

The Australian Labor Party and Indonesia's dictator Suharto

By Peter Symonds
31 January 2008

Anyone who harbours any illusion that the current Labor government in Canberra will establish a more enlightened Australian foreign policy should examine the reaction this week of Labor ministers, past and present, to the death of former Indonesian military dictator Suharto.

Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating made a point of flying to Indonesia at short notice to pay his last respects to the man whose 1965-66 coup was responsible for the deaths of at least half a million workers and peasants. In comments to the *Australian*, Keating, who of all the Labor leaders forged the most intimate ties with Suharto, described him as a close friend and key strategic ally, brushing aside his crimes as “missing the point”.

Keating's presence at the funeral was not a personal or spur of the moment decision. The Rudd government's delegation included Attorney General Robert McClelland, standing in for the Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, and the Australian ambassador to Indonesia, Bill Farmer. Keating's apologetics are part and parcel of the longstanding relationship that successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal, had with the Suharto dictatorship for more than three decades.

An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 15, when it appeared that Suharto's death was imminent, urged Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to attend the funeral. After noting Rudd's presence would be seen “as conferring some kind of forgiveness for the dark side of Suharto's rise to power”, the newspaper elaborated on the critical role played by Suharto for Australian interests and called on Rudd to go—“as a mark of respect for the office [of president] and as a sign of our involvement with Indonesia.”

“[Not to attend] would also reek of hypocrisy”, the *Herald* declared. “From [Liberal prime minister] Harold Holt telling a New York audience approvingly about how Suharto's army was ‘knocking off’ the communists, to favourable maritime boundary agreements, to the Indonesian support for Australian positions in Association of South-East Asian Nations [ASEAN] and Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC] forums, to Jakarta's tacit support for the reach of

US power through its archipelago, Australian governments consistently saw Suharto's rule as a strategic plus for the country. We encouraged one of his worst adventures—the annexation of Portuguese Timor—when arguably we could have talked him out of it. Had the Asian financial crisis not brought his rule to an involuntary end in May 1998, Australian prime ministers would have been courting Suharto for many more years.”

In the end, Rudd, like other world leaders, decided to maintain a discrete distance from Suharto, preferring to offer “our condolences on the passing of former Indonesian President Suharto” from afar, rather than joining Keating in Indonesia. But as the *Herald* intimated, it would have been entirely appropriate for Rudd to attend the funeral to express Canberra's gratitude for services rendered, particularly as the Labor Party was intimately involved in cementing the relationship and directly encouraged the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor that led to the deaths of 200,000 people.

In 1965, Canberra was just as determined as Washington to remove the Indonesian regime of President Sukarno, whose anti-imperialist posturing and relations with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was viewed as a danger to Western interests. Australian diplomats and intelligence officers in Jakarta at the time of the Suharto coup coordinated closely with their American counterparts. Former US ambassador to Australia Ed Clark praised Australia for helping the US “to take a hundred million people away from the communists, by doing everything they could to help overthrow the Sukarno government”.

On becoming opposition Labor leader in 1967, Gough Whitlam quickly sanctioned the slaughter. If the PKI had succeeded in taking power 18 months earlier, he said, “we would have had a country of 100 million dominated by communists on our border. We can only imagine the additional and crippling sums we would now be spending on defence.” The Suharto regime would remain central to Labor's strategic orientation when it won office in 1972. One of Whitlam's first acts as prime minister was to

welcome Suharto on his first visit to Australia—a step that provoked not a ripple of protest or criticism from Labor’s “lefts” or the trade union leaders.

The Labor government, in league with Ford administration in the US, was central in encouraging Suharto to invade the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975. Before being ousted from office in late 1975, Whitlam held two summits with the Indonesian dictator to offer his assurances that Canberra would turn a blind eye to any intervention. A major factor in Australia’s calculations was the discovery of oil and gas in the Timor Sea. Whitlam’s ambassador to Jakarta, Richard Woolcott, advised in a diplomatic cable to Canberra, that a seabed treaty “could be more readily negotiated with Indonesia than with Portugal or independent Portuguese Timor”.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Bob Hawke, which came to office in 1983, secured the lion’s share of the energy reserves through the 1989 Timor Gap treaty with the Suharto junta. In return, Australia became the only Western country to formally recognise Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor. Hawke’s first foreign minister Bill Hayden had ensured the resumption of talks by removing the demand for East Timorese independence from the Labor Party platform. His successor Gareth Evans and Indonesia’s foreign minister Ali Alitas toasted the final signing of the treaty with champagne onboard an Australian aircraft flying over Timor.

Labor trenchantly defended its dealings with the Suharto regime, deliberately playing down the military’s atrocities in East Timor and other areas. In response to the widely publicised massacre of at least 200 people, mostly pro-independence supporters, in Dili in November 1991, Canberra minimised the number of dead and lent credibility to Jakarta’s claims not to have been involved. In June 1994, Evans was cited in the *Age* as saying “all available evidence” suggested “horribly aberrant behaviour rather than a deliberate, centrally directed act of state policy”. Later documents came to light demonstrating that the Labor government had been fully briefed by Australian officials in Indonesia on the extent of the slaughter.

Keating, who took over as prime minister from Hawke in 1991, depended heavily on the Suharto regime to open diplomatic doors and economic opportunities in Asia. Suharto’s support was crucial to Keating’s efforts to establish APEC as the major regional leaders’ forum in opposition to efforts by the Malaysian government to marginalise Australian influence in Asia. In return, the Keating government stepped up defence ties with the junta, filling the gap left by the decision of US Congress to limit military relations with Indonesia following the Dili massacre.

In comments reported in the *Age* in 1994, Labor’s defence minister Robert Ray bluntly dismissed criticism of Australia’s military support for the Indonesian dictator. “Indonesia’s finding that its opportunities in the US to train militarily are much more limited than they’ve been in the past, if not drying up,” Ray said. “So Australia is willing to fill part of the void. Clearly some will object but they always do... Our agenda is not entirely run by them, though.” These arrangements culminated in the signing of a joint security treaty with Indonesia in 1995, paving the way for joint military exercises.

The fall of Suharto in 1998 amid the Asian financial crisis, and the re-emergence of claims by Portugal, the former colonial power in East Timor, led the government of Liberal Party leader John Howard to support Timorese independence. Labor immediately followed suit with shadow foreign affairs spokesman Laurie Brereton urging Howard to adopt a more “forthright position” on self-determination for East Timor. The entire political establishment lined up behind the Australian military interventions in 1999 and 2006, not out of any concern for the Timorese people, but to preempt rival powers, safeguard control of the Timor Sea oil and gas, and establish a regime in Dili favourably disposed to Australian interests.

Labor’s reaction to Suharto’s death is of a piece with its long and sordid history of support for the Indonesian dictatorship. Keating spoke for the party as a whole when he embraced Suharto as a friend and dismissed criticisms of his brutal atrocities. The WSWS contacted the offices of prominent Labor “lefts”—Laurie Ferguson, Anthony Albanese, Tanya Plibersek and Lindsay Tanner, all of whom are ministers or parliamentary secretaries in the Rudd government—to solicit their reaction to Keating’s remarks. None returned the call, which is not surprising given the silence of left faction going all the way back to Suharto’s 1972 visit to Australia.

Labor’s support for the mass murderer Suharto is a timely warning that the Rudd government will literally stop at nothing in its aggressive pursuit of the interests of Australian capitalism in Asia and beyond.

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