Government leaders pay tribute to Indonesia's former dictator Suharto

Peter Symonds
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The death of former Indonesian dictator Suharto on Sunday at the age of 86 has elicited a stream of tributes from world leaders and in the international press. There is something both disturbing and ominous about praise for a man who was responsible for the murder of at least half a million people in the 1965 coup that brought him to power and the deaths of another 200,000 following the 1975 Indonesian annexation of East Timor.

Suharto's funeral, with full military honours, took place on Monday in the central Javan city of Solo. While he was forced to step down in 1998, the regime that Suharto established remains largely intact, despite its more recent democratic trappings. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, himself a Suharto-era general, presided over the lavish ceremony, hailing the dead dictator as "a loyal fighter, a true soldier and a respected statesman".

While no prominent US official attended, a White House spokesman announced that President Bush had sent "his condolences to the people of Indonesia on the loss of their former president". Two of South East Asia's longstanding autocrats—former Malaysia Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew—flew to Indonesia to pay their last respects to the military strongman.

Such was the scale of Suharto's crimes that the media could not completely ignore the brutality and corruption of his regime. But the coverage has been at pains to emphasise his "positive contribution" and urge a "balanced approach" to his legacy. A comment in the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, hailed Suharto for transforming Indonesia from "an economic basket case and a trouble maker in the region" under previous President Sukarno into one of Asia's tiger economies. "For all his flaws, Suharto deserves to be remembered as one of Asia's greatest leaders," it declared.

The most open defence of Suharto's record has come from the Australian establishment. Leaders, past and present and across the political spectrum, have recorded their debt of gratitude to the former dictator for "stabilising" the country by physically eliminating the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and serving as a key ally in Asia for more than three decades.

Former Labor Party Prime Minister Paul Keating, who attended the funeral with Attorney General Robert McClelland, told the *Australian* that he warmly remembered Suharto as an old friend. He dismissed the attention given to Suharto's record on human rights and corruption as "missing the point", adding as an aside that "the only point where that's an issue is on [East] Timor and on the PKI." If Suharto had not been president, Keating declared, "We [Australia] wouldn't have been spending 2 percent of GDP on defence—it would have been more like 8 or 9 percent."

Keating's remarks echo his comment as prime minister in 1994 when he declared that no country was more important to Australia than Indonesia. He described the emergence of Suharto's New Order government as "the single most beneficial strategic development to have affected Australia and its region in the past 30 years." The following year, the Keating Labor government signed a security treaty formalising Canberra's close military ties with the Indonesian dictatorship.

These apologetics are politically telling. For those who lived through this period or have studied it, Suharto's atrocities rank among the worst of the century. Just over a year ago, Saddam Hussein was found guilty in a rigged trial in US-occupied Iraq and executed for crimes that pale beside the bloodletting carried out by Suharto in the 1965 coup. The widow of ousted President Sukarno said of Suharto's legacy: "He was Indonesia's Pol Pot"

For 32 years, the Suharto dictatorship served as the critical linchpin for US imperialism and its junior partner, Australia, in suppressing revolutionary struggles throughout the region and containing the influence of the Soviet Union and China. In the 1960s, as it was becoming more deeply embroiled in the war in Vietnam, Washington was increasingly antagonistic to Indonesia's President Sukarno, a bourgeois nationalist, whose response to deepening social unrest at home was to posture, with the PKI's assistance, as an "anti-imperialist" and to present his limited reforms as "socialist" measures.

The ousting of Sukarno was one of the CIA's success stories. In one blow, it entrenched a military regime that was loyal to Washington, fiercely anti-communist and ruthless in its suppression of any political opposition. The pretext for the Indonesian coup was the kidnapping and murder of six top generals on September 30, 1965, allegedly at the PKI's instigation. General Suharto promptly established his firm control over Jakarta, sidelined Sukarno and, exploiting the deaths of his rivals, whipped up a carefully orchestrated campaign of violence against the PKI, its supporters and anyone suspected of socialist sympathies.

US diplomats and CIA officers, led by the US ambassador to Indonesia, Marshall Green, were intimately involved in the slaughter that followed, supplying "shooting lists" of top PKI

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officials to the Indonesian military for interrogation and murder. What was involved was the physical destruction of a party with a membership numbering in the millions. Lacking enough death squads, the military turned to right-wing Muslim organisations, which willingly participated in the elimination of a party that was seen as a threat to traditional landowners and other vested religious interests.

Reliable estimates put the final death toll at between half a million and a million. To cite just one contemporary article, *Time* magazine reported: "The killings have been on such a scale that the disposal of corpses has created a serious sanitation problem in northern Sumatra where the humid air bears the reek of decaying flesh. Travellers from these areas tell us small rivers and streams have been literally clogged with bodies. River transportation has become seriously impeded."

The Stalinist PKI, which was based on the "peaceful road to socialism", not revolutionary politics, made no attempt to mobilise against the military. Its entire orientation was to subordinate the working class and peasant masses to Sukarno. Even as the military was murdering its members, the PKI leaders insisted that the party should do nothing to alienate Sukarno. Sukarno, however, was incapable of seriously challenging the US-supported military. After temporising for months, he formally handed over power to Suharto in March 1966.

The New Order regime that emerged from the carnage borrowed from the corporatist outlook of European fascism. Every aspect of society—from government administration, the police and judiciary to the media, trade unions and peasant organisations—was subordinated to the state and Suharto's military high command, in particular. All forms of dissent were systematically crushed. Hundreds of thousands of PKI members and supporters were detained in concentration camps into the late 1970s.

Suharto's much vaunted economic miracle was heavily dependent in the first instance on large amounts of American aid, then from the early 1970s on the increased income produced by the quadrupling of prices for Indonesian oil exports. Particularly sensitive to the danger of rural unrest, Suharto took some limited steps to subsidise farmers. But the country's staggering social inequality was nowhere more evident than in the corporate empire built up by Suharto, his family and close business cronies through state monopolies and patronage on a vast scale. A UN report last year estimated that Suharto had siphoned off $35 billion. In the end, having loyally served his purpose as a Cold War ally, Suharto became an obstacle in the era of globalised capital to the opening up of the Indonesian economy and was summarily cast aside by Washington in the midst of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

For successive US administrations, the Suharto regime was an important ally in Asia. However, for Australian governments, as Keating explained, the Indonesian junta remained "the single most beneficial strategic development" in the region. Successive prime ministers—Labor and Coalition—cultivated the closest of relations with the dictator. In 1972, shortly after being elected, the new Labor government welcomed Suharto in Canberra on the first of two trips to Australia. The following year Prime Minister Gough Whitlam declared: "I have found that fundamentally, the Indonesian and Australian governments have similar views."

The Whitlam government along with the Ford administration in Washington gave the green light for the 1975 Indonesian invasion of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor. Having just suffered a devastating strategic defeat in Vietnam, the US and Australian governments feared that the fledging Timorese independence movement was a potential catalyst for unrest in Indonesia and across the region. For two decades, successive Australian and US governments solidly backed Indonesia's bloody suppression of Timorese resistance, at the cost of 200,000 lives.

One factor in Canberra's support for the Indonesian invasion was always the lucrative oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. Australia became the only country in the world to formally recognise Indonesia's annexation of East Timor—in return for a border agreement and the lion's share of the seabed resources. In the wake of the turmoil following Suharto's fall in 1998, the government of Liberal Party leader John Howard—determined to preempt rival powers, Portugal in particular—made a tactical shift to support Timorese independence. Its military interventions in 1999 and 2006 were to install a regime favourable to Australian interests and, above all, to retain control of the Timor Sea oil and gas.

Australia's intimate relationship with the Indonesian dictatorship and its successors goes well beyond the immediate issue of Timor's energy reserves. Suharto was not only an insurance against political instability in Indonesia, and more generally Asia, but also opened diplomatic and economic doors in South East Asia for Australian governments and corporations.

Even after his political fall from grace in 1998, Suharto continued to enjoy the tacit protection of the powers that be, not only in Indonesia, but in Washington, Canberra and internationally. He was never prosecuted for his bloody crimes against the Indonesian people. Attempts to put him on trial on charges of corruption were shelved using the pretext of his ill health.

The readiness of governments to embrace the dead dictator signifies that the lack of any genuine commitment to democratic rights in the political establishments of any of these countries. Their willingness to brush aside Suharto's atrocities and praise the achievements of his New Order regime is a chilling warning that mass murder is regarded in ruling circles as a legitimate instrument of foreign and domestic policy.

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