

'The Act of Killing': New narrative with new views

Nelly Martin
WISCONSIN

I need to state it upfront that this piece is not coming from a historian, but an Indonesian layperson. Right after I watched the movie and before I wrote this piece, I started a conversation with a group of friends residing in Indonesia. Their reaction was easy to guess: "I don't like the movie because it gives a bad name to the Indonesian government". I can totally understand this stance because that's how the majority of Indonesians have been indoctrinated. Another strong opinion stated that the movie, which is aimed at an international audience, would just give the impression to the world that the Indonesian government has been treating the Chinese badly. I am not going to discuss this. For me, it is just a matter of power and who is powerful enough to write it down and to instill it in the people. As an Indonesian studying overseas for quite a while now, I can understand where some Indonesians are coming from — that the crushing of

the communists was justified and excusable. My best guess is that we might have been brainwashed into considering that the entire massacre was legal and ethical. Again, I speculate here. What interests me more is the way the director narrates the story. I may refer to the movie as a life history. Seeing it from the life history point of view, this piece is trying to reconstruct the history from another point of view. There are two reasons why this movie may be worth watching. First, it is because this movie is voicing the unheard voice, one which was not present when history was being written. Second, this movie is, as Cole and Knowles (2000) put it, provides a broader understanding of other human experiences. It gives us some understanding of the complexities of the killer's decision making. Whether or not we want to forgive him, it will be our personal choice and inclination. The truth is there and should be revealed. While I am not sure if I can forgive the killer(s), this movie has started a dialogue, which hopefully

can mediate the differences and friction among the Indonesian government, the killers, the victims and the nation in general. Additionally, this piece has successfully made "the audience aroused by vivid, intriguing, soothing, perplexing, provocative, and even shocking portrayals of all kinds" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 103). Some scenes may be too vulgar or sadistic but I can tell that the director did a lot of research before filming. Also, we can really sense a close relationship between the director and the protagonist (the killer) from the language he uses with Joshua Oppenheimer the director. He would simply call him "Josh" instead of Joshua and this may be a signal that this movie went through a long process in which both parties built up a close relationship. Some utterances in the movie show this relationship. The protagonist seems to be relaxed and re-tells the story without any hesitation. Also, I need to praise Joshua for being such a good listener, and that is the key to the life history: "[the] willingness and commitment to listen" (James, 2000, p. 125).

Another good quality of Joshua is the position that he took. As an outsider, he clearly emphasizes it when responding to the killer's regret: "they [those who were killed] had much more fear because they knew they were going to be killed, unlike you who knew that you were being filmed". This very sentence is to convey that what the killer did was not right. At least that's how I interpreted it. However, as much as I respect Joshua's position, I feel that the closing seems to mislead the viewers. It is, at least for me, to sympathize or to forgive the killer. At the end, whether or not you want to forgive him, it is a matter of choice. Moreover, this movie may have been made through togetherness (Bakhtin, 1981). Together the director and the protagonists have collected and recollected the memory and re-told the stories. This recollection and retelling attempts to understand cultural and social phenomena rather than understand only individual lives and personalities, though it is only narrated by one person. It is a view from a broader perspective, rather than a narrow-

minded one. It is our task to keep questioning and evaluating what we hear, read and see so that we don't pass judgment too easily. It is for us to teach and educate our children that we need at least to be fair and listen to both sides of the story before making any decision or passing any judgment. This is the message that I took away from the movie. That said, this movie is not to be banned or to be avoided, as we just need to employ our critical thinking in scrutinizing what's good and what's bad. It is obvious that it is not for children. It's more for the parents so they can have balance when narrating Indonesian history. At the end, I was actually hoping there would be some historical background about the PKI (the Indonesia Communist Party) so that international viewers would understand it comprehensively. The lack of this part seems to take it for granted that all of the audience will have understood Indonesian history. Also, a statement from the Indonesian government that the act of killing of those people was sinful is missing.

Some friends argue that this movie should also have captured the government asking for forgiveness from the victims. As this movie is from the other perspective, it may have been wise to do so. The last message I wish to convey is that we don't have to worry that the world or other countries will hate us after seeing the movie. Simply put, those who are well-read and well-educated will seek other sources before passing judgment. On the other hand, those who hate easily, due to their lack of knowledge or ignorance, will pass judgment regardless. There is nothing we can do to for this group of people. Whether we want to be a hater or a critical thinker, it is up to us. So, my friends, let's forget our hatred, and instill love within us, because differences are inevitable. This movie is just another narrative from another perspective.

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Why the battle against tax evasion matters so much

Stephan Richter
THE GLOBALIST/WASHINGTON, D.C.

We live in an era when the rapid integration of the global economy causes great stresses in the lives of many people. Manufacturing workers, regardless of location and nationality, can lose their jobs in large numbers if the facility where they are employed is no longer productive enough. And in many a country, social benefits are being trimmed constantly, in an effort to make the welfare state sustainable during conditions of rapid population aging. Under such circumstances, it is politically explosive — and in a democracy ultimately self-defeating — to let some individuals go on in their belief that they, unlike most regular tax-paying citizens, do not really

have to play by the rules. In such a world, it is pivotal that people live and operate under the same set of rules. There cannot be one set for all regular wage earners, who have their taxes and other charges automatically withdrawn from their monthly wages, and another set for people who enjoy great "flexibility". True enough, there is a whole raft of prominent banking institutions, accounting firms and law firms — never mind the myriads of shady operators in this field with much lesser names and completely dubious reputations — who make a rich living indeed from setting up and operating this netherworld of tax evasion. But their activities do not happen in a social and political vacuum. Economic globalization has brought about a significant increase in terms

of income inequality in most Western societies. That is even true in countries which traditionally put much more emphasis on equality and solidarity, as is the case throughout Scandinavia. When that happens, public policy must take appropriate measures to ensure a clear sense of tax fairness and equity in domestic society. And if the effort to ensure that requires resorting to extraordinary and, yes, in the minds of some, illegal measures, then that is what is required. The law is never an absolute category. It is ultimately the codification of a set of moral choices between various layers of conflict situations, as they are either known or anticipated to exist. When tax authorities can obtain information that penetrates the other-

wise impenetrable world of tax evasion, then clearly any government acts within its proper rights if it chooses to enforce against the truly immoral choice. That truly immoral choice is not paying one's proper tax obligations, as required under the public laws of the land, no matter how clever, cunning and reassuring one's bankers, lawyers and accountants are. In such cases, it is immoral, and ultimately illegal, to protect the tax offenders for their claimed right to "privacy" or, more stupefying yet, protection under the "rule of law". Anybody seriously considering the alternative just needs to ask this question: What happens to the internal fabric and moral fiber of a society where the vast majority plays by the rules (if only because they have no other choice), but a very

small minority, already privileged with its high level of economic success, does not? Under those circumstances, how can even the most basic notions of social and economic equity and fairness be upheld? Is it desirable in any conceivable way to have such an unfortunate separation — between the law-abiding "losers" and those who are merely treading in place (i.e., the many) and those who consider themselves above the law (i.e., the few)? If the answer to any of those questions is no, then one must act accordingly. It is issues such as combating tax evasion that give the all-important, but abstract sounding goal of advancing the broader cause of global governance their real-life meaning. Proper governance in the fields of global finance and the global econ-

omy means more than just rectifying the voting right in international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, overdue as that is. For this important endeavor to find resonance among the wider public, the reform efforts must yield effects in daily life. Combating tax evasion is precisely such an issue and a cause. It promotes the sense of fairness and a lived practice by all citizens to operate under the same rules and be wedded to advancing the life opportunities of all citizens and not just the most fortunate ones. Few things are more vital to promoting and sustaining democracy over the long haul. The writer is publisher and editor-in-chief of The Globalist and president, The Globalist Research Center.

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Your letters

Learning from Finland

With reference to the article entitled "What Indonesia can learn from Finland" on page four last week, the interview was an eye-opener not only for Indonesians but all Southeast Asian developing countries that need to focus on future generations. The education system is the underlying force and power in playing a vital role in the development of a country. As mentioned in the excerpts, the emphasis placed on educational quality, equality and nobility (as a profession) in Finland, is highly commendable and advisable to be followed by other countries too. I want to congratulate *The Jakarta Post* and appreciate the effort put in to make us aware of great people, systems and cultures that force us to think differently and creatively.

PRATI WEST JAVA

Russia must deter US aggression in Syria

Any unprovoked attack on Syria by the US would be a state-based act of terrorism and a war crime. The fact that the Assad government may have used chemical weapons against its own people is an atrocity, but not one the US should try to fix by committing another. The US has neither the mandate nor the legitimacy to act as the world's policeman and trying to do so will only result in our world becoming a less safe place. The US has not learned the lessons of Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq. In each case, the US invaded these countries without a just cause and in the process provided the catalyst for a conflagration that cumulatively killed millions. Not one of these countries is better off for what occurred. Neither has the world become a safer place. Indeed terrorism has escalated, not diminished, because of US actions. We need a counterbalance to the US, particularly as successive administrations have shown they are prepared to ignore the UN Security Council veto of both Russia and China. China and Russia are the only two nations with the military might to provide an effective deterrent to further US aggression and acts of terrorism. The US claims it will defend South Korea and Taiwan if they are attacked by either North Korea or China, respectively. We need Russia to rise to this opportunity and also defend its ally — Syria. This would up the anti and provide the deterrent the world needed to further US aggression. Obama is betwixt and between. He has announced he will wait until Sept. 9 to ask Congress to give him a blank check to launch a terrorist attack against Syria. He hasn't the courage to go it alone. He wants the Congress to validate his terrorism. If Russia fails to rise to the occasion and the US proceeds with an unprovoked attack on Syria, then Syrians and Syrian supporters would have the moral right to attack US interests around the world in kind. US aggression must never be allowed to go without punishment even if the punishment is meted out in unconventional ways. Being militarily weaker in a battle may make the fight much harder, but it doesn't in any way take away from the moral right to defend oneself against an aggressor.

ADAM BONNER BROGO, NEW SOUTH WALES

Text your say

Forest fires

Your comments on the forest fires that have hit Riau again in less than three months, sparking thick haze, which forced students in Pelalawan regency to suspend their school activities:

Any measure that the government could take would not have much success in eradicating the forest fires immediately, as more and more hotspots keep appearing and won't stop unless someone acts by fixing the problem at the source. We all know that 29 perpetrators have been caught as of today so it can be concluded that the fire is more human-oriented than nature-oriented. The question that we need to ask is: Why were those people willing to harm their own community? Don't they also live in the same haze-induced environment due to their own wrongdoings? Apparently, they thought that money makes up for every conse-

quence, even at the cost of their community's health and well being as well as their own. Whose fault is that? I think that the first measure to stop the fires from recurring (and also other problems that this country is facing) is by educating people to help the nation's sense of morality. A sense of community-awareness must be brought to people whose moral compass is already askew. Then supplement it with a proper and decent education. Who knows? They may not be aware of the health consequences that are caused by their actions. With the source of the problem fixed, the technical aspects of cleaning the damage should be easy.

TIARA ANGELICA SEMARANG

Comments on other issues

Bad policies could cause a repeat of 1998

Sept. 2, p3

Indonesia has not come up with "good policies" quickly enough as its current account deficit widens and its currency continues to plummet. Policy makers' failure to deliver the right responses to investors could lead the country to a repeat of the traumatic 1998 financial crisis, during which the economy also saw an overshooting exchange rate, slumping foreign exchange (forex) reserves, high inflation and a sharp slowdown in growth. Former Bank Indonesia (BI) governor Darmin Nasution once blamed the deficit, which has occurred for seven consecutive quarters since late 2011, on President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's unwillingness to curb fuel subsidies that had enlarged oil imports and created an unnecessarily high dollar demand.

Your comments: Take a look at Ministerial Regulation No.7/2012 Mr. President, and you shall find the answer. Seek and

you shall find.

The government caused the massive overlap of ownership of land concessions and now requires that all mines be classified and certified "clean and clear" or CNC. Poor local owners have to seek the help of a public notary to sort out the mess, which could take as long as two years and cost about US\$8,000-\$10,000 in legal fees in addition to, you know, "other fees". In the meantime, no work can be done on their land. This is what this government has done to the people.

SMS

Hold on tight... this is eerily similar to 1997. Stock up on instant noodles and bottled water now.

DEEDEE S

It will be OK! We are in better condition compared to in 1998. If ratings drop below investment, our borrowing costs will sky rocket, and since most of our debt is foreign, we will be out of luck.

The one major and scary difference is that now there are more religious hard-liner groups compared to in 1997.

Anyone caught initiating forest fires, small as it may be; shall be liable for not only legal punishment, but also exclusion from any forest environment. Household trash of any form may not be burned but instead buried in the ground to form useful compound fertilizers. Village chiefs need to educate the villagers that forest fires have severely negative international implications. The negative consequences of forest fires is so grave that anyone found guilty of causing forest fires is to be banned for good. The ignorant population and the indifferent village chiefs are equally to blame for not being aware of the fire hazard. Last but not least, cigarette factories are to chip in on how to safeguard our forests from burning cigarette butts.

We certainly can never be too careful with what our indolent population do; we just have to be vigilant and resourceful. MOELJONO ADIKOESOEMO JAKARTA

Topic of the day

Djoko's punishment

The Jakarta Corruption Court has sentenced former National Police Traffic Corps chief Insp. Gen. Djoko Susilo to 10 years in prison for graft and seized assets worth Rp 120 billion (US\$12 million) from him. Is the sentence sufficient?

Send your thoughts by email, SMS, Twitter or Facebook. Include your name and city.

If the economy worsens, religious violence, not just ethnic violence, will be a major problem. Dark days ahead? Let's hope not. But like you, I am feeling a bit tense.

DUNCAN TAN

Start booking your ticket out of the country. That should relieve the tension.

JAYTEE

Litter police to come on strong

Aug. 31, p2

The Jakarta Sanitation Agency will fully enforce the new bylaw on waste management in January after familiarizing the public with the regulation and the consequences faced by offenders. Agency head Unu Nurdin said he had disseminated information on Bylaw No. 3/2013 to urban and waste management experts as well as mayors and other agency heads to expedite the campaign. "I started the campaign earlier than planned, which was October. The bylaw will be enforced in Janu-

ary at the early, but it is also possible to see it enforced in November or December," he told *The Jakarta Post* on Friday.

Your comments:

I think this is a very important initiative, but at the same time producer responsibility should be encouraged. There are various solutions available such as oxo-biodegradable additives that can easily be mixed with the normal plastic manufacturing process at very little extra costs for producers and many plastic manufacturers are already certified for oxo-biodegradable plastic in Indonesia. Oxo-biodegradable plastic can still be collected for recycling and if littered they break down in the natural environment within two or three years and cause no harm as they will ultimately be consumed by microbes.

CHRISTIAN FRITZ

It is all over this beautiful country and unfortunately the rest of the world can see it also. Recent photos of Bali show an 8-kilometer stretch of lovely beaches covered in tons of garbage.

Who wants to sunbath there? DODI