

# Indonesia: The historical irony behind leftist book raids

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**Jakarta — Raids on leftist books discussing communism and the banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) have started again. Shortly after the police and military seized leftist books from a book stall in Probolinggo on July 27, a similar incident occurred in the South Sulawesi provincial capital of Makassar.**

Both incidents occurred within a period of one week. Historian Andi Achdian sees the irony behind both book raids. Particularly when the Indonesian Muslim Brigade (BMI) raided leftist books at the Gramedia bookstore in Makassar on August 3 which were written by Franz Magnis-Suseno — the contents of which are actually critical of Marxism and Leninism (communism).

Achdian said that the tradition of leftist ideas in Indonesia has long historical roots and influenced the independence movement against the Dutch in Indonesia.

“... without leftist thinking, Indonesia would never have existed on the world map. Historically the anti-colonial movement developed because there was such criticism. Without leftist ideas, we would just be colonial slaves of a foreign country,” said Achdian when contacted by CNN Indonesia on Wednesday August 7.

If leftist ideas were once triumphant in Indonesia, now they have become something that is constantly found fault with. The fate of leftist ideas and their books, said Achdian, has been the complete opposite of right-wing ideas and their books.

In political science, the term “right” generally refers to conservative ideas or groups. Achdian notes that books containing right-wing ideas — including those categorised as extreme right — are freely bought and sold in Indonesia.

He gave the example of the book “Mein Kampf” written by German fascist leader Adolf Hitler which has been translated into Indonesian and has long been sold openly in Indonesia.

“A book which is universally seen as the most right-wing, ‘Mein Kampf’, is freely available in Indonesia. The latent danger of right-wing fundamentalist was clearly demonstrated in the recent Christchurch [massacre],” he said.

Achdian also said that raids on leftist books are an indication of a retreat in attitudes and thinking. This retreat has been so extreme that Achdian even compares it with the practices carried out during the Dutch East Indies colonial era.

Achdian said that during the colonial period, the Dutch government opposed any ideas about independence ignited by the fledgling independence movement by producing official books to counter them. Discourse was countered with discourse.

“Now this brilliance isn’t tangible, what they resort to now is violence in public places,” said Achdian.

The University of Indonesia historian believes that there is nothing wrong in leftist books being published and circulating in Indonesia. He says that leftist book in fact offer critical ideas. One of these is the idea of opposing colonial practices.

It is on these grounds that he believes that the raids on leftist books are an attempt to silence criticism and logical reasoning.

This has been done again and again as in the case of the repeated raids on leftist books. Achdian refers to these as “seasonal” raids. He even suspects that these raids are being used as a political commodity.

Achdian said that these raids may well be carried out in order to cover up policy weaknesses such as the lack of programs or initiatives for the poor to address things like healthcare or low wages. So reviving an anti-left stigma is an easy road to take.

“I actually see this as the life style of one group as a political force. The easiest way is to revive certain kinds of stigma in society. The easiest and cheapest stigma, yes well its leftist ideology,” he said.

Achdian did not however cite which group is using raids on leftist books as a political commodity. Although he deplores the attitude taken by law enforcement officials who give the impression of allowing it to happen.

By allowing it to happen, it is as if these raids are being legitimised. “The problem is that law enforcement officials are allowing it. It even becomes an initiative which in the end they also carry out,” he said.

Achdian says that the solution to stopping the book raids is law enforcement so that the public obeys with the law. Obeying the law also applies to law enforcement officials who in several cases have also taken part in raids on leftist books.

“There has already been a Constitutional Court ruling which regulates this. And the state officials must also be aware of the law... These state officials must act on legal grounds, not the personal interpretations of individual people,” said Achdian.

Achdian asserted that the public has the right to produce and read books containing leftist ideology. He said that ideas in society cannot be restricted so that they become like a frog trapped in a coconut shell — an Indonesian saying meaning to be narrow minded but acting as if one knows everything. (gst/wis)

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**CNN Indonesia**  
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**P.S.**

Translated by James Balowski. The original title of the article was "Ironi Literasi di Balik Razia Buku Kiri"

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<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190807195121-32-419365/ironi-literasi-di-balik-razia-buku-kiri>