LEKRA reappraised


Reviewed by ARIEL HERYANTO

The left-wing cultural organisation LEKRA generates as much emotion today as it did 20 years ago when it was outlawed.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first and the most comprehensive published study of what the author describes as 'the evolution and character of the Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Institute of People's Culture), or LEK: A, a "left-wing cultural organisation which functioned in Indonesia between 1950 and 1965." Any reader of this book, even with minimal knowledge of the subject matter, will soon grasp the importance of this book as s/he opens the first few pages. Indeed, the significant contribution that the author makes for contemporary scholarship is unquestionable and hardly needs explication here.

Unique

Rather than attempting to 'review' or assess the substance of this book, I wish to note below the unique and outstanding status that this book occupies both in the context of the Indonesian society today, as well as in Indonesian studies. Keith Foulcher shows why the study of the subject is important: 'LEKRA represents the first sustained attempt in modern Indonesian history to address a cultural organisation which has been one of the major themes of world-wide intellectual and cultural history since the mid-nineteenth century. It was the first organisational response in Indonesia to the question of the relationship between a commitment to social and political change and the practice of art and literature' (p.20). Despite its uniqueness, much of LEKRA's historical role has been 'misinterpreted', 'denied', 'diminished', 'pilloried and caricatured, to the point where it emerged as a travesty' (pp.1-2) in today's Indonesia.

For over two decades after the eradiation of LEKRA and all the left-wing organisations in the country, it is practically impossible to hold an open and unemotional discussion on LEKRA. The only accepted and legitimate manner to make a reference to LEKRA would be to allege, condemn or otherwise means a great deal: to be politically 'subversive', overtly challenging the legitimate order and authority in power, or to appear as a 'sympathiser' of the 'unforgivable'. Hardly anyone could take the risks.

A curse

During and following the years of the mass killings (estimated at between 50 to 100 thousands) of allegedly left-wing individuals, the banning of leftist organisations, and detention of others in large numbers without trials, LEKRA has been one of the series of words for cursing. A pointed finger and a public utterance from the lips of an authoritative figure: 'PKI!' (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Indonesian Communist Party), or 'LEKRA!' are enough to strip any Indonesian of her/his civil rights or even life.

The impressive success of the ruling New Order's economic-growth oriented development programs, thanks to the oil-boom miracle, during the past decade helped to ease the horrific tension. By no means, however, has the trauma from the purge-trials ceased to exist. As the happy few in power encountered newly arising grievances from the under-privileged, the practice of discreetly perceived potential threats by accusing them of having some sort of associations with the bygone 'left' proved effective. During the months approaching the recent 1987 general election, for instance, many employees lost their jobs for having been identified as having relatives, close or distant, who were allegedly 'left' in the past. Marital commitments were broken for similar reasons (see Inside Indonesia, No. 11, August 1987, p.33).

Arief Budiman

It took two decades, and it took someone with sound credentials like Arief Budiman, to inform an non-Indonesian public for an open-minded, cool-headed, reappraisal of the past history of LEKRA. Arief Budiman was one of the key figures of the right-wing, army-backed, Manifest Kebudayaan (Cultural Manifesto) group that was founded to pose a direct confrontation with LEKRA. Arief Budiman wrote his 'provocative' reappraisal in Manifest Kebudayaan's literary journal Horison early this year. The kind of reaction he received was familiar. 'To hell with your LEKRA!' were the words of Wiratmo Soekito, a co-signatory of the Manifesto, in the subsequent issue of the journal. Several younger poets and literary critics were dumfounded upon being accused of being 'neo-LEKRAists', or sympathisers of LEKRA by some senior literary figures in the arts centre of Jakarta as a result of minor disagreements in discussions on aesthetics.

A meaningful discussion of LEKRA has been made even more difficult by the fact that the greatest part of LEKRA documents, and artistic works of its members were destroyed in the years of the turmoil. While surviving former members of the organisation have been either deprived of the right to speak or write in public, or severely discouraged from doing so, non-partisans to the LEKRA versus Manifest Kebudayaan confrontation barely have any access to authentic source materials for re-examining the past history in question.

In light of the above, this recently published book is unique and indispensable for students of post-independence Indonesian art and culture.

It is not accidental that the book has come from a non-Indonesian and has been published outside the country. It is delightfully unsurprising to see that the author is one of the most knowledgeable scholars in contemporary studies of modern Indonesian literature and the publisher is a leading institution in today's scholarship on modern Indonesia.

The author has not only gone through the painstaking labour of collecting bits and pieces of the materials to construct a comprehensive survey. He has also demonstrated a profound analytical model for dealing with the materials. LEKRA is not examined in isolation from its social environment, both domestic and international. Neither are members of the organisation treated as cogs in a single machine. Subtle parallels as well as contradictions between individuals and institutions are scrutinised with care and artistry. It must be admitted, however, that several typographical errors, mostly of words in Indonesian, do exist in this book.

Official displeasure

It is most likely that certain groups within the literary, cultural or political establishments in Indonesia will be unhappy with this book. This is not because Keith Foulcher is merely defending and re-establishing LEKRA's reputation. He is not, and in fact he presents a fundamental criticism of LEKRA, which is different from those coming from the currently dominant establishments in Indonesia.

In contemporary Indonesia many crucial issues of history have been officially represented and perceived in black-and-white caricatures. Far from being sentimental about the destroyed LEKRA and presenting a counter white-and-black caricature, Keith Foulcher shows the complexities and ambiguities of relationships between those who were mutually antagonistic. Furthermore, he shows significant similarities in the fundamental views of aesthetics of LEKRA and its adversaries.

Thus, it is very unlikely that those dominating the status quo would readily and whole-heartedly accept and appreciate this book on its own merit. When offered a short review of this book, none of the major newspapers, literary and cultural journals in Indonesia dared to publish it.