

THE SILENT GRIEVANCES AND UNTOLD REGRETS

Cultural Reconciliation of the Nahdliyyin and the Former 1965 Political Prisoners in South Blitar¹

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Abstract: Between 1965 and 1968, South Blitar as the “last defense” of Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) underwent military operation. In East Javanese’s memories, PKI members frequently clashed with members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization prior to the 1965 coup, and led to thousands of deaths, mostly among PKI affiliates afterwards. For decades, both groups lived in silent grievance. From the mid-1980s, under NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), a new movement toward understanding and reconciliation emerged. This research examines how Syarikat, an informal NU youth network inspired by Gus Dur’s vision, facilitated cultural reconciliation in South Blitar without relying on formal NU structures. Based on oral histories and narrative analysis (2021–2024), the study highlights the role of religious legitimacy and moral authority in reshaping perceptions and building trust. The findings suggest that culturally grounded, empathetic dialogue rooted in shared spiritual values can heal historical divisions and promote social inclusion.

Keywords: Indonesia Communist Party (PKI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Santri Community for Advocacy in Indonesia (Syarikat), Cultural Reconciliation.

Introduction

The assassination of several high-ranking Indonesian Army officers during the events of the 30 September 1965 Movement (G30S) implicated the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as the main

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culprit. In the aftermath of this incident, leftists were widely stigmatized, convicted of treason, stripped of certain civil rights, became targets of political persecution, violence and even murder for several years following 1965.² A half-century has passed since the fatal occurrences of the 1965-68 anti-Communist purges in Indonesia. While there is a growing societal awareness of the need to heal old wounds, reconciliation efforts remain fraught.³ The stigma against former leftists persists, and attempts to openly discuss the tragedy—such as gatherings of former political prisoners or dialogues touching upon Communist issues—have often been silenced or disrupted.⁴ Observers note that since the 1998 Reformation, the Indonesian government has paid insufficient attention to matters of humanity and justice, leaving a society still fragmented and distrustful.⁵ To this day, there is no broad agreement supported by all parties to facilitate large-scale reconciliation.

Scholarly discourse on 1965 violence often centers on genocide and human rights frameworks, both in Java and beyond.⁶ Numerous studies probe the mechanisms of mass killings and even categorize

² Suparman Marzuki and Mahrus Ali, "The Settlement of Past Human Rights Violations in Indonesia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2240643>.

³ Salim Haji Said, *Gestapu 65: Pki, Aidit, Sukarno, Dan Soeharto* (Bandung: Mizan, 2018), 198-99.

⁴ Lovina Soenmi, "Konflik Vertikal Dan Horizontal Terjadi Pada Kasus Korban 65," YPKP 65, accessed 12/12/2021, 2021. <https://ypkp1965.org/blog/2015/10/27/konflik-vertikal-dan-horizontal-terjadi-pada-kasus-korban-65/>; Setara Intitute, "Pembubaran Diskusi Tan Malaka," Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, accessed 12/12/2021, 2021. <https://setara-institute.org/pembubaran-diskusi-tan-malaka/>.

⁵ Katharine McGregor and Ken Setiawan, "Shifting from International to "Indonesian" Justice Measures: Two Decades of Addressing Past Human Rights Violations," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 5 (2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1584636>.

⁶ Robert Cribb, "Genocide in Indonesia, 1965-1966," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 2 (2001), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713677655>; Vannessa Hearman, "The Slaughter Season: Killings and Detention in East Java," in *Unmarked Graves, Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018); Geoffrey B. Robinson, "The Army's Role," in *The Killing Season, A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Grace Leksana, "Collaboration in Mass Violence: The Case of the Indonesian Anti-Leftist Mass Killings in 1965-66 in East Java," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 1 (2021), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1778612>.

them as genocidal acts.⁷ Methodologically, some researchers have attempted to quantify victims through approaches like population loss analysis.⁸ Other academic works explore the intersections of religion, politics, and mass violence, often highlighting the clashes between Muslims and Indonesia Communist Party (PKI) sympathizers in Java.⁹ Certain studies extend beyond the island, examining similar triggers elsewhere and contemplating the pre-1965 historical trajectory of the PKI and its political frictions with opposing groups.¹⁰ Within this body of literature, the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—Indonesia's largest Muslim organization—remains central. Historically entangled in these events, both the Nahdliyyin (NU members) and the former PKI prisoners have carried silent burdens of grievance and regret that linger to the period of the reconciliation as exemplified by the case of South Blitar.

South Blitar itself has appeared in academic discussions, particularly in relation to the Trisula Operation (the military raid in South Blitar) to eradicate the Communists and debates concerning victimhood and the scale of violence.¹¹ To illuminate how

⁷ Jess Melvin, "Mechanics of Mass Murder: A Case for Understanding the Indonesian Killings as Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research: 1965 Today: Living with the Indonesian Massacres* 19, no. 4 (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2017.1393942>.

⁸ Siddharth Chandra, "New Findings on the Indonesian Killings of 1965-66," *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S002191181700081X>; Siddharth Chandra, "The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: The Case of Central Java," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 3 (2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2019.1626751>; S. Chandra and T. Zhang, "Glimpses of Indonesia's 1965 Massacre through the Lens of the Census: The Role of Civilian Organizations in the Mass Anti-Communist Killings of 1965-66 in East Java," *Indonesia* 2023, no. 116 (2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ind.2023.a910150>.

⁹ Greg Fealy and Katharine E. McGregor, "Nahdlatul Ulama and the Killings of 1965-66: Religion, Politics, and Remembrance," *Indonesia*, no. 89 (2010).

¹⁰ Robert Cribb, "The Act of Killing," *Critical Asian Studies: Reframing North Korean Human Rights (part 2)*, guest editors Christine Hong and Hazel Smith 46, no. 1 (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2014.867621>; John Roosa, "The State of Knowledge About an Open Secret: Indonesia's Mass Disappearances of 1965-66," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S00219118-16000474>; Hearman, "Making the Pki: Turmoil, Repression and Growth," in *Unmarked Graves*; Audrey R. Kahin, "The 1927 Communist Uprising in Sumatra: A Reappraisal," *Indonesia* 62 (1996), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3351390>.

¹¹ Vanessa Hearman, "Guerrillas, Guns, and Knives? Debating Insurgency in South Blitar, East Java, 1967-68," *Indonesia* no. 89 (2010); Vanessa Hearman, "Contesting Victimhood in the Indonesian Anti-Communist Violence and Its Implications for

reconciliation might take shape in South Blitar, this paper begins by presenting how national political tension in the aftermath of 1965 bloody incident in Jakarta spread to remote areas, in this respect, South Blitar. Then, this paper examines local perspectives on the 1965 period and the identities of those labeled as PKI in South Blitar. It then examines the vision of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), a key NU leader whose intellectual and moral stance encouraged recognizing the complexity of the past. Building on Gus Dur's ideas, NU-affiliated youths in several districts in Java, including South Blitar, working as part of the Santri Community for People's Advocacy (Syarikat), have pursued cultural reconciliation strategies.¹² Rather than relying on formal NU organizational structures, these NU-youth networks employ community-driven approaches that encourage dialogue, understanding, and a departure from the rigid "right vs. wrong" narrative. Existing studies on reconciliation following the 1965 incidents remain limited, particularly at the local level in places like South Blitar. By engaging NU members actively involved in

Justice for the Victims of the 1968 South Blitar Trisula Operation in East Java," *Journal of genocide research* 19, no. 4 (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2017.1393943>. Further information regarding Trisula Operation please read: Budiawan, *Mematahkan Pewarisan Ingatan Wacana Anti-Komunis Dan Politik Pasca-Soeharto* (Jakarta: ELSAM - Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004). Here some excerpt from Budiawan: "The official story of the Soeharto regime claims that after the failed coup attempt in 1965, the remaining Communist Party members tried to regroup and start another rebellion. The military found out and conducted Operation Trisula, which destroyed the hiding places of the PKI and resulted in the arrest, imprisonment, or killing of the PKI leaders and locals. To celebrate the success of the operation, the government built the Trisula Monument on the site, which was called the "last stronghold of the Communists."

¹² The Syarikat, founded in the mid-2000s as a study group of young NU activists in Yogyakarta, was inspired by Gus Dur's humanitarian vision and informed by the members' own intellectual pursuits. Seeking to foster a more democratic NU community founded on mutual respect and equality, they built a network connecting NU youth across various cities—particularly in East and Central Java—and organized initiatives to promote reconciliation with individuals labeled as "ex-Communists." These efforts included publishing Hasan Raid's autobiography and translating the "Cornell Paper," A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1st, 1965 Coup in Indonesia. Although they encountered reactionary opposition, a growing sense of shared victimhood under the New Order regime opened pathways for advancing reconciliation. Still, these efforts depend on multiple factors, including collective memory of past violence. A notable example of grassroots reconciliation took place in Blitar, East Java, where Lakpesdam NU members led these initiatives. For a more comprehensive understanding, see Budiawan.

reconciliation efforts, this research explores key field insights and clarifies the social significance of such local-scale endeavors.

In an effort to analyze grassroots reconciliation academically, this research emphasizes the importance of local activism and narratives in South Blitar. The study, based on fieldwork conducted in 2021, 2022, and 2024, provides a portrait of a community movement attempting to foster peace in a localized context—often overlooked by national discourse. Understanding these small-scale initiatives may offer valuable insights into how reconciliation can unfold on the ground, inspiring more inclusive and culturally sensitive strategies to address historical wounds within fragmented societies.

The Spread of Political Tensions from Jakarta to South Blitar

The PKI's G30S coup in 1965 triggered a series of important events in the post-colonial history of Indonesia: the dismantlement of Sukarno from power and rise of Suharto, and the dissolution of Indonesia Communist Party (PKI) along with the eradication of its cadres and sympathizers from the elite up to the grassroots level. Until today, historians have not yet in "one word" about what was actually the nature of the event in that devilish night. Robert Cribb summarizes several possibilities regarding the incident.¹³ First, there is a possibility that the incident was initiated by junior officers who were disappointed towards the lavish lifestyle and the political conservatism of their seniors in the Army, so that the juniors attempted to intimidate and to embarrass them. Second, besides what was aimed by those army junior officers, there is also a possibility that they had been trapped in a further political agenda associated with groups outside the Army, namely the rivalry between the Army and PKI in gaining influence from Soekarno. In this second possibility, Cribb argues that it should be impossible for the juniors to be against the military hierarchy without political supports and protections. Although there is no evidence regarding the promised protections, it is the fact that Special Bureau of Indonesia Communist Party (BC PKI) had involved in a routine communication with several coup planners to obtain supports from Army officers, which was the PKI's political rival. Third, there is a possibility that the coup plan was coming from Sukarno's rivals which worked together with the PKI too. Still according to Cribb, Some evidence display implication of Suharto's involvement with the

¹³ Cribb, "Genocide in Indonesia, 1965-1966," 231.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States. This inference cannot be fully ascertained, but yet cannot be ignored.

Asvi Warman Adam, an Indonesian historian, agreed with Sukarno's statement that the case was the convergence of three causes: confusion within the PKI leadership, subversion from a party outside Indonesia, and irresponsible individuals within Indonesia (not clearly mentioned who by Sukarno).¹⁴ Adam concluded that Sukarno did not view the PKI as the entire political party masterminded the G30S, but rather some PKI leaders were involved. This conclusion is supported by the fact that Sukarno was the supreme leader of Indonesia and had access to intelligence information from various sources at that time. Moreover, the G30S could have been easily anticipated following the kidnapping and assassination of several high rank Army officers, indicating that PKI members throughout Indonesia may not have been involved or may not have been aware of what was happening.

Following accusations of PKI involvement in the 1965 incident, a series of purges and massacres against its sympathizers swept across Indonesia between 1965 and 1968. Estimates vary, but one study suggests about 150,000 to 500,000 deaths occurred in East Java alone.¹⁵ Research indicates that Ansor, the youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), took part in the killings of PKI members and sympathizers, allegedly acting on Army order and protection.¹⁶ The preexisting social tensions between NU and PKI supporters likely fueled the violence, revealing deeper conflicts that could surface without warning.

Viewed through a historical lens, the involvement of *santri* communities as represented by NU in the events of 1965–68 cannot be understood without considering their earlier tensions with the Communist movement. Although not all Communists were atheists, communism was broadly perceived as rejecting religion as a legitimate authority, making it inherently incompatible with Islam.¹⁷ This perception stemmed from repeated confrontations, especially in East

¹⁴ Gerin Rio Pranata, "Melihat Dalang Peristiwa G30s Dari Pidato Nawaksara Soekarno Pada 1967," *Tempo*, 30 September 2021, 2021, <https://www.tempo.co/politik/melihat-dalang-peristiwa-g30s-dari-pidato-nawaksara-soekarno-pada-1967-468810>.

¹⁵ Chandra, "New Findings on the Indonesian Killings of 1965-66."

¹⁶ Robinson, in *The Killing Season*, 161.

¹⁷ Cribb, "Genocide in Indonesia, 1965-1966," 227.

Java. In the 1948 Madiun Affair, the PKI clashed violently with Masyumi members, causing fatalities, and in 1963 it carried out unilateral land seizures targeting “excess” property owned by NU *keiai*.¹⁸ Although these actions were not direct attacks on NU itself, the substantial landholdings of *keiai* leaders and their status as “landlords” attracted harsh criticism. Such incidents deepened the rifts between Communists and *santri* communities, a tension further aggravated by smaller-scale conflicts in East and Central Java throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁹ Taken together, these recurrent conflicts reveal a longstanding pattern of hostile interaction between the PKI and *santri* groups, making it more prone to sudden escalation. Even isolated disputes could rapidly amplify into broader unrest, indicating the volatile nature of the political landscape leading up to 1965–68.

South Blitar became known as an alleged Communist base because it was perceived as a refuge for individuals linked to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and other leftist groups following the political turmoil of the mid-1960s.²⁰ The area’s remote, impoverished farming communities were seen as fertile ground for clandestine activities, and the state’s ongoing crackdown on anyone sympathetic to the PKI contributed to this reputation. Subsequent military operations, such as the 1968 Trisula operation, specifically targeted South Blitar, reinforcing its image as a bastion of Communist resistance.

Local Narratives on the Communists in South Blitar

This section attempts to present local perspectives on South Blitar and its residents before and after the 1960s. The aim is to outline the broader social context, enabling readers to understand the constellation of information surrounding events that followed the G30S incident in this area. The discussion proceeds in two main information. The first examines the geographical setting of South Blitar and explains why it served as a “final base of defense” for PKI figures from outside the

¹⁸ Fealy and McGregor, 39-40.

¹⁹ Cribb, "Genocide in Indonesia, 1965-1966," 229; Fealy and McGregor, 40-41; Hearman, "Making the PKI: Turmoil, Repression and Growth," in *Unmarked Graves*, 51; Said, 198; Hasanuddin Yusuf Adan et al., "Islam and the Foundation of the State in Indonesia: The Role of the Masyumi Party in the Constituent Assembly the Perspective of Fiqh Al-Siyāṣah," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 7, no. 1 (2023): 388.

²⁰ Hearman, "Contesting Victimhood in the Indonesian Anti-Communist Violence.

region. The second outlines the socio-political characteristics of Kecamatan Bakung and other nearby villages that functioned as PKI strongholds in the 1960s. The insights in this section are drawn from fieldwork interviews with local informants.

Indonesians refer to Blitar as Bumi Bung Karno (the Land of Sukarno). This is due to the fact that the first president of Indonesia is buried in this town. According to Asvi Warman Adam, the decision to bury Sukarno in Blitar was driven by Suharto's political instincts to distance Sukarno from the capital city.²¹ In addition, there is also the possibility of creating the impression of Sukarno's closeness to the Indonesian Communist Party, which had won the 1957 regional elections in Blitar. In addition, the South Blitar region is also known as the "defense base" for PKI figures from various regions who sought refuge for survival. These opinions confirm that Blitar has a very strong meaning for the constellation of power politics in the past where the Indonesian Communist Party had a fairly dominant party in the region. During fieldwork in South Blitar, it became evident that the region's challenging geography, characterized by hills and dense rain forests, significantly influenced local social dynamics. Settlements often lay well below the main road, making them appear withdrawn from the heart of community life. As Masrukin, one of our informants, noted, many residents before the anti-Communist purges lived deep within the forest.²² After the events of September 30th, 1965, the authority mandated that all residents move closer to the main roads to facilitate monitoring and control.

In this tense environment, it was easy to misinterpret individuals' motives. Rusni, a head of the Nahdlatul Ulama Branch Council (MWC NU), described how his father—felt under pressure to take side by both the Army and the Communists back in 1968—chose to live in the forest rather than join either side.²³ Had he stayed in the village and took side, he risked his life. Unfortunately, this decision, driven by fear

²¹ Tatik Ariyani, "Terdorong Nafsu Politik Soeharto Yang Ogah Penuhi Wasiatnya, Makam Bung Karno Malah Jadi Simbol Sempurna Titik Awal Kedigdayaan Nusantara Yang Terpaut Ratusan Tahun," *intisari online* 2021, <https://intisari.grid.id/read/033057364/terdorong-nafsu-politik-soeharto-yang-ogah-penuhi-wasiatnya-makam-bung-karno-malah-jadi-simbol-sempurna-titik-awal-kedigdayaan-nusantara-yang-terpaut-ratusan-ta>.

²² Masrukin, interview by Auliya Ridwan, July 7th, 2022.

²³ Rusni, interview by Auliya Ridwan, July 7th, 2022.

and survival, led the authorities to suspect him of being a Communist sympathizer in hiding. Such conditions, born from the area's geography and intense conflict, made it possible for anyone seeking safety beyond the main roads to be mistaken for a member of the Communist movement.

In an interview with Rusni, all residents of Ngrejo Village of Bakung, who were the same age as his father, fell into the category of PKI sympathizers.²⁴ However, according to him, the PKI in Ngrejo Village had fundamental differences from the PKI that was perceived by Indonesians in general, i.e., participated actively in politics and involved in mass movement. In 1968, both young and old, who were over 17 years old and were not at home, the authority would categorize them as members of the PKI. Rusni's father falls into the category of political prisoners of Class D (sympathizers). Apart from that, there were also Class C political prisoners who were usually prominent figures in society and indicated that they had links with the PKI. The other political prisoners in Ngrejo Village were Group B political prisoners who were usually very influential people but did not carry out any activity due to the government's efforts to suppress the PKI in South Blitar. There are 3 former political prisoners of Group B in Ngrejo Village, including one of whom is Rusni's uncle and was detained on Buru Island. Group A political prisoners who were the prime figure of the PKI were not found in Ngrejo Village.

In a further statement by Rusni, people of Bakung joined the PKI because of their ignorance and fear of not joining. The peasants joined the Indonesian Farmers' Front (BTI), one of the organizations considered to be the under-bow of the PKI. Meanwhile, young women joined the Indonesian Women's Movement (Gerwani). "The lure of the PKI to attract the masses at that time was to educate people to become intelligent citizens, free from stupidity," Rusni said. The Bakung people themselves also never thought that the PKI after 1965 was considered an enemy of the state. Even surprisingly, in the locals' knowledge, the president of Indonesia was Dipa Nusantara Aidit (General Secretary of PKI), not Sukarno. This indicates how local PKI members had misled the information to Bakung residents and, hence, most locals had not enough information about what happened in the Indonesia national politics.

²⁴ Ibid.

Bakung District in the 1960s was considered an isolated place due to both geographical and communication limitations. Masrukin revealed that electricity was not available until the 1990s, which meant that even radio was not accessible in the area during the 1960s.²⁵ As for the religion, Rusni stated that Islam was introduced to the area in the 1970s by soldiers.²⁶ Actually, in 1948, Kiai Hasan Mukmin from Ponorogo established a *pesantren* with only three students. Unfortunately, the *pesantren* only survived for three years as it was burned-down by the Communists who escaped from the 1948 Madiun Affairs, causing the Kiai to move southward (Malang area).²⁷ Since then, the three students of Kiai Hasan practiced Islam secretly and even did not teach their children to pray in order to avoid a similar incident. Another violent action by the Communist in the area was in 1965, when the Communist burned-down several locals' houses who were considered the Communists' enemies.²⁸ The burning of the *pesantren* and the locals' houses show the impact of political conflict on communities, and how it can disrupt the progress and continuity of education and traditions. Additionally, the decision of the three *santri* not to teach their children to pray reflects a sense of fear and caution in the face of past experiences, highlighting the lasting impact of traumatic events on individuals and communities.

In essence, Bakung functioned as a refuge for Communists involved in national-level political struggles, making it possible for local inhabitants—who may not have fully understood these political dynamics—to be indirectly affected. This became especially apparent during the 1966–68 period, when state-led efforts to eradicate Communist influence reverberated throughout the community. Moreover, Bakung itself preserved the memory of tensions between residents and Communist elements long before the remnants of the PKI were targeted in the 1968 Trisula Operation. At the same time, those who joined left-leaning organizations often did so without a clear ideological or political understanding of where the Communist Party stood within the national political constellation. In the next part, this

²⁵ Masrukin, interview.

²⁶ Rusni, interview.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

article discusses how the idea of reconciliation emerged and translated into practice by NU youths in South Blitar in the 2000s.

The Emergence of Reconciliation Idea

The reconciliation efforts driven by the Nahdlatul Ulama youth in South Blitar cannot be separated from Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency (1999-2001). Abdurrahman Wahid known also as Gus Dur was advocate of democracy during Soeharto's New Order authoritarian regime. Interestingly, he was revered leader of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). In the 1960s NU was in fierce conflict with PKI and took side with the Army in the purge of Communists. In early 2000 Gus Dur made a controversial recommendation to revoke the decision of Temporary National Assembly (TAP MPRS) No. 27 of 1966 which banned communism and Marxist-Leninist views in Indonesia.²⁹ Failing to gain enough support in the National Assembly, the president pressed on by issuing a presidential decree that allowing Indonesian citizens with Communist familial background to become civil servants.³⁰ Gus Dur's foundation for his actions was the mandate of the 1945 Constitution to protect the entire Indonesian nation.³¹ Gus Dur believed that repealing the decision would open up opportunities for reconciliation and heal old wounds. To understand what was behind the abolition of the TAP MPRS, we interviewed a former reconciler in Blitar.

During our interview with Baharuddin, a civil servant of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and former head of Lakpesdam (NU's Institute for Human Resource Development) and who was involved in the pre-reconciliation stages, we sought to understand how the initiative of reconciliation was taken.³² According to Baharuddin, Syarikat was an institute comprising NU youth members who were concerned about social and political issues. Baharuddin himself came

²⁹ Katharine E. McGregor, "Commemoration of 1 October, "Hari Kesaktian Pancasila": A Post Mortem Analysis?," *Asian Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2002): 61-62, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357820208713330>.

³⁰ Waston, et al., "Islamophobia and Communism: Perpetual Prejudice in Contemporary Indonesia," *Revista De Gestão Social E Ambiental* 18, 2 (2024), 4-5 <https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v18n2-075>.

³¹ Abdul Rahman Ahdori, "Ini Alasan Dicabutnya TAP MPR Tentang Pelarangan PKI," NU online, accessed 12/12/2021 <https://nu.or.id/nasional/ini-alasan-dicabutnya-tap-mpr-tentang-pelarangan-pki-wA18X>.

³² Baharuddin, interview by Auliya Ridwan, July 14th, 2022.

to realize that over time, after the Reformation in 1998, the issue of human rights in relation to the 1965 tragedy was becoming increasingly popular and it seemed to be an issue that would never end.

The attention of NU youths in Blitar towards the 1965-68 tragedy was triggered by two important incidents.³³ Firstly, in 1995, the East Java NU Ansor Youth Movement held a social service event in the Bakung area with a program to distribute food supplies and build water pipeline networks. However, when the Banser (Ansor's paramilitary wing) members approached the residents' houses, many of them ran away in fear. The villagers still harbored trauma from the events of the 1960s in their village, i.e. military raid, in which Banser involved in. Secondly, the NU management development program in villages in South Blitar area always failed due to lack of support from the community. These two incidents require deep study to understand why NU's presence in South Blitar seems nor easily welcomed.

In 2000-2001, Syarikat conducted research on the 1965 event with funding from the Asia Foundation. The research was conducted in Kebumen, Purworejo, Jember, Blitar, and Banyuwangi. According to Baharuddin, the research results became one of the recommendations for Gus Dur to follow up on this case, resulting in the idea of reuniting the fragmented society due to the past bitter moments. Afterwards, M. Imam Aziz, head of Syarikat, translated Gus Dur's thoughts into reconciliation program.³⁴ Syarikat networked in several places on the island of Java, networked with other organizations outside the NU community, and met with anti-reconciliation groups.

The process of reconciliation cannot be achieved solely by taking action on the ground. Reconciliation requires the trust and confidence of the conflicting parties, and winning their hearts and minds is a crucial first step. In the case of the reconciliation effort in Indonesia, Imam Aziz understood the importance of gaining the support of the NU leaders in the regions.³⁵ By meeting with the *kiai* and Banser leaders, Imam Aziz aimed to convince them to support the initiative. He believed that once the top leaders were on board, it would be easier to convince those lower down the chain to support the reconciliation efforts. This approach indicates the importance of working with and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Moh. Asrofi et al., *Rekonsiliasi Kultural Tragedi 1965 (Catatan Pengalaman Syarikat Indonesia)* (Yogyakarta: Syarikat Indonesia, 2016).

³⁵ Baharuddin, interview.

gaining the trust of key leaders of *santri* community to successfully implement reconciliation initiatives. In the next subset, this paper discusses how the idea of reconciliation was taken and accepted by the community in South Blitar.

Rebuilding Trust through Faith and Culture

In the reconciliation efforts in South Blitar, young NU activists received both support and opposition from internal NU circles.³⁶ There were also some *kiai* (Muslim traditionalist cleric) who appear silent as if they agreed, but maybe they disagree. Interestingly, in fact most of the former political prisoners of PKI's background showed positive enthusiasm even though obstacles sometimes remained in one or two cases. However, some NU members rejected the reconciliation idea arguing that, what happened in the past was part of the *jihad* (struggle) in defending the country, and nothing was wrong with that. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the reconcilers and the former prisoners, there was a narrative indicating a provocative attempt to clash the *santri* and the accused PKI member so that the conflict in Jakarta spread to the region.

The figure at the center of the reconciliation efforts was Baharuddin, the head of the Lakpesdam in 2000, a son-in-law of the *Kiai* of Pesantren Dawuhan. Bahruddin confronted multiple challenges: he had no initial network among the former political prisoners (Indonesian, ex-Tapol) and struggled to convince local NU *kiai* of the importance of reconciliation.³⁷ Pondok Pesantren Dawuhan, established in 1886, stands as one of the oldest *pesantren* in Blitar and played a critical role in fostering reconciliation between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) communities and former Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) affiliates. Although the locals of South Blitar might not have fully comprehended the broader political currents affecting their region, they were inevitably drawn into them—both during the anti-Communist purges of the 1960s and in subsequent decades.

The role of Rusni, a son of a former political prisoner, was also significant in gaining the trust of other political prisoners for the NU youth who were leading the reconciliation efforts.³⁸ Rusni was actually

³⁶ Masrukin and Farida Masrurin, interview by Auliya Ridwan and Ahmad Yusam Thobroni, 17/11/2021.

³⁷ Baharuddin, interview by Auliya Ridwan, May 15th, 2024.

³⁸ Ibid.

a foster child of Bahruddin's uncle, who ran a *pesantren*. Rusni's identity as a son of a former political prisoner was revealed when he shared that his father and uncle had to report to the local military office every month. It was through Rusni that the reconcilers established communication with former PKI figures in Blitar.

The establishment of communication networks with sympathizers of the PKI in Blitar was crucial for the success of the reconciliation efforts. With the help of Rusni, the reconcilers managed to build such a network and received positive responses from several prominent figures who once were PKI members or its member of its *underbouw* organizations, such as Sukiman from the The PKI's People's Cultural Institute (LEKRA), Murtalam, Rusni's uncle from PKI affiliated All-Indonesia Central Labor Organization (SOBSI), and Putmainah from the PKI's Indonesian Women's Movement (Gerwani). The positive response of these individuals was due in part to the efforts made by the reconcilers to gain the trust of the local community. The establishment of trust between the reconcilers and the community was necessary for the success of the reconciliation process. The involvement of prominent figures from different organizations and affiliations also helped to increase the legitimacy and credibility of the reconciliation efforts.

In reconciliation processed, Pondok Pesantren Dawuhan became a venue for a critical reconciliation process. Some ex-Tapol associated with the PKI were invited to the *pesantren* in the early stage of reconciliation.³⁹ Initially, they approached with profound anxiety, sweating nervously as they crossed a suspension bridge leading to the compound in the east of the Pesantren, haunted by memories of past massacre and forced disappearances during the period of 1965–1968. Nonetheless, in the Pesantren, Baharuddin employed a cultural approach, engaging the former prisoners with friendly conversation, humor, and empathy. This approach helped bridge the gap, gradually easing the ex-Tapol's distrust and encouraging them to remain at the Pesantren from morning until late afternoon—far longer than they had planned.

Baharuddin carefully introduced discussions about past tensions and the humanitarian purpose of the reconciliation efforts.⁴⁰ Through

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

these conversations, the ex-Tapol began to trust the reconcilers' intentions. Drawing from personal connections, Baharuddin learned about individuals like Parto, a farmer who had once joined the PKI's Indonesian Peasants' Front (BTI) unwittingly in 1960s, unaware of its affiliation with the PKI. Through Parto, Baharuddin connected with former leftist figures in South Blitar. Trust, however, was not immediate—it took three visits for some ex-Tapol to believe in the sincerity of this young NU activist's reconciliation agenda.

Gaining religious legitimacy was essential. Senior *kiai* in Blitar, such as Kiai Zuhrawardi of the NU Branch Leadership Council (PCNU), supported Baharuddin by emphasizing that Islam rejects the notion of inherited sin, thus helping shift the local *kiai's* perspective. Similarly, Kiai of Pondok Pesantren Dawuhan, Kiai Halim, Baharuddin's father-in-law, lent his support, along with other respected *kiai* like Kiai Imam. Through these endorsements, Baharuddin could counter the suspicion that he was somehow promoting a “new style” of communism—an accusation that some had spread through banners warning of PKI resurgence, which in Indonesia notoriously known as latent threat.

As the process unfolded, long-standing narratives began to unravel. Participants discovered that, before the political tension escalated in 1965, interactions between NU and PKI members in Blitar had been comparatively normal. This provides counterbalancing evidence against previous claims that individuals affiliated with communists perpetrated violence in South Blitar. PKI members also occasionally helped organize NU events during those periods; joint participation at celebrations and commemorations had not been unusual. Misinformation and rumor-mongering—then as now—had stoked mutual fears. NU figures had heard stories of alleged PKI plans to murder certain *kiai*, while PKI supporters believed they were being targeted by NU. Only through open dialogue and encountering each other in person did both sides recognized that many of these fears were products of disinformation, manipulated by the heated politics of the period.

In the 1960s, there were indeed tensions, and Communist sympathizers in Blitar tended to be people who rejected religious practices. Because of this, the number of *santri* at local *pesantren* remained very limited. Yet, over time, these stark divisions gave way. The Dawuhan reconciliation initiative led to practical measures, such

as the formation of Yasinan (Qur'anic and prayer recitation) groups and the establishment of a microfinance cooperative funded through initial capital grants. Today, many former ex-Tapol families are involved in the NU management in South Blitar, indicating a significant shift in local social relations.

Reconciliation in Blitar was not primarily initiated by local *kiai*; it emerged organically from personal encounters and the patient cultivation of trust. Remarkably, while the history of the 1960s included tragic executions of alleged PKI members—some of which took place near Dawuhan—documents and testimonies suggest that the *kiai* of Dawuhan, *kiai* Zahid and *kiai* Halim, never ordered such violence. Moreover, there are accounts of some *kiai* offering shelter to targeted individuals, reaffirming that not all religious leaders endorsed the brutality that occurred.⁴¹ As both sides began to realize that their past hostilities were fueled by national-level tensions and political manipulations beyond their control, they gradually embraced a shared future. The process of reconciliation in South Blitar, exemplified by the Pesantren Dawuhan, shows that genuine understanding, patient dialogue, and religious legitimacy can heal deep historical wounds and restore trust, even after decades of estrangement.

In September 2001, a cultural night was organized at the Trisula monument in South Blitar to gather NU people involved in the PKI raid and former political prisoners.⁴² The event aimed to celebrate the Islamic New Year and promote cultural reconciliation. Despite initial hesitance from local officials, permission was granted after the Lakpesdam activists convinced them that the event had no political agenda. The event included speeches, prayer recitation, Quranic reading, and cultural performances by local *pesantren* students and families of political prisoners. The former presented *kenprung*, while the latter presented *campur sari*. This event can be seen as a positive step towards reconciliation, as it brings together individuals from different backgrounds through culture and religion. It shows that through

⁴¹ This finding is supported by another research stating that ex-members and supporters of PKI got closer religious and social connections to NU after 1966. See Amanah Nurish, "Santri and Abangan after a Half Century of Clifford Geertz," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 21, no. 2 (2021), 234; Amanah Nurish, "When Abangan Embraces Sufism: Religious Phenomenology to Counter Radicalism in Contemporary Java," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 11, no. 1 (2021).

⁴² Masrukin and Masrurin, interview.

mutual understanding and respect, even people with a history of conflict can come together and find common ground.

NU members and the ex-Tapol saw the meeting as a sign of the start of sincere reconciliation between them. They didn't perform the usual reconciliation rituals of victim sobbing, perpetrator confession, apology, and forgiveness, but rather saw themselves as all victims. The meeting was a way to bury the past and revive the memory of harmony. This grassroots-level reconciliation supports the idea of empowering civil society, making communities less vulnerable to divisive politics. By promoting a sense of unity and understanding between former adversaries, reconciliation can help to prevent future conflicts.

The re-establishment of social ties between members of NU and ex-Tapol eventually turned into a regular meeting forum, such as the *balal bibalal* (mutual forgiveness) after the celebration of Eid al-Fitr. For example, in 2003, a *balal bibalal* was held at the office of Lakpesdam NU Blitar and was attended by Kiai Farhan as the Secretary of the NU Blitar Syuriah Council. After that event, in the following years, local reconcilers made routine visits to the homes of former political prisoners at least once a year.

What kind of personalities from NU youth joined as the reconcilers? On our first visit to Blitar in 2021, we met with Masrukin and Farida Masrurin, a husband-and-wife team actively involved in the Lakpesdam PC NU Blitar. Since 2005, both have consistently participated in and organized cultural reconciliation initiatives between NU members and ex-Tapol. While they are not part of the pioneering generation of reconcilers, they have remained engaged and committed for over two decades.

Their backgrounds offer insight into the type of individuals emerging from NU youth ranks who champion reconciliation. Farida's father, an Ansor member, once involved in mass crackdowns on alleged PKI supporters in South Blitar.⁴³ He had even clashed with a local elementary school teacher who, at that time, was accused of promoting atheistic ideas and questioning religious beliefs. These personal family stories reveal that figures now engaged in reconciliation often come from environments steeped in the very conflicts they seek to resolve.

⁴³ Ibid.

The success of cultural reconciliation in South Blitar appears in both measurable outcomes and qualitative changes. Before the process began, the NU-affiliated National Awakening Party (PKB) received nearly no votes in the ex-Tapol communities, who instead supported Golkar.⁴⁴ By 2004, however, PKB secured a decisive victory, and NU established branch management in every sub-district. This shift suggests diminished mistrust and growing confidence in NU.

Reconciliation also fostered greater participation in NU's religious and cultural activities, such as Yasinan. For example, Sukiman, a former Lekra figure, not only led a local Yasinan group but also helped create a thriving savings and loan cooperative with NU support, demonstrating tangible economic benefits.⁴⁵ As former political prisoners integrated into the NU community, their perceptions evolved. Yateman, one ex-Tapol, no longer blames the past and now openly identifies himself as a member of NU.⁴⁶

From Distrust to Peaceful Coexistence

The success of cultural reconciliation in South Blitar can also be understood through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and doxa.⁴⁷ Initially, the local community's habitus—shaped by decades of mistrust, fear, and the long-held assumption of an inherent clash between NU members and former political prisoners—had normalized antagonistic relations. In Bourdieu's terms, the prevailing doxa (the taken-for-granted assumptions about what is normal and acceptable) dictated that former PKI supporters and NU communities could not coexist peacefully. These doxic beliefs perpetuated a habitus entrenched in suspicion and animosity.

The reconciliation efforts, however, introduced new forms of capital—particularly symbolic, cultural, and social capital—into this

⁴⁴ Baharuddin, interview.

⁴⁵ Masrukin and Masrurin, interview.

⁴⁶ Yateman, interview by Auliya Ridwan, July 7th, 2022.

⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "Outline of a Theory of Practice," (1977), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511812507>; Gregory L Acciaioli, "Knowing What You're Doing: A Review of Pierre Bourdieu's Outline of a Theory of Practice," *Canberra Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (1981); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (Westport: Greenwood, 1986); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, (London.: Sage Pub., 1990).

social field. Prominent NU leaders, such as Kiai Zuhrawardi and Kiai Halim of Pesantren Dawuhan, wielded significant symbolic capital as respected religious authorities. Their endorsement of reconciliation served as a powerful form of legitimacy. By invoking religious principles that reject inherited sin and emphasize compassion, these leaders challenged the established doxa and reframed the moral landscape. Their authority allowed them to redistribute symbolic capital toward inclusive and empathetic practices, thereby altering the community's perception of former political prisoners. Moreover, the reconcilers from Lakpesdam brought with them cultural capital rooted in religious education, moral credibility, and organizational skills. Their approach of empathy and open dialogue functioned as a counterforce to entrenched narratives.

As these shifts took hold, a new doxa began to replace the old. The unquestioned assumption that former PKI supporters were permanent outsiders gave way to a normalized belief that they could participate in local religious, economic, and cultural life. The change in voting patterns further indicates the recalibration of the political habitus, reflecting the community's internalization of new values and trust toward NU. Ultimately, by leveraging symbolic capital and religious legitimacy, the reconcilers dismantled the old doxa and cultivated a habitus more attuned to cooperation, understanding, and mutual respect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the cultural reconciliation in South Blitar demonstrates that long-standing tensions, historical grievances, and mutual suspicion can be effectively addressed through deliberate, trust-building measures grounded in moral authority, cultural sensitivity, and shared religious values. The involvement of figures who carried symbolic capital, such as respected *kiai* and committed NU activists, played a significant role in shifting the community's habitus and dismantling entrenched doxa. Drawing on principles of empathy, humor, economic cooperation, and religious legitimacy, these reconcilers gradually transformed the social field into one where cooperation, dialogue, and mutual respect replaced antagonism and mistrust. The subsequent changes—reflected in electoral patterns, religious participation, and economic ventures—offer compelling evidence that historical wounds can heal through inclusive, culturally

resonant approaches. The South Blitar case thus provides valuable insights for other communities seeking to reconcile past conflicts, suggesting that the careful deployment of symbolic, cultural, and social capital can reshape collective perceptions and foster a more harmonious, forward-looking social reality. []

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