Finding the X Factor: Counter-frames, Political Opinion Formation, and Agency in Reconciliation Efforts for Indonesia’s 1965 Anti-Communism Purge Victims

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Abstract

Indonesians are taught by the government that communism is a devil trying to rip the country’s democratic and religious values. The propaganda started with a 'coup attempt' perpetrated by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) on September 30, 1965 that left several army high ranking officers killed. The putsch then justified a state-supported genocide throughout the country that claimed up to 1.5 million of suspected PKI supporters. Whether the coup attempt happened and who masterminded the tragedy has remained unanswered, and the victims have yet to find justice until now. Movements to demand truth, reconciliation and the state’s formal apology for this travesty have been going on for years without concrete results. Despite increasing media coverage and effort to provide another side of the story, public opinions and attitude are relatively unchanged. This research aims to find how counter-frames of the social movements affect people’s political opinion formation process; whether counter-frames can surpass existing common knowledge; and whether human agency can be formed in this specific case. It is discovered that counter-frames can affect one’s understanding and stance in various degrees depending on their initial proximity, level of interest, and knowledge about the issue. This research also finds that among Collective Action Frames, agency is the most influential source of injustice and the party regarded as the enemy will only open a new discourse and change public opinion but are not enough to make people act.

Kata kunci/Keywords:

Agency, framing, counter-frames, collective action frames, G30S/PKI, political opinion formation.
support from Western countries (Easter, 2005) remains a mystery.

But ever since that day, Indonesia is not the same country.

Soeharto took over the government with a fraudulent presidential decree and ignited a war against communism and PKI. After disbanding PKI, the government —under the New Order regime— published 1966 Parliamentary Decree No. XXV prohibiting communism and its related activity and organization, but their gravest act was cutting the ideology to the roots through murder and moving citizens to kill supporters and affiliates of PKI. Within a couple years, at least 1.5 million civilians were persecuted (The Jakarta Globe, 2012) without trial and in inhumane ways in what Pohlman (2014) called as ‘the clearest example of political genocide in the 20th century’.

New Order regime went to a great length to hide this part of history by focusing on framing PKI as the culprit behind the murder of the generals and portraying its supporters as blood-thirsty savages who will stop at nothing to take the country. Using school curriculum, from textbooks to mandatory viewing of Arfin Noor’s 1983 movie called “Treachery of The September 30 Movement”, media control and regulations, communism became not a political ideology but rather a barbaric movement with strong atheist values—a threat to the religious and harmonious society of Indonesia.

The propaganda might be one of the most successful ones in world history. For more than 50 years, communism is a taboo in Indonesia. The decree is still intact and any talk regarding the topic is seen as vile. Until recently, those related to the victims were not seen as citizens. Even after the unjust label of ‘ex-political prisoners’ was erased from their ID cards, they still suffered from stigma and were barred from access to decent living. Not only (alleged) communists suffered from physical eradication, they also endured what Card (2003) called ‘social death through dehumanization and social vitality cut off’.

Social movements and academics have voiced their opinion against the propaganda and New Order. Anderson (1987), for example, showed that PKI’s savagery shown in the 1983 movie was merely an exaggeration that contradicted the 6 generals’ autopsy reports (i.e. no eye gauging nor castration, mostly only involved gunshots). Some writers and filmmakers also tried to deliver different perspective of the purge, such as writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Leila S. Chudori, but were and still are in danger of exile and raid from New Order supporters.

After the fall of New Order regime in 1998, activists finally managed to push the government to act. In 2008, National Commission on Human Rights was ordered to form a truth finding committee, yet in 2012, after the result was published and confirmed the massive human rights violation, the government did not act further to push the reconciliation effort (The Jakarta Post, 2012).

New hope arose in 2012 with a launch of a documentary titled “The Act of Killing” (TAOK) by Joshua Oppenheimer followed by its sequel “The Look of Silence” (TLOS) in 2014. The former follows Anwar Congo, one of the perpetrators of the purge, boasting about his killings while the latter deals with Adi, whose brother was killed in 1965, meeting the killers to ask questions about the purge (The Jakarta Globe, 2014). TAOK, per Wieringa, “exposes the echoes of the horrendous mythmaking that still haunts Indonesia society. We are provided with an insight into the justifications Anwar Congo gives for his becoming a mass killer” (2014:198). Both received national and international attention, including an Academy Awards nomination, and managed to bring the issue to the younger public so that discussions could be restarted to achieve reconciliation. However, the success was not without rejection and fearmongering from some parties, saying that opening old wounds would only hurt the nation and start PKI’s resurrection. Screenings were often dismissed and the director would not risk returning to Indonesia for safety reasons.

In 2015, the issue of the purge victims’ reconciliation re-emerged as it was brought before the International People’s Tribunal in Den Haag, The Netherlands. With numerous witnesses sharing their grim experiences, activists started to push forward their cause, making the mainstream media finally pay some attention. However, the coverage snowballed in a wrong direction—from reconciliation and issuance of formal apology to the victims to totally different issues: national apology to PKI and the resurrection of communism. The public response was a mix between debates using facts of the purge and again, anti-communism propaganda and fear that apparently never left the country. On the other hand, movements like Ingat 65 (Remember ’65) and alternative news site like Rappler.com started to use the momentum to push the issue harder. However, there is little evidence that this effort has resulted in significant outcome.

This research aims to seek whether counter-frames embedded in media artefacts supporting social movement promoting reconciliation affect public’s political opinion formation and whether counter-frames can pass mainstream discourse and framing. Using focus group discussion, I will examine the process where political opinion and agency are formed, and if possible, changed.

**Literature Review**

**Social Movements and Framing**

Social movements and mediation are inseparable. With the world being mediated more than ever, mediation becomes movements’ way to fulfill their logics of bearing witness—showing public their cause through performances directly or indirectly. Through repertoires of mediation, movements can
construct collective identity, personalize the political, and develop alternative lifestyles and values to achieve their intended goal (Cammaerts, 2012). For example, in the context of representation of distant suffering, which is often the main theme or main cause of a movement, mediation is the key to spread the stories or frames (more on this later) to those who cannot feel the pain in person. To do this, Rucht (2013) contends that movements have the options to determine their steps regarding mediation effort. The options are summed into a “quadruple A” consisting of Abstention (opting out the use of mainstream media), Attack (criticizing the media), Adapt (complying to the logics of media), and Alternative (self-mediation) — but again, in this increasingly mediated world and especially in the matter of Indonesia’s 1965 tragedy reconciliation, it seems only Adapt and Alternative are viable options.

While movements in general depend on political opportunity structure — condition that gives possibilities of at least some victories for any collective actions (Reynolds, 2001), their mediation efforts also rely on mediation opportunity structure — degree of possibilities that their messages will get through using communication effort (Cammaerts, 2012). The latter coexists with the former and consists of three linked components: media opportunity structure (possibilities to showcase the cause and movement); discursive opportunity structure (possibilities to produce counter narrative); and networked opportunity structure (possibilities to use technology to support the movement). There are indeed fascinating topics to talk about said structures, but I will focus on activities related to the first two, especially movements’ counter narrative to sway their target public.

According to Benford & Hunt (1992), employing techniques with dramaturgy approach is an integral part of movements’ effort to reach their goals. Such techniques include scripting (composing the message and is built upon frames), staging (preparing script actualization), performing, and interpreting (individually and collectively making sense of symbols and conditions). Frames, the basis of scripting stage (and thus, of all stages), are the center of this research.

Frames, per Goffman (1975), are used to organize information and knowledge so it can affect how audience perceive and understand the message. It is done by shaping messages either through natural frameworks, where frames are shown as undirected and normal, or through social frameworks that provide backgrounds that might bring out the agency of people to do something. Either way, frames, in the case of social movements, are thus intentional with human agency as the goal. This is aptly termed by Gamson (1992) as Collective Action Frames.

There are various versions of Collective Action Frames, but I will use Gamson’s version as the foundation of this research. His version consists of three items: Injustice, Identity, and Agency. Injustice refers to indignation of the others caused by other actors. This frame, per Gamson, will work best when the situation has identifiable actors behind it rather than abstract forces. The second frame is Identity, a process of defining two opposites: ‘we’ and ‘them’ who have different values and interests. Agency, the last, gives the notion of possibilities to alter conditions through collective action.

Collection Action Frames, per Snow & Benford (2000), have to be action-oriented to inspire and legitimate activities of a social movement. To carry out this function, they state three things frames should do, summed in what they call Core Framing Tasks consisting of Diagnostic Framing (finding the problem), Prognostic Framing (proposing a solution), and Motivational Framing (call for action, or what Gamson previously called as Agency frames). These tasks are not without problems. Diagnostic framing, for instance, is noted by Snow & Benford (2000) for its tendency to focus on who to blame, rather the bigger cause of problem. Prognostic framing that eventually leads to a distinction of good and evil may also emphasize the tendency to blame the opponent. Gamson is also aware of this problem, arguing that the shift of focus also occurs upon Injustice and Identity frames. I, too, have proved this claim in the case on Indonesia’s 1965 anti-communism purge, where media prefer to talk about President Soeharto’s part rather than than society’s social economic condition that enabled such purge to happen throughout the archipelago or the push for reconciliation — something that I also noted occurring in the film used in this research as media discourse later.

Other authors have also noticed the use of frames and framing in social movements. Gamson & Wolfsfeld (1993) claims that frames are important to organize meanings by interpreting events. This interpretation process, they argue, is conducted by media and the movements — each with its own process — but also involving non-actors such as the larger public in the meaning making. Moreover, Cammaerts (Unpub.) describes how framing and discourse can try to change status quo through five levels of change: building collective identity, forming alignment to those with similar values, amplifying the idea by spreading it ‘beyond the likeminded’, increasing resonance and salience of the frames (also beyond the activists), and transforming the hegemony into an open discourse where new values can be discussed and change might happen.

Nevertheless, even the most touching frames do not necessarily translate to a change in opinion or action. Boltanski (1999) blames the stagnancy to audience’s doubt over representation — who is behind the coverage, what is their intention. He contends that indignation and horror shown by the message, also the demand of action, are often overshadowed by crisis of confidence and inaccessibility of action. More on this will be discussed in the next part.
Having discussed the importance of frames, I must address another concept of themes. Themes and frames might refer to different things but are interrelated and a part of each other. While frames usually suggest the bigger values or main message of a movement, themes refer to the details brought up within the messages. Despite the difference, I will treat both terms as interchangeable in this research as both refer to similar aspects under similar overarching values.

Both frames and themes have their own adversarial counterparts: counter-frames and counter themes—a package that cannot be separated. When there is one, there is the other. Themes, according to Gamson (1992), are mostly attributed to values that are safe, conventional and normative, while counter themes challenge the mainstream culture or common sense. When a theme is created, or brought up, its counter theme is already there, waiting to be activated. The main effect of counter framing, per Snow & Benford (2000), is how it can affect the other movement’s framing by forcing them to be defensive and to develop new frames to make their causes stronger and clearer.

Deciding which one is the theme and which one is the counter theme is not the point of a social movement as it depends solely on one’s understanding and stance of an issue. Someone’s themes might be another’s counter themes. This also applies to frames. In this research, I put the propaganda for anti-communism purge and values under a government sponsored movement’ framing—the frames, making the values of new movements proposing reconciliation the counter-frames.

**Political Opinion Formation**

Media and communication play an integral part in the opinion or attitude formation process, though it is not the sole determining factor. Gamson (1992) argues that opinion formation process happens in social context and is influenced by what he calls Conversation Resources. There are three components of Conversation Resources: media discourse; own experience or proximity to an issue; and popular wisdom that comes from shared knowledge and personal resource. The three affect one another in a way that cultural values affect one’s experience and how he/she perceives discourses of an issue.

Regarding proximity to issues of distant suffering, the public or audience can be divided into three different groups (I decided to classify Indonesia’s 1965 anti-communism purge as distant suffering, not in the sense of space, but rather time distance). The groups, according to Cohen (2001), are: immediate public (those who actually witness or about stories from first hand sources); external/metaphorical public (those who gets information from secondary sources i.e. media); and bystander states (other government or international organizations). Where an individual is located among this classification will bring variation to his/her opinion and attitude when he/she is faced with new frames or counter-frames.

**Agency as Social Movements’ Goal**

As we have discussed earlier, frames of movements are action-oriented, thus it is important to not only talk about opinion formation (change of cognition and perception) but also cover the concept of agency. Agency is a part of Giddens’ (1984) Structuration Theory. While the theory explains how society works and culture changes, the concept of agency focuses on individual’s ability to make choice (‘free will’). Giddens contends that although human beings are ‘purposive agents’ who have reasons for their activities, structure within the society they live in plays a major role in driving their actions. Systems, the major institutions within society, impose rules in everyday life that determine how we use our ‘resources’. Such rules enable interaction but limits it within ways that are acceptable for the society. Structure is the ‘common value’ resulting from practice of rules that guards said ‘acceptable way of living’.

Rules become ‘stock of knowledge’ internalized within individuals as members of society. This knowledge materializes as values and common sense. The system (i.e. the government) uses ‘allocative materials’ (in shape of propaganda and law) and authoritative or organizational facility (in shape of government or individual power) to impose the rules and enforce the values to the society. Those all become power, sanctions, and communication that ‘mediate’ social relations.

The implication of structure is usually taken for granted as human beings are not aware that it determines how they see, talk about, and act upon issues. Human agency is built upon reflexivity based on one’s continuous monitoring of his/her actions and others’ actions, rationalization (sound reasons why choices are made), and own motivation (intentionality, which Giddens also argues is influenced by human need for ontological security—to conform to what they have always known to be true).

Take our attitude towards stigmatized group for example. Misir (2015) claims that ‘enactment of stigma converts structure into action and action into structure’ (p.332). That cycle affects both the stigmatized group and people who enact the stigma, who in turn will reflexively monitor their own conduct and make them act based on their position, either further enact the stigma in social interaction for the former or trying to reduce the stigma for the latter. This shows that structure plays a major role in determining someone’s motivation and sense of what is right or wrong.

People like what they are familiar with, but that doesn’t mean that culture cannot change. Human agency, when it come from many (or enough) individuals, can push for change. By studying current and past patterns, people can analyse and find flaws to fix. However, it can take a long time as structure is shaped, learned, and practiced gradually and over time, making its reversion happen in similar manner.
In context of framing of and by movements, the limiting structure is also visible (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993) as movements face difficulties in their struggle over meaning making caused by cultural obstacles (such as structure-shaped common knowledge) and lack of access and resources. Even if the frames do come through, structure may still inhibit people’s agency to act upon status quo. Boltanski (1999) contends that insecurity of action and crisis of confidence towards movement actors and their motivation may neutralize a sense of anxiety brought by injustice frames (of Collective Action Frames we discussed earlier) and reduce the appeal of demand of action. The probability of this condition to happen is high should the ruling structure limit movements’ political opportunity and have stronger counter-frames or hegemony.

Going back to the main discussion of agency, it should be made aware that agency is not limited to physical action but also change of attitude. While there is no direct causal relationship between the two, both are not unrelated. Boltanski (1999) noted the importance of change of thoughts before achieving a change of action. Either through messages or situations that seem possible for change to occur, audience must believe that they can do something to make them to do, or at least say something about the current condition (p.173).

Along with this topic, I also must address political participation as a substantial form of human agency in a democratic society. Participation is the foundation of democracy, but lately it has been noted how lower political participation is becoming omnipresent, be it in forms of lower civic engagement, especially after the booming of television era (Putnam, 2000), or lower election turnouts. This, according to Dahlgren (2009), is ‘a fundamental problem for contemporary democracy’. He blames this on two main things. First, the elite model of democracy (which is also Indonesia’s evident style of democracy) that makes citizens think that it is politicians’ job to do everything needed to better the society, or in Dahlgren’s words: ‘we vote them to take care of political matters’ (p. 12). The second reason is the people are not inspired to do anything. This refers back to frames brought by movements —how ‘hot cognition’ brought by emotional frames are not enough to move people.

Gamson (1992) adds that people being not confident that they can make a change as another reason for this problem.

This discussion will eventually return to the concept of agency. We can conclude that one’s action, in this case, political participation and support for movements, is never a decision based solely on his/her knowledge. There is an overarching structure in shape of knowledge, values, rules and regulations, and common practices that influences one’s conduct. Dahlgren (2009) supports this notion as he suggests us to check the socio-cultural features of the people and the landscapes of everyday life to seek why civic engagement is decreasing. Cynicism and powerlessness, he argues, might sprout not from one’s unwillingness to participate but rather from experienced inequality and the feeling of betrayal by the system.

On the other hand, structure may also create opportunities supporting people’s agency. As Norris (2002) argues in her research on international comparison of political activism, participation among the public nowadays are becoming more varied thanks to the new structure of opportunities (i.e. internet) that people not just sit and watch undergoing process from afar. With the new said structure and opportunities, but also considering existing social and cultural structure, power, and values, whether movements and their themes can find new and more effective ways to ignite people’s agency will be a question worth seeking answer to.

**Conceptual Framework**

Following the thriving social movement and increasing coverage regarding the push for reconciliations of Indonesia’s 1965 anti-communism purge victims, this research seeks to find whether counter-frames brought by supporters of the movement are affecting people’s political opinion and agency. This research builds on three core concepts: frames (and counter-frames), political opinion formation, and agency.

This research builds on Gamson’s (1992) findings on political opinion formation, but here I will focus on materials with frames that are adversarial to common knowledge and values. I also elaborate Giddens’ concept of Agency to illustrate social movements’ logics of action-oriented goals. The

![Figure 1. Conceptual Framework](image-url)
hypothesised relationship between frames, political opinion formation, and agency is illustrated in the process diagram above. It should be noted that this research will not focus on causal relationship, because as I have discussed in previous parts, nothing can predict whether or how frames can affect one’s cognition, opinion, or agency. As Giddens (1994) and Gamson (1992) imply people’s opinion and agency are influenced by many factors beside the message and the medium, and this also applies to how people react after they face counter themes conflicting with their existing knowledge and culture.

This research attempts to examine people’s political opinion formation regarding the issue of Indonesia’s 1965 anti-communism purge and the demand for reconciliation. It will also seek for possibility of human agency and factors that might influence people’s agency. This will be a case study for a bigger question of how people use counter-frames as additional conversation resources when discussing topics or stances that have been taught since their childhood. The key questions are: (1) How do people form a political opinion in social context when counter-frames are conflicting with common values or knowledge?; (2) To what extent counter-frames and discussion affect one’s understanding, opinion, and sense of agency?; (3) And in the end, what will it take for social movements to ignite people’s sense of agency?

By answering the research questions above, I hope this research will show how the public works when faced with counter-frames conflicting with internalized values or knowledge; show the important stages and key points in of opinion formation process; and be a base for further study on social movements and public opinion. The aim for this paper is also to provide much needed suggestions for activists, especially those involved with the 1965 tragedy reconciliation, to accelerate their endeavor to reach their goals.

**Research Methodology**

**Focus Group Discussion**

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were used in this research as a self-contained method (Morgan, 1997) with no other method being used as supplementation. Using FGD, I wanted to recreate an everyday setting where public opinion formation happens, including rational debate and negotiation (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). As “process in social setting” is the center of this research, not “effect”, FGD is the only method suitable to gather data. To make the most of the real-life simulation, the discussions were done in a relaxed setting to draw out opinions and perceptions easily (Putcha & Potter, 2004), using participants’ own language and in conversational tone (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

FGD gives additional advantages compared to other methods as it provides not only one but three levels of data analysis: individual, group, and interaction (Cyr, 2015) as the latter two can only be captured through unscripted or spontaneous dialogues and interactions among participants. For deeper analysis, Cyr noted that focus on individual level data can be captured through triangulation. Follow up interviews were proposed for this purpose, especially regarding sensitive issues that participants might have been reluctant to share in front of other participants (i.e. connection to the purge). This was not done because it appeared that conversations made during few first discussion already triggered sufficient response.

Population for this research is Indonesian youth aged 18-25 with at least high school diploma, assuming they have been exposed to teachings of the issue in school and are young enough not to be directly involved in the purge, making them either immediate audience or external audience group according to Cohen’s (2001) audience classification. Purposive and voluntary sampling was done for this research because, unlike Gamson’s 1992 research, random sampling was not a viable option due to my limited resources.

Samples were limited to three big cities in Indonesia Jakarta, Depok, and Bandung with number of participants only to fit 6 sessions. The three cities are among Indonesia’s biggest and most modern cities with Jakarta being the country’s capital, Depok being one of Jakarta’s satellite cities, and Bandung being the capital of West Java. The three cities host the nation’s best universities and schools. The choice was made with assumption that residents of bigger cities would have better access to education and media exposure (thus, discourse about the issue). Being more knowledgeable, I assumed that they would be the front door of change and would be more open to new information.

Recruitment was conducted through online form, stating information and schedule of research. The form was distributed through social media accounts of mine and my colleagues. Due to the sensitivity of the issue in Indonesia, I concealed some keywords such as PKI, communists, the purge, to protect myself from possible unwanted circumstances, but I did provide further information about the research when interested applicants contacted me. In the end, 91 people registered to participate but only 42 participants joined the discussions.

I conducted structured discussions but with flexibility should new questions emerged from the participants. Questions were modified from a pilot project conducted in April 2016. To follow Lunt & Livingstone’s (1996) suggestion of the best number of participants in each session, I planned to conduct sessions of 6-10 persons each. Pilot project showed that I could only handle up to 8 participants at a time, thus I limit the number to 6-8 participants per session. However, due to some technicalities (i.e. traffic, last minute cancellations), I ended up conducting 7 sessions with 4-8 participants each. Despite not planning to do continuous discussions until achieving saturation due to my
Acknowledging Frames and Counter-frames

The first theme I discovered from the data is acknowledging collective action frames and its counter-frames. I divided this theme into two groups: things I identified and things participants are aware of.

Participants were aware of frames and frames in discourse they received, both in the past and during FGD. Among anti-communism themes, injustice was still in participants’ memories, especially regarding the 1983 “Treachery of the September 30 Movement” movie they saw during school years.

“All I remembered from the movie was the cruelty in Indonesia’s glumnest era. It felt like watching horror movie.” –Luthfi, 25, entrepreneur.

Identity was noted in a sense of “us versus them”, though some admit not understanding the whole issue. Agency was also felt through the acknowledgement of the move to eradicate communism in the 60s supported by government and the public. In the themes of the movement (through media item and information given by researcher), three CAP were also identified. Main messages of reconciliation effort, push to spread knowledge through discussion, and push for formal apologies were well received and included throughout the conversation. Injustice and identity appeared as shown in example below:

“It confirms that communism was made evil by the government [...] That’s why any effort to let people know the truth is always hard to succeed, the people who are guilty still have political power in the government. (Identity)

The most interesting part is if we look from humanity perspective, how a lot of people had to die and never get justice because of these religious doctrines. (Injustice)” –Zira, 23, Research Assistant

The “us versus them” value also applied to the current situation, as Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) was referred few time as the antagonist against current spread of knowledge regarding this issue. Also, by admitting those who are guilty are still in power, I sense agency could be inferred in two possibilities: 1) any change is going to be hard (as seen in the example above), or 2) people power not to elect those people anymore.

From overall conversations, I verified Gamson’s conversational resources role in the opinion for-
mation process, especially in the beginning when participants were asked about where they stand and what they know of the issue. Media discourse items stated were primarily education, including mandatory screening of an anti-communism film produced in 1983, history lessons, and visits to anti-communism museum in Jakarta. Public discourses were noted from the phrase “I have been told...” found in many cases. Few also noted that this issue was starting to resurface in past few months.

“Yes, people are talking about it again. It makes me curious. I searched for books on PKI but all was sold out so I have very little understanding about G30S/PKI.” – Syifa, 18, student.

I will explain later why proximity turned out to be the most interesting item among these resources. From the three resources, I infer that there are three groups of audience when it comes to issue with engrained doctrine and controversy (or even conspiracy) like G30S/PKI and the purge. First, those who accept the discourse they get. This mostly consists of those who are not interested in the matter thus not wanting to know further when faced with discourse. Second, those who accept the discourse but started to question details as they grew older.

“I was shown the film since elementary school. It has always been emphasized that PKI was the culprit of the coup attempt. Then, in high school, the narration stayed the same [...] Since my undergraduate, I became more critical, trying to see that PKI might not be the one who did the coup. It might be a just way to erase communism practiced by some people, done by Soeharto.” —Zira, 23, research assistant.

Third, those who never believed the common discourse from the beginning.

“For me, the movie was part of government propaganda as they say PKI was against the nation’s principle. The movie showed that PKI as anti-thesis of what Indonesia stands for.” – Bimo, 24, postgraduate student.

While the three types above are influenced by media and public discourse, there is another type, related to the third resource — proximity. Out of 6 persons claiming direct relation to the case, a pattern of deeper curiosity and emotional drive appeared. Triadi (25, entrepreneur, FGD 6), whose family was torn in two as his grandfather was in the army and his grandfather’s twin was killed, grew infatuated to the whole PKI issue. Edo, 24, whose grandfather disappeared during the purge and another grandfather’s house was destroyed by PKI, also shown deeper curiosity among the others. Edo seemed to still suffer (he was emotional during the discussion), yet he managed to be neutral and consider the bigger factors taking part in the purge, including the Cold War. Triadi was a step further.

“I actually want to defend (PKI and the victims). I believe there are unfinished business. Why did they have to dismiss discussions of communism? What’s wrong with that! I bet they didn’t even read Das Kapital!” —Triadi, 25, lecturer.

Opinion Formation Process

I break this part into two stages: change of knowledge and change of opinion. Both took off from this chapter’s earlier parts about knowledge from the past and present also the media item screened. While the parts above were about the themes and discourse, this part is more about what the participants drew from what they had just seen and the discussion they were having, also how their opinions and feelings evolved throughout the conversation.

The process of cognition change started with the first theme: awareness of new information. This awareness emerged after participants listened to other participants’ stories, especially regarding their experience and knowledge about the purge. From here, they were also faced with “The Look of Silence” with its counter-frames. The movie succeeded to be a trigger for further conversation and provide new information especially to those who didn’t know much about the issue.

“Well, we did learn the history. We knew how many people died, the 7 murdered generals, but we didn’t know the effect of it. And from this film [...] it gave us a sense of empathy, how they felt... What if it was our family?” —Aisyah, 18, student.

Furthermore, the new information drove participants to realize that it is conflicting with their existing knowledge, or at least what they were taught in school or by the mainstream media. This is the second stage of opinion formation process.

“I’ve seen the film before and it opened a new point of view about PKI and previous government. If proves that history is written by the winner, I think. The people don’t know that they have been brainwashed by their own government.” —Dzikri, 24, producer.

However, for those with proximity with the case or doubt about discourse they got, the new information brings opposite effect — it reinforces their existing knowledge, meaning that the counter-frames did align with how they see the issue. These people are more invested to the issue, thus might probably have more interest before the research to seek the truth, experience more discourse, and question the hegemony.

“It’s like what we’ve talked about. Turned out after G30S/PKI, a propaganda was made [...] Thousands of people killed millions who were accused of being PKI, including my grandpa. He was accused and then disappeared without any evidence that he was a supporter...” —Habib, 20, student.

Even for those with doubt and relatively good knowledge, like Bimo, 24, postgraduate student at a military university, the movie still managed
to emphasize counter-frames, especially injustice, and gave deeper impressions to what he had known.

“In war, death and killings are normal. I can understand killing, I know it’s twisted, but genocide is a whole different thing. [...] All I know that PKI wanted to do a coup by kidnapping the army generals. I admit, those who attempted coup should be stopped, even if it means being killed. But a purge? It didn’t make sense. Killing is understandable, but this is too far. In terms of quality. We know a lot about the quantity, but about how they were treated. They were sent to prison and lost their rights as human beings.” —Bimo, 24, student.

Also, it seemed that most participants were not aware about what is going on with social movements pushing for reconciliation and formal state apology and the fear mongering regarding this issue. Even if they do, they don’t take it seriously as it was seen only a part of daily news that will eventually will die down.

The next stage in political opinion formation process is changing individual and/or group opinion regarding the issue. This is done through the next themes: questioning existing knowledge. After being shown messages with counter-frames, participants traced back how and where they got such knowledge, then started questioning the source’s credibility. Confusion among participants were also common. Acquiring new information opposite to what they have known their whole lives made them ask “who’s right and who’s wrong?”. This is the start of what Cammaerts (2016) refers to the transformation stage, where hegemony is shaken and people are starting to open the opportunity for new discourse.

“The point is what we were taught in school was not right, yeah? Those we thought were wrong could be innocent? [...] It seems unreal that people killed with such cruelty. On the other hand, I don’t know why innocent people also fell as victims.” —Shafira, 19, student.

After being exposed to opposing messages and starting to question their stance, participants became less trusting when it comes to new information of counter-frames. Realizing they might have been manipulated in the past, now they scrutinized the source’s credibility and motivation before believing the messages, though this didn’t apply to every participant. In some cases, I needed to raise the question whether they believed the movie they have just seen, and when I did, it took them aback and made them rethink their answers.

“I’m intrigued with how this documentary was made [...] I don’t know how to make a documentary because I think film can be edited, set, and shaped.” —Triadi, 25, lecturer.

However, participants still showed discontentment towards old frames of anti-communism values and its sources, but not to the length that they felt being lied to. It seemed that they could set distinction between telling a lie and not telling the whole truth.

“I got enlightenment, but I don’t feel lied to. I think that it’s a new side of the story.” —Lutfi, 25, entrepreneur.

“I don’t feel lied to because I didn’t immediately believe the doctrines I received. Feeling lied to means that I believed everything, but what I’m feeling is my curiosity is being justified even more.” —Zara, 19, student.

While almost everyone showed their discontent towards the New Order (and eventually fell into the trap of shifting the focus to blaming the opponent rather than talking about the issue itself), one participant tried to make sense of the past by trying to understand the perpetrators’ reasons to conduct the purge.

“I can see it from the military point of view, though. This could be their revenge because their generals were killed, captured, and mutilated. From what I’ve learned from my friends in the military, it is a corps with strong sense of belonging because they’re like a family there. Now imagine if your family is captured and tortured, you will be mad, won’t you? You’d do the same to revenge that pain.” —Bimo, 24, student.

Again, knowledge and proximity show to be influential to one’s reception and perception of counter-frames. This also displays that no matter how captivating the presentation of counter-frames is, people are still highly influenced by the structures and values they surround themselves. Hence, it is not easy to sway one’s opinion just by shoving materials with counter-frames.

The next theme that emerge from the discussion is the change in perception or feeling towards the issue of reconciliation and demand for formal apology from the state. After the talk about suffering and opinion exchange, most participant (including those without initial knowledge about this issue) said that formal apology is important and needed to recognize the atrocities and admit state negligence. It is also a reasonable thing to pursue considering the pain victims’ have been going through. Some even agree that it will take more than just saying sorry. Reconciliation is what the victims need more.

“They should free the families from all discrimination. What will an apology do?”

“It’s only a statement!” —Dzikri, 24, producer, and Triadi, 25, lecturer.

This implies that current social movements failed to transmit the importance of their cause (i.e. why do they even want a formal apology?) and the fact that messages from activists are not sufficiently heard by the public. The strategy to amplify their themes and make it resonant to the wider public might need to be improved. Apart from the recognition, there was indeed a participant who blatantly said he didn’t care about the case as it is already in the past.
Agency: Change of Behavior

The first theme or step to achieve human agency is to believe that change can happen. Participants were divided into two groups: those who believe that change is possible and who don’t. However, the believers still had some reservations. One participant noted that it will require a long time because reconciliation is not an urgent matter to be addressed by the government now. Two other said that considering current situation and the pattern of Indonesia’s past, it would need much more than just waiting—a chaos to force the public to do a swift action, as it has always been with several occasions/demands in the country’s history.

While that group had their doubts, the non-believers were firm with their pessimism. Reasons varied, but they were sure that nothing good could come out of the movements. There were concerns about the push for reconciliation being just another headline among numerous daily news, the issue being a diversion of something hidden by the intelligence agency, but the most popular source of this pessimism was the consideration of structure within the society that limits any action to succeed. Participants acknowledged the power of structure in one’s agency, as stated in Giddens’ Structuration Theory, and internalized it without even realizing it.

“Let’s say you demand the current government to apologize for this past sin, they would think that it wasn’t their doing, not their responsibility. So, why would they apologize?” —Apti, 23, tax consultant.

Another participant argued that the issue is still a source of public uneasiness, making it wiser for the government to leave it alone. A fear of risk was also prevalent, that pushing for the demand will open old wound and divide the public against each other again. The answer for the apparent pessimism was to move on. “Moving on” was a term easily found in various discussions.

“For me, as a citizen, not student, I don’t think so. I think it will hurt our stability. We already have seeds of conflicts, seeds of separation like in Papua. I don’t know what will happen if we have one more addition to that seeds. As a citizen, I think please don’t let there be any more problems. But as a scholar, I also want to know the truth, just for personal curiosity. But then again, it’s just a wish. We can’t get everything we want. Even Superman couldn’t save everyone; some people still die. We’re just ordinary humans. Do we really need all truth to be revealed? I don’t think so.” —Bimo, 24, student.

Another participant argued that after all these time, most families of victims already accepted the fate and closed the chapter, it was those indoctrinated in both sides who made this issue big again. Thus, moving on was the sensible thing to do.

Despite the pessimism, there were still participants who conveyed willingness or interest to do something to support the cause. There were not many variations of recommended action participants are willing to do. “Talking about the issue to others and open more discussions in daily conversations” was the most common answer. This seemed like a safe answer to many participants. However, I noticed there is a difference between those who were resorting to a safe way out and those who were enthusiastic (thus, more likely to act) even though the answer given was the same. I only noted one participant saying she is interested to take real action by joining a social movement focusing in human rights violation in the future.

On the other hand, those who believe change can eventually happen but are not willing to lend a hand, delegating responsibilities to other parties was the option they took. They demanded the government to take actions and human rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) like KontraS (Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence) to take care of the movement. Some vaguely referred to “the people” to take responsibility without saying what they would do as part of “the people”. This is what Cohen (2001) call as passive bystander behavior. Reason for this behavior, as we have discussed above, might be the unsupportive political opportunity structure that killed any hope that change can happen.

Delegating responsibilities and minimum effort pledged by few optimists demonstrate that making people move and support a movement is a tough thing to do. It is hard enough to make people believe that change can happen and they can make it happen, and even when they say that they want to participate, there is nothing that can assure us that they will do it. I believe that this problem is rooted in two problems. First, realization that real-life action is constrained by limitations (i.e. common values, political opportunity structure). Second, activists are too busy telling people stories of indignation and “the evil”, they forget to send a message of hope (that change is achievable) and concrete ways people can contribute to the cause. Either way, activists for the reconciliation of 1965 anti-communism purge still have a long way to go.

Notes on discussion process

Talks about identity and prognostic frames shifted the spotlight from the movement to blaming “the others”. Snow and Benford’s (2000) concerns came true. Like the media discourse opting to focus the blame rather to acknowledge bigger causes of problem, participants were easily swayed to follow the same path—they preferred to talk about Soeharto’s part in the purge and his obsession to gain power, rather than talking about the lack of literacy and instability that also ignited the hatred. Soeharto’s name and his New Order regime appeared in every discussion. There is nothing strange with that as it’s common knowledge that both played a major role in purge and propaganda, but it is fascinating to see how blame took part not only in discussions about the past but also about the current condition. There is al-
ways “the other” in every situation, be it the gov-
ernment, the army, and even the Islamic Defender
Front (who attacked discussions about the purge
in several regions). “The other” was used as deter-
rent to commit any action although participants
claimed they know the cause is important to push
forward.

During various sessions, especially those with
more than 6 participants, I observed that discus-
sions could go off topic because people were easily
distracted. Participants had their own versions of
story and conspiracies. While it drove the conver-
sation away from the topic guide, it showed the va-
riety of discourses people get outside the imposed
curriculum and media. One participant’s academ-
ic research, for instance, brought her to new infor-
mation of foreign interest in Indonesia’s natural
resources that might be the reason why General
Soeharto needed to topple President Soekarno’s
regime using anti-communism propaganda. Pres-
ident Soekarno’s close relationship with PKI and
communism values were used to decrease people’s
support for his presidency, pushing him to step
down. Another topic usually talked about was the
1998 reformation movement that toppled Soehar-
to from his 32-year-long presidency. Participants
related the chaos and brutality in 1998 to the
purge in 1965 as both took lives of many innocent
victims and both went under the rug in any dis-
cussions about Indonesian history. Through link-
ing the two cases, participants without direct ex-
perience or proximity with the purge (but was old
enough to witness the 1998 chaos) could relate to
the purge victims’ suffering.

Relating to own experience shows how impor-
tant emotion, or what Gamson called “hot cogni-
tion”, is in political opinion formation. It made
people more interested in the issue, especially if
there is a personal touch. Listening to stories
about the purge from actual relatives of victims
created a sense of authenticity and secondhand
proximity to the issue, compared to just hearing
similar stories from me or the media.

Discussions when there were direct “victims”
went more smoothly than those without. Partic-
ipants became more interested to ask questions
and being involved in the conversation. Session #7
with two male participants telling personal stories
about the purge and getting close to tears was one
of the most interesting sessions. The participants
in the session were mostly 18-19 year olds, fresh-
men in university with basic knowledge about the
issue, but the personal stories from the two men
prompted other participants to seek deeper and be
more opinionated. On the other hand, when there
was no one directly related to the issue, the talk
became a rather cold one. Participants saw the
issue as another piece of history and suffering be-
came normalized. Nonetheless, I must admit that
there is no evident causal relation between heated
conversation and real commitment of action.

The last point I noted is those with personal
relevance are seen as opinion leader during the
discussions. Conversations almost always end-
ded up similar with the leader’s point of view. My
take on this phenomenon is it shows participants’
openness to new information. Participants are re-
ceptive to messages and opinions appeared during
discussions and opted to adapt the perspective,
thus dubbing the person as opinion leader. While
I did worry that this might die down silent par-
ticipants’ voices, Gamson claims that it is a nor-
mal practice. As he contends, “conversations are a
collective product. The dynamics of opinion lead-
ership and the normative pressure that arise in
groups are not distractions from what people re-
ally think, but are a natural part of the collective
process in which political consciousness is negoti-
ated.” (1992, p.111). If so, it would be worth trying
to make those with proximity to the issue talk to
the wider public, but in a casual way rather than
in publicity-stunt way. They can share stories in
a natural setting, be involve in conversations, be
opinion leaders regarding this issue, and sway
people’s opinion—as they did in this research.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Agency, both in terms of themes and the politi-
cal opportunity structure, is the most important
element in controversial issues with long-term
imposed knowledge and opposing current move-
ments. It is relatively easy to change one’s opinion
in cases like this using media discourse items and
open discussions, although it must be noted that
after uncovering questionable things about “com-
mon sense” and discourses they had learnt since
they were little, messages and counter-themes
coming from new sources might raise few doubts
and questions because now the audience are not
as oblivious or naïve as before. Transforming opin-
ion into action, however, is a whole different thing.

It is interesting to see how contagious pessi-
mism is among people. Even though audience rec-
ognize the need and importance of a real change,
prompt consideration of structural challenge can
flip the hope around in a second, making them re-
think their opinion, support, and further action,
resulting in overt pessimism. Even in cases where
there is optimism that change can be achieved,
people would only pledge to minimum effort, or
in most cases, opt to delegate responsibilities to
government or “the people” — a classic passive
bystander behaviour. How easy it was to change
the course of discussion is also alarming. Snow
and Benford (2000) already feared that Collective
Action Frames, especially identity, might shift
focus from the real problem to putting the blame
on someone, and the concern is proven in this re-
search. Parallel to the pessimism and passive by-
stander behaviour, blaming “the other” (from the
past and the present) is usually taken as the easy
way out, rather than to continue talking about
measures to take right now.

So, what will it take to transform coun-
ter-themes to actual support and real action to
achieve the desirable change? What I see here is
political opportunity structure and how such opportu-

nity is shown in agency themes are the key. This find-
ing will only reaffirm Giddens’ claim of the impor-
tance of structure and power in people’s agency, but what will movements be if they could only rely on external condition to thrive?

As cliché as it may sound, from what I’ve gath-
ered in this research, the only thing that will help is time. As it took decades and a change of generation to fade New Order’s propaganda, doc-

trines, and lies, it might also take a long time — faster, maybe, considering the rate of today’s in-

formation dissemination and people’s openness to discussion—to finally uncover what happened in the late 1960s and (taking one participant’s term) “unlearn” what we have been taught about this issue for years by the system. As a catalyst, movement activists should continue pushing for reconciliation effort through direct demand to the government and gathering of public support. Messages, however, should stress more on themes of agency: the possibility to achieve change and the hope. Themes of identity and injustice are indeed important, but will not get the cause far as we have seen in this research that, ultimately, people want to do what they think will succeed. Showing bad things that happened and pointing finger to those who are guilty will touch people’s emotion and even anger. But what are feelings without actions? Thus, messages should focus on pushing for real action: what common people can do to help and reassurance that whatever they do can give an impact—that success is achievable with their help.

I propose future research regarding themes, counter-themes, and agency, especially in cases with long-term initial knowledge or doctrines like Indonesia’s 1965 anti-communism purge, to include content analysis to see which theme is the most prevalent and whether the theme of agency has been mentioned sufficiently. Furthermore, it would be fruitful to do similar research (maybe with similar cases i.e. atrocities happened during Indonesia’s 1998 reformation) with wider audience spectrum from different social economic background and in various regions. This research focuses on youth in big cities because I believe they are the first gate towards accepting new values considering their exposure to news, relatively higher education and critical thinking capacity, and possibilities to meet with diverse society compared to the older generation and people living in remote areas. However, to capture a bigger picture of Indonesian society, with its thousands of ethnicities and values, it would be valuable to conduct similar research with more diverse participants from different age groups and backgrounds.

To conclude this writing, I will answer the three research questions I have posed in the beginning.

(1) How do people form a political opinion in social context when counter-frames are conflicting with common values or knowledge? Without trying to generalize different cases nor implying definitiveness, I found that people shape their opinion through three main stages: change of knowledge, change of opinion, and change of behaviour, though a change in one stage doesn’t always transform into a change in another stage. Change of knowledge usually starts with awareness of new information consisting counter-frames. Based on individual’s position and proximity to the issue, the information will either create awareness of conflicting frames or reinforce the already doubtful knowledge. Then, if the message is deemed touching or acceptable enough, people will change their opinion about the issue (or in some case, finally have an opinion). This opinion will be in form of admittance that the issue is important and establishment of discontentment towards old frames (hegemony). Change of behavior is the tricky part. Realizing how the structure and system might block any effort and possible change will stop people’s support to materialize into real action. Agency, thus, is blocked, not from outside force but rather from people’s own state of mind.

To what extent counter-frames and discussion affect one’s understanding, opinion, and sense of agency. This research found that counter-frames and discussions might affect one’s understanding in various degrees depending on where they started in the beginning (proximity, level of interest, level of understanding). Counter-frames can either act as reinforcement to the already doubtful minds, as a mere information to the ignorant ones, and as opener to a new discourse.

What will it take for social movements to ignite people’s sense of agency? As agency is found to be a vital factor here, I assume that activists should transmit more messages of hope that change is achievable and that every individual can chip in to achieve the goal. Frames of agency should also be more concise so audience would understand what is needed and what they can do as common people.

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