

**At the Crossroads of National Rituals,  
Rectification of History, And Judicial Pursuit:  
Current Indonesian Perspectives on the Dutch-Indonesian conflict**

MUHAMMAD YUANDA ZARA\*

*On December 9, 2011, the Dutch government through its ambassador to Indonesia before people attending a ceremony in Balongsari (Rawagede), apologized for the killing committed by the Dutch troops to hundreds of the kampung dwellers in 1947. He repeated it on September 13, 2013. Beyond commentaries from the Dutch government and victims' families, the apology created an unprecedented major debate in Indonesian society at large, not just about a specific case, but also on reexamining the nature of Dutch colonialism and violence inherent in it. How can the Dutch-Indonesian conflict in 1945-49 remain so influential in Indonesian nation-state today?*

Reproductions of the Dutch-Indonesian conflict seem to be a continuous process in Indonesia. Since a very young age, Indonesian children are socialized with the memory of it. School curriculum incorporates negative stories of Dutch colonialism. Most of Indonesia's 163 national heroes, that any Indonesian should remember, are actually those who fought the Dutch. Almost all of Indonesian television channels annually commemorate Indonesian Independence on August 17 by broadcasting Independence-related programs. In every month in a year there is at least one important date that is commemorated (either locally or nationally) by Indonesians, and all these dates have to do with important events in the Independence period.

In the last one decade, popular culture strengthens the bad images of the Dutch in the conflict, especially via movies. Some high budget war movies were made, and all dealt with the conflict—and all were bestseller. Indonesian media did not present these movies

simply as “war movies,” but rather framed them with patriotic tone, by stating that, for instance, watching some of the movies would “make you realize the great importance of the merits of Independence heroes.” Unsurprisingly, these movies put Indonesians as protagonists and the Dutch as the bad guys.

Sometimes, debates about the Dutch-Indonesian conflict culminated in certain moments. In the past, a handful moments sparked such debates, such as during the West Irian dispute (early 1960s), the bloody visit of Indonesian President, Soeharto, to the Netherlands (1970), and Indonesian government’s demand to the Netherlands to stop funding Indonesia through the IGGI following what Indonesian government saw as Dutch intervention on East Timor (1992).

It is thus almost impossible to ignore the presence of various reproductions of the conflict in contemporary Indonesian public spaces and media. The popular images about the Dutch with regards to the colonial past are usually uniform: violent, abusive, covetous, hot-tempered, and racist Dutch. Such depictions are easily found across multiple media from which Indonesians comprehend the conflict, encompassing museums, monuments, dioramas, songs, movies, novels, press, cartoon, caricatures, etc., making incessant commemoration of Indonesians’ struggle against the ferocious Dutch in the conflict appears as national rituals where every citizen participates, or being made to participate.

Depictions mentioned above have certain functions, with the most important one as a moral story to unite Indonesians who come from different backgrounds by ensuring that Indonesia was once “united” to fight foreign aggressor, the Dutch. Given Indonesia’s enormous diversity, emphasizing unity is always at the heart of government efforts to implant the feeling of Indonesianness in each citizen, and the story about the unity of Indonesians during the conflict serves as the best means to foster such feeling.

## **A sensitive past?**

Indonesians today are divided concerning Dutch violence in 1945-49. Firstly, those who ask recognition from the Netherlands for every dreadful impacts of the Dutch presence in Indonesia. Vice chairman of Indonesia's House of Representative, for instance, demanded the *de jure* recognition of Indonesian independence in August, 17, 1945. Others, encompassing anonymous netizens to activists who advocated the family of victims of Dutch violence argued that the "Police Actions" were aggressions of foreign troops towards a sovereign state, and that the Dutch committed criminal conducts throughout Indonesia. The Dutch are seen systematically killing and torturing Indonesians regardless of gender and age. The Dutch violence should be labeled war crime, and those perpetrated it should be brought into international court.

This view was strengthened by the development in the last one decade, encompassing statement of Dutch Minister Ben Bot in 2005, 2011 apology from Dutch government, and more importantly, what some see as irrefutable evidences of Dutch violence, namely photos of Dutch troops executing powerless Indonesians, which went viral in Indonesian mass media and the internet.

Secondly, some Indonesians demand the Dutch government to take speedy measures to thoroughly apologize for negative consequences caused by the Dutch, and to provide relevant compensations not just to immediate victims and their family but also to "Indonesian nation" in general. This view appears primarily in online discussions among Indonesian netizens commenting the apology issue. Some perceive these measures as the evidences that the Dutch can really make peace with their violent past which in turn would allow Indonesia to forgive the Dutch. This also means that the Dutch should integrate their violent conducts during the whole colonialism into their school textbooks. For these people, judicial process is not that necessary in comparison to "rectification" of history and considerable attention to the wounds of the victims and "Indonesian nation."

Lastly, those who want to forget the past and prefer that the disputes on violence during the Dutch colonialism to be closed. Some Indonesians are passive with regards to efforts to bring the Dutch crime into investigation, either by researchers or prosecutors. This view is mainly voiced by the Indonesian government which does not want to risk increasingly good economic relationship with the Netherlands. Netizens who second this opinion present another reason: Indonesia is now facing more serious problems of poverty and corruption, and it is better to tackle these problems rather than painstakingly talking about cases in distant past. They may also see that Indonesians committed violence during the conflict too, thus bringing the Dutch to the court will only affect Indonesia as well.

The Indonesian authorities rarely commented on the Rawagede case and the apology that followed. Given that the Netherlands is one of Indonesia's largest trade partners in Europe, maintaining good relationship with the Netherlands apparently restrained the government to go too far on this matter. The Indonesian government had no intention to push the Netherlands to apologize, but on the other hand it positively reacted to the apology.

Dutch newspapers *NRC* interviewed Indonesian President J. Widodo shortly before his visit to the Netherlands in the second half of April 2016. When asked about the proposal of Dutch minister of foreign affairs to reexamine wrongdoings occurring during the Dutch-Indonesian conflict, the president answered that he preferred to "look ahead," indicating his reluctance to welcome an extensive investigation on violence resulted from the conflict. This stance was not new, and was also observable with regards to the previous president, S.B. Yudhoyono, whose government was somewhat inert with the reopening of Rawagede and Westerling case. Even, New Order regime, whose leader Soeharto once fought the Dutch during the conflict, also tended to deliberately put the theme of Dutch crime aside. His strongest message was in his reception of Dutch Queen Beatrix in Jakarta in 1995 despite urge by some that the Queen to apologize to Indonesia. In addition, the

then Indonesian Secretary of State Moerdiono confirmed that “Why should we reopen old wounds? It is not necessary. Our nation is not like that. The government sees that the past is over” (Saelan, 2008: 79).

The Indonesian press paid a huge attention to the Rawagede case and the Dutch apology. They published news about the events, interviewed victims’s relatives, and Dutch and Indonesian officials. Some considered the Dutch Court’s decision as the victory of common people against a foreign government who claimed that the case of 1947 killing was already expired, or in other words, that this was the fighting against forgetting. Yet they appreciated the apology and praised the Indonesian tradition of forgiving those who ask for forgiveness.

The victims’ family, especially the widows, generally accepted Dutch apology as it was really meaningful for the family and the whole villagers. Yet, bitterness towards the Dutch’s violent conducts remains striking in the family’s responses, citing especially the lost of the loved ones and the atmosphere of terror the Dutch created. They were thankful with the compensation, and some would use it for two typical aspirations of ordinary Indonesians: housing and performing pilgrimage to Mecca. Nevertheless, the Dutch were expected to not just pay compensation, which would only useful for short run, but also think about a long-term compensation, such as the provision of scholarship for grandchildren of the victims.

Numerous photos associated with Dutch execution of Indonesian fighters in the last few years were extensively spread Indonesian public sphere. The front page of *Volkskrant* dated July 10, 2012, which showed the first series of execution photos found in a thrash bin in Enschede, were republished and put online. It was widely discussed on online news portals, online forums, and even on Twitter. The discussion was soon flooded with tears of sadness to the war situation, patriotism and pride towards Indonesian freedom fighters, and anger to Dutch brutality. Some connected such pictures with war movies about Dutch violence, thus showing the attempt to link historical events with their audiovisual

representation which may contain not just truth but also prejudice. For many Indonesians, these photographs also confirmed history teaching they got during their schooldays about Dutch brutality.

Indonesian media, too, paid attention to the plan of Indo-Europeans and Dutch veteran organization, VOMI, who would demand apology from Indonesia due to violence committed by the *pemuda* during the Bersiap period. Yet, this was minor news and was not extensively responded by Indonesians, apparently because it was seen unfit with general picture of the Dutch as the most brutal perpetrator of violence, as well as due to serious lack of research in Indonesia examining non-Indonesian victims.

## **Epilogue**

As long as the Indonesian nation-state that was born in 1945 stays alive, discussions about the conflict will always exist in Indonesia. Perhaps it was not completely an Indonesian bias to equate the word “Belanda,” or the Dutch, with negative associations; in fact, in seven decades after the conflict began the Dutch generally remained silent to the “excessive violence” or, as some historians now see it, a structural violence leading to war crime (Oostindie, 2015), that they committed in Indonesia. Some believed that the Dutch issued apology just because the court ordered them to do so. Otherwise, would the Dutch still consider, let alone take care of, the physical and psychological wounds of the victims and their families, and the hardships millions of Indonesians experienced during the Dutch military operations? And what about numerous atrocities that the Dutch committed during their centuries-long presence in Indonesia, which, according to an account, killing between 600,000-one million victims (Raben, 2014) and their following miseries? After the court’s decision on Rawagede case, some Indonesians demanded the Dutch’s responsibility to less known incidents, where Indonesians, unarmed combatants and civilians, becoming the target of Dutch’s unlawful violence, such as Bondowoso Death

Train (East Jawa) and Situjuh Affairs (West Sumatra), even the Dutch execution of civilians in Kuta Reh, Aceh, during the Aceh War. How would the Dutch react to this series of calls? Legal process and apology are fine, yet the opening of true story, acknowledgement and restorative justice, are what the affected people are looking for.

After all, the images the Dutch established in Indonesia over hundreds of years of Dutch-Indonesian relation are strongly depended on the ways the Dutch behave. Thus, the more research on Dutch (and of course also on Indonesian) violence and more judicial or other acceptable solutions to those affected by the violence, the more the possibility that both countries would accept their violent past and, if feasible, reach postwar reconciliation. Both Dutch colonialism and the fact that the Dutch (before 2011 apology) made no substantial efforts to admit their violence and take relevant steps are making the images of the Dutch as a vicious colonizer and an arrogant former-colonizer remain intact. Consider how the 2011 apology may change the situation: despite suspicion to Dutch apology, however, some Indonesians highly appreciated the apology and even saw it as a sign of a gentleman's attitude.

It is now the most appropriate time for the Dutch to reexamine their violence during the conflict and soon take measures to provide the victims and their family with justice they deserve, and to furnish the Dutch and Indonesian public with an accurate, comprehensive story about the conflict. It is necessary to hold relevant steps, involving not just historians, but also victims, NGOs, law experts, and mass media from Indonesia and the Netherlands. As a consequence, Indonesians should also be ready if such efforts touch the killings perpetrated by Indonesians to non-Indonesian civilians. Yet, I believe that post-authoritarian Indonesian society nowadays is more open to receive criticisms and conflicted views. This reexamination on both sides will definitely be sensitive and risk deconstructing the image about glory past of each side, but it is undoubtedly a vital step to make sure that history is written honestly, that the public know what really happened, and that the victims and their family get their rights.

\* MUHAMMAD YUANDA ZARA was born in West Sumatra and received a bachelor's degree from the Department of History at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, in 2007, and a BA and MA in history from Leiden University in 2009 and 2010 respectively. He is a PhD researcher at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and is affiliated with the University of Amsterdam. His dissertation examines propaganda by the Republic of Indonesia and its supporters, both in Indonesia and abroad, during the Dutch-Indonesian conflict (1945-49).

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