. Books and writing equipment are not provided by the schools.

Few of the families have accommodation of their own and must rent accommodation. This is done by contracting a place or a room for a year and paying a year's rent in advance. These amounts are not controlled, which means that every year the families are confronted with an increased lump sum to pay for rent.

In addition to these economic burdens which are an extremely aggravated form of the burdens being borne by most Indonesian families, the detainees wives face the suspicion and sometimes open hostility shown in many localities to women living without husbands. Few women remain unmarried and a widow would be expected to marry again. The sensitive position in which they are placed as wives of detainees makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse and hostility. This complex of difficulties has led many wives to opt for a solution that conceals their relationship with a detainee. This often means that the wives have had to sever their connections with their husbands and are unable to visit them in prison. It is a terrible choice with little consolation to be found whichever one is taken.

The prisoners are deprived of knowing anything about their prospects of release and this constant uncertainty bears heavily on the wives. With so many of them, hopes have turned to despair and many of them have decided to give up waiting and to succumb to the pressures of society by suing for divorce and seeking the security of another marriage.

Buru Island

In the case of those prisoners held on Buru Island, the Government has a stated policy of permitting wives with their children to join their husbands. The vast majority of both wives and husbands have turned down this option because of the arduous conditions on Buru and in particular because of the limited educational facilities that are available. For those wives who have somehow managed to cope with their problems, the choice of going to Buru has been rejected. About 200 wives are now living in Buru with their husbands and are said to be happier than they were formerly. They are mainly women who had found their conditions as detainees' wives too desperate to manage and took the lesser evil which at least offered them companionship in a family unit. There have been many reports of women having been cajoled into agreeing to join their husbands on Buru or else being forced to divorce them. There is no legal basis for this, but many of the women do not know their legal rights, or are too frightened and vulnerable and so easily succumb to bullying.

The Buru Camp has already had disastrous effects on separated families. Any expansion of the scheme, as the Government intends, will have the worst possible consequences for both the families and the prisoners.