How long is now?
Of Indonesian *reformasi* and the belated reclaiming of its Cold War history

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The title alludes to the mural along Oranienburger Strasse, Berlin-Mitte, ‘an ubiquitous memorial and perhaps nostalgic (...) glance back at Berlin’s recent, creative past”, as “epochs both overtake and lag behind themselves’

To me, therefore, the mural also encapsulates the dynamism of the Indonesian students who in the autumn of 1998 kept me lecturing into late night, searching as they were for ways of reclaiming critical history – but also the sad fate of their ambitions. So, ‘how long is now’?
Since the Cold War lost steam – and thus also much of the old Left – the progressives’ root-problem, has of course, with a few exceptions in Latin America, been their floating character and lack of representation in organised politics

An often neglected aspect of this, however, is the loss of history

I. Why?

II. What’s the most crucial missing history
I. Why the continuous neglect?

The first reason is certainly that the elitist lib-dem elitist accord. Too many skeletons in the closets.

Second, the main trust of most of the new pro-democrats was to fight the corruption and the authoritarian state.

Third, the moral obligation of the pro-democrats was to focus on the immediate perpetrators and the fate of the victims.
II. What was lost and why is that so crucial?

Continues to constrain the reinvention of (broadly speaking) social democratic development.

Four examples:
1. Leftists abandon critical analyses, lose interest and look for ‘something quite different’
   • Leftists even in Sweden (in-spite of Edelstam)...
   • Cold war leftist blinkers (‘too little Maoism’)
   • Even rigid leftist interest petered out, opting for something new...
   • Social democrats too preferred to forget why ‘their’ partners had tried but failed ‘democratic shortcuts’ to progress
   • Turning to UN, Unions, human interventionism, liberal democratic institution-building, plus some CSOs & a few political groups
2. Centrists ignore the history of ‘politics of order’ and support its new version: state-building ahead of democracy. As human interventionism, ‘good governance’, liberal economies and democratic institutions backslided, centrists follow now Fukuyama: liberal democratisation must be preceded by ‘state-building’.

Ignored critical historical analysis of what was wrong in previous projects and allies. Hence, uncritically accept Fukuyama’s thesis – even if almost the same as Samuel Huntington’s old argument from the mid-1960s about the need for ‘politics of order’ which after Indonesia spread around the South, often in the form of ‘middle class coups’.

Huntington and Fukuyama may partly be right about the North European experiences (strong state before democracy), but pre-democratic citizenship & accountability ahead of strong states. So, can’t be exported to other contexts where this is not at hand. One has to start anew.
3. Also the best analyses of the massacre fail to understand that even few top PKI leaders had good reasons to engage in an Algerian-like ‘push’ to strengthen the radicals within the military, behind Sukarno.

Even in Jeff Robinsons’ new history of the Indonesian ‘Killing season’ where he acknowledges John Roosa’s account the involvement of some few top-PKI leaders in fostering the 30 September Movement in Jakarta, Jeff (along with most other analysts) seem unable to understand why leaders of an until then, supposedly, successful party would have involved themselves.

Thus another, important example of what the suppression of critical historical analyses of dynamics during the Cold War holds us back.

When first convinced (in 1979-80) of the involvement of a few top PKI leaders I couldn’t proceed the way Roosa did. I was looking into the history of the party strategy to understand why the party, in spite of the fact that it seemed to be successful, had run into a deadlock.
Here are the main factors that undermined PKI’s reformist mass-based strategy:

PKIs abandoning of parliamentary liberal democracy in favour of the rigid-leftist and cold war inspired dogmas of giving priority to anti-imperialism and state-lead ‘national-democracies’. (Later, the CPI in India did similarly, while CPI-M ++ did not.)

the party’s inability – with blinkered class analysis and the focus on the Cold War leftist ideas of progressive and anti-imperialist state leaders – to scrutinise the dynamics of primitive accumulation by way of political dominance and capturing of the state under the banner of nationalism.

the insufficiency of the PKI’s conventional land-reform strategy when trying to unify and mobilise majorities of the rural poor against landlords. Hence the PKI led movement was instead trapped in complicated local conflicts and horisontal dependencies and loyalties.
4. The democracy movement continues to vacillate between liberalism and populism, failing to address democratic state-building and interest representation

• It took until the mid-1980s until young Marxist oriented students-cum-activists developed new analysis of the role of politics and state in the primitive accumulation in Indonesia – and in order to alter this began to focus on the crucial issue of democracy. However, the discussion focussed on class and structure. And it did not benefit from a critical analysis of the abandoning of liberal democracy. Hence there was no follow up discussion on how democracy would be fought for and develop.

• After the fall of the wall in Berlin and the end of the Cold War, therefore, liberals and issue-oriented CSO-activists, socially floating, fragmented, and with little focus on ideology and political united front work dominated the pro-democracy struggle against Suharto.
• Post-1998, moreover, in short of a viable model for progressive democratisation, the radical students and political groups were marginalised by the elitist lib-dem. pact.

• Over the years, then, little has happened in efforts to ‘go politics’ – aside from (a) aborted attempt at local parties (b) diaspora politics, (c) rallying behind populist reformist politicians.

• However, the instability to learn from previous experiences regarding primitive accumulation and how to fight it through democratisation (including broad alliances and interest based representation as a complement to liberal democracy) continues to hold back advances, and even the ability to contain right wing populism-com-identity politics.
In short:
Blinkered and poor analyses of the fate of the ‘old’ social democratic-cum-reformist-communist Left during the Cold War – plus the rise of ‘politics of order’ and it’s devastating generation of authoritarian rule around the South from the mid-1960s until the rise of the third wave of democracy – continues to hamper the development of a broad new social democratic and liberal oriented Left.

This applies to countries like Indonesia in the South – but also progressives in countries like Sweden. Our previous attempts to link up with likeminded groups and movements in the South were lost in the setbacks in the South and the inability to analyse them.