

Indonesia: Telegrams confirm scale of US complicity in 1965 genocide

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Recently declassified documents shed new light on the United States' role in one of the largest slaughters of the 20th century, writes Jess Melvin, in an article for Melbourne University's Indonesia at Melbourne blog.

There is much outrage in the United States that a foreign state might have attempted to influence its 2016 presidential election. The release on 17 October of a cache of previously classified telegrams sent from the US embassy in Jakarta provides new and damning evidence that the US is no stranger to the dark arts of covert regime change.

It's not new news that the US openly supported the rise of Suharto's New Order military dictatorship as a means of halting the seemingly unstoppable advance of communism during the height of the Cold War (in July 1966 Time magazine described Suharto as "the West's best news for years in Asia"). But these telegrams provide new insights into just how much knowledge the US had of the consequences of this support.

The new telegrams confirm the US actively encouraged and facilitated genocide in Indonesia to pursue its own political interests in the region, while propagating an explanation of the killings it knew to be untrue.

The new telegrams, published by the National Security Archive (NSA), show embassy staff were aware systematic mass killings, which they describe as a "slaughter", were occurring throughout the archipelago, from West Papua to Sumatra. They also demonstrate a knowledge of Indonesian military killing techniques.

In one telegram, dated 28 December 1965, embassy staff in East Java report how "victims are taken out of populous areas before being killed and bodies are buried rather than thrown in river", while other victims were "being delivered to civilians for slaughter".

In another telegram, dated 31 December 1965, embassy staff explain the "army is quietly releasing nightly 10 to 15 prisoners to Muslims for execution". The system of transporting prisoners to remote killing sites and releasing prisoners from military-controlled jails into the hands of civilian "executioners" (algojo) was used by the military to allow it to deflect its own agency in the killings.

US complicity in the genocide has previously been established by historians. It is already known, for example, that US embassy officials had encouraged the military to seize state power during the lead-up to the killings. In March 1965, US ambassador to Indonesia Howard Jones (1958-April 1965) observed that an "unsuccessful coup attempt by the PKI [Indonesian Communist Party]" would provide the ideal pretext for the military to launch its own disguised coup. Once this plan was initiated on 1 October 1965, US officials insisted that the military should continue its attack against the PKI, even after it became clear that the military was facing no resistance.

The US also provided covert material support for the killings. Telegrams released by the US State Department in 2001 revealed that in October 1965, the US had supplied telecommunications equipment to the military to facilitate its attack, while in December it transferred Rp 50 million to the military-sponsored Kap-Gestapu death squad.

At the time of the killings, US president Johnson and then US ambassador to Indonesia Marshall Green (June 1965- 1969), made a point of never commenting publicly on the unfolding violence in Indonesia. The reason given for this silence was that nobody knew for sure how many people had been killed and that condemnation of the killings could have left the US open to charges of “interference” in Indonesia’s domestic affairs.

This explanation was clearly disingenuous. Instead, US officials co-opted media outlets to actively spread military propaganda accounts of the killings both inside and outside Indonesia. This propaganda account described the killings as the result of a spontaneous uprising by “the people” and alleged that the 30 September Movement – a failed internal-military action that was used by the military to justify its own attack against the PKI – had been masterminded by the PKI and China. These claims were later repeated by Green in his 1990 memoir.

The new telegrams confirm that US embassy staff were aware PKI members around the country appeared to have no prior knowledge of the 30 September Movement. They also reveal the embassy knew that news reports republished by the Indonesian military claiming Chinese involvement in the 30 September Movement were “a hoax” that had originated in Hong Kong.

As Green explained on 4 May 1966, allegations of Chinese involvement had been manufactured to serve “the propaganda needs of the moment”, namely to deflect blame for the Movement away from Soekarno. He had then stated bluntly that “we [US embassy staff] do not think the Chinese were a primary factor in the September 30 Movement”. This did not stop the US (and Green personally) from repeating these claims. In both cases, the embassy’s willingness to circulate what it knew to be “fake news” helped to incite the killings. Indeed, this propaganda account of the killings remains intact in Indonesia to this day.

Two additional revelations stand out from the telegrams. The first is that the US knowingly repeated military attempts to portray the killings as the result of spontaneous religious violence. In addition to the report noted above, that documents the military’s attempt to blame Muslims for the killings, embassy staff reported in December 1965 that Islamist groups in Medan, North Sumatra, were issuing instructions that it was a religious obligation for Muslims to participate in the killing of communists. The PKI, it was explained, were the lowest level of infidel, “the shedding of whose blood is comparable to killing chicken[s]”.

This revelation supports my research from Aceh that the military deliberately encouraged such announcements as a means of easing the consciences of civilians that it was ordering to participate in the killings, while also deflecting attention away from its own central role in the violence. The US encouraged this interpretation in its internal telegrams by suggesting the killings possessed the “colouration of [a] Holy War”.

The second additional revelation that stands out from the telegrams is that the US was keenly aware the military was using the killings to implement a draconian military dictatorship. While it is common knowledge that the US has routinely supported right wing military dictatorships throughout the global south, it is not widely known just how quickly Soeharto’s military dictatorship crystallised in Indonesia.

The telegrams confirm my previous findings that the military specifically used legislation established

under the guise of the Ganyang (Crush) Malaysia campaign (1963-66), to bring civilian government under its command, mobilise civilian militia Hansip groups and initiate a purge of the civilian bureaucracy. This “new order”, as the new dictatorship was being tentatively described, was consolidated throughout Sumatra by the end of December 1965 and resulted in the military becoming the “new political arbiter” in the country. This account contradicts the common assumption that the military did not seize power in Indonesia until March 1966.

The release of these new telegrams comes at a critical time in Indonesia. Despite over half a century passing since the 1965 genocide, support for the military’s attack against the PKI remains the founding ideological basis for the post-Soekarno Indonesian state. Despite hopes during the early reformasi (reform) period that Indonesia would come to terms with its dark past, this hope – which was reignited with the election of president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo in 2014 – is now rapidly fading. The former New Order elite is consolidating itself under the leadership of retired general and Gerindra Party chariman Prabowo Subianto, who is widely expected to run against Jokowi in 2019.

The spectre of communism is proving to be a potent rallying point. In September, anti-communist demonstrators believed to be supported by Prabowo succeeded in demanding police shut down a discussion at the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation, on the laughable basis that the organisation was hosting a secret congress of the PKI. Religious- and race-based hate speech drawing from 1965-era rhetoric appear to be on the rise in the country.

Individuals with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in Indonesia often claim that addressing the 1965 period will open the wounds of the past. In fact, they actively keep the wounds of the past open to justify their own position. This form of genocide denial in Indonesia is, of course, strengthened by the US’s reluctance to come to terms with its own involvement in the killings.

There is little prospect the current US government will do anything but repeat former administrations’ implicit acknowledgements that the killings were justified. When Donald Trump speaks about “making America great again” it can be assumed – if he can think so far back – that the victory of anti-communist forces in Indonesia would feature as a successful example of foreign regime change.

Nothing justifies the mass extermination of civilians. The telegrams confirm the US government knew full well that this is what it was supporting. We live in a time when truth and lies are becoming increasingly blurred. This makes it only the more important to hold those in power to account.

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* RED FLAG. 11 NOVEMBER 2017:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/6103>