What is to become of a nation which is not honest to itself?
The long lost Supersemar

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Almost 50 years has lapsed and yet the original copy of the Supersemar is nowhere to find. Two generations have been denied knowledge of the historical document, the precursor of the New Order government.

Copies of the 11th March Letter (Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret) available at the National Archive is allegedly a fake one.

While the opening up of state secret archives is a common practice in many countries, the archive about the visit of three army generals to the Bogor Palace in 1966 has never been found.

Attempts to obscure the Supersemar have been obvious from start. The Genta Suara Revolusi dan Angkatan Bersenjata dailies reported two different versions of the Letter at that time.

Deputy Prime Minister Soebandrio then said that President Soekarno delegated power to Soeharto to guarantee order and security provided that he would report to Soekarno, as the top commander of the Armed Forces, from time to time, according to a book by Siauw Giok Tjhan in Reflection of an Indonesian Patriot.

Soebandrio was present in the meeting between Soekarno and army generals Amir Machmud, Andi Muhammad Jusuf dan Basuki Rachmat at the Bogor Palace on March 11, 1966.

“The Soeharto camp, including the three generals, conveys the message that the Letter is a Transfer of Authority, in which Soeharto has the full authority to act as a president without being a president,” Siauw, head of the Indonesian Citizenship Deliberation Body (Baperki) wrote in his book.

Soeharto who was then Head of Staff of the Army did not heed Soekarno’s rebuttal that the Supersemar is not a transfer of authority. Soekarno reiterated his rebuttal in his State of the Nation Address on August 17 Independence Day of 1966.

Soebandrio and Siauw, charged with their involvement in the G30S movement, spent more than ten years in prison. The charge has never been proven.
“It is clear that the Supersemar was designed to take over executive power from Soekarno. And it is clear too that Soekarno did not intend to transfer power to Soeharto,” Siauw Tiong Djin, son of Siauw Giok Tjhan, said in a recent interview.

“It was Soeharto who craved for a transfer of power, because without the Letter, he would always be overshadowed by the popularity of Soekarno,” said Tiong Djin who is doctoral graduate of political science from Monash University, Melbourne.

He was unperturbed when asked about the falsification of the Letter.

“It is only logical that the Letter was falsified. And it is also logical that the falsification produced two different versions because the original was nowhere to be found. The original document would have not allowed Soeharto to take over power,” said Tiong Djin who now resides in Melbourne.

Not a great loss

But noted historian John Roosa seems to take it lightly.

“I don’t think it is a great loss. In fact, I think it is much better that way,” he said in an email interview.

“Soeharto and his generals didn’t care about the precise text of the Letter. They just wanted some kind of a document that they could use as a justification for their coup against Sukarno,” he said.

Soeharto arrested a number of left-leaning cabinet ministers and set up a new cabinet soon after the Letter was issued.

“No version of the Letter instructs Soeharto to arrest some of his cabinet ministers and form a new cabinet. Soekarno consistently stated that the Letter did not authorize Soeharto’s actions against his own cabinet. Even without the original document, it is clear that Soeharto was indifferent to the president’s precise instructions,” said the history professor of British Columbia University, Canada.

Asked if the Supersemar was akin to Soekarno’s political suicide, Roosa said that the Supersemar was the coup de grace of Soeharto’s creeping coup d’etat.

“With Supersemar, Soeharto’s creeping stopped. He began a full-fledged coup after March 11. I do not think Sukarno was intentionally committing political suicide. After all, the Letter simply restates to “restore order” that Soeharto had done since October,” said the author of Pretext for Mass Murder:
Supersemar is inevitably linked to the September 30th Movement (G30S), a movement blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) which is still clouded in mystery.

Tiong Djin is convinced that Soeharto was the main actor (dalang) behind the G30S.

“He was the one who wanted the kidnappedgenerals killed for they had put Soeharto on court and punished him for corruption in the Army in the past.

“Soeharto’s involvement is obvious. Colonel Abdul Latief informed Soeharto on Sept. 30th 1965 about the impending kidnapping attempt. As a military officer he was obliged to report the information to his superior General Ahmad Yani.

“But instead of reporting it to Yani he back-stabbed G30S movement,” Tiong Djin said.

“Col. Latief dan Lt. Col. Untung were Soeharto’s favourite adjutants. It was Latief who brought Soeharto’s name to prominent in the Yogyakarta attack in 1949. Untung did the same in the Mandala operation in West Irian in 1963-64,” Tiong Djin said.

“Soeharto was the main actor behind the creeping coup d’etat against Soekarno,” he said.

Sense of history

Amid public attempts to rectify history following Soeharto’s downfall in 1998, sense of history among the younger generation is diminishing, according to an Australian professor.

“Amongst the university students I taught, a sense of history was sadly lacking. Most knew very little about Indonesia’s past, except some very basic things such as 17 August 1945, 30 September 1965, Presidents Soekarno and Soeharto,” said Dr. Colin Brown who taught at Parahyangan University in Bandung from 2009 to 2013.

“I once mentioned Benny Murdani in a class, and got blank faces. I doubt whether many would have heard of Supersemar, let alone any questions about the authenticity of the versions held by the National Archives.
Is there a better sense of history amongst the wider population?

“My impression is that there is not, except perhaps amongst some older people, and this perhaps because of a wider personal experience of Indonesia’s past. In particular, I note little interest in the events of 1965-65.

“Nor is this lack of interest in history limited to the history of Indonesia. I have been increasingly disturbed in recent years by the increased public prominence given to Hitler, in books and posters, suggesting that many Indonesians have no idea what kind of a man he was.

“Our local Sunday market in Bandung, for instance, had a stall which routinely sold Hitler posters alongside ones featuring the Beatles, Marilyn Monroe and the Wali Songo,” said the adjunct professor of politics in Griffith University, Brisbane.

Colin is pessimistic when asked about whether history books in Indonesian schools will ever be rectified.

“Where is the pressure to change likely to come from? All the major social and political leaders and authority figures have an interest in maintaining the current versions of the story. Revisionism is not on any of their agendas.

“As a non-Indonesian, it worries me that so many Indonesians -- and Indonesia as a nation -- have not come to grips with the most critical period of the country’s post-1945 history: the events of 1965-66.

“To examine critically those events would be, for many, a difficult and disturbing task. So much of post-1965 Indonesia’s national character and self-image is built on a particular interpretation of those events. Challenge that interpretation, and you challenge that character and self-image.

“But in the long run, it has to be done, both because a nation which is not honest with and about itself is flawed, perhaps fatally, and because thousands of Indonesians suffered as a result of the events of 1965-66, and many are still suffering,” said Colin.

Colin said they deserve to have that suffering acknowledged, at the very least and former president Abdurrahman ‘Gus Dur’ Wahid did start a process of reconciliation, but the process has obviously stalled.

Roosa is more optimistic about a possible rectification of Indonesian history in school textbooks regarding the massive tragedy in the mid-1960s.

“A rectification is certainly possible. Many Indonesians are finding out more about the events of 1965-66 and may force a change.
"I think what is most important to insert into the textbooks is a discussion of the 1965-66 massacres. The textbooks mention the September 30th Movement but say nothing about the massacres that followed.

"Hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians were buried in unmarked mass graves or dumped in rivers. Nothing can excuse that kind of atrocity. Even if one believes that the repression of the PKI was necessary, one cannot, without sacrificing a claim to being a decent human being, believe that massacring detainees was justified.

"Every society in the world has a history of atrocities, but not every society has been so thorough as Indonesia in suppressing that history, to the point of not even mentioning it in history books," John said.

Colin said It is ironic that the rest of the world can freely access information about the 1965-66 events, and debate their meaning and veracity, while young Indonesians for the most part have only one version made available to them.

"They deserve better. And pragmatically, of course, in the long run they will get access to more information: contemporary means of communication make this almost inevitable.

"And what will they then think of the education system and the political system which systematically hid so much of their past from them?" Colin asked.