

Indonesia

How the West backed the massacre of a million people

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The destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), 40 years ago following the seizure of power by pro-US military officers headed by General Suharto was a decisive event in the history of South-East Asia in the second half of the 20th century.

By 1965, the PKI had three million members and was said to be the largest Communist party in the world outside of the Soviet Union and China. In addition to its large membership, about 15 million people had indirect connections to the party through their membership of peasant associations, labour unions and other social movement organisations led by PKI members. It was, according to a September 1, 1965, US National Intelligence Estimate, “by far the best organized and most dynamic entity in Indonesia”.

Within a few months of the October 1, 1965, Suharto-organised military coup, however, the PKI would be destroyed in a cataclysmic campaign of political terror and mass murder carried out by the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI) and right-wing Islamic organisations.

According to a 1968 study by the CIA, “in terms of the numbers killed the anti-PKI massacres in Indonesia rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s”. At least one million Indonesians were slaughtered in the anti-PKI massacres.

Nowadays, of course, Western policy-makers are trying to rehabilitate the Indonesian military’s reputation in order to fight Jemaah Islamiyah. This article, therefore, examines Western support for this anti-PKI terror campaign, which seriously weakened Indonesian political life and set the scene for the emergence of Islamic terrorism in the region. For reasons of space, it takes up the story after the massacres had commenced.

Once the killings were underway, Western policy-makers and diplomats were keen to support the ABRI. The problem they faced was that President Sukarno’s previous anti-imperialist rhetoric had resonated strongly with the Indonesian public. Any overt support would therefore serve only to expose the Indonesian army as a tool of the West.

Sukarno’s towering reputation presented a significant obstacle. A deft touch was required. US ambassador Marshall Green understood that economic aid should not be offered because economic difficulties hurt the reputation of the civilian administration, not the army. His military contacts told him that there was an urgent need for food and clothing in Indonesia but it was more important to let Sukarno and his foreign minister, Subandrio, “stew in their own juice”.

Western media coverage

The information campaign in support of the killings was created along similar principles. The ABRI secretly urged that foreign news broadcasters not give the army “too much credit” or criticise Sukarno. Instead, they should emphasise PKI “atrocities” and the party’s role in the mutiny by left-wing ABRI officers that preceded the Suharto-led coup.

While Sukarno could not be directly attacked, an Indonesian general offered to provide Western agencies background information on foreign minister Subandrio, who was regarded as more vulnerable.

Australian ambassador Keith Shann was told by his superiors that Radio Australia should never suggest that the ABRI was pro-Western or right-wing. Instead, credit for the anti-PKI campaign should be given to other organisations, such as Muslim and nationalist youth groups.

Radio Australia had an important role to play because of its high signal strength and huge audience in Indonesia. Its listeners included the elite as well as students, who liked it because it played rock music, which had been officially banned. It was therefore told to “be on guard against giving information to the Indonesian people that would be withheld by the Army-controlled internal media”.

The Australian ambassador worked to ensure that it gave “prominent coverage” to “reports of PKI involvement and Communist Chinese complicity” while playing down or not broadcasting “reports of divisions within the army specifically and armed services more generally”.

Another senior official recommended that Radio Australia “not do anything which would be helpful to the PKI”. Instead, it “should highlight reports tending to discredit the PKI and show its involvement in the losing cause”.

The US, Britain and Australia co-operated closely in the propaganda effort. Marshall Green urged Washington to “spread the story of PKI’s guilt, treachery and brutality”, adding that this was “perhaps the most needed immediate assistance we can give army if we can find [a] way to do it without identifying it as [a] sole or largely US effort”.

The British Foreign Office hoped to “encourage anti-Communist Indonesians to more vigorous action in the hope of crushing Communism in Indonesia altogether”. Britain would emphasise “PKI brutality in murdering Generals and families, Chinese interference, particularly arms shipments, PKI subverting Indonesia as the agents of foreign Communists”.

British ambassador Sir Andrew Gilchrist wrote: “I have never concealed my belief that a little shooting in Indonesia would be an essential preliminary to effective change”.

Throughout this period, Western radio stations continued to recycle stories from Radio Jakarta or the army newspapers and broadcast them back to Indonesia. US embassy officials established a back-channel link through the US army attache in Jakarta, who regularly met with an aide to Suharto ally General Haris Nasution.

The US embassy also compiled lists of PKI leaders and thousands of senior members and handed them over to the Indonesian military. While these kinds of lists were based entirely on previous reporting by the PKI’s press, they proved invaluable to the military which seemed “to lack even the simplest overt information on PKI leadership at the time”, according to a report Green sent to Washington in August 1966.

General Sukendro, a senior army intelligence officer, secretly approached the US embassy in early October 1965, asking for assistance in the army’s operations against the PKI. This included

supplying “small arms to arm Muslim and nationalist youths in Central Java for use against the PKI”.

Green authorised the provision of 50 million rupiahs to the Kap-Gestapu movement, which was leading the anti-PKI terror campaign. He advised the State Department that there was “no doubt whatsoever that Kap-Gestapu’s activity is fully consonant with and coordinated by the army. We have had substantial intelligence reporting to support this.”

Overall, the US provided the ABRI with money, medicines, communications equipment, weapons and intelligence. It was satisfied with the return it received on this investment.

On February 21, 1966, Sukarno tried to reshuffle his cabinet and sack General Nasution as defence minister. But with the public cowed in fear of the killings, Sukarno’s attempt to assert his authority failed. There were large demonstrations backed by the army, and on March 11 soldiers mounted a show of force outside the presidential palace.

Sukarno signed a letter of authority handing over executive power to General Suharto. He remained president until 1967, continuing to defend the PKI and to speak out against the massacres and anti-Chinese racism that accompanied them. Without access to the media, however, his speeches failed to achieve political traction.

In the wake of the massacres, Indonesia’s pre-eminent cultural and intellectual organisations - the Peoples’ Cultural Institute, the National Cultural Institute, and the Indonesian Scholars’ Association - were shut down, and many of their members were arrested or imprisoned.

More than one and a half million Indonesians passed through a system of prisons and prison camps. The PKI was physically annihilated, and popular organisations associated with it were suppressed. The whole of Indonesian society was forcibly depoliticised. In village after village, local bureaucrats backed by the army imposed a control matrix of permits, rules and regulations. Citizens were required to obtain a “letter of clean circumstances” certifying that they and their extended families had not been associated with the left before 1965. Indonesian society became devoted to the prevention of any challenge to elite interests.

Control of the universities, newspapers and cultural institutions was handed to conservative writers and intellectuals, who collaborated with Suharto’s New Order regime and did not oppose the jailing of their left-wing cultural rivals. Along with the violence, certain cultural values were strongly promoted. Discussion of personal, religious and consumerist issues was encouraged, while discussion of politics was considered to be in bad taste. The conservative establishment also monopolised Indonesia’s external cultural relations.

Suharto would rule for more than 30 years until a popular uprising and a crisis-ridden economy forced his resignation on May 21, 1998.

P.S.

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