

Australian opposition leader concerned about Indonesian instability

The Labor Party and the Suharto junta

Mike Head
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Australian Labor Party leader Kim Beazley has called on the Suharto regime in Indonesia to respect the human rights of protesting students ... because the unrest in Jakarta is driving down the value of the Australian dollar.

Beazley made his comment on Thursday, after the previous day's rioting and looting sparked by the cold-blooded killing of six students by Indonesian troops on May 12. The turmoil helped send the Australian dollar to below 63 US cents--a 12-year low--as investors and financiers pulled funds out of South East Asia as a whole.

Later in the day, Beazley reiterated his alarm about the flow-on effects for the Australian economy. There had to be political change, he said, because the instability in Indonesia threatened to cause not only a 'terrible loss of life' but problems throughout the region.

Beazley's professed concern for the plight of Indonesian students is somewhat belated. Just two-and-a-half years ago he was in Jakarta for the signing of a security treaty between the Suharto regime and the then Labor government on December 18, 1995.

As deputy prime minister, Beazley accompanied his leader, Paul Keating, foreign affairs minister Gareth Evans, defence minister Robert Ray and Australian generals to the ceremony with Suharto and his generals. The treaty committed Canberra to consider joint military action in the event of 'adverse challenges' to the Suharto dictatorship. The wording was unusual. Normally, security treaties refer to 'external' threats.

In other words, the Labor leaders stood ready to back Suharto militarily against the Indonesian masses. Keating told a press conference that 'the emergence of President Suharto's New Order Government in the 1960s was the event of most positive strategic significance to Australia in the post-war years.'

These comments were uttered without so much as a whisper of dissent from any section of the Labor and trade union leadership, including Beazley. Suharto and his fellow generals seized power in a long-prepared CIA-backed coup in 1965-66, to prevent the development of social revolution against the government of his predecessor, Sukarno. Suharto's troops and thugs massacred more than one million workers and peasants within a year. For weeks the rivers of Java and Sumatra were choked with the corpses of their victims.

By entering a formal alliance with Suharto, the Labor leaders signalled their determination to protect the regime in the face of a growing movement of Indonesian workers against the low-wage and repressive conditions maintained by the 30-year-old dictatorship. In the previous year, Indonesian workers, paid as little as \$1.40 a day, had engaged in 1,130 strikes--a threefold rise--despite continuous military involvement in the suppression of industrial action.

The Laborite leaders were already deeply implicated in the crimes of the Indonesian generals. The Labor government had long supplied sophisticated military equipment, intelligence data and expertise to the Indonesian junta. More Indonesian military personnel, including high-ranking officers, trained in Australia than in any other country. As defence minister for several years in the late 1980s, Beazley played a central part in this collaboration.

This military partnership, maintained by the Howard government since 1996, directly expresses the profit interests of corporate Australia. Some of its best-known names--such as BHP, Rio Tinto, CC Amatil, Transfield, Pacific Dunlop, ICI and Boral--have flocked to Indonesia over the past decade to exploit the abundant supply of cheap labour guaranteed by the Suharto junta,

as well as the archipelago's enormous mineral wealth and an emerging upper middle class consumer market.

By the end of 1995 approved investment had soared to more than \$9.1 billion, from just over \$2.8 billion at the end of 1994--making Australia Indonesia's 10th largest foreign investor. Australian exports had also grown more than 50 percent from \$1.3 billion in 1990 to \$2 billion in 1994.

In joining hands with Suharto on behalf of Australian big business, Keating and Beazley were following closely in the footsteps of their Labor predecessors.

Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam held two intimate meetings with Suharto in Yogyakarta in September 1974 and Townsville in April 1975 to encourage the generals to annex the former Portuguese colony of East Timor. Whitlam's role climaxed on December 4, 1975, just three days before the Indonesian invasion of the territory, when he stated on television that if Indonesia went in, 'We would do absolutely nothing.' Since then at least 200,000 Timorese people have died as a result of the Indonesian takeover.

In December 1989, it was again a Labor government--that of Bob Hawke--which took the next major step. Foreign minister Evans and his Indonesian counterpart, Ali Alatas, signed the Timor Gap Treaty in a back-slapping and glass-clinking ceremony as they flew over the Timor Sea. The Labor government became the only administration in the world to legally recognise the Indonesian annexation of East Timor.

The Labor leaders supported Indonesian control over Timor in order to provide Australian-based companies with guaranteed access to the immense wealth of the Timor Sea--estimated to hold up to 1 billion barrels of crude oil.

The December 1995 treaty showed the readiness of the Labor leaders to participate in violent anti-working class repression in order to defend the profits of Australian companies. It underscored the necessity for a unified struggle by the Indonesian, Australian and international working class against not only the Suharto junta but the capitalist system itself, and all its political servants.

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