

Brutal Indonesian dictator Suharto declared national hero

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On November 10, in ceremonies held at the State Palace in Jakarta, Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto officially declared the brutal dictator Suharto a national hero.

Suharto was a lifelong military man and virulent anti-Communist. In 1965-66 he took power in Indonesia by launching one of the worst mass murders in the 20th century, orchestrating and overseeing the slaughter of more than half a million Indonesians accused of being Communists. His corrupt dictatorship secured the interests of international finance capital and US imperialism, acting as a bulwark of reaction in Southeast Asia. For over thirty years, until his ouster in 1998 in a wave of protests, the Suharto New Order regime maintained capitalist order in Indonesian society through repression and war.

All of these events, from his bloody rise to power to his ignominious removal, occurred in living memory. There is no family in Indonesia that was not caught up in these events. To declare the architect of the worst crime in the country's history a national hero is itself a criminal act of deception.

The rehabilitation of Suharto in Indonesia is an expression of the accelerating turn to authoritarian forms of rule, in response to deepening crisis and mass social anger, by the capitalist class around the globe. This process in Indonesia is bound up with the rise to power of Prabowo.

There had been earlier attempts by the military and figures associated with the dictatorship to declare a Suharto a national hero. These attempts ran up against opposition and mass protests. One year after taking office as president, Prabowo succeeded in completing the process and ignoring protests and opposition.

Prabowo was the son-in-law of Suharto and was a commander in the Indonesian military, serving largely in the special forces, known as Kopassus, from 1974 to 1998. He was the general commander of Kopassus during the final years of the dictatorship.

Trained in the United States at Forts Bragg and Benning, Prabowo was directly responsible for many of the crimes that sustained the New Order regime. He is guilty of military atrocities against civilians in East Timor, West Papua, and Aceh. In one instance alone, the Kraras massacre of 1983 in East Timor, military forces under Prabowo burned villages, ordered the digging of mass graves, and executed around 200 civilians.

As the regime began to weaken and collapse, Prabowo was installed as the elite Army Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad), headquartered in Jakarta, just months before Suharto stepped down, and oversaw the military abduction and murder of activists.

Like many leading generals in the Indonesian military, Prabowo became immensely wealthy in the corrupt heyday of the New Order regime. As his military career ended, Prabowo rose to prominence in politics through Golkar, the party of the Suharto dictatorship, and Gerindra, which broke from Golkar in 2008.

The removal of Suharto in 1998 marked the beginning of a period in Indonesian politics known as the reform era, or Reformasi. The mass protests that ousted the dictator secured a certain degree of freedom of

speech, in which public discussion of the crimes of the regime became possible. But the ruling class figures who took the reins in the reformasi government were bent on protecting and restoring the apparatus of military rule.

Presidents Abduraman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-4) oversaw a continuity of rule between Suharto and the Reformasi era. They preserved the military apparatus intact. Golkar, the party of the dictatorship, was not dismantled, and quickly recovered. The anti-Communist statutes, the legal bedrock of the Suharto dictatorship, were preserved and remain on the books, allowing the prosecution of left-wing organizations. There was no reckoning for the crimes and the criminals of the regime. In 2004, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a military general under the New Order regime, secured the presidency in an alliance with Golkar.

The mass murder of 1965-66

As there was no overhaul of the apparatus of state or the political parties of dictatorship, so too there was no systematic investigation of the crimes of the deposed regime. No official body set about to uncover the facts of the all-too recent past, or to dig up the mass graves of northern Sumatra, eastern Java, and Bali.

Access to national and regional archives did open up, however, and a number of scholars set out to unearth the events of the terrifying year, 1965-66, in which Suharto seized power. The past decades have seen the fruits of these efforts in the publication of a number of groundbreaking historical works. Two excellent films directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), brought the massacres to more prominent international public attention.

The scale of the mass murder in Indonesia could not be covered up so the Suharto regime concocted a national myth to explain what had happened: a failed Communist plot had triggered an eruption of mass outrage in spontaneous acts of uncoordinated local violence. This narrative first emerged in the Western press, with racist depictions of the inscrutable and blood-thirsty Javanese. It was taken up in modified form and became the official narrative.

What we now know can be summarized: in half a year, at least 500,000 unarmed civilians were killed on the basis of their alleged political affiliation with the Indonesian Communist Party. The mass murder was instigated, organized and overseen from the top down by the Indonesian military under Suharto. Over a million people were illegally detained in concentration camps, where they were often tortured and treated brutally, sometimes for decades. All of this occurred with the assistance, oversight, and funding of US imperialism, which was not only fully aware of the death toll, but celebrated it.

Background

The Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) was founded in 1920, the first Communist party in Asia. It confronted immense tasks, unifying the vast colonized masses and working class of the Dutch East Indies for the overthrow of colonialism and capitalism.

Leon Trotsky, in his theory of permanent revolution, demonstrated that only the working class could complete the goals of a democratic revolution, including genuine national self-determination and land reform, by seizing power and taking socialist measures. The capitalist class, regardless of its nationality, was hostile to the working class and counter-revolutionary. This perspective guided the 1917 October revolution and runs throughout the first four congresses of the Communist International.

The defeat of an attempted revolution in 1925-26 drove the PKI underground. The party re-emerged to public prominence at the end of the Japanese Occupation. Adopting the reactionary nationalist perspective of Stalinism, the leadership of the PKI repudiated the program of permanent revolution and spoke of the need for an exclusively national and democratic revolution in order to justify its support for a section of the national bourgeoisie. By the 1950s, under the leadership of D.N. Aidit, the PKI was giving enthusiastic support to the bourgeois nationalist Sukarno.

Sukarno retained his hold on power over the explosive class tensions of Indonesian society by carefully balancing between the rival social forces of the PKI and the military. He attempted to pursue a parallel balancing act on the world stage between the imperialist powers, on the one hand, and the Communist bloc, on the other, as a leader of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement. This perilous strategy imbued Sukarno's every action with a certain volatility.

The PKI became the largest Communist Party in the world outside of the Soviet Union and China. In 1965, the PKI had an estimated 3.5 million members, while an additional 20 million people were members of its affiliated mass organizations. Acting through these organizations the party leadership repeatedly corralled social anger behind illusions in Sukarno. They called off mass strikes and prevented the seizure of land by peasants in an effort to preserve their alliance with the president.

The volcanic tensions beneath the Sukarno presidency mounted. In 1963, Sukarno sought to mobilize the support of the military and the Communist Party behind his military campaign, known as Konfrontasi, against the British creation of Malaysia. The PKI complied and directed the anger of the working masses behind the slogan "Crush Malaysia" in support of the Indonesian military campaign.

September 30: The pretext

The Johnson administration in the United States sought to assert US imperialist interests in Asia on two fronts in 1965: in Vietnam and Indonesia. The results were spectacularly bloody, two of the worst crimes of the twentieth century. Johnson launched the saturation bombing of North Vietnam and by the end of the year the United States had deployed 185,000 troops to Vietnam.

Washington also sought the removal of Sukarno and the destruction of the PKI. Washington had trained over 4,000 Indonesian military officers at US military academies, and there were intimate ties between certain sections of the Indonesian military brass and the Pentagon (Jessica Darden, *Aiding and Abetting: U.S. Foreign Assistance and State Violence*

(Stanford University Press, 2020) p. 49). The difficulty, from the perspective of Washington, lay in orchestrating a military seizure of power without publicly moving against the immensely popular Sukarno.

A conception took shape, discussed secretly in the top circles of US and British intelligence: if a coup attempt were staged by the PKI then the army could move against the party in the name of defending Sukarno. The first draft of this plot appeared in a CIA memo in September 1964. In November 1964, a memo of the British Foreign Office stated, "there might therefore be much to be said for encouraging a premature PKI coup during Sukarno's lifetime." In December, another memo of the British Foreign Office declared, "A premature PKI coup would be the most helpful solution for the West—provided the coup failed." In March 1965, US Ambassador to Indonesia Howard Jones told a meeting of State Department officials, "From our viewpoint, of course, an unsuccessful coup attempt by the PKI might be the most effective development to start a reversal of political trends in Indonesia."

In March 1965, National Security Council (NSC) 303 Committee, the apparatus through which the Johnson administration oversaw covert activities, approved a program in Indonesia for "a covert liaison with a support for existing anticommunist groups, particularly among the [less than one line of source text not declassified], black letter operations, media operations, including possibly black radio, and political action within existing Indonesian institutions and organizations." (On the above two paragraphs, see Geoffrey Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66* (Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 108-10).

Historian Bradley Simpson accurately sums this up: "The United States and Britain unquestionably sought to entice the PKI into a coup attempt or some other rash action in the hopes of provoking a violent response by the army and organized covert operations and propaganda efforts to this end for the better part of a year" (*Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960-68* (Stanford University Press, 2008)).

Sukarno's health was rapidly failing. On September 30, in what scholar John Roosa refers to as the "pretext for mass murder," a group of six senior Indonesia Army generals and one lieutenant were detained and later killed by a conspiracy of junior officers, who claimed to be acting to prevent a CIA-backed coup against President Sukarno (John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006)). One of the leaders of the junior officer coup, Col. Abdul Latief personally visited Suharto hours before the events and claimed that he informed Suharto of the plot. Suharto did nothing.

Many questions remain unanswered surrounding the precise events of September 30. What is clear is that a small clique of officers played the precise role that the CIA sought to orchestrate, and that Suharto seems to have known about the events in advance.

The "mechanics of mass murder"

Suharto moved against the PKI. While his actions were initially presented as being in defense of Sukarno, he ignored Sukarno's orders and began to implement rule through the military. The military began to broadcast viciously anti-Communist propaganda, creating the atmosphere of a pogrom. The CIA produced and supplied at least some of this propaganda.

Over the next ten months more than half a million people were murdered. This death toll is the scholarly consensus for a conservative figure; serious estimates range up to a million (On this point, see

Katharine MacGregor, ed., *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics, and Legacies* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p.1).

Historian Jess Melvin discovered a trove of Army documents in Aceh that allowed the detailed reconstruction of how this was done, in what she aptly termed “the mechanics of mass murder” (Jess Melvin, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder* (Routledge, 2018)).

The slaughter of the PKI was conducted in two phases. The first, was marked by mass detention, with public killings staged in some areas. The public killings left a deep imprint on popular consciousness and became the most remembered aspect of 1965-66. The majority of the slaughter, however, occurred in the second phase, as the military gradually emptied out the detention centres night after night, bringing the victims in army trucks to secret mass graves and rivers where they were executed and their bodies disposed of. The army commander for Aceh visited the military posts and issued instructions for those detained to be killed (John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-66 in Indonesia* (University of Wisconsin, 2020), p.17.)

Another fact which recent scholarship has overwhelmingly confirmed is that the killings were politically targeted. These were not random killings, or the explosion of village violence. Those murdered were, or were alleged to be, members of the PKI or its affiliated mass organizations. This was a campaign that sought to exterminate anyone who held left-wing political views. The greatest numbers of killings tended to take place in areas that were locations of the sharpest social struggles, around plantations and sites of labour conflict.

The killings were centrally orchestrated by Suharto. He incited the mass murder, set the precedent by staging killings, and deliberately selected military personnel who conducted executions (Roosa, *Buried Histories*, p.243). Those who survived were subjected to other atrocities. One million Indonesians were placed in concentration camps, subject to forced labour and torture. Many would be held until 1979.

The events of 1965-66 were unspeakably barbaric. Robinson writes, “Bound and gagged, they were then lined up and shot at the edge of mass graves, or hacked to pieces with machetes and knives. Their remains were often thrown down wells, or into rivers, lakes, or irrigation ditches; few received proper burials. Many were subjected to sexual abuse and violence before and after their killing; men were castrated, and women had their vaginas and breasts sliced or pierced with knives. Corpses, heads, and other body parts were displayed on roads as well as in markets and other public places” (*The Killing Season*, p.7).

One additional quote will suffice, “While some were killed with automatic weapons or other firearms, the vast majority were felled with knives, sickles, machetes, swords, ice picks, bamboo spears, iron rods, and other everyday implements. And while some died in military or police detention centres, most died in isolated killing fields— in plantations, ravines, and rice fields, or on beaches and riverbanks— in thousands of rural villages dotted across the archipelago.” (Robinson, *The Killing Season*, p.123).

But while the implements of slaughter were often primitive, they served a precise political intent and were wielded with bureaucratic efficiency. Hit lists of those to be executed were circulated by the army. Robinson reports that a former death squad commander in North Sumatra stated, “We exterminated communists for three months, day and night. . . . We got lists of the prisoners we brought to Snake River. Every night I signed the list” (Robinson, *The Killing Season*, p.156).

At least some of the names of those to be killed were supplied to the Indonesian military by the US Embassy. “As many as 5,000 names were furnished over a period of months to the Army there, and the Americans later checked off the names of those who had been killed or captured” (Robinson, *The Killing Season*, p.203).

Washington, and to a lesser but significant extent, British and Australian imperialism, oversaw, funded, coordinated, and assisted in the mass

murder, aware at every step of the death toll. Within weeks of the launching of the slaughter, the US began supplying covert military aid to Indonesia. All aid was directed to the military. Washington was determined to support Suharto without stabilizing Sukarno. The US also covertly and directly supplied cash to anti-Communist organizations and paramilitary groups, including the notorious KAP-Gestapu.

This aid flowed to Suharto while the Johnson administration was not only aware of, but enthusiastically kept tabs on the death toll. Simpson damningly recounts, “The Johnson administration’s decisions to extend aid were made after it had become clear that the United States would be directly assisting the army, Muslim organizations, student groups, and other anti-Communist forces in a campaign of mass murder against unarmed civilians—alleged members of the PKI and its affiliate organizations. Moreover, U.S. officials knew and expected that the covert assistance they provided would further this campaign” (*Economists with Guns*).

The mass murder furthered the interests of US business. A collection of economists and technocrats trained at UC Berkeley, who later became known as the “Berkeley mafia,” worked hand in hand with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to draw up the economic framework of Suharto’s New Order, integrating Indonesia into the circuits of international finance capital. Non-alignment was at an end.

US aid to Indonesia skyrocketed. It increased fourfold to \$546 million in 1968, and hit a record high of \$1.22 billion in 1972 (Darden, *Aiding and Abetting*, p.53). For Washington, dictatorship was good for capitalism, and mass murder a solution to the threat of Communism.

The authoritarian model set up by Suharto in Indonesia was exported throughout the region. Scholar Matias Fibiger writes, “The New Order internationalized counterrevolution across the region” (*Suharto’s Cold War: Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2023) p. 283). In my own scholarship I demonstrated that Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines imposed martial law in 1972 with the support of Washington in a manner deliberately modeled after Suharto’s New Order (Scalice, *The Drama of Dictatorship: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines* (Cornell University Press, 2023)).

In a popular recent work, *The Jakarta Method: Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped our World* (PublicAffairs, 2020), Vincent Bevins demonstrated how Washington saw events in Indonesia as an immense success and sought to implement them widely. “Jakarta” became a byword for right-wing murder. In 1973, on the eve of Pinochet’s seizure of power in Chile and the murder of Chilean Communist Party members and other leftists—again with the backing and orchestration of Washington—the threat that was bandied about was “Jakarta is coming.” Recently discovered military documents, reveal that the Brazilian dictatorship launched “Operation Jakarta” aimed at the extermination of the Brazilian Communist Party in 1973.

Conclusion

The crimes of Suharto reveal the depths that capitalism will descend to defend the system of private property and profit. The rehabilitation of Suharto is a whitewash by Prabowo of the crimes on which his administration rests, and of which he himself is guilty. But it is more than this.

It is a declaration of intent by the capitalist class and should be treated by the working class in every country as a serious warning. They are declaring the methods of mass murder and concentration camps to be socially acceptable; and what’s more, heroic.

A repeat of the crimes of 1965-66 is not unthinkable. It is in fact unfolding. From the genocide in Gaza to the mass roundups by the masked ICE Gestapo of the US Border Patrol, the ruling class is bringing back openly fascist methods in defense of capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg's stark assessment stands: the crisis of capitalism presents society with only two alternatives, Socialism or Barbarism.



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