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Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **What Is So Bad About Forgetting? The Case of Collective Amnesia in Indonesia**

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### **Citation**

Barung, R. K. (2024). *What Is So Bad About Forgetting?: The Case of Collective Amnesia in Indonesia*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# **What Is So Bad About Forgetting?**

The Case of Collective Amnesia in Indonesia



**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands

Bachelor's Thesis: International Relations and Organizations

Bachelor's Project: Readings in the History of Political Thought

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Word Count: 7992

Embargo: Open

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(Seasia News, 2024)

## Introduction

What is happening here? Although it seems like any other social media post one would see as they scroll through their feed, it is rather a daunting look at Indonesia's collective memory. I see tweets and posts like the one above and every time a wave of emotions strikes me. Sadness, anger, disappointment, and hopelessness are common every time I come across posts like this on social media. This post which garnered over 300,000 likes on Instagram, references the growing trend of naturalization of Dutch football players with Indonesian roots to represent the Indonesian football team (Seasia News, 2024). The upper half of the post paints a dialogue between Dutch Colonial Sailors and Indigenous Indonesians in the 1600s where the Dutch are seen asking the indigenous leader to have his people "work" for the Dutch. This is then followed by the bottom half of the post where 400 years later, the President of the Indonesian Football Federation is seen asking the Dutch Federation's President for his people back. One could see this post in a lighthearted manner, seeing as the result of these naturalizations has led to the recent success of the Indonesian National Team, however, this is simply revisionist history, a dangerous one at that. One comment under this post alone reads "After being told about history lessons while still in school which led us to "hate" the Dutch, I just now want to say THANK YOU to CORNELIS DE HOUTMAN, thank you for stopping by, brother."<sup>1</sup> (el\_maulana18, 2024). This may seem like an extreme case to single out, however, hundreds and thousands of other comments and posts share this similar sentiment that the Dutch's role in Indonesia was merely transactional and more eerily, collaborative. Dutch colonization has lost its meaning as the Netherlands is now seen as a long-lost partner of Indonesia.

What is being lost here? To put it bluntly, the colonial relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia is lost, specifically the violent behavior of the Dutch towards the Indonesians throughout the colonial period. This was a period of Indonesian history that saw the violent exploitation, repression, and atrocities committed against the Indonesian people. Prince Diponegoro, a Javanese Prince who is now remembered as a national hero who fought against Dutch colonial rule once said that "the Dutch are bad at heart", alluding to their evil actions as they would show no respect to the Indigenous people of Indonesia (Reybrouck, p. 45, 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> My Translation of the comment, original comment is as follows "Setelah dicekoki tentang pelajaran sejarah saat masih sekolah yg menggiring kita untuk "Membenci" belanda, Baru sekarang gw ucapin TERIMA KASIH sama CORNELIS DE HOUTMAN, terimakasih sudah mampir kakak"

Among these atrocities was the Java War of the 1800s which saw the death of over 200,000 Indonesians in battle and through famine, accounting for more casualties than the War of Independence from 1945 to 1949 (Reybrouck, p. 45, 2024). This was the reality of the Dutch colonial period, to reshape and revise it meant forgetting those who fought and struggled for the nation. Comparing this reality to the language used by Indonesians to describe the historical period contemporarily, it is rather a sinister reflection of modern Indonesian society. This idea of ignoring essential parts of history is a daunting reality. This is what this paper seeks to do by highlighting the Indonesian case. Indonesia's past is rich yet troublesome, and its eras are unique, having gone through a colonial past as well as a highly repressive regime in the late 20th century, Indonesia's history has gone through a fair share of turmoil. One scholar, Paul Bijl (2012), puts it best, stating that "in Indonesia, colonialism has also left traces in the public sphere around which a variety of contesting cultural memories have been built. For a long time dominated by national concerns stemming from a repressive and highly centralist government, latter years have shown the slow opening up of Indonesia's memory landscape, with possibly more room for multiple versions of the past." (p. 458).

The acts of forgetting can also be felt and seen in the overall political landscape of modern-day Indonesia. Not only has Dutch colonial history been revised, but other integral points of Indonesian history have faced the same fate. This past February, the people of Indonesia have recently appointed the controversial Prabowo Subianto as president of the country. Subianto's past can be summarized by a 2005 investigation by the Indonesian Human Rights Commission which found that Subianto ordered the kidnappings of 23 pro-democracy activists, 1 of whom was killed and 13 are still missing to this day (Tasevski, 2019). Outcomes from the event only saw the demotion of Subianto from his position as a military general, however, he has never been jailed for these accusations (Tasevski, 2019). Yet, given his troubled past and controversial status, Subianto still managed to win the presidential election in Indonesia. To quote a news article, "Supporters of Prabowo Subianto say his past record has expired. The past in question refers to the case of human rights violations regarding the abduction of students in 1997-1998." (Febriyan, 2023). Although the article only specifies Subianto's supporters as the culprit in forgiving his past, it should be noted that Subianto won in a landslide majority (Strangio, 2024).

This concept of collective forgetting can be defined as collective amnesia. The concept can be best described by McMullin (2011), who labels it as “a failure in memory, and in the case of modernity, it refers to a loss of the evaluative dimension of communal memory” (pp. 91-92). The change or rather a loss of the “evaluative dimension of communal memory” is precisely the illustration of what is happening in both cases of Indonesian colonial history and contemporary history.

Thus, the implications of this forgetting present themselves on a larger scale, which this paper suggests is the incapability of Indonesians to conduct themselves in politics. One op-ed by Utami (2024) covers this claim, stating that “What is happening to us today is collective amnesia. Essentially, thanks to 32 years of being under an autocracy, we never had the chance to train our muscles in practicing democracy”, she goes on to paint the issue as a systemic issue where “We [Indonesians] were taught to understand colonization and the struggle for independence so we could appreciate it, to memorize the five *Silas* and patriotic songs, but we were not given the tools to question the state or participate meaningfully in politics”. Collective amnesia has led to the dumbing of Indonesian citizens. Indonesians are not equipped to carry out democratic duties as they do not possess any political care or responsibility.

This paper will seek to explore this notion of collective amnesia and its implications sequentially through the research question **What is so harmful about forgetting?** The case of revision in Indonesian history dictates that changes in Indonesia's collective memory are occurring. Thus, a literature review on collective memory will be done to explain how they are formed, the role collective amnesia plays in its formation, and the implications of collective amnesia itself. Hannah Arendt's (1958) work *The Human Condition* will be used to give a unique insight into diagnosing the problem. Arendt's concept on the faculty of human action will be delved into to describe what is needed in conducting politics. This paper will argue how collective amnesia contests Arendt's concept of human plurality that is inherent to politics, how it prevents the space for politics to be manifested, and lastly, how it creates the conditions for tyranny. In the end, these Arendtian concepts will later be re-discussed with the Indonesian case to illustrate my claims in practice. The Indonesian case will also be used to discuss what can be done to alleviate collective amnesia and why it continues to persist.

## Literature Review

A crucial aspect of creating collective memory is the inevitability of collective amnesia. The general scholarly debate on collective amnesia mostly touches on this inevitability. The memories that are chosen to be forgotten tend to be formed by individuals of power who can use this opportunity to create collective memory that best shapes their rhetoric. The consequences that come from this are twofold, the first being the creation of a dominant and subordinate class in society after the formation of collective memory, and the second being the permanent loss of historical memory.

To begin, collective memories are “memories which contribute to defining the identity of a group”, they strengthen social bonds by allowing individuals to feel a sense of belonging within a group as well as the ability to shape parts of one’s identity (Tanesini, 2018, p. 199). Collective memories are “enduring because they are endorsed as beliefs” and “they are shared because they are common to most members of the group” (p. 212). Collective memory creates a reality where individuals can embody others who live amongst themselves. However, paradoxically, creating these collective memories involves the faculty of forgetting or collective amnesia. In this same chapter, Tanesini takes a psychological approach to explaining the creation of collective memories. He creates a “kind of strong memory ignorance” which consists of a form of “self-deception” to create self-admiration and a “self-serving bias” (p. 212). He argues further that the creation of collective memories tends to fall down this path of ignorance due to individuals being much more inclined to remember actions that “exemplify traits predictive of success”, which in turn creates a reality where a group’s collective memory is only seen in a positive light, ignoring others that might highlight a harsher reality (p. 212). Moreover, Tanesini argues that fluency over one’s past is another factor in the pitfall of creating collective memories. Humans tend to believe that the history they can recite well or perfectly is a “proxy for accuracy”, meaning that collective memories that are often recalled are more likely to be “endorsed” and “believed” (p. 212). Both these examples represent a form of ignorance as their inaccuracies are taken as reality. Collective amnesia thus not only becomes a paradoxical issue but also a daunting one, as the preservation of memory in itself, requires a faculty of mass forgetting.



This portion of the review will cover how this inevitability of collective amnesia is done vis-a-vis nationalism. Nationalism here can be briefly defined as the doctrine that gives individuals a sense of togetherness or as Ernest Renan (2018) puts it a “vast solidarity” that embodies the “sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and of those one is yet prepared to make” (p. 261). This solidarity that embodies the past and present of the nation is rooted in consent or “the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life” (p. 261). Renan argues that nations require individuals to forget, pointing to the fact that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (p. 251). Renan provides the example that most French citizens have more than likely forgotten about the Saint Bartholomew Massacre or the Massacres in Midi, as forgetting them was essential to the creation of the French nation-state (p. 251). Another scholar, Carsten (1995), in their article covering the politics of memory, brings forward a similar sentiment by claiming that forgetting history is essential as “the past is to a considerable extent one of diversity, but the future can be projected as one of similarity and kinship.” (p. 330). Another scholar, Billing (1995) claims that the act of forgetting is synonymous with its counterpart, remembrance. However, this remembrance takes shape in the form of selective memory and can be seen as a failure in remembering one’s history, much like the discussion brought forward by Tanesini. Billing claims that “every nation must have its history, its own collective memory. This remembering is simultaneously a collective forgetting: the nation, which celebrates its antiquity, forgets its historical recency” (p. 2). This sentiment is also shared by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1874, as cited in Cheng, 2014), who argues that

[W]e must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. This is the point that the reader is asked to consider: that the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and a system of culture (p. 4).

Nietzsche’s claim paints collective amnesia not only as a necessity but also in a positive light. Nietzsche alludes to the question of which memories should be remembered and forgotten. Understanding who gets to filter these memories can be seen through the implication of creating collective memory under nationalism.

Implications of creating systemic forms of collective memory result in it being perverted to serve the purpose of those in power. Tanesini (2018) argues that strong ignorance that is present in the formation of collective memory is typically a manifestation of memories of powerful members of one's community and not of others (p. 214). He argues further that "due to the mediation of social power, perceived expertise, and the ability to take up the role of main narrator of past events", those in power can shape the collective memory of the masses (p. 214). This notion of control is discussed by Cross (2023), who argues that "the framing of collective historical memory to influence practices and collective amnesia are both efforts to control the memory narrative of events" (p. 6).

Moreover, this deliberate act of narrating history through the eyes of those in power is discussed in Henry Rousso's (1991) piece, the *Vichy Syndrome*, where he discusses the collective memory shaping of post-1944 France (p. 10). He explains that "The trauma of the Occupation, and particularly that trauma resulting from internal divisions within France, reveals itself in political, social, and cultural life." (p. 10). In the case of post-Vichy France, Rousso paints how Charles De Gaulle "established the founding myth of the post-Vichy period" and as his leadership and legitimacy were unchallenged the newly crowned leader "subsequently lost no opportunity to write and rewrite the history of the war years" (Rousso, 1991, p. 16). Rousso's main thesis on the Vichy Syndrome delves into how French collective memory was systemically shaped by Charles De Gaulle to look at the collaborative relation between Vichy France and Nazi Germany differently. The recollection of this historical piece is contemporarily met with a large sentiment of shame, one that is now shunned and repressed (p. 10). The French were able to repress this memory through what is called "resistancialism", or a process "that sought to minimize the importance of the Vichy regime and its impact on French society, including its most negative aspects" (p.10).

This can also be seen in the collective memory shaping of post-colonial states whose memory is shaped by their leaders to remember proudly their struggle against colonial oppression. Paul Bijl (2012), argues that the Indonesian leader Sukarno, framed "official history" to primarily focus on the Indonesian Revolution in the second half of the 1940s with little attention to the colonial period (p. 453). He argues further that Dutch colonial history in Indonesia is remembered mostly

“for the consistent and geographically widespread resistance of inhabitants of the archipelago” (p. 453). This focused form of memory aims to invoke a sense of pride and strength by shaping the Indonesian struggle in this manner. The colonial period, on the other hand, highlights a period of weakness, therefore by highlighting the resistance, Indonesian collective memory is shaped with pride through the eyes of its leader. This historical piece resonates with the argument Tanesini puts forward regarding the human tendency to remember history that is “predictive of success” (Tanesini, 2018, p. 212). The Indonesians in this case chose to collectively forget a haunting reality from their past to preserve the reputation and harmony of the nation-state.

The consequence of collective amnesia in both these historical cases, whether rooted in shame or pride, creates a structural issue after the creation of a nation’s collective memory. Individuals who do not hold great social power are seen as subordinates to those who are. Tanesini argues for this, explaining that when collective memories are “self-serving” to the ruling elites, the adoption of said collective memory “functions to boost the intellectual self-trust of members of dominant groups” (p. 215). Intellectual self-trust here can be interpreted as the level of optimism or belief one has over their judgment and belief in a particular domain (p. 215). Tanesini provides the example of Black British people who contemporarily are framed as a “problem” in British society as they are either seen as victims of a crime, individuals who pose a threat to social cohesion or are discriminately seen as criminals (p. 215). Thus, individuals who belong to these minority groups are stuck in this “vicious cycle” where their intellectual self-trust continues to dwindle creating the loss of self-respect whilst also simultaneously inflating the self-trust and ego of the dominant group (p. 215). Collective amnesia thus creates a structural issue that can only be felt after the formation of collective memory. Collective amnesia creates an environment where there will always be a winner and a loser in contemporary society, a situation filled with discriminative sentiments felt toward a group that had no role in shaping the nation’s collective memory.

Further implications of collective amnesia can be seen through its rather eerie effect on the permanent loss of collective memory. To quote Carsten (1995) once again, these systemic forms of forgetting not only mean revisionist thinking may trump all, but rather “the stories which are not told, the relatives who are no longer significant, are forgotten through the fact that no

information about them is transmitted. One cannot forget what one has never known” (p. 330). Paul Bijl (2012), presents a similar example where “In Aceh, a widespread assumption is, for instance, that one will forget, but that this is acceptable as someone else, namely a higher political or intellectual authority, will remember” (p. 454). This idea brings into conversation the arguments made by Tanesini that certain members of society are held in higher regard as they are seen as the creators and guardians of a nation’s collective memory and Carsten’s argument that collective memory will eventually be lost. Lastly, if one were to make the distinction that collective amnesia rather mimics a form of ignorance and not complete amnesia, Carsten’s argument essentially explains that permanent loss of memory is inevitable if collective amnesia were to persist in a group’s collective memory. This implication or rather consequence, can be felt as the notion of “one cannot forget what one has never known” will inevitably occur if stories are left to be revised or forgotten.

The scholarly debate regarding collective amnesia, although exhaustive, covers the topic as a necessity in the formation of collective memory, claiming it as a given. Implications that come from collective amnesia present a contemporary structural issue and the permanent loss of history. However, its implications on the world of conducting politics are yet to be discussed. This is how Hannah Arendt will be used in this paper. Arendt’s concepts will serve as a counter-argument to accepting the inevitability of collective amnesia. If most scholars were to think that forgetting is a given, Arendt’s concepts would argue for the opposite, explaining how collective amnesia prohibits a political life and the looming possibility of past mistakes in history repeating itself.

## **Arendt**

Arendt will be used in a threefold manner in this section. As previously mentioned, the Arendtian concept of action, or how Arendt envisions a political life will be the basis of this section. Within this framework of action is the sub-topic of remembrance, which will touch on how remembering one's collective past is crucial to Arendtian politics. Firstly, I argue that forgetting contests the Arendtian concept of human plurality inherent to action. Second, I argue that forgetting prohibits the space for politics to be manifested. Implications from both these claims converge to create my final claim that forgetting creates the conditions of tyranny.<sup>2</sup>

### **Action, Remembrance & Tyranny**

For Arendt (1958), Politics is remembering (p. 8). Arendt argues that “action in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history” (pp. 8-9). To understand why Arendtian politics relate to remembrance, the activity of action and its components will first be explained. The concept can be defined as a “means to take an initiative”, “to begin” or “to set something into motion” (p. 177). These beginnings are manifested through speech and deeds. Arendt argues that politics “rises directly out of acting together, the “sharing of words and deeds” (p. 198), and that “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth in which we take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (p. 176). Words and deeds allow humans to freely express themselves for who they are and their unique selves. Additionally, words and deeds allow men to distinguish each other from one another as humans live amongst one another. This is because “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” (p. 7). Plurality is the idea that through the abundance of humans collectively inhabiting this shared world, we can connect and distinguish ourselves from one another. Arendt places this condition of plurality in such high regard as it is the condition of “all political life” (p. 7). Humans are born into a world amongst others, hence, to Arendt, the highest faculty of life is our ability to live and interact with one another. This plurality consists of two characters for Arendt, equality and distinction. Arendt explains that men who interact with one another must be equal, “if men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before

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<sup>2</sup> To reiterate, Arendt's concepts will mostly be scrutinized through *The Human Condition* (1958). However, as the discussion moves to tyranny, parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) will also be used to formulate my claims.

them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them.” (pp. 175-176). Men also have to be distinct from one another as “if men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood” (pp. 175-176).

Forgetting, I argue, challenges the Arendtian concept of plurality. This is how memory and remembrance play a role in Arendtian politics. With these two characters of plurality, Arendt alludes to the temporal aspect of action wherein it is crucial to also understand and recognize those who come before us and to think of those who will come after us. Memory, thus, not just of one’s own, is necessary to keep the condition of plurality alive. Humans are not beings of isolation and we do not live only amongst the people that are alive today. We are a collective body that transcends time, manifested through the memory we have of others who came before us, and this memory will continue to exist for those who come after our passing. McMullin (2011) shares this sentiment in her interpretation of Arendt, stating that “memory is above all the faculty by which we recognize and preserve the unique, particularly the uniqueness of the individual person publicly showing herself forth in excellence.” (p. 105). Plurality works hand in hand with remembrance to ensure that politics can continue to be manifested. Verovšek (2014), interprets this notion similarly, arguing that for Arendt, “the ability to create a narrative of the self through time is crucial for individuals” as “without this ability, human beings cannot enter into the interpersonal relationships necessary for the creation of unique identities” (p. 390). Because action requires the plurality of men, these narratives are not limited to one man’s memory but also stretch to the common memory of men. Verovšek argues through Arendt that “citizens must be able to establish bonds that cut across social boundaries. These relationships extend both to their ancestors, from whom they inherit the world, and to their descendants, to whom they shall leave it.” (p. 390). Much like how plurality and remembering work together in unison, both personal memory and collective memory are both needed for each other as “individuals depend on the community to provide them with a common framework onto which they can link their individual memories of past events” (p. 390).

Other than the condition of plurality, forgetting or a lack of remembrance also poses a threat to the creation and preservation of a political realm. Arendt (1958) argues that “the whole factual

world of human affairs” depends on “the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember” (p. 95). Political action for Arendt is actualized in a space she calls the *polis*. She describes this *polis* as a location of collective memory or “a kind of organized remembrance” (p. 198). The *polis* first and foremost is the avenue through which men can present themselves, where “the extraordinary” nature of action can be turned into an “ordinary occurrence of everyday life” (p. 197). The second function of the *polis* is to “assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made “products,” the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable” (p. 197). The *polis* allows for remembrance to be manifested. Speech and deeds to Arendt are fragile. They begin in isolation in the thought and memory of the actor and only once they are brought into the public realm can they then be manifested and remembered by others than that of itself. Arendt argues for this, stating that

Without remembrance and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfilment and which makes it, indeed, as the Greeks held, the mother of all arts, the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been. (p. 95).

The *polis* for Arendt can be understood as the embodiment of collective memory or rather a continuous effort to preserve human acts and deeds. It is through the continuous sharing of stories over generations can politics truly exist. Moreover, the Arendtian *polis* is not rooted in its geographical location nor borders, rather “it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together” (p. 198). This avenue of politics does not necessarily require a location, as long as individuals are able to preserve the memory of those who partook in acting together, politics can be manifested anywhere and at any time.

Forgetting thus depletes the space for politics to be manifested. If individuals choose to continue to forget the deeds and acts of others around them, there will not be any space left for anyone to partake in politics. Envisioning this situation reflects a reality where words and deeds have lost all meaning. Politics at this stage is rendered useless. Without the recollection of the words and deeds of others, humans are essentially shouting into the abyss where what they say holds no bearing as they are never put into dialogue. Arendt pictures this reality through the work of the scientist. Arendt argues that the action of the

Scientists, since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence (p. 524).

At this stage, humans have replaced the very essence of what makes human life so worth living. To act and to speak is the single greatest reflection of what it means to be human. According to Arendt, “a life without speech and without action” means to be “dead to the world” as this form of life “has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (p. 176). The ability for men to step into a public realm and reveal themselves to the world is emancipatory, it is freeing. Free from the shackles of everything else in the world, action allows individuals to disclose themselves for who they truly are. Arendt provides the example of the *sans-culottes* or the proletariat class of the French Revolution who most people assume revolted to emancipate themselves from labor. However, they are the greatest reflection of action as in the wake of a new political realm, they were able to truly disclose themselves for who they were by “adopting costumes to distinguish themselves and even derived their names from it” (p. 218). This is why the Arendtian *polis* is crucial. The *polis* ensures that every man who wishes to enter the world of action through speech and deeds to always be appreciated and remembered. The *polis* thus assures collective memory to be built and most importantly preserved. She explains this stating that “those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages” (p. 197).

Lastly, the greatest implication of forgetting is it breeds the condition where politics is replaced by tyranny (p. 221). Arendt holds memory and remembrance in such high regard because she is wary of past mistakes in history repeating themselves. Given that forgetting prohibits the condition of plurality and the creation of a political realm, action now can no longer be manifested. History highlights how a life lived without plurality shows the “impotence of the strong and superior man who does not know how to enlist the help, the co-acting of his fellow men” (p. 189) and instead acts alone. Arendt argues that

The most obvious salvation from the dangers of plurality is monarchy, or one-man-rule, in its many varieties, from outright tyranny of one against all to



benevolent despotism and to those forms of democracy in which the many form a collective body so that the people 'is many in one' and constitute themselves as a 'monarch' (pp. 220-221).

This concept of rule refers to the notion that "men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey" (p. 222). The elite that commands, do so by dictating how collective memory is formed. Arendt argues that the emergence of rule is not rooted in the dismay of men, rather it is the only other substitute for action (p. 222). Because action involves the web of human relations, any act or deed done in the public realm has no guarantee that it will produce any change in the world. It is solely dependent on how others choose to interpret and manifest the words and deeds of the actor. Rule provides an alternative to the unpredictable nature of action, a condition of control (p. 220). At this stage, collective memory diverges solely into the memory of some. The manifestation of the world strictly lies in the vision of the ruling class which seeks to command. This sentiment reflects the arguments made in the literature review of how collective memory tends to mirror the stories and memories of dominant members of society. Every aspect of any tyrannical regime seeks to destroy and abolish any form of contesting memory other than that of the official. Memory is diverse, as when men step into the political realm through their words and deeds, characters of uniqueness and distinction are present to ensure that every man is different from one another. The diversity of memory and men de-anonymizes history, it preserves the stories of individuals that have passed. Within tyranny, memory preserves the stories of struggle and opposition. Action breeds individuality which is ever so problematic when unifying the masses is the goal.

This relationship between the destruction of memory and tyranny is mostly discussed by Arendt in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She covers the relationship straightforwardly. Arendt (1951) provides the case of amnesia in Stalinist Russia, stating that "as for the gift of memory so dangerous to totalitarian rule, foreign observers feel that 'if it is true that elephants never forget, Russians seem to us to be the very opposite of elephants.'" (p. 434). Arendt's example highlights the importance of forgetting and ignorance in shaping a totalitarian regime. These governments find ways to not only eliminate opposition but also to ensure that the existence of such opposition never surfaces (p. 435). She explains this best, stating that "important to the total domination apparatus [is] this complete disappearance of its victims" (p. 434). States will use

every fiber of their being to ensure that only their narrative is preserved. The erasure of memory not only creates a situation where contestation is prohibited but also justifies the atrocities committed by them. McMullin (2011) argues through Arendt that the replacement of collective memory was what led Adolf Eichmann to commit the crimes that he committed with Nazi Germany (p. 104). Eichmann remembered “things almost exclusively specific to his own life narrative; he never fit this narrative into an overarching public sphere in which events had a greater significance than those of his own” (p. 104). Eichmann channeled a form of collective amnesia, changing the evaluative dimension of German collective memory as a reflection of his own. Given that his memory is self-serving, Eichmann saw no wrong in the atrocities he committed. If anything, his memory was completely oblivious to any wrongdoing, or as Arendt notes, “were events like bowling with his superiors, not mass deportations to death camps.” (p. 105). This is the reality of a world where forgetting is rampant. Members of society become pawns of the ruling elites. These individuals can do whatever they wish to do without guilt and most importantly, without repercussions.

These implications of tyranny are how this paper will bring back the Indonesian case. Arendt argues that rule is not only limited to a despotic regime but can also stretch to democracies so long as the people are “many in one” (Arendt, 1958, p. 221). Indonesia, although labeled as a democracy, I argue is not only liable to the conditions of tyranny but rather is transitioning to one as we speak.

## Indonesia

Arendt's constant reminder to not forget and to not repeat mistakes in history reflects the purpose of this paper wholly. From the introduction, my sentiments of sadness and disappointment masked my greater feelings of fear. Indonesia, as mentioned several times throughout this paper not only went through a long period of colonial subjugation but also an oppressive and repressive autocracy that lasted for over 32 years from 1965 to 1998 (Berger, 2008). Their history has always been shaped by those in power. To quote Eep Saefulloh Fatah – a prominent political thinker in Indonesia –

History is important not when events happen but because of what follows. The history of 1965 is important because its impact has been felt in the times since then, right up to the present day. Unfortunately, history is usually made by those who win (Latief, Miryanti & Mahendra, 2005).

The sentiments that come from this reality are that it feels like there is no end in sight. History seems to repeat over and over again as a new dominant group comes in to rule over the masses. Past regimes leading up to the current have destroyed memory into oblivion, leaving no room for Indonesians to remember. With the recent election win of Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia, I believe is continuing down this path of tyranny.

To elect a leader with a past that has yet to be resolved is a complete reflection of what Arendt feared so deeply. It is not merely the fact that Indonesians have chosen to forget one specific moment in an actor's history, it is rather how seamlessly the forgetting occurred. Just 5 years ago, the incumbent president, Joko Widodo, went against Subianto in his re-election campaign and stated that

We understand the problems of this nation and know what we have to do. Our leadership is neither authoritarian nor a dictatorship, we have no track record of violating human rights, we have no track record of violence, and we have no track record of corruption (Andayani, 2019).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> My translation of the quote, the original is as follows "Kami sudah paham persoalan bangsa ini dan tahu apa yang harus kami lakukan. Kami tak punya kepemimpinan diktator atau otoriter, kami tak punya rekam jejak melanggar HAM, kami tak punya rekam jejak lakukan kekerasan, kami tak punya rekam jejak korupsi"

Now, not only has Widodo endorsed his past rival throughout the election, but his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, is Subianto's vice president (Berenschot, 2023). Indonesian politics feels manufactured. Arendt's concept of rule perfectly encapsulates this reality. Arendt's (1958) condition of rule and tyranny, specifically on her point that "men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey" (p. 222). Indonesians are still collectively engaging in "politics", however, it lacks all the conditions that make action meaningful. Indonesian politics lack individuality. Indonesians are not engaging in politics for the sake of disclosing oneself, they are doing so because the state promotes them to do so. Arendt would argue that Indonesians have failed in keeping her conditions of plurality. How can Indonesians ever step into the political realm if they are not able to recognize the words and deeds of actors that came before them?

From Subianto's past to Widodo's statement, Indonesian citizens fail to understand that it is them who hold the power to keep these individuals in check. Arendt argues for this through her concept of promise. Promising provides a remedy to the unpredictable nature of action (Arendt, 1958, p. 244). Promising creates the condition where any actor, once they disclose themselves into the public realm, always be bound to their act (p. 244). This is because men "can never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow" nor are they able to foretell the consequences of their actions (p. 244). Thus, the faculty of promising depends on men other than the actor himself to remember the acts that he has committed. Promises also serve as an alternative to the Arendtian rule as the unpredictability of action remains untouched (p. 244). These acts will still possess the ability to move however they want, however, there is a constant remembrance by others that no matter how long an actor chooses to ignore their acts, men will always be there to remind him of his deeds. Insofar as plurality is upheld, these reminders will never cease to exist as the men will continue to share the words and deeds of actors that have come before them.

This is the form of action Indonesians can practice and manifest. In fact, they are already present in contemporary Indonesia. *Aksi Kamis* or The Thursday Act is a grassroots political movement that seeks to find justice for the victims of human rights abuses by the Indonesian government, namely the victims of the 1965 massacre and the 1998 riots (Agne, 2024). Every Thursday at 15:00 for the past 17 years, hundreds of activists have stood in front of the

President's Palace and demanded the President provide answers for the atrocities committed by the Indonesian government and bring the officials who partook in them to be brought into justice (Agne, 2024). Unfortunately, in the 17 years of *Aksi Kamis*, the most the Indonesian government has done was to set up a short meeting between the activists and President Joko Widodo back in 2018 (Ihsanuddin & Krisiandi, 2018). Ever since that meeting, nothing has been done by the Indonesian government to continue dialogue with the activists. Although no change has yet to come from this movement, these acts still capture the Arendtian faculty of promising perfectly. This is Arendtian politics manifested in its purest form. It reflects the emancipatory idea of action wherein individuals can release onto the world their words and deeds whilst also preserving the promises that were made by others. Perhaps, given the right circumstances and a rise in political care, the demands of *Aksi Kamis* can be realized if Indonesians recognize their capacity to act.

### **Love Of The Nation**

One final intuitive hunch I cannot seem to ignore when discussing this issue of collective amnesia is *why* we continue to forget. As previously discussed, Indonesians still possess the capacity to invoke change. We are capable of changing our fate and yet, no change occurs. We continue to forget and ignore. I would like to attempt and discuss this issue through Arendt's conception of love.

I argue that we continue to forget not just because of the regime we belong to but because bringing back memories invokes change that is always uncomfortable. Going against "official" history means going against the nation-state. We challenge the very thing most citizens cherish most. Their love and respect for the nation have blinded them from being able to accept any other forms of alternative history. Understanding this love for one's nation may serve to explain the persistence of collective amnesia in modern Indonesian society.

Arendtian love explains the preservation of forgetting. The concept provides a reason why individuals continue to believe state propaganda and choose to ignore history, even if it comes at the cost of the very individuals it proclaims to aid. Arendtian love can be best understood as a form of love that can destroy the public realm and politics altogether. Arendt famously claims

that love not only is an apolitical force but rather an antipolitical force and “perhaps the most powerful of all apolitical human forces” (Arendt, 1958, p. 242). Arendt argues that love should remain in the private sphere or the space in which politics does not exist. Multiple interpretations of Arendtian love seek to explain the antipolitical nature of love, however, one scholar, Butorac (2018), scrutinizes one form of Arendtian love well, naming it “neighborly love” (p. 711). This neighborly love is a concept mostly derived from Arendt’s (1996, as cited in Butorac, 2018) dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine*, which defines this form of love as a force that requires one to love one’s neighbor/peer irrespective of who and what they are (p. 711). Butorac compares this form of love to “God’s unconditional love” (p. 711). The notion of unconditionality is crucial to the conception of neighborly love as it erases the distinction between humans (p. 711). Butorac claims that this unconditionality “sublimates our uniqueness, that dimension of plurality that distinguishes us” (p. 711). Through unconditional love, no longer are men able to be unique nor are they able to distinguish themselves from one another. This is iterated by Butorac, claiming that “Man and neighbor become untethered from the characteristics that distinguish and relate them in public life, losing all sense of their uniqueness” (p. 711). It is for this reason that neighborly love is antipolitical as Arendtian action and the public realm would cease to exist if men were not able to truly disclose themselves and all of their personhood. This form of love is frankly also impossible to apply on such a grand scale. By attempting to emulate God’s unconditional love, the concept becomes unworldly. It is something godlike, a trait belonging to an eternal that can never fully be achieved as humans are limited to the capacities that they possess. To love every human irrespective of whoever and whatever they are is quite literally impossible. In so far as men are capable of loving, they are essentially “loving” nothing. This unnatural form of love can only cause further peril if forced onto the public realm.

To finally bring the Indonesian case back into the picture, one author, Aspinall (2015), brings forward an analysis of the new form of nationalism present in modern-day Indonesia. One of his arguments lies on the topic of national dignity (p. 78). Here, he points to an underlying problem of “deep insecurities among both the Indonesian elite and public about Indonesia’s own record of achievement and its place in the world” (p. 80). These insecurities lead to questionable policy decisions and behavior shaping of Indonesian citizens (p. 79). One striking example used by

Aspinall is when the Agriculture Minister of Indonesia placed an import ban on a crucial Indonesian household spice simply because they are typically used as dog and cat food (p. 79). The reasoning behind such a ban was to restore respect for Indonesia in the eyes of other countries and the minister was ready to receive backlash as he “was willing to do anything for the Republic of Indonesia’ (p. 79).

This minister’s “love” for the country perfectly captures the issue Arendt brings forward. She argues that “society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family” (Arendt, 1958, p. 39). By forcing the idea that all members of a country are meant to love one another regardless of their different traits, backgrounds, and even general whereabouts, the notions of conformity and the inability to think for oneself arise. For one cannot “love” a nation nor can it “love” every individual within a nation. This notion of one great family reflects the tenet of neighborly love that seeks to eradicate all uniqueness through unconditionality. It is rather fitting to point out the implications of tyranny that can be drawn from this line of thought. This is brought up by Arendt's initial critique of modern society where she says that “because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world” (p. 52). Arendtian love paints the condition of modern Indonesian society perfectly. Love is and always has been a strong force. Arendt understood this, she saw the powerful capacity love had in human relations and foresaw the harrowing effects it might have if it were to be mixed with politics. Perhaps it is uncomfortable to go against the thing one loves most, however, just like in life, to love also means to be honest. It is time for Indonesians to be honest with the state of our society, for it is not one of prosperity but one of rule.

## Conclusion

I have presented the emergence of collective amnesia in Indonesia. I argued that this phenomenon is rampant and plagues modern Indonesian society. The paper delves into the harms of this collective amnesia through the lens of several scholars who partook in the conventional debate. This paper contributes to the discussion of the debate by using Hannah Arendt's concepts of action to explain how collective amnesia prohibits a political life. Moreover, this paper proposes two things for Indonesia and its citizens, the first as a call to action and the second as an attempt to wake Indonesians up from forgetting. This paper suggests the inevitable fall towards tyranny for Indonesia if forgetting were to persist. Indonesian citizens have to regain a sense of remembrance alongside the realization that change can only happen through them. Further research can expand on the interplays of how to solve this issue of collective amnesia through Arendt, perhaps through her concept of storytelling. Lastly, the limitations of this paper lie in the scope of how I used Arendt. *The Human Condition* and a few excerpts from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Love and Saint Augustine* were used. A greater discussion could have been made if I had been able to incorporate the last work in Arendt's canon *The Life of Mind*. The interplays between memory and action are discussed extensively in her final work. However, as I have yet to fully read the work, creating claims from it would not have been just or adequate.



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