

Suharto (8 June 1921- 27 January 2008) — A career soldier who commanded a country

Tuesday 29 January 2008, by [ROOSA John](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2008).

Contents

- [A pleasant career](#)
- [Moving up the ranks](#)
- [His lucky day](#)
- [The creeping coup d'état](#)
- [Carrots and sticks](#)
- [The grand Ponzi scheme collapses](#)
- [Mr Minus](#)

Taciturn, reserved, reclusive, emotionless, Suharto ruled Indonesia for 32 years as a mystery man, a dictator who presented himself as a faceless, replaceable figure in an apolitical administration. His speeches were dull, forgettable affairs filled with mind-numbing bureaucratese, worn clichés, and pious homilies. There is not a single statement by which he is remembered today. If asked, Indonesians struggle in vain to recall some memorable phrase from him, while even the youth can quote Sukarno, the president he overthrew in 1965. Suharto has left a wordless memory.

Rarely interviewed but frequently photographed, he is remembered by a gesture: a smile. It was how he wished to be known: his 1969 authorised biography was titled *The Smiling General*. It was a Cheshire cat smile, fixed in place, concealing, not expressing his emotional life, prompting puzzlement about the intrigues and violence that were being conjured up in the mind behind it.

Suharto's parentage is a matter of mystery. In his 'autobiography' written by the man most responsible for crafting his public image, G Dwipayana, Suharto claims he was born to a poor peasant family in the village of Kemusuk near Yogyakarta. A magazine owned by his trusted military intelligence czar claimed in 1974 that his father had been an aristocrat. In what was perhaps a pre-planned response, Suharto invited journalists to his office in the presidential palace to explain his lineage and produce witnesses who could vouch that he was the true salt of the earth. Despite his protestations, his genealogy remains suspect. Among Indonesians it is widely rumored that he was the illegitimate child of a Chinese businessman.

A pleasant career

Whatever his origins and childhood experiences, his adulthood was clearly that of a career soldier. He enlisted in the Dutch military in 1940, an event he mentions in his 'autobiography' as 'the key to opening a door to a pleasant walk of life'. The pleasant life of marching and drilling continued under the Japanese occupation when he became a member of that colonial state's militia. Like all other militiamen, he joined the newly-created Indonesian national army once the Japanese military surrendered in August 1945. There was no question of going back to serve with the Dutch – they had

already been stripped of all their power and wealth by the Japanese and had suffered the war years in squalid concentration camps.

Because of his military training, Suharto was given a high rank (lieutenant colonel) in the new Indonesian army that organised itself to fight a guerrilla war against the returning Dutch troops. By 1948, he had become the commander of a brigade of troops stationed in and around Yogyakarta, the capital of the Republic. The army's guerrilla attacks did little to slow the advance of the Dutch troops. Despite having the homefield advantage, Suharto was caught by surprise on 19 December 1948 when Dutch troops invaded Yogyakarta and captured it the same day without facing any resistance. Inexplicably, all four of Suharto's battalions were outside the city. It was one of the worst setbacks for the Republic: its two highest leaders, Sukarno and Hatta, were captured.

[*As early as 1948 he had said 'My politics are at the end of the bayonet.'*]

Suharto had a chance to redeem himself when he led an attack on Yogyakarta in March 1949. The attack inflicted only minor damage to the Dutch troops occupying the city and was repulsed within six hours. Suharto and other army commanders, however, claimed that they had temporarily held the city and proven the might of the Republic's forces to the world. After Suharto took power in 1965 the event was turned into the decisive victory of the war for independence, with a film made about it, Janur Kuning (1979), and a grand monument built in the city (1985).

As a man who served in three different armies within the span of a decade, Suharto wore his political commitments lightly. One of his army colleagues later told a journalist that Suharto said in 1948, 'My politics are at the end of the bayonet.' No wonder that Sukarno and his left-leaning defence minister introduced political commissars into the army. Like many soldiers trained under Dutch and Japanese officers, Suharto had no experience in the popular nationalist movement that had struggled against imperialism.

Moving up the ranks

After independence was won in 1949, Suharto rose his way up the ranks: colonel, brigadier general, major general. His one setback came in 1959 when he was removed from the command of the Central Java troops for corruption. But the affair was hushed up and he was quickly rehabilitated. He was given command over the operation to seize West Papua from the Dutch in 1962 - an operation that was aborted after a last-minute diplomatic agreement. He was then shifted to Jakarta and given command over the army reserves, Kostrad, in 1963. With an undistinguished record, rudimentary education, and no ability in a foreign language, he was by 1965 a prime candidate for the highest position in the army, serving as the replacement for the army commander, Yani, whenever he traveled abroad.

Suharto had risen to the top of an army that was becoming a kind of parallel government, using its territorial commands, originally designed for defence against foreign invasion, for ruling over civil society. Most of his fellow generals, including the senior-most, A.H. Nasution, were strongly anti-communist and determined to check the rising power of the communist party (PKI) in the early 1960s. To rival the party, they sponsored trade unions, artists' associations, and newspapers. They met with religious organisations and political parties and assured them that the army would use force if need be against the PKI.

Suharto did not clearly associate himself with either side. A former PKI member of the parliament told me that DN Aidit, the head of the party, believed in early 1965 that Suharto was a 'democratic' officer because he had supported the ending of the army's martial law powers in 1963. But Suharto

was also collaborating with the anti-communists in his covert effort to put the brakes on Sukarno's anti-Malaysia campaign, begun in 1963.

His lucky day

Suharto's fence-sitting ultimately proved to be what put him into power. When the pro-PKI and pro-Sukarno army officers decided to strike against their rival officers, they assumed Suharto would support them. A group of junior officers organised the kidnapping raids of seven army generals on 1 October 1965. Two of the conspirators were good friends of Suharto's and one of them told Suharto beforehand about the plot. The abductors, calling themselves the September 30th Movement, wound up killing six generals, among them the army commander Yani. It was Suharto's lucky day. In Yani's absence he became army commander. The September 30th Movement had not been masterminded by Suharto but it played into his hands perfectly.

As army commander, Suharto immediately began defying presidential orders and implementing the long-standing agenda of the anti-communist officers, which was to reduce Sukarno to a figurehead president, destroy the PKI, and establish a military dictatorship. Suharto's anti-communism did not stem from any deep-seated ideological commitment. If the September 30th Movement had succeeded and the communists had gained more power, one can easily imagine the ever-opportunistic Suharto accommodating himself to the new regime. He was such a nondescript, unremarkable officer that many observers believed in the first weeks of October that he was merely following General Nasution's lead.

The creeping coup d'état

Sidelining President Sukarno turned out not to be too difficult. The grand old man of Indonesian nationalism, the 'extension of the people's tongue', kept voicing protests but did nothing concrete to stop Suharto's guns. He confirmed Suharto as army commander, raised his rank, and gave him emergency powers. The coup de grâce of the gradual coup d'état came in March 1966 when Suharto used a vaguely worded order from Sukarno about 'guaranteeing security' as a justification for arresting 15 ministers and dismissing Sukarno's cabinet – as if the president ordered his own overthrow.

The destruction of the PKI – the precondition for imposing a new military-dominated polity – turned out not to be too difficult either. The PKI leadership, in disarray after 1 October, urged its followers not to resist so that President Sukarno could arrange a political resolution to the crisis. But the president had no power over Suharto's army. Working with civilian militias, the army organised one of the worst bloodbaths of the twentieth century, rounding up over one million people and then secretly executing many of them. Detainees disappeared at night. Mass graves holding uncounted corpses lie unmarked all over Sumatra, Java and Bali.

[*The September 30th Movement was not masterminded by Suharto but it played into his hands perfectly.*]

No document exists proving that Suharto ordered any killing. On the rare occasion when he mentioned the killings in later years he blamed them on civilians running amok. Serious investigations into the who, where, when and how questions about the killings reveal that the army was primarily responsible and that Suharto must have at least approved of them if he did not give an explicit oral or written order for them.

Carrots and sticks

In taking power Suharto and his fellow army officers realised that the long-term stability of their rule would depend on their ability to improve living standards. They looked to foreign aid, investment and markets to provide the main stimuli for economic growth. Western capital which had been boycotting Indonesia because of Sukarno's policies found the welcome mat laid out. Suharto personally intervened in late 1965 to stop Sukarno's minister of industries from nationalising the oil sector. With the army's terror campaign against unionists at oil wells, rubber plantations, and factories, Western capital was also given a more docile labor force.

One reason for Suharto's remarkable ability to stay in power for so long lies in his expansion of public sector employment. By the end of his reign, 4.6 million people were on the state payroll, about triple the number in the early 1970s. Millions more were dependents on these salary earners. The security of the monthly paycheck was attractive even if the income was low. Also, some government jobs came with chances to earn more money through corruption. These civil servants and their relatives were the regime's key base of support, voting and campaigning for the government party Golkar in every election. Those not voting for Golkar were denounced for biting the hand that fed them and stood little chance of earning a promotion.

Suharto's habitual response to dissent was, to use today's lexicon, shock and awe. In Papua, he maintained an army of occupation that treated the indigenous population as sub-humans whose loyalty had to be won through violence. For years, the only side of Indonesia that Papuans saw was the army. He was responsible for the tens of thousands of Papuans killed in the counterinsurgency campaign from the late 1960s to 1998. He was also responsible for the war of aggression against East Timor in 1975 and the over 100,000 people there who died because of the warfare in that half-island. He was also responsible for the deaths of thousands of Acehnese who were victims of yet another counterinsurgency campaign (1990-98) designed to terrorise civilians into not supporting the guerrillas, instead of offering the civilians a more positive alternative.

Suharto stubbornly pursued the same strategy even when it was proving to be counterproductive, when the terror inflicted in Papua, East Timor and Aceh was generating more widespread resistance. Only after Suharto's downfall have Indonesian politicians had the chance to pursue wiser, more humane diplomatic and political resolutions to these wars: President Habibie allowed a UN-administered referendum in East Timor in 1999 and President Yudhoyono concluded a peace treaty with the Acehnese nationalists in 2005.

The grand Ponzi scheme collapses

In evaluating Suharto's rule, the so-called 'balanced' approach of many Western scholars has been to criticise Suharto for human rights violations but to praise his economic performance. Those impressed by the annual growth rates of six percent are like gullible investors in a Ponzi scheme convinced that the high returns are irrefutable evidence of success. The economic growth of the Suharto years was largely accomplished by wildly selling off the country's natural resources. It was a predatory, unsustainable type of growth. The leading sectors were oil and timber. Both were terribly mismanaged because of the corruption. Today Indonesia is a net oil importer and its forests are rapidly disappearing, cut down by loggers or burned up by palm oil plantation owners. The revenues from all those exports were not reinvested in other sectors; they disappeared into the personal bank accounts of the Suharto family, their cronies (such as Bob Hasan), and state officials.

After three decades of economic growth à la Suharto, the Indonesian government was left heavily in

debt and the economy left without a domestically-financed industrial base. It is fitting that Suharto, whose minions lauded him as 'the father of development,' passed away in the hospital owned by the state oil company (Pertamina) that his family and cronies (such as Ibnu Sutowo) milked with abandon.

[*Perhaps the best that can be said of Suharto's 32 year reign is that it could have been worse.*]

Suharto's regime lived by foreign capital and it died by foreign capital. The liberalisation of the financial sector that the US pushed Indonesia to adopt in the early 1990s resulted in much greater vulnerability to sudden international shifts in the capital flows. Money flooded in to Suharto's caste of kleptocrats and their phony banks and then suddenly flooded out. The grand Ponzi scheme collapsed with the Asian economic crisis of 1997. The only legitimacy that Suharto had enjoyed was his apparent ability to engineer economic growth. Once that ended the usually compliant middle-class turned on him, unwilling to tolerate his corruption, his greedy children and his obscenely wealthy cronies. The spontaneously formed movement for 'reformasi' declared its main enemy to be KKN: Korupsi, Kolusi, and Nepotisme. The Suharto family's own 'I Love the Rupiah' campaign, coming from those who held the most dollars, did not quite have the same cachet.

The family's extensive stable of paranormals could not save them, neither could their obsequious army generals, not even Lieutenant General Prabowo, Suharto's son-in-law who commanded elite troops in Jakarta and was always flush with money from his brother who owned the country's one steel mill. Suharto resigned on 21 May as Jakarta was still smouldering from the mysterious riots in which stores owned by Indonesian-Chinese were torched.

Mr Minus

Perhaps the best that can be said of Suharto's 32 year reign is that it could have been worse. He did not opt for the strategy of the Burmese generals and close off the country. Dependent upon foreign capital, he was vulnerable to international pressure. The release of tens of thousands of political prisoners in the late 1970s was largely due to pressure from outside the country. He did not opt to legitimate himself through religion and impose Islamic law. The Indonesian state remained largely secular. He did not promote a cult of personality around himself. When faced with mass protests in 1998, he did not opt to stay in power at all costs.

The late great Indonesian writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a political prisoner of Suharto's for 14 years, once wrote that he could not bring himself to write about the Suharto regime. While he wrote many historical novels about pre-colonial Java and the Indonesian nationalist movement, he thought nothing interesting could be said about the man responsible for imprisoning him and banning his books. For him, Suharto was a negativity, what he called a 'minus x', a reversion back to Java's colonial-era aristocrats who bullied their subjects for the benefit of European business interests, yet prided themselves of their great cosmic powers, and remained narrow-minded and indifferent to the science and arts of the Europe that had conquered them. No doubt some will remember Suharto for something positive but as Indonesia struggles to overcome his terrible legacies one wonders whether anyone will be able to consider his title 'father of development' as anything other than a cruel joke.

P.S.

* From Inside Indonesia 91: Jan-Mar 2008:

http://insideindonesia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1042&Itemid=47

Copyright 2007 © Inside Indonesia

* John Roosa (jroosa@interchange.ubc.ca) is a member of Inside Indonesia's editorial team, and the author of *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia* (2006).