

This week in history: May 23-29

22 May 2022

25 years ago: Political crisis in Indonesia

On May 29, 1997, national elections held in Indonesia expressed the gulf between the Indonesian military dictatorship's political system and growing social unrest in the country.

Despite unprecedented election-related clashes—in which 123 people died—according to official returns, the ruling Golkar party won over 73 percent of the vote, its highest ever proportion. Golkar, run by President Suharto and the military junta, would retain an overwhelming majority of the 425 elected seats in the national assembly.

General Suharto, at the time 76 years old, clung to power in the run-up to the following year's rubber-stamp vote for president by the assembly, which also had 575 appointed members, mainly chosen by the military. Since he seized power in the bloody military coup of 1965-66, Suharto never faced a presidential challenger.

The elections were widely regarded as a fraud. The only parties permitted to stand were those sanctioned by the junta: Golkar, the Muslim-aligned United Development Party (PPP), and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDI).

Support for the PPP increased from 17 percent in 1992 to 23.6 percent. The PDI vote fell dramatically from 15 percent to a mere 2.8 percent, reflecting widespread discontent with Suharto's ousting of opposition figure Megawati Sukarnoputri from its leadership. Megawati, daughter of former president Sukarno, had called on her supporters not to vote for the officially recognized PDI faction.

The underlying social tensions were expressed in violent clashes which erupted throughout the election campaign between supporters of different parties. On the final day of campaigning, the regime deployed riot police and more than 20,000 soldiers to prevent opposition rallies.

Following the elections, concern was expressed in ruling circles in Australia and the US over the lack of an official political safety valve for opposition to Suharto, particularly in light of his age. The US administration had provided a degree of support for Megawati, banking on the possibility of her playing a similar role to that of Corazon Aquino in the Philippines.

Neither Canberra nor Washington was concerned with the democratic rights of the Indonesian masses. Both backed and participated in Suharto's coup, following which more than 1 million workers and peasants were murdered and the largest Communist Party outside of Russia and China was wiped out. Successive governments in both capitals backed the blood-soaked dictatorship to the hilt for over three decades.

Their concerns expressed growing frustration with the continued monopoly control of much of the Indonesian economy by the Suharto family and its cronies. International capital was demanding more open access to cheap labor and markets in Indonesia.

50 years ago: Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek, becomes Taiwan PM

On May 26, 1972, Chiang Ching-kuo, former head of the brutal secret police and the son of Chiang Kai-shek, longtime dictator of Taiwan and leader of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang party, became the new prime minister of Taiwan. His selection as prime minister was a step in preparing his eventual takeover of the aging Kai-shek's position as president.

Chiang Ching-kuo became his father's closest political ally soon after their 1949 flight to Taiwan after defeat in the Chinese Civil War. From 1950 to 1965 he served as director of the secret police and oversaw the torture and assassination of political opponents of the anti-communist regime. The period of "white terror" under the Chiang dynasty in Taiwan saw the imprisonment of over 140,000 suspected political opponents of the Kuomintang. Thousands were executed.

As the younger Chiang came to higher level political positions, a crisis had emerged in Taiwan. The island government had lost significant international support as the United States and other imperialist countries began recognizing and making deals with the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing. In October 1971 Taiwan lost its position in the United Nations as the official representative of all China.

As it had become clear that the Kuomintang dream of launching an imperialist-backed invasion and takeover of mainland China had passed, Chiang Ching-kuo sought out other solutions. Among them was to transform Taiwan's working class into a source of cheap labor for the emerging high-tech and computer markets. Taiwan and the other "Asian Tiger" countries opened themselves up to foreign investors who massively profited off the cheap labor enforced by the various military dictatorships.

Requiring access to international markets, the younger Chiang was forced to accept the "one country, two systems" policy of Deng Xiaoping, paramount leader of the People's Republic of China. Capital flowed in despite the fact that, for most of the world, the Taipei regime was no longer treated as the legitimate government of all of China, a mantle it still nominally claimed. For

example, Japan closed its embassy in Taipei in 1972. But over the next 20 years it made Taiwan a cheap labor components hub for its exports to the US. By 1990 Japan controlled the top 10 Taiwanese auto companies.

75 years ago: British government approves plan to partition India

On May 23, 1947, the British cabinet of Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee gave its approval to a plan for the partition of India along Hindu-Muslim ethno-communalist lines. The ensuing division of the country later in the year would claim the lives of millions.

At the conclusion of World War II, the declining British empire was confronted with the wave of anti-colonial struggles that swept the globe, including in Asia and Africa. In India, opposition to British dominance intensified, culminating in a February 1946 naval revolt in Bombay, which rapidly spread and triggered mass working-class struggles, including general strikes.

The British ruling elite responded by moving towards the granting of a formal independence that would keep India within the sphere of imperialist domination, but that would grant direct control to the local ruling elites.

A British cabinet mission in July 1946 had proposed a federated national government, with semi-autonomous provinces based on religious lines. The British promotion of communalism intensified the agitation of Hindu and Muslim nationalist leaders, who were seeking to ensure that their own sectional capitalist interests would be well-represented in the new state.

Fearing that the federated government would be dominated by the Hindu elite and its political representatives in the Indian National Congress, Muhammad Ali Jinnah of the Muslim League called a “national day of action” in August, 1946. It resulted in major clashes and communal rioting, with thousands killed. The violence would continue, at varying levels, for months.

In March, 1947, Attlee appointed Lord Louis Mountbatten as Britain’s last viceroy of India. He was given a mandate to prepare for formal independence by June 30, 1948. Mountbatten had been encouraged to preserve national unity if possible. Upon his arrival in India, he rapidly concluded that the communal conflicts could be seized upon to divide the oppressed masses of the region on a permanent basis. The British ruling class’s greatest fear was that that the deepening turmoil could discredit all factions of the ruling elite in the subcontinent, creating the conditions for the reemergence of struggles by the working class that transcended ethnic divisions. He lobbied for and won support for a partition from senior Congress leaders.

Mountbatten blithely dismissed warnings that partition would lead to mass killing. This is what occurred when the plan was put into effect in August 1947, with communal violence resulting in anywhere from 200,000 to 2 million deaths. Displacements are estimated at between 10 and 20 million, one of the greatest refugee crises in world history.

100 years ago: Lenin suffers first stroke

On May 25, 1922, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party and head of the Soviet state, suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right arm and leg and impaired other functions. As he later told Leon Trotsky, “I could not even speak or write, and I had to learn everything all over again.”

By July, Lenin had regained his ability to write and move, although he did not officially take up work again until October. There were to be three more strokes, one on December 1922, a third in March 1923, and the final one in January 1924, which killed him.

It was in this last period of his life, one of great physical debility, that Lenin took up a struggle against the increasingly independent and self-seeking bureaucracy in the Soviet state apparatus and Communist Party.

Already, at the 11th Party Congress in March 1922, Lenin had warned, “If we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.”

During Lenin’s convalescence and relative inactivity in 1922, Josef Stalin, who was becoming the central representative of bureaucratic interests against the party and the working class, formed a secret bloc with Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, who began a clandestine campaign against Trotsky in the leading bodies of the party.

In September 1922, Lenin intervened in a dispute between the leaders of the Georgian Communist Party and Stalin over the question of national rights for the smaller, non-Russian nationalities in the proposed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which was to be established in December. Lenin opposed the Great Russian chauvinism of Stalin and his accomplices and defended the Georgian Communists.

In this period, he sought the active collaboration of Trotsky in struggle against the bureaucracy and formed a bloc with him against Stalin. It was in December 1922 that he began the series of letters that have come to be known as “Lenin’s Testament,” in which he ultimately called for the removal of Stalin as General Secretary of the party.



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