

Historian says US backed “efficacious terror” in 1965 Indonesian massacre

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U.S. terrorist intervention in Australasian region

The United States and British governments, supported by Australia, were deeply complicit in the murder of more than half a million alleged communist sympathisers in the wake of the 1965 Indonesian coup, a prominent historian told an international conference in Singapore last month.

Brad Simpson, Assistant Professor of History and International Studies at Princeton University and author of “Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968”, said the US and British governments did “everything in their power” to ensure that the Indonesian army would carry out the mass killings.

The conference, entitled “The 1965-1966 Indonesian Killings Revisited”, held at the National University of Singapore from June 17-19, was a rare forum on the subject. The event, co-hosted by the university, the Asia Research Institute and the Australian Research Council, involved some 30 scholars from around the world.

Within Indonesia, the history of the political slaughter carried out between October and December 1965 has been suppressed for decades. The massacre of at least 500,000 people, the jailing without trial of about a million others and the widespread use of torture and rape, ranks as one of the great crimes of the twentieth century.

Despite the official secrecy surrounding the events, the consequences still reverberate within the country’s social and political life. The current ruling elite can trace its history back to the 1965 events. President Susil Bambang Yudhoyono, for instance, is a former general while his father-in-law, Sarwo Edhie Wibowo, was an Australian-trained officer who led the killings in Central Java.

No such conference could be held in Indonesia and most of the participants were non-Indonesian. Since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, tentative attempts to examine the coup have foundered on opposition from the military. A truth and reconciliation commission set up by parliament never got off the ground and the Constitutional Court has now ruled it unlawful. School textbooks reflect the military propaganda, which maintains that the killings were part of a “patriotic campaign” against communism. Marxism remains officially proscribed.

The Age interviewed two elderly survivors of the massacre, Sumini and Anwar Umar, who maintain a weekly vigil across the road from the president’s offices in Jakarta. Sumini, a former kindergarten teacher was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for ten years for being a member of Gerwani, a women’s movement linked with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Anwar, who had been secretary-general of a civil servants union, spent 12 years in prison and was also tortured. Even after their eventual release, their identity papers were marked to show they were former political prisoners and they were unable to work.

The coup followed a period of sustained political upheaval following World War II. The Indonesian masses were determined to throw off the desperate poverty and oppression that had been imposed

for over 350 years, firstly by the Dutch, then the Japanese. During the struggles for independence, hundreds of thousands of workers had joined the Stalinist PKI, erroneously believing that it still represented the revolutionary socialist traditions of the Bolshevik revolution.

Following independence, President Sukarno precariously balanced between the various demands of the ruling elites and widespread social unrest among workers and the poor. Posturing as an “anti-imperialist” and a “man of the people”, Sukarno increasingly relied on the PKI to contain the demands of masses.

In 1957, foreign domination over the economy was shaken by a massive eruption of workers and peasants who seized or occupied factories, plantations, banks and ships. Sukarno relied on the PKI to ensure that the property was handed over to the army, which was sent to suppress the movement. Following further unrest in 1962, and again in early 1965, Sukarno brought the army commanders and PKI leadership into his cabinet.

In the midst of the Cold War, as it became involved in Vietnam, Washington was increasingly concerned at the PKI’s size and influence. In 1965, however, as preparations for a military coup became evident, the PKI continued to subordinate the masses to Sukarno, in line with the reactionary Stalinist theory of a “two-stage” revolution, and insisted on the “peaceful road” to socialism, promoting deadly illusions in the armed forces. Even as Sukarno banned all strikes, the PKI blocked any independent movement of the working class, thereby encouraging the military to act with the backing of the US and its allies.

According Simpson’s paper, “Capitalists come back! The Political Economy of the 1965-1966 Killings,” there was “a lot of evidence that the US was engaged in covert operations ... to provoke a clash between the army and the PKI ... to wipe them out.” Even at the height of the massacre, and while harboring deep reservations about the military’s willingness to enact the sweeping political and economic changes Washington deemed necessary, US officials and their regional allies were “weighing the conditions under which they would resume assistance to Jakarta”.

In an interview with the Darwin-based Southeast Asian Times on June 7, Simpson said US and other Western officials viewed the mass killings as “efficacious terror”, an essential building block of the “quasi neo-liberal policies that the West would attempt to impose on Indonesia after Sukarno’s ouster”. They viewed the wholesale annihilation of the PKI and its supporters as “an indispensable prerequisite to Indonesia’s reintegration into the regional political economy and international system, the ascendance of a military modernising regime and the crippling or overthrow of Sukarno”.

Immediately after the coup, the US administration rushed to express political support for the Suharto regime. It provided covert monetary assistance to the Indonesian armed forces, while the CIA organised arms from Thailand. The US government also provided communications equipment, medicine and a range of other items, including shoes and uniforms.

“The United States was directly involved to the extent that they provided the Indonesian Armed Forces with assistance that they introduced to help facilitate the mass killings,” Simpson told the conference. The British government also extended an emergency loan of 1 million pounds to Indonesia in late 1965 and promised not to attack Borneo if Indonesia withdrew soldiers engaged in a conflict with British-backed Malaysia, Simpson said.

While Simpson claimed that he found “zero evidence” that the US government masterminded the coup itself, it is unlikely that the military plotters proceeded without assurances from the US and its

allies. The full story of US involvement remains to be told.

The pretext for the coup was the kidnapping and murder on September 30 of six generals, allegedly at the PKI's instigation. Suharto swiftly rounded up the "rebels", took control of the capital and launched his anti-communist pogrom, which was designed to exterminate every known member and supporter of the PKI, along with thousands of trade union members and ordinary workers, peasants and students.

US diplomats and CIA officers, including the former US ambassador to Indonesia and Australia, Marshall Green, subsequently admitted working hand-in-glove with Suharto and his butchers in carrying through the massacres. They personally provided the names of thousands of PKI members from CIA files for the death lists.

In another paper to the conference, David Jenkins, former foreign editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, said that the Australian, British and US embassies were aware of the mass killings, but did not raise a single protest to the systemic slaughter. All the embassies knew the PKI had not initiated the coup but did nothing to protect the victims from the military.

Archive documents released in Australia in 1999 proved that the Johnson administration in Washington was actively agitating for the formation of a military regime, and urging its embassy in Jakarta to co-ordinate closely with the army and insist that the generals act ruthlessly to crush the PKI. When, at the end of October, Washington determined that Suharto should establish a military government, it did so in close consultation with both the British and Australian governments (see "US orchestrated Suharto's 1965-66 slaughter in Indonesia").

Other conference speakers highlighted the significant role played by the Muslim organisations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in the killings. These right-wing organisations, acting at the behest of and at times organised by the military, willingly participated in the eradication of workers and peasants who were seen as a threat to traditional landowners and vested religious interests.

Historian Greg Fealy from the Australian National University cited instructions from NU leaders to its members exhorting them to physically eliminate all traces of communism. According to Fealy, "they made frequent references to terms such as menumpas [eradicate or annihilate], membersihkan [cleanse], mengganyang [crush], and mengikis habis [eliminate]." Muslim clerics played central roles in overseeing and directing the killings, and coordinated with military officers.

The killings were notable for their gruesome character. Many victims were either beheaded, garrotted or had their throats slit with knives or machetes wielded by the Islamic militias. "It was done face-to-face," Fealy said. Unlike the "mechanical" processes employed by the Nazis, or Pol Pot's farms, the executions were "done by hand".

American anthropologist Mark Woodward said that in Yogyakarta, leaders of Muhammadiyah, the dominant Islamic group in the area at the time, issued statements declaring the destruction of the Communist Party an individual religious obligation, not just a collective one. Katharine McGregor of the University of Melbourne said that following the killings, NU members touted their participation as "a form of patriotic service to the nation" and reminded Suharto's New Order regime of the debt owed to the religious community.

In 2000, President Abdurrahman Wahid, who was a senior member of NU, issued an apology to people affected by the violence and proposed to officially lift the ban on communism. The move met

vehement opposition from senior NU members and the military. During a recent interview conducted by McGregor, NU chairman Hasyim Muzadi declined to comment on the role of NU in the 1965 violence, saying “all that happened must be considered history and not opened up again, otherwise another civil war might occur.”

The sensitivity of the Indonesian ruling elites to the airing of these terrible crimes underscores the need for workers and young people to learn the political lessons of the PKI’s betrayal that led to this strategic defeat for the working class.

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