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Indonesia

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**The state funeral of ex-dictator General Suharto took place on Monday, 28 January as Asian stock markets began to slide once more.**

At the time of the last Asian crisis ten years ago, this man was forced from office by a mass movement. The Indonesian currency lost nearly a third of its value in 1996 and the country’s economy shrank by nearly 14% in 1998. Life had become unbearable for Indonesia’s teeming poor and those predominantly young people who organised strikes or took to the streets risked making the ultimate sacrifice in confrontations with Suharto’s massive armed forces.

“One of the 20th century’s biggest killers and greatest thieves” is how the Daily Telegraph described him. His death should have been marked by a public recital of all his crimes. Instead, the current prime minister, Yudhoyono, speaking of Suharto’s “Great service to the nation”, announced seven days of public mourning. A fleet of 11 air force planes took his family escorting the body to the almost royal burial place near Solo and a full guard of honour from the hated elite force, Koppassus, was at his grave-side.

There too were former regional allies like Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia. (As again the Daily Telegraph put it, “They belonged to a generation of authoritarian rulers that stretched across Asia from Burma to the Philippines and South Korea).

When Suharto, the butcher of East Timor, lay dying, the current president of that poverty-stricken independent nation, Jose Ramos-Horta, asked for prayers to be said for him! This was the man who commanded the operations that saw over a quarter of a million people killed in the rape of East Timor from 1975 onwards - including four of Horta’s own immediate family! Suharto’s super-rich, pampered and corrupt daughter, “Tutut”, in tears outside the hospital where he died, had pleaded for forgiveness “if he had any faults”!

## Massacre

This man Suharto, described by some as modest and with a benign look on his face, waded to power through rivers of blood in 1965-66. On the pretext of

crushing a communist plot, more than a million people were slaughtered and the whole population was held in fear of their lives for over thirty years. “The army, which he controlled, had supplied weapons to, and whipped up, an already restless population to mutilate and murder people suspected of being communists” (International Herald Tribune). Ethnic tensions were exacerbated in this process. The label of ‘communist, wrote John Gittings in the Guardian, included labour and civic leaders and thousands of others who would never even have heard of Karl Marx”. (January 28).

Over the next decades, anyone remotely connected with ‘communists’ or ‘lefts’ - even a grandchild - could be arrested and tortured, sent to a prison, a labour camp or just ‘disappeared’ in the manner of other brutal dictatorships. Suharto had soldiers and spies posted in every town across the sprawling Archipelago. As the IHT confirmed, hundreds of thousands more people were killed over the years in the restive provinces of Aceh and Papua, where Suharto sent in the military to quell independence movements.

The 1965-6 bloodbath had the full backing of the capitalist world. They feared for their system as mass opposition swelled from below in the world’s eighth largest country wracked by inflation and starvation. The Communist Party at the time was three and a half million strong – the third largest after China and the USSR. There was real fear of a Cuba or a China and, along with Vietnam, the idea of a major Asian country setting off a domino collapse of capitalism in the whole region. The change of regime, as the Independent’s biographer pointed out, was the first example of a major Asian power changing sides in the Cold War.

## Friends

The veteran Australian author and broadcaster, John Pilger, explains in his trenchant piece on Suharto (Guardian 28 January) that it was none other than the US embassy in Jakarta that supplied the general in 1965 with a “zap list” of Indonesian Communist Party members “and crossed off the names when they were captured or killed”. He goes on to quote a senior CIA operations officer in the 1960s who describes the ter-

ror of Suharto's takeover in 1965-66 as "the model operation" for the US-backed coup that got rid of Salvador Allende in Chile seven years later. Pilger also quotes a BBC correspondent at the time, who revealed the British government's secret but very practical involvement in this slaughter – giving armed naval protection to Indonesian forces participating in it. "There was a deal, you see", says Roland Challis!

"The deal", Pilger explains, "was that Indonesia under Suharto would offer up what Richard Nixon called 'the richest hoard of natural resources, the greatest prize in South East Asia'" The deal was done at a conference in Geneva, sponsored by Time-Life Corporation, led by David Rockefeller and with all the major corporate giants, major oil companies and banks in on the carve up – General Motors, Imperial Chemical Industries, British American Tobacco, Siemens, US Steel and many others.

From then on, according to the International Herald Tribune (28 January), "The United States rewarded him (Suharto) with a foreign aid program which amounted to more than €4 billion a year in economic support and €350 million in military credits." A team of largely American-educated economists and technocrats (swiftly dubbed the Berkeley Mafia since a number had attended Berkeley University in California) was put in charge of the economy under instruction to create a 'new order'.

On the same theme, Gittings' obituary in the Guardian exposes how, "Suharto gained his biggest reward for destroying the Indonesian left when he invaded East Timor in December 1975 – just one day after US president Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger had dined with the Indonesian leader in Jakarta. As secret documents...would reveal, Suharto asked for US 'understanding'". This he got from Ford but Kissinger simply added that "it would be better if it were done after we returned [to the United States]"!

After the genocide in East Timor was perpetrated – the killing of nearly a third of the population with the aid of British-supplied aircraft and machine guns - Margaret Thatcher described Suharto as "one of our best and most valuable friends". The World Bank described Suharto as a "model pupil". Indonesia received the biggest bail-out loan - €43 billion - from the IMF at the time of the Asian crisis of 1997-8. But nothing could save the rotten Suharto dictatorship, once the mass movement had gathered its unstoppable force, Suharto's friends exerted pressure on him to step aside in the interests of saving capitalism, and all their very real interests in Indonesia.

All this explains why, as Pilger puts it, "Suharto, unlike Saddam Hussein, died not on the gallows but surrounded by the finest medical team his secret billions could buy".

## Never to be forgiven

Real hatred for Suharto can be heard in the voices of the veterans of the struggles and oppressions of the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s and some of those who make up today's opposition to the ruling clique. But hypocrisy abounds in most of the capitalist media. They have tried to put a gloss on the legacy of this Western-backed tyrant, peddling the idea of the "father of the nation" held in high regard by his subjects. He is credited personally with developing the Indonesian economy.

The truth is that the decades of considerable, though not spectacular, economic growth (averaging 7% per annum) were achieved on the backs of the super-exploited Indonesian working class, banned from organising their own unions or parties and deprived of the right to strike or protest publicly. The Indonesian regime also had the good fortune of rising world prices for the country's oil. None of the benefits reached the majority of the population – the workers, the young and unemployed and other urban and rural poor.

## Nepotism and plunder

Meanwhile, General Suharto and his brood were plundering state assets to record-breaking levels. Suharto's wife, Tien, is said to have trained her offspring in the art of taking kick-backs, earning the nick-name "Madame Tien per cent". Monopoly control over contracts was granted to family and cronies ranging from toll roads to publishing, logging to the clove cigarettes, oil extraction to shipping, TV stations, chemical plants and hotels.

In 2004, Transparency International, an anti-corruption watchdog, declared Suharto to be the world's greatest ever kleptocrat. Having amassed a fortune of up to €35 billion, he also topped the league of the world's richest and most corrupt individuals drawn up by the UN and the World Bank last year. Yet he has never been successfully tried for these crimes.

The plundering of every branch of the economy by all of his six children has also gone virtually unpunished. One son, Tommy Suharto, was eventually successfully prosecuted for hiring a hitman to assassinate the judge who had convicted him of graft! He served less than a third of a 15 year sentence only then to be acquitted and freed.

## Retribution?

Now that the dictator is dead, maybe a bolder approach will be taken in pursuing these hyenas who tear more and more personal wealth from the body of

the economy – an economy which cannot guarantee two meals a day to the majority of the population.

The pressure mounts for a clean-up and for action to be taken against crony capitalism and against the military. Victims of Suharto's repressive regime fume at the failure to prosecute him for mass murder. On the Saturday before Suharto died, activists were rallying in the centre of Jakarta to demand he be put on trial. In December last year an investigation was announced of six cases of human rights abuses including the killing of more than half a million people.

But, in spite of the high hopes of the activists who fought heroically against the Suharto regime, the record of the governments which have succeeded him does not augur well for the people of Indonesia to get either social or economic justice. They have been led by people personally indebted to the 'great leader' for their positions of power. Even the first woman president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, along with the other post-Suharto presidents have been in league with at least one wing of the powerful army. They will stop at little to prevent revelations about their own involvement in the economy being exposed.

A Financial Times editorial on 29 January quoted Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew as saying that Suharto had not had the recognition he deserved from Indonesians. "I think the people of Indonesia are lucky", he said.

"It is not surprising", it continued, "that Indonesians whose families fell victim to massacres and human rights abuses under Suharto disagree ... or that generals and tycoons who prospered disagree... The important question – given that the same clique of soldiers and businesspeople wield power in democratic (sic!) Indonesia today – is whether they have learned anything since Suharto's fall a decade ago during a popular uprising prompted by the Asian financial crisis".

The Financial Times' obituary of Suharto – by John Aglionbury and Shawn Donnan – warned of the level of feeling that still exists for past crimes. "Victims remain determined to see justice done", they wrote. "His (Suharto's) sins were so great [and] they were political, economic and psychological... No one should be allowed to get away with what he did", said one former detainee, held for twelve years without charge as part of the 1965 crackdown on suspected communists..." (28 January).

## Lessons for new generation

As the founders of the CWI pointed out at the time of Suharto's rise to power, with a different policy, the massive Indonesian Communist Party could have led a successful struggle to establish a workers' and poor

peasants' government long before the crisis of the 1960s. If the struggle against the colonial oppressors in Indonesia had been led by the Communist Party, under an independent banner, basing itself on the growing working class and with policies to end capitalism, landlordism and imperialism, a new Asian socialist revolution would have begun. It would have spread from the largest Muslim nation in the world to neighbouring Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike and changed the course of world history..

The fatal mistake of the Communist Party, following the Maoist 'two stages theory' of revolution, had been to submerge its forces in an alliance with the bourgeois nationalist 'founder of the nation', Sukarno. The idea was to build up Indonesian capitalism before fighting for socialism. However, the crises in society could not be solved by a weak capitalist class and the military was able to use its power to move in and impose its brutal methods of rule.

The harsh lessons of the past need now to be drawn by a new generation of youth and workers who will be forced into struggle by the crises to come. They will search for and build organisations to galvanise the struggle – not only against corrupt and weak capitalist governments but for a socialist solution in their country, their region and world-wide.

A revolutionary party with a far-sighted leadership was and is needed – one with confidence in the ability of the working class to conduct on an all-out struggle for a socialist society and one that is ready to make an appeal to the workers of all other countries to follow their example.

The mass demonstrations which brought an end to Suharto's dictatorship were made up predominantly of students who risked their lives in the fight against corruption, nepotism and military rule. They were supported by the millions-strong working class, many of whom had begun in the 1990s to take up the cudgel of industrial action in the 1990s. Suharto must have known the game was up when the army began to crack. The scenes of young women in headscarves calmly placing flowers in the barrels of the soldiers' guns will remain in the memory of all who saw them. It was a repeat of what had happened a quarter of a century before in the Portuguese revolution on the other side of the world.

A detailed account of those memorable events, with an analysis of all the factors involved, is available on this site. Click publications and scroll down to Indonesia: An Unfinished Revolution. It covers the issue of what political forces were involved and what the CWI thought about the kind of programme needed for a lasting victory. Also in that compilation is a brief but unique history of the rise and fall of the Indonesian Communist Party. The printed pamphlet can be purchased by clicking on Books on the same site -

# Indonesia: Death of Suharto, Clare Doyle, CWI, 30 January 2008

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