

Suharto — the Australian elite's favourite mass murderer

Wednesday 6 February 2008, by [RANDELL Justin](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2008).

Genocidal mass murderer and former Indonesian dictator Suharto died in hospital in Jakarta on January 27, aged 86, never having faced justice for the millions of people he killed or the billions of dollars he stole during his three decades in power. While Suharto may be gone, the hypocrisy of his rich-country supporters — especially Australia — lives on.

Through a spokesperson, US President George Bush expressed “his condolences to the people of Indonesia on the loss of their former president”, according to the January 28 Washington Post. In the same article, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd described Suharto as an “influential leader” who “oversaw a period of significant economic growth and modernization”.

Rudd characterised Suharto's record of genocide as merely “controversial”.

Former prime minister Paul Keating, Attorney General Ian McClelland and Australian ambassador to Indonesia Bill Farmer attended Suharto's funeral on January 28. McClelland told AAP that while the Australian government recognised “issues of controversy”, it also recognised “his achievements ... he brought Indonesia from a country that was subsistence to one with a developing economy ...”

Keating told the Australian on January 28 that focusing on Suharto's crimes was “missing the point”, because Suharto “devoted himself entirely to the development of social conditions in Indonesia”.

Mass murder

Keen to secure the great wealth of the Indonesian archipelago for Western corporations, Australian and US government support for Suharto goes all the way back to his rise to power via a bloody military coup in 1965.

Suharto, then a top-ranking general, overthrew the nationalist government of president Sukarno, which had undertaken a number of measures that attempted to protect Indonesia from the ravages of exploitation by Western corporations.

Even more concerning for Western governments was the rise of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) on the back of mass struggles by workers and peasants. By the time Suharto took power, the PKI had an estimated 3 million members and 20 million organised supporters, making it the largest communist party outside of the Soviet Union and China.

With the active assistance of the CIA and the US embassy, Suharto launched his coup, utilising the military and right-wing Islamic fundamentalist militias to carry out a campaign of mass slaughter against all leftists or suspected leftist sympathisers.

No-one knows the exact number killed, but at least half a million people were butchered in the space of four months. Some estimates put the figure as high as 2 million.

The PKI was physically exterminated — completely wiped out.

Under Suharto, democratic elections and freedom of speech were completely non-existent, while opponents were routinely killed, jailed and tortured.

At a New York meeting of the Australian-American Association in July 1966, then-prime minister Harold Holt expressed his joy at this turn of events, infamously declaring with satisfaction: “With 500,000 to 1 million communist sympathisers knocked off ... I think it is safe to assume a reorientation has taken place.”

Indonesia was opened for business. Via corruption and nepotism, Suharto and his cronies became obscenely rich while any attempt by ordinary Indonesians to organise to defend their rights was brutally suppressed.

Dividing the spoils

London-based Australian journalist John Pilger summed up the benefits of the Suharto regime for corporate interests in a January 28 article in the British *Guardian*. “The deal was that Indonesia under Suharto would offer up what Richard Nixon had called ‘the richest hoard of natural resources, the greatest prize in south-east Asia’.”

According to Pilger, Suharto’s “US-trained economists ... agreed to the corporate takeover of their country, sector by sector. The Freeport company got a mountain of copper in West Papua. A US/European consortium got the nickel. The giant Alcoa company got the biggest slice of Indonesia’s bauxite. American, Japanese and French companies got the tropical forests of Sumatra.”

One of Suharto’s greatest crimes was the invasion and annexation of East Timor, also backed by Western governments — especially Australia. Up to 200,000 people — around one third of the population — died in East Timor as a result Indonesian occupation.

Australian ambassador to Indonesia at the time of the invasion, Richard Woolcott, recommended that Canberra back the invasion, because Australia could “more readily” negotiate a deal with the Suharto to give Australia access to the oil and gas in the Timor Sea than with an independent East Timor.

In 1985, Australia became the first country to formally recognise Indonesia’s illegal annexation of East Timor. The Timor Gap Treaty, signed by Australia and Indonesia in 1989, secured the division East Timor’s gas and oil deposits between the two countries.

Nine months later, the Indonesian military killed or wounded more than 450 young mourners at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, the capital of East Timor. Then-foreign minister Gareth Evans, who had signed the treaty, called this “an aberration, not an act of state policy”.

Soon after the “aberration”, the joint Australian-Indonesian board overseeing implementation of the treaty awarded 11 contracts to Australian oil and gas companies.

When a mass movement, led by pro-democracy students, forced Suharto from power in May 1998, then-prime minister John Howard praised Suharto’s time in power as bringing “stability” to the archipelago.

Suharto’s crimes against humanity were carried out on behalf of Western interests, and could not have occurred without the support of countries like Australia. The outpouring of support for Suharto following his death is consistent with Australian foreign policy: democracy and human rights are

only allowable when they don't interfere with the profits of big business.

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #738 6 February 2008.

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