

Interviews and documents show...

# US orchestrated Suharto's 1965-66 slaughter in Indonesia

## Part 1: New evidence on how the October 1 coup was triggered

By Mike Head  
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Damning new evidence has come to light pointing to the extent of the involvement of the United States government, closely supported by the Australian and British administrations, in the military coup staged in Indonesia by General Suharto on October 1, 1965 and the subsequent massacre of up to one million workers, peasants, students and political activists.

Last week, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a three-part series that included interviews with former Indonesian political prisoners and extracts from documents obtained from US and Australian archives. The material shows that the Western powers urged the Indonesian military commanders to seize upon false claims of a coup attempt instigated by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), in order to carry out one of the greatest civilian massacres of the 20th century and establish a military dictatorship.

By most estimates, between 500,000 and a million PKI members and supporters, as well as people of ethnic Chinese origin, were murdered, and tens of thousands were detained in prisons and concentration camps, without any visible resistance. The documents show that throughout late 1965 and early 1966 US and Australian officials approvingly reported to their respective governments that army units and Muslim groups were working hand-in-hand to shoot, hack or club to death at least 1,500 suspected PKI sympathisers per day, sometimes parading their heads on sticks.

This enthusiasm in the Western embassies for the bloodbath reflected deep strategic and political interests. In the decade before the coup, the major powers had come into increasing conflict with the unstable nationalist regime of Indonesian President Sukarno. In late 1957 and again in 1964-65 he had barely contained mass movements of workers and peasants, whose strikes and occupations threatened first Dutch and then US and British banks, companies and plantations. By 1965 Sukarno was precariously balancing between the military commanders, the Muslim organisations and the PKI, which had some three million members and supporters, making it the third largest Communist Party in the world, after China and the Soviet Union.

The US had cut off foreign aid to Sukarno while building up relations with sections of the military. From the mid-1950s it

began training and equipping Indonesian officers and troops, in preparation for a move to topple or sideline Sukarno. The first coup attempt came in November 1956 when Indonesian army Deputy Chief of Staff Colonel Zulkifli Lubis sought to take control of Jakarta and overthrow the government. Regional military takeovers followed the next month in Central and North Sumatra. Throughout 1957 and 1958 the CIA inspired a series of secessionist and right-wing revolts in the oil-rich regions of Sumatra and Sulawesi, where Caltex and other US oil firms had large investments. Then between 1959 and 1965, the US supplied \$64 million in military aid to the Indonesian generals.

A huge amount was at stake for the US and its allies. Indonesia had immense natural resources, including some of the largest oil and rubber operations in the world, a teeming population and its 3,000 islands sat astride the sea routes from Asia to Europe. The US and the other capitalist powers regarded the archipelago as an absolutely crucial prize in the war against the anti-imperialist struggles that erupted across Asia after World War II. The 1949 victory of Mao Zedong's forces in China had been followed by that of Ho Chi Minh's in northern Vietnam. Insurgencies arose in Indochina, Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines from the late 1940s.

In the months prior to the Indonesian coup, the US administration of Democratic Party President Lyndon Johnson had dramatically escalated its intervention in Vietnam, sending in hundreds of thousands of troops and beginning its saturation bombing of the north. And the British and Australian governments were engaged in military conflict with Sukarno's regime over Indonesia's opposition to the British-backed formation of Malaysia, which encompassed key portions of the large mainly Indonesian island of Borneo.

The first part of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* series is substantially based on an interview with former Sergeant Major Bungkus and earlier statements by former Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Latief. Both were jailed in 1965 for their involvement in a supposed military putsch instigated by the PKI on September 30, 1965. They were only released from prison in March this year—apparently the only survivors of the participants in the

September 30 affair. Hundreds of others were tortured and executed.

Their testimony completely undermines the official version of Suharto's coup—that he and his fellow generals were responding to a takeover bid instigated by the PKI through its supporters in the military. By this official account—presented in "documentary" form annually on all Indonesian TV stations until last year—PKI-inspired officers rounded up six of the country's highest-ranking generals on the night of September 30 and brutally killed them, leaving their bodies horribly mutilated. The plot was only thwarted, the authorised story insists, and the nation saved from the "evil" of communism, when General Suharto heroically intervened and took control of Jakarta the next day.

According to the statements given by Bungkus and Latief, the alleged "PKI coup" was an internal military power struggle, engineered by Suharto as a pretext to destroy the PKI.

Bungkus, as a member of the Indonesian presidential guard, was ordered on the night of September 30 to participate in one of seven teams dispatched to kill or capture senior generals. At a briefing, Bungkus and other NCOs were told by their commanding officer, Lieutenant Dul Arief, that seven top generals had set up a "Dewan Jenderal" or Council of Generals, and were planning to stage a coup against the then president, Sukarno.

By September 1965, the situation in Indonesia was extremely tense. Rumours abounded that the army was going to once more move against Sukarno and the PKI through the establishment of such a Council of Generals.

Yet, the operation against the generals on September 30 had two obvious flaws. In the first place, the squad sent to the home of the Indonesian Defence Minister General A. H. Nasution—the officer with the closest links to the US Embassy and the CIA—somehow failed its assignment, allowing Nasution to escape. Secondly, no-one was sent to deal with General Suharto, then the commander of the Army Strategic Reserve. On October 1, Suharto, backed by Nasution, was able to quickly mobilise the necessary units to take control of Jakarta and then extend his rule across the country.

Bungkus was only a junior figure in the events but he insists that the officers from whom he took his instructions were not linked to the PKI. And he and other members of the presidential guard who took part in the assassinations were simply following orders. In his view, Suharto carefully orchestrated the September 30 affair as a means of moving against the entire left-wing movement in Indonesia.

This is corroborated by Latief, who revealed a number of critical facts upon his release from prison. He said that he had personally reported the coup plan to Suharto before the killings. "Pak Harto [Suharto] knew for sure that on September 30, the seven generals were to be brought to Bung Karno [Sukarno]," Latief said.

Latief said he went to the military hospital where Suharto was with his ill baby Tommy, to alert him to the intended move against the seven generals, but Suharto took no action. "I think it is clear Pak Harto used the opportunity of the arrest of the generals to blame the PKI and reach power."

Latief also referred to a document proving British and American involvement in a plot by the seven generals to effectively seize

power from Sukarno. "The plan to arrest the generals was related to the existence of a 'Council of Generals' which was first revealed through the leaking of a British Embassy document, which said the council was to supervise Sukarno's policies. The document, a letter from the British Ambassador, Sir Andrew Gilchrist, also revealed the British were working with the CIA."

Unanswered questions remain about the events of September 30-October 1. It is not certain whether Suharto merely allowed the murder of the generals, or helped organise them. The involvement of the CIA and the British in Suharto's actions requires further investigation. Noticeably, none of the archives dealing with the lead up to the coup have yet been opened. But the speed with which Suharto moved on October 1 supports the conclusion that, acting in concert with the US agencies, he engineered the whole operation to eliminate his rivals and provide a pretext for moving against Sukarno and the PKI.

Finally, it is highly unlikely that the PKI planned to overthrow Sukarno's government, in which the party participated as coalition partners with the military and Muslim leaders. In line with the Stalinist doctrine of maintaining an alliance with Sukarno and the national capitalist class, the PKI leaders had repeatedly helped quell the struggles of workers and peasants. Under the "two-stage" theory, they had insisted that socialism would only arise peacefully and gradually after a prolonged capitalist stage of development in Indonesia. Even as signs grew of preparations for a generals' coup, they had urged their followers to have faith in the so-called pro-people's aspect of the military apparatus. [See *Lessons of the 1965 Indonesian Coup*]

Moreover, there was no mobilisation of the vast membership of the PKI and its associated trade unions, student organisations, women's movements and peasant organisations. In the subsequent holocaust there was no sign of PKI-led resistance. In fact, even as the death squads were set loose, the surviving PKI leaders and their patrons in Moscow and Beijing urged PKI followers to offer no opposition but to continue to subordinate themselves to Sukarno, who collaborated with Suharto and was retained as titular president until 1967.

The new evidence of direct US, British and Australian involvement in triggering and exploiting the 1965-66 events provides a critical lesson in the so-called democratic and humanitarian concerns of the major capitalist powers. They stand ready to orchestrate and sanction mass killings and repression to pursue their economic and strategic requirements in Indonesia and elsewhere.

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