

Book review – History

Indonesia as an “Unfinished Nation” and the legacy of Suharto

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Book review of *Unfinished Nation* by Max Lane (Verso, 2008).

Much of the traumatic story of Indonesia since independence has been buried in mass graves, secret military archives and censored reports.

The grand silence imposed on the media about what really happened in the coup led by former general Suharto in 1965 against then president Sukarno and his government, plus the orgy of bloodshed and the purge that followed - wiping out up to a million Sukarnoists, Chinese, socialists and communists in a year of CIA-backed terror - is still far from broken.

In the decade since Suharto was ousted by popular indignation and people power on the streets of Jakarta there has been no official investigation and none of Suharto's generals have been held accountable for the slaughter.

Max Lane, an Indonesia specialist and translator of the famous works of Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer, brings an essential understanding to events in *Unfinished Nation*. He portrays how Indonesia today is torn between two legacies: the post-independence era of Sukarno, who led a popular nationalist and anti-imperialist government, and the 33 years of military dictatorship that followed.

In the early 1960s the US government was deeply concerned about the developmental direction of this resource-rich nation. Many in Washington saw Indonesia as the region's centrepiece. Then US president Richard Nixon characterised the country as “containing the region's richest hoard of natural resources”.

But independence hero Sukarno and his non-aligned policies were major obstacles to the realisation of Washington's geopolitical-economic vision. Moreover, his government had a working relationship with the powerful PKI, the parliamentary communist party Washington feared would eventually win power through the ballot box.

Suharto was a part of a cabal of pro-Washington generals who had been plotting the downfall of their president for several years in consultation with the CIA. The coup agenda was clear: annihilate the two-million strong PKI, wipe out all forms of opposition - especially trade unions - and make the country safe for an influx of American corporations and foreign banks poised to exploit those natural resources.

Suharto's New Order regime, as it was officially known, represented not only a purging of people but a purging of ideas and a rewriting of history. Existing history books were removed from schools.

Sukarno's heroic role in overthrowing Dutch colonial rule disappeared from textbooks. Instead the part played by the Indonesian military was glorified. Schools, universities and the media all received sanitised accounts of history emanating from the newly created History Centre of the Armed Forces. Feature films were commissioned to reinforce this indoctrination and falsification. Leftist books were banned and burned. This Javanese version of cultural Stalinism, which assiduously attempted to destroy all political and social memory, received little attention in western countries at the time.

Lane takes us back to the future when in March last year, nine years after the overthrow of Suharto, the country's attorney general banned 14 history textbooks. The historians' "crime" was they had deviated from the official Suharto version of history, which blamed the killing of seven generals on September 30, 1965, on the PKI. That incident had been used as the pretext to stage the coup against Sukarno and the PKI.

By August last year thousands of textbooks had been seized, the government ignoring public petitions for restraint and reason. In several towns another round of book burning took place.

How can Indonesia fully know itself as a nation without knowing its past, asks Lane. If people cannot gain access to truthful and dissenting accounts of the Sukarno years and what followed, without the usual vilification, then the nation remains without a properly recorded history.

But despite the disinformation during the decades of Suharto's rule, the legend of Sukarno still casts a magical spell on voters; and it was the Sukarno name that propelled his undynamic daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri, to electoral success in 1999. In Cambodia the atrocities in the Killing Fields of Pol Pot have been extensively researched and recorded since 1979: Phnom Penh has a well-established documentation centre.

Indonesians, however, are still waiting to find out what really happened in 1965 and 1966. Every nation has to come to terms with its ugly past eventually. Germany and Hitler; Cambodia and Pol Pot; Argentina, Chile and their military death squads and dirty wars.

In an age of truth commissions, trials and international justice, Indonesia is an exception. Suharto's generals are determined to keep a lid on the past and immunity reigns. The impunity of the generals, says Lane, has fuelled their brutality and arrogance and led to more crimes, for example in East Timor.

Suharto is dead, but the nation is still trapped by his sinister legacy.

Many Suharto obituaries said his greatest crime was the hoarding of billions of dollars in foreign assets. But his transgressions were much more severe: an estimated one million people were butchered in a year. Meanwhile, Indonesia still lacks a government willing to confront its ghosts.

P.S.

* By Tom Fawthrop, South China Morning Post, August 3, 2008. The title is ours (ESSF).