CHAPTER TEN

A KILLING TOWN (1965–1967)

Not even the gecko would make a sound and not even the cock would crow.


After my husband did not come home, I felt terribly sad. I wept out loud, but some people warned me: ‘Don’t weep out loud, or they will come and get you too. So I wept, but only after pushing my mouth into the pillow.’

(Mama Ribka, Alor – Kolimon and Wetangterah 2012:305).

The victor’s cause pleased the gods, but that of the vanquished pleased Cato.

(Lucan, The Civil War, I.128)

This chapter reaches into the dark heart of Kupang’s history. This is what my friends told me not to write, indeed, what the government today continues to declare was ‘not a gross violation of human rights.’ The fear the New Order worked hard to instil continues to hamper research into what precisely happened during the anti-communist pogroms. Years after it ended, standard New Order narratives still dominate the accounts researchers take over from local informants, as Steve Farram’s otherwise remarkably detailed work illustrates (2002). That the historical authenticity of these accounts is dubious at best became obvious in a more recent report (Kolimon and Wetangterah 2012). Young female church activists in Kupang here bring to light the experiences of women caught in the pogroms, in seven case studies. Once one becomes aware that the mainstream narratives represent internalized regime propaganda, they can still serve a wry analytical purpose. They indicate how shallow democratic

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1 ‘Ya, ada pulang datang, tidak nasehat anak-anak atau pesan-pesan ... habis keluar malam, tidak tau kemana. Setelah bapak ... tidak pulang, saya pung perasaan sedih sekali. Saya menangis keras-keras, tapi ada yang tegur bilang, “Jangan menangis keras-keras; nanti mama juga dijemput.” Jadi kita menangis, tapi tutup mulut di bantal baru menangis’ (Mama Ribka, interviewed by the report authors, 12 September 2010, Kadelang hamlet, East Kalabahi Timur village, Alor – Kolimon and Wetangterah 2012:305).

reform has been and how high a degree of moral legitimacy an only super-
finicially reformed provincial state continues to enjoy. Katharine McGregor
raised a similar question when, in a recent edited volume on the 1965 kill-
ings, she observed that every single attempt to memorialize mass graves in
the newly democratic Indonesia has been thwarted by thugs with conser-
ervative religious and military backing (Kammen and McGregor 2012:234–
62). Such ironic legitimacy reflects extensive middle class complicity in
the pogroms. This chapter chooses to explore the class-biased embedded-
ness of the state in provincial society by examining how the pogroms were
organized in and around Kupang.

A nascent cross-class coalition led mainly by teachers had brought
renewal to the surrounding countryside in the 1950s, but by the early 1960s
it was beginning to break down. For provincial conservatives higher up in
the rapidly expanding bureaucracy, the prospect grew increasingly
unpleasant of having to share the resources of the state for a greater good,
just as they had learned to manipulate them for their own good. This
bottom-up conflict was the subject of previous chapters. We now turn to
the role played in Kupang by the nation's supreme top-down institution,
the military. The events in Jakarta on 1 October 1965 had made its senior
officers determined to carry out an anti-communist purge, but they could
not do it without local allies. Chapter 6 showed that they had done a poor
job of finding these in the 1950s, but they had worked hard on it since then
and intensified their efforts that October 1965. Since the early 1960s those
members of the urban middle class who felt most threatened by the com-
munists were increasingly ready to be wooed, though certainly without
realizing the depths of antisocial behaviour to which the alliance would
expose them. They ranged from students who were active in religious
clubs and were planning civil service careers, through businesspeople
dependent on government work, to bureaucrats and village heads guard-
ing economic gates.

Military

Chapter 8 explained how the army under chief of staff General Nasution
evolved into an increasingly effective political organization. It began to
expand into the provinces. Its only rival was the PKI, and it often found
itself scrambling to imitate organizational techniques whose effective-
ness had been proven by them. From the late 1950s it began to greatly
elaborate the ‘territorial’ system whose origins lay in the revolutionary
struggle. The rather conservative social structure outside Java made the