

# Political Violence in Indonesia — Legacy of Suharto's Dictatorship

Łukasz Bonczol

**Abstract:** *For three decades Indonesia was governed by a dictatorial military right-wing regime led by General Suharto<sup>1</sup> — the so-called 'New Order'<sup>2</sup>. The regime was born in an enormous massacre, when the largest communist party outside the Sino-Soviet bloc was virtually eradicated. Throughout the years Indonesian politics has been dominated by a language of violence — on a local and national level, in the relations between the state and society, and between the country's center and outer regions. A whole new infrastructure has been developed to drain the country's wealth to the benefit of an elite, and to carry out violence — directly, via different state proxies, or even in collaboration with the criminal underworld. Although the dictatorship came to an end a decade ago, its legacy was hard to overcome. The New Order has left its imprint on the society, which is unlikely to vanish easily after the introduction of any institutional reform.*

**Keywords:** *Suharto, Indonesia, New Order, Violence*

## The Origins of the New Order

At the beginning of the 1960s, Indonesia fell into a severe self-perpetuating crisis leading to an inevitable catastrophe. Its signs were visible both in the country's domestic and international affairs. The economy was collapsing, food shortages and hyperinflation led to unrest and the radicalization of a growing numbers of people. Democracy was a dead idea, with the elections postponed *ad calendas graecas*, frequent military intrusions into the public sphere under the auspices of martial law, and a president striving for strengthening his powers towards authoritarian rule<sup>3</sup> (Hindley 1967: 241). As for the foreign affairs, Indonesia's stance

gradually departed from the 'non alignment' politics leaning towards a more confrontational approach to the Western world. This was reflected in establishing closer ties first with the Soviet Union, and later with the People's Republic of China. Moreover, Jakarta made preparations for the armed takeover of Dutch West Papua, and soon after launched a campaign of confrontation with the newly established Malaysia, which was depicted as a stooge of the neo-colonial Great Britain (Jones 2002, Leifer 1983: 91–110). At the apogee of the so-called *konfrontasi* both countries were at the brink of war. To protest against the inclusion of Malaysia into the Security Council, Indonesia even withdrew from the UN in a flamboyant gesture (Lev 1966: 103). In fact, these actions could be recognized as president's Sukarno adroit play to divert people's attention from domestic politics and channel the anger of the impoverished, desperate masses.

The two strongest political forces outside the president's palace were the army and the PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* — Indonesian Communist Party). The latter was the largest Communist party outside the Sino-Soviet bloc, having 3 million regular rank and file and further 10 up to 15 million members of affiliated organizations: associations of peasants, students, women, unions etc. (Pauker 1969: 35). Rex Mortimer in his classic study claims that the total number of PKI may have reached 27 million (Mortimer 2006: 366). No matter whose estimates are correct, there is no doubt that since early 1950s PKI had been steadily on the rise and by 1965 it had posed a formidable force able to mobilize masses of highly disciplined and devout supporters. The opposite edge of the political spectrum was occupied by the army. Having its origins in the *guerrilla* warfare during the 1945–1949 war of independence, the Indonesian military had its own funding sources and a well-developed territorial structure. Both gave it considerable independence within the political system and enabled it to meddle into state affairs from the local to the national level (Sundhaussen 1982). The army's high command perceived communism as the greatest threat and was concerned by Sukarno's belligerence.

In the year 1965, popularly known as 'a year of living dangerously', by the name of Sukarno's famous speech (Department of Information... 1964), the situation in Indonesia further deteriorated — the country witnessed mass political demonstrations, riots, the burning of embassies with tacit support of the authorities, as well as land occupations by peasants revolting against landlords. In the middle of the turmoil Sukarno was doing his best to maneuver between the army and the PKI, and prevent their clash (Hindley 1967: 239–243, 248–249). When in August the president suddenly fell ill, the atmosphere became even more tense — everyone tried to predict the possible course of events, while Sukarno was already old and the question of possible succession remained unresolved.

In the morning of 1 September 1965 a small group of conspirators made an unsuccessful coup attempt killing six army generals from the high command (including the Chief of Staff Gen. Yani)<sup>4</sup>.

The decapitated military instantly reorganized under the leadership of general Suharto and, putting all the blame on PKI, launched a large-scale brutal campaign against the left. In the eventual pogroms of communists and their supporters that had taken place across the country, up to one million people were slain. These events are commonly described by historians as 'carnage' or 'bloodbath'. The eyewitnesses provided grizzly descriptions of mutilated

bodies, decapitations, drinking of victims' blood, rafting piles of corpses down the rivers, or exposing cut off body parts in public. The accurate death toll is unknown, remaining one of the greatest mysteries of contemporary history. There never have been any reliable official investigation, and only a few foreign scholars managed to write revealing studies on the events of that time. Perhaps the most comprehensive comparison of estimates by different authors made so far was compiled by Robert Cribb<sup>5</sup> (Cribb 1990: 12). Due to the scarcity of reliable evidence, these numbers vary from 150 thousand to 1 million. However, in different sources one finds even larger estimates — up to 2 million. One thing which can be taken for granted is that this posed a huge national trauma which affected the whole society. Virtually everyone had a relative, neighbor or colleague, who fell victim to the anticommunist onslaught.

For a short period of time the Indonesian army seized power and marginalized the incumbent president Sukarno. The memory of what happened during *musim potong* ('a time of carnage') helped the regime to intimidate the society and to justify the extraordinary measures to maintain 'peace and stability'. This 'tranquility' was to be achieved mainly by violent and coercive means. Luckily for Suharto, he managed to find allies abroad. The United States immediately backed the newly-established military regime, providing it with diplomatic support, economic aid, and even lists of names of the alleged communists, which were eventually used by the Indonesian military in bloody purges (The National Security Archive 2001: 386–387). The permanent elimination of the communist threat in Indonesia had a great strategic importance for the USA at the time of escalation of their engagement in Vietnam. In the words of the then American ambassador in Jakarta Marshall Green: *Within the next several years, a miraculous transformation occurred in Indonesia, triggered by communist assassinations of six top generals (...). This led to the Army's crushing of Indonesia's Communist Party, the eventual unseating of Sukarno, and the emergence of a pragmatic new order led by General Suharto* (Green 1992: 1–2).

## The way New Order worked

The very reason we know so little about the Indonesian massacres of 1965 is that the military had no interest in letting anybody ever discover the truth. The more obscure those events remained, the more free could the new authorities be in providing 'the one and only, proper and official explanation'. A forged version of history was thus spread through all the propaganda channels new regime had at its disposal: the press, television, cinema, textbooks, museums and ceremonies. PKI was depicted as a greedy, depraved and destructive force - and for decades the containment of communism posed a *raison d'être* for the new regime, in the field of both domestic and international politics (McGregor 2007: 21–38, 61–99). The 'specter of communism' and the possibility of its revival (quite irrational, though) constituted a justification for quelling every sign of protest and dissent and creating an atmosphere of an everlasting threat. It is quite obvious that in such an environment there were no conditions for public debate about the past — scholars who dared to research inconvenient topics faced curtailment, or were banned from entering the country (Lane 2008: 50)<sup>6</sup>. The role of the army in

the massacres was obscured, while the intensity of carnage was attributed to the character of rural masses — portrayed as backward and prone to violence, ready to spontaneously unleash their anger if not kept under appropriate control. In the center of this propaganda — intended to disguise the actual role of the army units in organizing massacres — was the belief (easily followed by the foreign press) that in certain circumstances the mob could ‘run *amok*’ (Roosa 2006: 27)<sup>7</sup>. The scale and cruelty of massacres were thus collocated with the wrongly understood cultural context, only to blur the responsibility of the actual executors (Cribb 2002: 556). The military authorities portrayed themselves as saviors who brought peace and stability after a period of social turmoil and economic debacle. The fresh memory of massacres posed as some kind of bogey in people’s minds, reducing the need for applying direct means of terror in order to maintain the political *status quo* (Eklöf 2003: 46).

This does not mean, however, that the new administration refrained from the policies typical for totalitarian regimes. Just the opposite, the New Order maintained plenty of security and intelligence bodies, with the most feared Kopkamtib at the head. The laconically worded description of Kopkamtib as ‘an extra-judicial organization capable to arrest outside legal procedures’ (Sumarkidjo 2001: 139) gives us some idea about the institution which members had virtually divine powers over the ordinary citizens. Thousands accused of communist or subversive activity were tortured and imprisoned without trial. Many of them were held in tropical prison-hells, such as the notorious concentration camp located on Buru island<sup>8</sup>. Political prisoners were stigmatized with special marks in their identity documents and even after their release remained totally excluded from public and professional activities (Lane 2008: 93). What was even worse, the stigma extended over their families, especially children (Dwyer and Santikarma 2003: 297). In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, some prisoners who had been arrested a quarter of a century ago were still in captivity.

Under the reign of Suharto Indonesia became a ‘praetorian state’, with military officers colonizing nearly every field of public life — from the parliament and bureaucracy to the supervisory boards of various enterprises. Connections gained during military service, as well as personal connections, were essential for one’s political career. The only group equal to the ‘praetorian’ strata in power and corruption was Suharto’s family and cronies. These ruthless elites, standing above the law, created a culture described in Indonesia by a slogan ‘KKN’, which means *korupsi, kollusi, nepotisme* (corruption, collusion and nepotism). There were many interpretations of the New Order, but one of the most accurate summaries was provided by Adrian Vickers, who wrote: *the New Order state was a ‘rentier’ or plunder state, a criminal state, and an ABS<sup>9</sup> state, with all the appearances of a capitalist military-bureaucratic state* (Vickers 2001: 80).

Moreover, as Elizabeth Fuller Collins points out, these aforementioned features of the New Order, together with the lack of freedom to associate and the ineffectiveness of the legal system, made violence the only means of defending their rights for large groups of desperate workers and peasants (Fuller Collins 2002: 586–589). Factory strikes and land occupations became very frequent and intensified steadily during the 1990s. However, the regime did not hesitate to quell them in a ruthless way, and due to the censorship in the media their impact on the national level was limited.

It is impossible to estimate the precise number of victims of the regional and separatist conflicts that Indonesia witnessed under the New Order in many spots of the archipelago - Moluccas, Aceh, East Timor, West Papua and South Borneo are the most renowned examples. In East Timor alone the brutal occupation, which began in 1975, resulted in approximately 116–170 thousand deaths (Kiernan 2003: 593–594). Although each of these cases abounded with many unique local implications, they all seemed to fit into a larger picture. Suharto's Indonesia resembled a 'Javanese empire', with the demographic, cultural, economic and political center located on Java, which colonized the outer islands. At the heart of this process was the flow of *transmigrasi* (migrants) from the overpopulated Java to the remote areas. Apart from the obvious demographic reasons, this process favored strengthening political control over vast and heterogeneous territory of the state. Indeed, the whole program was a vehicle for achieving strategic goals such as national defense and security (Otten 1986: 185–195, 242; Tirtosudarmo 1990: 25)<sup>10</sup>. The settlers encountered resistance from the indigenous population, which in many instances became minorities in their own land. The eventual clashes were reinforced by religious and ethnic factors, resulting in violent and prolonged conflicts.

In order to suppress unrest and assert a greater control over native inhabitants, as well as to drain profits from local economies, regional military commands established and sponsored youth militias and vigilance groups of various sort. Some of these task forces were disguised as mass paramilitary organizations and received official backing of the local authorities, others were created as a private initiative of a single commander and had to support themselves on their own (feeding on civilian prey) or remained under direct supervision of one of the intelligence bodies in Jakarta. Because of such a grandiose net of dependencies and unclear connections, along with ubiquitous opportunities to gain illicit income, both the militias and the military underwent a gradual process of demoralization and criminalization. State violence was thus often carried indirectly, bypassing the law and with the instrumental use of demimonde.

Common practice was to employ *premen* — 'men of violence', shadowy figures operating on the fringes of society since time immemorial, who perhaps may be compared to the members of Chinese 'secret societies'. *Premen* or *jago* (literally 'tough guys'), are a kind of Indonesian phenomenon — they may act as assassins, kidnappers, extortionists or arsonists, be employed to intimidate witnesses and play the role of agents provocateurs.

Under the New Order the state elite had a total monopoly on violence — both legitimate and criminal — and wanted to maintain this position at all costs. Illicit activities were prevalent, but they had to be carried in collaboration or with the tacit support of politicians or officers. In the 1982–1984 period the regime didn't hesitate to intervene with full force to curtail a wave of crime that had arisen beyond its control. In order to do so, police were given a free hand to carry out a campaign of extrajudicial executions of 10 thousand suspects<sup>11</sup>. Today these events are known as *Petrus* killings or 'mysterious killings'. What is symptomatic, the vacuum created after the eradication of gangs, was instantly filled by the forces under police or army control, who took care of the most profitable enterprises (Barker 2001: 30–53).

In the 1990s corruption, violence and demoralization of elites made Indonesia a truly collapsing state. In a 'praetorian empire' promoted officers returning from distant rebel territories brought their illegal business and criminal links to the capital. When soldiers involved in regional counterinsurgency warfare were sent to deal with street demonstrations and student protests, they behaved as they had used to during their tour of duty in conflict areas — they fired at the crowds with live ammunition and gang-raped captured women. These negative phenomena culminated during a short but stormy period of Suharto's downfall in 1998. Many observers were afraid that the upheaval related to the ending of dictatorship will result in another bloodbath (as in 1965), or could lead to the secession of some regions and eventually to the disintegration of the state.

## Beyond the New Order

Luckily, none of the nightmare scenarios came to life. Indonesia amended its constitution and passed several important reforms — introducing direct popular elections of the president, the limitation of army's involvement in politics and strengthening provincial authorities as a part of decentralization process. *Reformasi* (as democratization is called in Indonesia) hailed a great success and a genuine reason for pride among many Indonesians. But this is just one side of the coin and not everything went as smooth as it seemed. With the collapse of the former regime there was neither official investigation into the crimes of the past, nor a serious prosecution of war criminals and corrupted politicians. The crony connections of the New Order era remained largely intact. The endeavors to establish peace and a reconciliation commission on a national level — drawing from the South African experience — have also failed. The events of 1965 are still an inconvenient topic in public debate. When groups of activists attempted to proceed with the exhumations of the victims' bodies on some limited scale, they met with ardent resistance and violent response of protesters (Cribb 2002: 560–563).

With the dictatorship no longer holding the country in its iron grasp, one could notice a process of 'privatization' and 'democratization' of the organized violence. *The removal of Suharto in 1998 did not mean the complete collapse of patrimonial networks and authoritarian structures, but rather the loss of their central focal hub and they loosened into competing power centers.* (Wilson 2006: 267). Many of the militias, squads, youth organizations and vigilance groups had to decouple from their old patrons situated within the state structures and survive on their own. Their skilled staff joined a growing pool of men 'for hire' — the engineers of violence available to anyone who would like to make use of their services. Two economic crises produced large numbers of urban poor, from whom the rank and file thugs could easily be recruited. State violence has declined, but in the meantime the number of non-state actors has increased, resulting in the proliferation of various paramilitary vigilante militias and political-gangster organizations. In comparison to the New Order era, the constellation of such entities has now become exceedingly complex (Hadiz 2004: 627). Violence became

a product, an 'asset' available for sale to anyone interested, for instance, to break a strike or intimidate work unions. Despite operating like casual crime gangs, these groups often sought some kind of ideology as a justification for their existence. Soon, nearly every major political party or Muslim organization had its own paramilitary wing called *satgas*. The official purpose of such forces — which have tens of thousands members and their own insignia, uniforms and command structures — is to protect the party's assets, buildings and to better control its members. In reality, however, *satgas* are something between mercenary armies and normal security companies offering their services to the private sector, with close links to the government and military establishment, additionally running their own protection rackets alongside other illegal activities (Wilson 2006: 270–272).

From today's perspective, hopes for the 'new beginning' after Suharto's resignation seem premature. What emerged is *the entrenchment of a form of democracy that is run by the logic of money politics and violence and which is primarily dominated by old New Order elites who have reinvented themselves within new political vehicles* (Hadiz 2004: 627). Perhaps, Indonesia is following the path of the post-soviet Russia, rather than heading towards a Western type of liberal democracy.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Many Javanese have only one name.
- <sup>2</sup> It is called so to mark distinction with the turbulent years of the previous president Sukarno (i.e. 'Old Order').
- <sup>3</sup> Sukarno coined a slogan of 'Guided Democracy' for a system, he envisaged as better fitting Indonesia's native culture. In fact, it was an ideological explanation for abandoning the contemporary constitution and introducing back the old constitution of 1945, which provided strong presidential powers. As Don Hindley concluded, 'Guided Democracy was a euphemism for a presidential form of limited dictatorship'.
- <sup>4</sup> For a long time the course of the coup was shrouded in mystery and speculations. Its key figures were all killed or imprisoned, and testimonies obtained during a show trial (the *Mahmillub* trial) are highly doubtful. The latest revealing book has been written by John Roosa (Roosa 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> Apart from the aforementioned Criib's work, widely recognized sources are the studies by Geoffrey Robinson (Robinson 1995) and Gardono I. Sudhatmiko (Sudjatmiko 1992).
- <sup>6</sup> A vivid example of this is the case of Benedict R.O'G. Anderson, a co-author of the preliminary report about the 1965 coup, who was forbidden to enter Indonesia and continue his research (Anderson 2006: 8).
- <sup>7</sup> The word *amok* is derived from Malay and is used to characterize a person going on a sudden and mad killing spree.
- <sup>8</sup> A place which became famous thanks to a renowned writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer – a legendary Indonesian prisoner of conscience.
- <sup>9</sup> The abbreviation for *asal bapak senang* means 'keep the boss happy'. This was to characterize the tactic of distorting and falsifying reality in the reports for supervisors to create the appearances of success.
- <sup>10</sup> *Transmigrasi* played a role similar to that of Russians in the USSR and Serbs in Yugoslavia.

- <sup>11</sup> This is a rough estimate, as accurate data is unavailable. According to Barker, the killings have lasted for 2 years and the death toll was at least 5,000 or, possibly, even more than 10 thousand (Barker 2001: 30).

## References

- Anderson, Benedict R.O'G. (2006) *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures of Indonesia*, Jakarta: Equinox.
- Barker, Joshua (2001) 'State of Fear: Controlling the Criminal Contagion in Suharto's New Order', in Benedict R.O'G Anderson (ed) *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia*. Ithaca–New York: SEAP Publications.
- Cribb, Robert (1990) 'Problems in The Historiography of The Killings in Indonesia', in Robert Cribb (ed) *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966. Studies from Java and Bali*, pp. 45–63. Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.
- Cribb, Robert (2002) 'Unresolved Problems in the Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966', *Asian Survey* 4: 550–563.
- Department of Information Republic of Indonesia (1964) *A Year of Living Dangerously 'Tahun Vivere Pericoloso', Address by the President of the Republic of Indonesia on 17th August 1964*, Jakarta.
- Dwyer, Leslie and Santikarma, Degung (2003) 'When the World Turned into Chaos: 1965 and Its Aftermath in Bali, Indonesia', in Ben Kiernan and Robert Gellately (eds) *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, pp. 289–306. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Eklöf, Stefan (2003) *Power and Political Culture in Suharto's Indonesia: The Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) and Decline of the New Order (1986–98)*. Copenhagen: NIAS.
- Fuller Collins, Elisabeth (2002) 'Indonesia: A Violent Culture?', *Asian Survey* 4: 582–604.
- Green, Marshall (1991) *Indonesia: Crisis and Transformation 1965–1968*, Washington D.C.: Howells House.
- Hadiz, Vedi R. (2004) 'Indonesian Local Party Politics. A Site for Resistance to Neoliberal Reform,' *Critical Asian Studies* 4: 615–636.
- Hindley, Donald (1967) 'Political Power and the October 1965 Coup in Indonesia', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 2: 237–249.
- Jones, Matthew (2002) *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961–1965: Britain, the United States, and the Creation of Malaysia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kiernan, Ben (2003) 'The demography of Genocide in Southeast Asia: The Death Tolls in Cambodia 1975–1979, and East Timor 1975–80', *Critical Asian Studies* 4: 585–597.
- Tirtosudarmo, Riwanto (1990) *Transmigration Policy and National Development in Indonesia (1969–88)*, Canberra, National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University.
- Lane, Max (2008) *Unfinished Nation. Indonesia Before and After Suharto*, London–New York: Verso.
- Leifer, Michael (1983) *Indonesia's Foreign Policy*. London–Boston–Sydney: Allen&Unwin.
- Lev, Daniel S. (1966) 'Indonesia 1965: The Year of the Coup', *Asian Survey* 2: 103–110.
- McGregor, Katherine E. (2007) *History in Uniform. Military Ideology and the Construction of Indonesia's Past*. Singapore: ASAA and Singapore University Press.
- Mortimer, Rex (2006) *Indonesian Communism Under Sukarno. Ideology and Politics, 1959–1965*. Jakarta–Singapore: Equinox Publishing.
- Otten, Mariël (1986), *Transmigration: Myths and Realities – Indonesian Resettlement Policy 1965–1985*. Copenhagen, IWGIA Document no 57.

- Pauker, Guy J. (1969), 'The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Indonesia', Scalapino, Robert A. (ed) *The Communist Revolution in Asia: Tactics, Goals and Achievements*, pp. 274–309. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Robinson, Geoffrey (1995) *The Dark Side of Paradise. Political Violence in Bali*. Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press.
- Roosa, John (2006) *Pretext for Mas Murder. The September 30th Movement & Suharto's Coup D'Etat in Indonesia*. Madison WS.: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Shannon L. Smith (eds) *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History*, pp. 72–83. Singapore: ISEAS Press.
- Sudjatmiko, Gardono I. (1992), *The Destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). A comparative analysis of East Java and Bali*. PhD Thesis. The graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, Cambridge (Massachusetts).
- Sumarkidjo, Atmadji (2001) 'The Rise and Fall of The Generals' in Grayson J. Lloyd and Shannon L. Smith (eds) *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History*, pp. 137–145. Singapore: ISEAS Press.
- Sundhaussen, Ulf (1982) *The Road to Power. Indonesian Military Politics 1945–1967*. Oxford–New York–Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- The National Security Archive (2001) *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–68, Volume XXVI, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines*. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB52/> [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> April 2009].
- Vickers, Adrian (2001) 'The New Order: Keeping Up Appearances' in Grayson J. Lloyd and Wilson, Ian Douglas (2006) 'Continuity and Change: Changing Contours of Organized Violence in Post-New Order Indonesia', *Critical Asian Studies* 2: 265–297.