

Praying for Truth and Healing

Senior Prayer Groups as a Journey of Healing for Victims of the 1965 Tragedy in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The 1965 tragedy in Indonesia marked a traumatic historical event which saw the start of an anti-communist campaign of mass violence that used religion as a tool of propaganda. For three decades, those accused of being members and sympathizers of the Communist Party of Indonesia suffered violence and various civil rights restrictions. The victims are still struggling to speak the truth. This article describes how victims and their families in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, formed senior prayer groups as a space for truth-telling and healing. The groups became new families, formed based on the commonality of memory. In the groups, victims were heard and honoured, mourned together, strengthened each other, and even became reconciled. Over time, the prayer group developed into a group that facilitated joint economic empowerment. Senior prayer groups provide healing journeys for victims of the 1965 tragedy in Indonesia.

Keywords

1965 tragedy, Indonesia, religion, healing

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Religion and Anti-communist Propaganda in Indonesia

The 1965 tragedy in Indonesia marked a historical traumatic event that occurred across the entire archipelago of Indonesia. In the early morning of 1 October 1965, a group of middle-ranking Indonesian army officers abducted and murdered six top generals and one lieutenant.¹ The International Peoples Tribunal on Crimes against Humanity in Indonesia of 2016 (hereafter, the tribunal) reported that the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) was propagandized as responsible for the murder of six generals and one lieutenant. This propaganda marked the beginning of massive arrests and killings of members and sympathizers of the PKI and of organizations associated with the Indonesian communist party.² According to the tribunal, the violence and crimes that occurred in 1965 in Indonesia included mass killings, imprisonment, enslavement, torture, sexual violence, exile, and genocide.³ Anti-communist propaganda, maintained for more than three decades, contributed to the denial of civil rights of survivors and persecuted victims.

Previous research by Katharine McGregor shows that during the 1965 tragedy, religion was used as a tool for the propaganda.⁴ Indonesian communist party members and sympathizers were stigmatized as communists, and thus as irreligious. The military actively shaped and propagated an anti-communist discourse based on rigid religious doctrines and cultural references. The Muslim civil society organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah directed members to assist the military in killing members of the PKI and allied organizations. They declared the action as a religious duty, a form of worship. On the Catholic side, the secretary general of the Catholic Party mobilized Perhimpunan Mahasiswa Katolik Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Catholic Student Association) to be involved in the Action Front to attack PKI headquarters in Jakarta. In eastern Indonesia, where the community is overwhelmingly Catholic and Protestant, the local population supported the army. Persecution, violence, and arrests occurred within the entire archipelago of Indonesia, not

¹ Saskia Wieringa, Annie Pohlman, and Jess Melvin, eds, *The International People's Tribunal for 1965 and the Indonesian Genocide* (London: Routledge, 2020).

² Saskia E. Wieringa and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, "The International People's Tribunal on the 1965 Crimes against Humanity in Indonesia," in *Propaganda and the Genocide in Indonesia 1965*, ed. Saskia E. Wieringa and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana (London: Routledge, 2020), 40–59.

³ International People and Humanity Indonesia, *Final Report of the IPT 1965: Findings and Documents of the International People's Tribunal on Crimes against Humanity Indonesia 1965*, 20 July 2016 (The Hague–Jakarta: IPT 1965 Foundation, 2016), 19–72, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=3651&file=CoverPage>.

⁴ Katharine E. McGregor, "Confronting the Past in Contemporary Indonesia: The Anticommunist Killings of 1965–66 and the Role of the Nahdlatul Ulama," *Critical Asian Studies* 41:2 (2009), 195–224.

limited to large islands such as Java, Bali, and Sumatra but also taking place on small islands such as Sabu.⁵ The main purpose of the violence was not only to physically eliminate the Indonesian communist party but also to scare the lower classes and bind the middle-class elite to the new regime.⁶ After the tragic events of 1965, the Indonesian government determined to recognize only six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.⁷ Unfortunately, none of these are native Indonesian religions.

The reformation era in Indonesia, marked by the resignation of President Suharto in 1998, was a turning point in the anti-communist propaganda. Civil society began to initiate research from the perspective of victims, examining the role of religion in the 1965 tragedy. Nahdlatul Ulama initiated a community-based programme to re-examine its role in the 1955–66 violence.⁸ Civil society in eastern Indonesia initiated similar movements. The Eastern Indonesia Women's Network, which focuses on issues related to women, religion, and culture, started research on the 1965 tragedy in East Nusa Tenggara. The research, which began in 2010 and was published in 2012 in a book entitled *Forbidden Memories*, recorded the experiences of women who were victims of the 1965 tragedy.⁹ The compilation of the memories of these women victims disputes the official story that has dominated public discourse for more than three decades. In addition, this research also identifies the role of religion, particularly the role of the Protestant Evangelical Church in Timor and the Christian Church of Sumba, local churches in East Nusa Tenggara, in the 1965 tragedy.

The network's research aims to fulfil the right of victims. The United Nations proclaimed March 24 as the International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims.¹⁰ The victims' rights include the right to know the truth, the right to justice, the right to reparation, and the guarantee that the injustice will not reoccur in the future. Fulfilling the right of victims is a long journey that involves reinvestigating the past, acknowledging the

⁵ Mary Kolimon et al., eds, *Forbidden Memories: Women's Experiences of 1965 in Eastern Indonesia*, Herb Feith Translation Series (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 24–74.

⁶ Gerry van Klinken, "A Killing Town (1965–1967)," in *The Making of Middle Indonesia: Middle Classes in Kupang Town, 1930s–1980s*, ed. Gerry van Klinken (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 243.

⁷ "Penetapan Presiden Republik Indonesia," www.djpp.depukumham.go.id.

⁸ McGregor, "Confronting the Past," 205–206.

⁹ Kolimon et al., *Forbidden Memories*.

¹⁰ KKPK, *Menemukan Kembali Indonesia: Memahami Empat Puluh Tahun Kekeerasan Demi Memutus Rantai Impunitas*, ed. Koalisi Untuk Keadilan dan Pengungkapan Kebenaran [Indonesia] (Jakarta: Koalisi Untuk Keadilan dan Pengungkapan Kebenaran, 2014).

impact to this day, and preventing the same violence from happening again in the future.

According to research by the Eastern Indonesia Women's Network, the church actively participated in the process of arresting the victims. Participants and members of the PKI were church members persecuted as communists, meaning irreligious people who endangered Christianity and the Indonesian nation. Victims labelled as enemies by the state and in the church were ostracized as sinners. Women and children were the most affected victims: having lost their husbands, parents, or siblings, they had to survive amid stigma and restrictions on their civil rights. In societies with strong patriarchal influence, men are responsible for working to provide for their families. The foundation of the family is thus lost when a husband or father dies.

On the other hand, research has found that the church also played a role supporting the victims. Pastors in Sumba continued providing pastoral care to victims who were detained and accompanied victims who were shot dead by officers. The same acts occurred in Alor, where several pastors wearing togas confronted police and pleaded with them to stop the killings. Because of military pressure and the exploitation of religious issues, the anti-communist movement was very influential. The church was thus unable to take significant action for the victims.

This research not only collected victims' stories but also recognized and mapped the needs of victims. There was a need for victims to come together and increase solidarity through sharing stories and supporting and strengthening each other. Therefore, at the initiative of the victims and with the assistance of the East Indonesia Women's Network, a senior prayer group was formed. This group has been gathering to pray together every two months since 2012. The prayer meetings are held in the homes of the victims in turn, and the victims take turns leading the meetings.

Initially, the victims and families involved in this group were the resource persons in the research process, but over time, other victims heard about the group and joined in. With time, the group evolved from a prayer fellowship into a group facilitating economic empowerment. Unfortunately, this group only involved victims in three of the six research areas. The main obstacles were the nature of the archipelagic areas and the victims' advanced ages.

This article aims to explain how senior prayer groups provide a safe space for maintaining the collective memory and healing of victims of the 1965 tragedy. This article is written based on the experiences of volunteers who assisted the group, and the quotations are the testimonies of victims. Senior prayer groups have allowed the victims to

talk about truth, empowerment, forgiveness, and hope for justice. Even though they are victims, they initiated the path of reconciliation.

Senior Prayer Meetings: A Journey to Sharing the Truth and Healing

New family

Please, Aryz, donate this money to other victims. This is a small contribution from me; God has blessed me, and I'd like to share it with the widows of other victims. God has taken care of me as a widow, and I want to share my blessings with other victims as well; we both live in difficult circumstances, and we are family. Please give to them while also apologizing for not being able to give much. (OM)

These are the words of a widowed victim to a volunteer named Aryz. The victim asked Aryz to help her assist the widows of other victims. This quote illustrates the sense of belonging of the victims. In the senior prayer group, the victims have found and developed new families.

When victims meet and share with other victims, they become a new family. They become family not because they are related by blood but because they share the same experiences and memories of the 1965 tragedy. Gathering with other victims who share the same experience increases their sense of belonging because it proves they are not alone. It is challenging to maintain the belief that they are innocent after more than 30 years of being labelled guilty. Victims are motivated to keep going despite hardships because of their conviction that they are not guilty. They must survive and stay alive to pass on the truth to the next generation. They believe that the truth will eventually come to light. In senior prayer groups, victims find a place where their stories as victims of the 1965 tragedy are believed and honoured.

The senior prayer group meets and worships together every two months, attended by victims and family members. Gathering as a religious meeting is a safe and comfortable setting for the victims. Engaging in religious gatherings proves that the victims are not irreligious, as they have been stigmatized for decades. In the crisis of the aftermath, the coping process depends on the victims' orientation system.¹¹ As religious people living in a religious community, prayer meetings are an important element of the victims' orientation system, helping them to gain a sense of security and comfort. In addition, because the prayer meeting is a religious gathering, the police cannot disperse or arrest the participants.

¹¹ Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 99.

In the prayer meeting, the victims of the 1965 tragedy as a new family can share and discuss their current life – their children, grandchildren, and in-laws. As they are elderly, they share information about healthy lifestyles, nutritious diets, and medical care. Gathering with fellow victims and developing a new family creates a solidarity group. This is a significant step in the healing process because healing occurs in relationship with others.¹² Traumatic events destroy a person's inner self and the sustaining connections between an individual and community. In a solidarity group, traumatized people regain a sense of self, worth, and humanity because they experience a sense of connection to others. Trauma dehumanizes the victims, but the group restores humanity.¹³

Mourning the truth

For decades, we couldn't even mention our parents' names. Let alone light a candle or potpourri on their graves. I have no idea where my father was buried. We are grateful for the opportunity to share and mention their names during the prayer meeting. (OM)

These quotes from victim testimonies exemplify the terror, fear, and trauma experienced by the victims. Having a safe space where they can share their stories is a means of healing.

According to Herman, remembering and grieving are interconnected processes.¹⁴ Because traumatic memories are wordless and static, victims struggle and sometimes even find it impossible to articulate their traumatic experiences. Telling the story of the trauma will inevitably result in profound grief. In the aftermath of trauma, it is important to mourn in order to express grief, reconstruct traumatic stories, and find an inner life that cannot be destroyed. Through mourning, victims feel the full range of emotions. Mourning is an act of courage rather than humiliation and is resistance rather than submission to the perpetrators' intentions.

The voices of the victims were silenced for more than three decades. They were marginalized as enemies of the state and religion. Victims lived experiences as innocent people were doubted. Their suffering was considered a consequence they had to accept. The senior prayer group provides a medium for victims to mourn together as a family, where their stories of suffering are recognized as truth and their grief is understood. Their identity as victims is revealed, recognized, and accepted.

¹² Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Hachette 2015), 133.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 175–95.

The victims pray and sing as a family during senior prayer meetings. Apart from being liturgical, prayer and singing are means of expressing grief. After a traumatic event, the brain is unable to articulate traumatic experiences. Singing and praying are effective means of expression. According to Van Der Kolk, traumatic events affect Broca's area of the human brain, which functions as the brain's speech centre. Therefore, traumatic events cannot be understood.¹⁵ However, the right side of the brain, which oversees emotional responses connected to music, singing, and crying, is still active. Therefore, after the event, crying, praying, and singing are significant ways for people to express themselves.

Mourning is a process through which the victims begin to reconstruct the traumatic event. The victims' memories resemble fragments of frozen imagery and sensation, gradually collected, organized, and arranged in a chronological and historical context.¹⁶ In senior prayer meetings, the victims take turns leading these meetings, and each participant is given time to share their experience. The victims have a space to express their grief without stigma and judgment since everyone's experiences and grief are valued.

One traumatic event can produce different traumas in different people.¹⁷ People's orientation systems depend on social constructions that produce different interpretations of a single traumatic event. Each victim's experience is valuable because these experiences validate and complement each other. Mourning together as a family provides an opportunity for the victims to share and gain a more comprehensive picture of the 1965 tragedy. Combining different memories creates a more comprehensive collective memory to confront the dominant perpetrator narrative that has been victimizing them for more than three decades.

The senior prayer meeting as a grieving family is a safe space to share not only the grief of victims but also their strength. Experiencing intense violence and discrimination for more than three decades, the victims had their source of strength. The victims shared their strength and inspiring stories by singing, praying, and sharing. They are not in a relationship to find who is the strongest and most able to face adversity but to strengthen each other. Sharing experiences of how God was with them during difficult times allows them to turn negative memories of suffering into positive memories of signs of God's presence during suffering. Although the traumatic

¹⁵ Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2014), 52–53.

¹⁶ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 171–76.

¹⁷ Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 52.

event can never be completely forgotten, it can be remembered with a new, inspiring meaning.

That God is truth itself was the religious message that most encouraged them to persevere. God, the truth, will never abandon them on their journey. God will still be with them, and they will have elderly friends who will live long enough to be passionate witnesses. They must persevere so that future generations can learn from their experiences as victims of human rights violations. The senior prayer meeting is a grieving family that mourns the truth; but at the same time, the truth also strengthens them to endure.

Reconciliation

The wounded and crucified Lord is looking at us from the cross. God sees us who pray, sees us who cry, sees us who are troubled, and sees us who are humbled. I want to testify about the good God. I will not testify about revenge and hurt about the perpetrator. God has washed our hearts with oil to heal our wounded hearts. That is my testimony. (ON)

This was a statement from one of the victims in a session. The quote shows how Jesus' suffering enabled the victims to reconcile with the perpetrators. The 1965 anti-communist movement caused many conflicts. Conflicts within the victims' own families also divided the community against each other; hence, reconciliation became a significant theme.

One of the impacts of the 1965 tragedy was the breakdown of family relationships.¹⁸ Victims were alienated by their own families. The victims and their children, grandchildren, and related families experienced violence, stigmatization, and restrictions of their civil rights. Some of the victims' children, grandchildren, and relatives blame the victim for making their lives difficult. In addition, some families alienate victims because they fear being interpreted as victim supporters. Either way, it leads to the stigma of supporting enemies of the state and the church.

The senior prayer group as a new family is a means for reconciliation. Because the format of the meeting is a prayer meeting, the children, grandchildren, and families of victims feel comfortable participating. The meetings are not about political discussions but about praying and worshipping together. It is a safe space to share experiences of hardship but also to share how God strengthened and saved them. Hearing and sharing stories from other victims who have been victimized despite their innocence proves that violence is structured, systematic, and massive. It raises

¹⁸ Kolimon et al., *Forbidden Memories*.

awareness that they are victims of a larger scenario. It helps victims' families to move away from victim blaming and toward reconciliation. Family reconciliation is important because family acceptance is a significant factor for growth after the incident.¹⁹

Initially, only victims and their families attended the prayer meetings; later, perpetrators ventured to attend some of the prayer meeting sessions. Among them was a person who had tied the hands of the prisoners and prepared them for execution. They admitted that at that time they were forced to follow the orders of the army and had no other choice. If the perpetrator had refused the army's orders, they would be accused of defending the victims. As a result, they would be subjected to the same torture and violence. However, the perpetrator never felt at peace and always felt guilty about the experience. The senior prayer group is a space of reconciliation for perpetrators who want to apologize to victims. At the same time, such perpetrators' confessions further prove that in the 1965 tragedy, military and political interests pitted civil society groups against each other.

The military utilized terror and fear to divide the people. Therefore, many of the perpetrators who were coerced into engaging in torture can also be considered as victims. Military orders forced them to act violently because, if they disobeyed, they would be tortured. These types of perpetrators live with a sense of guilt they cannot express. Communities at the grassroots level have been forced against one another, and the result is that both perpetrators and victims continue to experience trauma. When state reconciliation is difficult to achieve, grassroots reconciliation is crucial because it enables the victims and perpetrators to express their trauma and live in peace. A senior prayer meeting is a journey toward healing and reconciliation.

Senior prayer groups also initiated community reconciliation. They built cooperation with the local government of the village and the church, where victims and perpetrators lived side by side. With the support of volunteers and in collaboration with local hospitals, they organized free medical treatment for the people in the village. Another form of reconciliation was to engage in an Easter drama at the local church. The drama depicted that Jesus' death showed God's great love for all people, no matter their sins and backgrounds. These plays invited people in the village to not discriminate against anyone, as everyone is a sinner, justified by Jesus' death and resurrection. By participating in activities like this, victims regain a sense of meaning in their lives, which has long been lost due to stigma. They believe they are important to society.

¹⁹ Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), 94.

Economic Empowerment

No one has cared for us for decades. We are now assisting one another through this senior prayer group so that all victims can improve economically. (OM)

The senior prayer group initially focused on prayer meetings, but over time, an awareness grew of economic empowerment. The victims who lost their fathers or husbands endured great suffering because they lost the main financial support of families. In addition, victims and families have been suffering economically because of violence, stigmatization, and civil rights restrictions.

The victims, their families, and even their descendants have been labelled state enemies. As a result, they are not permitted to work as civil servants, police officers, or soldiers, or in state-owned companies. Almost all jobs in private companies also require employees not to be involved in or have a family history of participating in prohibited movements in Indonesia, including the communist party. The victims' children and grandchildren faced discrimination in school, and once they graduated, it was difficult for them to find work.

The restriction of public rights has caused economic difficulties for victims and their families. Therefore, the senior prayer group attempted to engage with local churches and other organizations to provide economic empowerment. Through such cooperation, victims can access business capital grants to start or expand their businesses. The grants are distributed on a rolling basis, so those who have succeeded can support other victims. Economic independence also makes victims feel valuable and dignified, which increases their sense of belonging within the group.

In providing economic assistance, the groups considered the context of the victims' lives. For example, the widow of a victim who is a traditional textile weaver used the grant as capital for a weaving project. Weaving is a lengthy process that requires precision, patience, and creativity. For the victim, weaving calms the mind and allows them to forget the pressures of life for a moment by focusing on one activity that requires high concentration. Weaving is a process of cultural inheritance, stress relief, and economic gain. Moreover, because weaving has economic benefits, women weavers have the potential to become financially independent and even become the main breadwinners. At the same time, it indirectly challenges the patriarchal culture that treats women only as objects.

Conclusion

The 1965 tragedy in Indonesia was a traumatic historical event. The violence that occurred at that time took the form of mass killings, imprisonment, enslavement, torture, sexual violence, exile, and genocide against those accused of being members and

sympathizers of the PKI. This has been ongoing for three decades. Religion was used in the 1965 tragedy as a propaganda tool.

Civil society conducted research after the regime change to hear the voices of victims. One such study, conducted by the Eastern Indonesia Women's Network, collected the experiences of women victims in East Nusa Tenggara and examined the role of the church in the 1965 tragedy. The research found that there was a need for victims to gather. Out of this need, a senior prayer group consisting of victims and their families was formed. This group developed into a new family through the commonality of memory. In this group, victims found a safe place where their experiences were heard and honoured, where they grieved together, strengthened each other, and even reconciled. Over time, the prayer group developed into a group that fostered joint economic empowerment. The senior prayer group is a healing journey for victims of the 1965 tragedy in Indonesia.