

Australia: Official campaign against Indonesian executions steeped in hypocrisy and cynicism

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Broad layers of Australian workers and young people are justifiably repulsed at the impending execution in Indonesia of two Australian citizens—Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran—who were arrested in 2005 and convicted of drug smuggling.

Just six months in office and already under political pressure, Indonesian President Joko Widodo is determined to proceed with the executions, brushing aside appeals for clemency by declaring that nothing should interfere with “our sovereign right to implement our laws.” Six people were executed in January as part of his barbaric law-and-order campaign and another 11, including Chan and Sukumaran, are due to be shot by firing squad in the coming days.

Just as sickening, however, is the staggering cynicism of the official campaign to halt the executions. In a rather belated response to the groundswell of public opposition, the fate of the two Australians has now become a major focus of media attention and political posturing. Not surprisingly, the nine others accompanying the two Australians on death row are rarely mentioned.

The disgusting spectacle reached something of a climax last Thursday when leading figures of the federal Coalition government and opposition Labor Party, along with the Greens, trooped into the parliamentary forecourt at dawn to hold a candlelight vigil for Chan and Sukumaran. Prime Minister Tony Abbott, opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten and a slew of other politicians stood shoulder-to-shoulder in appealing for “mercy.”

Their campaign is steeped in hypocrisy. The fact that Chan and Sukumaran face the firing squad is the direct responsibility of the Australian Federal Police (AFP)

who, rather than making the arrests in Australia, provided detailed information to their Indonesian counterparts, knowing full well that the Australian citizens could face the death penalty.

Chan and Sukumaran along with seven “drug mules”—the so-called Bali Nine—were arrested in 2005 as they were leaving to return to Australia. The father of one of those detained, Scott Rush, had alerted the AFP to the drug smuggling plan before the nine had even left Australia for Bali, and was reassured that his son would be stopped from departing—a promise the AFP did not keep.

A decade later, the AFP guidelines continue to allow Australian police to collaborate with police forces in Indonesia and other countries in cases that could lead to the death penalty. None of those gathered in the parliamentary forecourt last week called for any ban on such intelligence sharing. According to the Fairfax media, the AFP has collaborated with foreign police forces in “potential death penalty situations” on 239 occasions in the past three years alone.

A police spokesperson justified the practice, declaring that the AFP “cannot limit its cooperation to countries that have similar legal systems as Australia.” Under both Coalition and Labor governments, the AFP has memoranda of understanding with police forces in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Japan, China and the United States, as well as Indonesia, all of which impose the death penalty.

The AFP’s secret agreement with the Indonesian police was sealed in 2002 in the wake of the Bali bombings, which had claimed the lives of 202 people, including 88 Australians. Since then the two police forces have established extensive relations in a range of

areas including counterterrorism and joint efforts to prevent refugees reaching Australia from Indonesia by boat.

The fraudulent character of the current campaign against capital punishment is highlighted by the record of both Liberal and Labor Australian governments on the death penalties meted out to the perpetrators of the Bali bombings. In 2003, Coalition Prime Minister John Howard, bluntly declared, “there won’t be any protest from Australia” if death sentences were handed down. After the judgements in 2008, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd insisted that the men “deserve the justice that will be delivered to them.”

Examples of such glaring double standards could be multiplied endlessly. All of those participating in last week’s vigil have blood on their hands.

One of the convenors, Philip Ruddock, declared that he wanted to see an end to state-sanctioned killing around the world. As immigration minister, Ruddock oversaw the barbaric system of “border protection” that condemned hundreds of refugees to death as they sought to reach Australia by boat. This included 353 men, women and children who lost their lives when the SIEV-X sank in 2001—in all likelihood because the Howard government knowingly allowed them to drown to send a message to other refugees that they should not attempt the journey. (See: “Ten years on: The SIEV X tragedy and the assault on democratic rights”)

When it comes to the United States, Australian governments, both Coalition and Labor, maintain a complete silence as scores of people are executed each year. Moreover, the entire political establishment in Canberra has supported the criminal activities of US imperialism under the pretext of the “war on terror”—from the illegal wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria that have cost hundreds of thousands of lives, to the arbitrary detention, torture and murder of prisoners in hell-holes like Guantanamo Bay. The joint US-Australian spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia provides essential targeting data for the Obama administration’s illegal drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen, which have killed hundreds of civilians. These extra-judicial murders are carried out without the slightest pretence of legal process.

The same politicians who are pleading for the lives of Chan and Sukumaran condoned and collaborated in the

torture of Australian citizens Mamdouh Habib and David Hicks. They support the ongoing US-led persecution of another Australian citizen, Julian Assange, whose only “crime” has been to expose the crimes and diplomatic intrigues of US imperialism around the world.

Politicians from across the spectrum are now posturing as opponents of the death penalty, not so much to save the Bali Two, but to save their own political skins amid widespread public hostility to the entire political establishment over its policies of war and austerity. In doing so, they wrap themselves in the Australian flag and would no doubt be satisfied if Chan and Sukumaran won a reprieve, while the remaining nine prisoners were sent to their deaths.

In the event that the executions go ahead, the Australian government, with the full support of the opposition parties, will make its “displeasure” known to Jakarta, but will do nothing that could upset its close economic and strategic ties with Indonesia. As far as Canberra is concerned—and, more importantly, Washington—Indonesia is a vital link in the US “pivot to Asia” and its military build-up against China.

Top American general, Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made the Pentagon’s position unambiguously clear during a visit to Australia late last month. Amid the rising clamour over Chan and Sukumaran, Dempsey pointedly urged stronger relations between Australia and Indonesia, making crystal clear that nothing could be allowed to stand in the way of the vast US-sponsored network of military alliances and partnerships throughout Asia as Washington prepares for war against China.



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