

[Leksana on Melvin, 'The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, November 13, 2019

Jess Melvin. *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder*. Routledge, 2018. xxv + 319 pages. \$145.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-138-57469-4.

Reviewed by Grace Leksana (KITLV) **Published on** H-Genocide (November, 2019) **Commissioned by** Ugur Ümit Üngör (NIOD: Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=53909>

The year 1965 is the most debated period in Indonesian history, due to the controversial event known as the September 30th Movement (Gerakan 30 September, G30S). The controversy revolves around two different trajectories. The first, which dominates the official narrative, emphasizes G30S as a coup attempt by the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI). This movement kidnapped and killed six generals and one captain of the Indonesian army in the outskirts of the capital, Jakarta. As a response to this movement, the military launched an operation to counter the coup and restore order. Within this trajectory, violence that occurred during the operation was considered a result of entrenched communal conflict in the society. Suharto, the former Indonesian president, made a statement in 1971 that “thousands of victims fell in villages because people acted by themselves, and also because horrible prejudices between groups that have been maintained by shallow political practices.”[1] However, this official statement failed to explain how a mass conflict happened nationwide at the same time, with similar patterns. The other trajectory argues that mass killings against more than five hundred thousand accused communists and other gross human rights violations against the Left (such as extermination, forced migration, torture, forced disappearance, forced labor, sexual abuse, and persecutions) occurred during the military operation in 1965-66.[2] It was not an operation to create peace and order after a ‘coup’, but an attempt to eliminate the Left and establish a new regime. Mass violence in this period was not a result of uncontrolled *amok*, but was coordinated by the military. The major problem with this argument is its lack of evidence, because most of the official documents are still restricted.

It has been more than fifty years since the event, and no strong evidence had been discovered to prove the military’s intention in the violence until Jess Melvin’s encounter with more than three thousand pages of classified documents in Aceh Government Library and Archives in 2010. The archives, which she later dubbed the Indonesian genocide files, in combination with interviews with victims and perpetrators in Aceh, form the backbone of this book.

Melvin starts by describing the historical background prior to the 1965 violence. Under the backdrop of the Crush Malaysia campaign, the national military managed to extend its structural power from the district to the subdistrict level, and also established coordination platforms that included government, military, and civilian representatives (such as Front Nasional and Pantja Tunggal). In Aceh, the military commander, Brigadier General Mohammad Ishak Djuarsa, established a new command structure called the Defence Region Command (Kodahan) to assist full mobilization of

the entire society to support the Crush Malaysia campaign. This new structure was built two months before the 1965 violence and was used later on to execute the annihilation campaign against communists. Moreover, Melvin also describes the contestation between Aceh's regional and Sukarno's central government that culminated in the Darul Islam rebellion (1953-62), but ended with a stronger alliance between military leaders and Acehnese elites. However, Melvin stresses that this regional friction cannot fully explain the genocide that occurred in Aceh.

From the Indonesian genocide files, Melvin tries to reconstruct how the mass killings were executed throughout Aceh province. As early as October 1, 1965, Suharto, the acting minister/commander of the Armed Forces (Men/Pangad) at that time, sent news to Djuarsa that a coup had taken place. This, according to Melvin, is the first indication that a structural central-regional command and coordination already existed at that time. By midnight, Lieutenant General Ahmad Mokoginta, Sumatra's inter-regional military commander, announced that the situation in Jakarta had been restored and called on the Armed Forces to annihilate the perpetrators this act of treason. This was the first public call to start the extermination campaign against the communists. On October 4, two announcements were delivered by the Aceh Special Region Pantja Tunggal (coordinating body consisting of government, military, political parties, and civilian groups) that called for a complete annihilation of the 30 September movement and obliged civilians to assist it. Melvin points out that this was the first explicit instruction for civilian mobilization.

While the people of Aceh were still confused about G30S in Jakarta (what it was, who was involved, and the implications of the movement), Djuarsa had already commenced his tour of different parts of the province to further consolidate the annihilation project. The tour involved coordination with local governments and public meetings that were usually held in open spaces, among large numbers of people. The purpose of these public meetings was to emphasize the role of PKI in G30S and to demand assistance from the people in the extermination process. This was done by stressing that civilians would be victims of violence by the communists if they did not help the military.

As a result, the public meetings triggered a number of anticommunist demonstrations in different districts in Aceh, followed by public arrests and massacres. Melvin presents evidence that these three levels of violence were directed or at least acknowledged by the army. For example, a radiogram on October 10 instructed that all demonstrations and meetings must have permission from Pepelrada Aceh (the regional authority related to the Crush Malaysia campaign). This instruction implies the coordination and control from the military over the civilian mass movement. To execute the killings, the military used trained executioners, rather than their own troops, which reflects an effort to distance itself from the killings. One example of the military-sponsored death squads was called the Pantja Sila Defence Front, whose members connected to the national Pancasila Front, established in Jakarta on October 23, 1965. In total, 1,941 cases of public killings in Aceh between October 6 and November 2, 1965, were recorded in the military's documents. Based on interviews with perpetrators, it is clear that the military coordinated the killings by using civilians, often by forcing them to participate. In her last chapter, Melvin describes anti-Chinese violence in Aceh and the purge against Aceh's civil service as part of the military's project to build a foundation for the new regime.

Based on this thorough analysis, Melvin argues that the mass killings and violence in 1965 amounted to a genocide. The difficulties so far in categorizing the Indonesian case as a genocide lie in the lack of evidence showing structural intent of the military to completely annihilate a particular group, and

the fact that the targeted group does not seem to fit into the genocide definition (as stated in the 1948 Genocide Convention) itself. For the first difficulty, Melvin successfully proves the structural nature of the mass killings based on her analysis of the Indonesian genocide files. Meanwhile, concerning the question of the target group, Melvin develops her argument from the alleged identity of communists as atheists or unbelievers. Drawing from legal scholars Matthew Lippman and David Nersessian, who state that “religious groups encompass both theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic communities which are united by a single spiritual ideal,” Melvin argues that the victims of 1965-66 killings were identified based on their religious identity, either as an imposed group characteristic (by the military or anticommunist groups) or by the communists’ self-identification (as “Red Islam”) (p. 45). This, I think, should be elaborated further, because among the victims themselves, there was an array of self-definitions of their religion prior to 1965 that cannot easily be characterized as atheistic or in any other monolithic way.

Drawing from the case of Indonesia, Melvin tries to critically examine not only the limited definition of genocide itself, but also how genocides are executed. In the conclusion, she open-mindedly delves into critical questions about her own study, such as whether the situation in Aceh was unique and cannot be generalized to other parts of the country, or whether the Aceh case indicated a coordination with the national command structure. Melvin does not deny the distinctive characteristic of Aceh, shaped by its historical background, such as the armed conflict of the Darul Islam rebellion. However, once again Melvin stresses that this factor alone was not sufficient to generate large-scale violence in the province. She also cites the fact that Suharto used multiple command structures to coordinate the genocide not only in Aceh, but also other parts of Sumatera (through the KOTI/Supreme Operations Command), Kalimantan-Eastern Indonesia (through Kopkamtib/Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order), and Java-Bali (through RPKAD/Indonesian Special Forces). This, according to Melvin, indicates a centralized, national coordination of the genocide, although regional variations existed.

The last section of the conclusion, “What next?” is very intriguing. After proving military leadership of the genocide, Melvin argues for a legal accountability that can take different forms, from truth-telling to official investigation, in order to end the impunity of the perpetrators. However, as a researcher who has successfully analyzed the Indonesian genocide files, Melvin does not elaborate much on the “what next” of the Indonesian genocide files themselves. What will she do with the documents and what are the implications of uncovering them? These are some interesting questions to be reflected on further. On a larger scale, what does Melvin think about other documents that may still be hidden, scattered, or even restricted? Do they exist, and how should we advocate for access to them? After all, access to classified archives is also part of the effort to seek truth.

Notes

[1]. “Surat Perintah 11 Maret untuk mengatasi situasi konflik ketika itu,” *Kompas*, 11 Maret 1971, as quoted in John R. Roosa and Ayu and Hilmar Farid, “Pengantar: Sejarah Lisan dan Ingatan Sosial,” in *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir : Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65 : Esai-esai Sejarah Lisan*, ed. John R. Roosa and Ayu and Hilmar Farid (Jakarta: ISSI, ELSAM& TRK, 2004), 10.

[2]. Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia RI, *Ringkasan Eksekutif Laporan Penyelidikan Pelanggaran Hak Asasi Manusia Berat* (Jakarta: KOMNAS HAM RI, 2012), 3-40.

Citation: Grace Leksana. Review of Melvin, Jess, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. November, 2019. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53909>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).