

Fifty years since the Indonesian coup

By Peter Symonds
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Fifty years ago today, Indonesian General Suharto seized upon the murder of six top generals to unleash massacres, in league with the CIA and US embassy officials, which resulted in the deaths of between 500,000 and a million workers, peasants, youth and members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), its trade unions and rural organisations.

Around the world, one of the great imperialist crimes of the 20th Century has barely been noted in the establishment media. As the US and its allies develop new intrigues, military interventions and preparations for war in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Asia, they work to cover up their past atrocities. Insofar as the US-backed Indonesian coup is referred to at all, it is solely to whitewash the role of the United States, Britain and Australia in planning, supporting and encouraging the military's reign of terror.

Every effort has been made to keep the events of October 1, 1965 shrouded in secrecy. Over the years, however, sufficient detail has emerged to completely discredit the official propaganda—that Suharto and the military were simply responding to an abortive PKI coup attempt, conducted in the name of a shadowy “September 30 movement” or G30S.

According to this account, PKI-inspired officers had rounded up or killed six of the country's highest-ranking officers. But the so-called PKI plot was riddled with obvious flaws. The squad sent to round up Indonesian Defence Minister A.H. Nasution somehow failed in their mission, allowing him to escape. Moreover, General Suharto, who was commander of the KOSTRAD Army Strategic Reserve in Jakarta, was not even on the alleged G30S assassination list. As a result, on October 1, Suharto, backed by Nasution, was able to mobilise the necessary forces to deal with the small numbers of troops involved in the “coup” and then extend military control throughout the country.

During the previous decade, the major powers had come into conflict with the unstable nationalist regime of Indonesian President Sukarno, who balanced precariously on the armed forces, right-wing Muslim organisations and the PKI, a mass party with some three million members and 20 million followers. Sukarno relied on the PKI to contain

the mass movements of workers and peasants that had emerged in 1957 and again in 1964–65, threatening the interests of US, British and Dutch corporations.

From the mid-1950s, the US had boosted military aid to Indonesia, training and arming officers and soldiers as it prepared to overthrow or side-line Sukarno. A failed attempt in 1956 by Deputy Chief of Staff Colonel Zulkifli Lubis to topple the government was followed, in 1957 and 1958, by a series of CIA-backed secessionist revolts in Sumatra and Sulawesi. In 1965, Washington's determination to remove Sukarno was reinforced by its escalating military intervention in Vietnam. Britain and Australia, both engaged in armed conflict with Indonesia, which opposed the incorporation of Sarawak and Sabah into Malaysia, were equally hostile.

What took place on October 1, 1965 in Jakarta followed a script that had already been laid out in March by the US ambassador to Indonesia, Howard Jones, at a meeting of State Department officials in Manila. “From our viewpoint, of course, an unsuccessful coup attempt by the PKI might be the most effective development to start a reversal of political trends in Indonesia,” he told the gathering. In the same month, the US National Security Council approved a covert propaganda campaign inside Indonesia to heighten fears of a communist takeover.

In June 1965, Jones was replaced as US ambassador by Marshall Green, one of the State Department's top political operators. Green had been charge d'affaires in South Korea during the 1961 military coup by General Park Chung Hee and, later, ambassador to Australia at the time of the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government.

Many questions remain unanswered about the “unsuccessful PKI coup.” Why were the six generals targeted? Were they actually planning a coup against Sukarno, or were the rumours a ruse to provoke the president and the PKI to act against them? To what extent, if at all, were PKI leaders involved in countering the perceived threat?

What is known is that Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Latief, who was centrally involved in arresting the six generals, had personally informed Suharto of the “coup plan” on

September 30, the day before its implementation. Suharto, however, took no action until after the generals had been detained and killed.

From October 1, Suharto rapidly implemented plans that had clearly been considered well in advance. He assumed the leadership of the armed forces, took control of Jakarta and launched a frenzied anti-communist propaganda campaign to justify the mass arrests and murders that followed. The side-lining of Sukarno began from day one, when Suharto refused to accept the president's appointment of General Pranoto as interim army commander.

The US embassy and the CIA, as well as the Australian and British embassies, were deeply involved in the massacres. As is clear from cables that were subsequently released, the only concern in Washington was that the Indonesian army, operating in conjunction with Muslim organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), would not go far enough. Ambassador Green sent a message on October 5, declaring: "The army now has opportunity to move against PKI if it acts quickly... Momentum is now at peak with discovery of bodies of murdered army leaders. In short, it's now or never..." The CIA supplied the military with hit lists of thousands of PKI leaders and members who were to be physically eliminated. As the piles of corpses mounted, embassy officials cheered the army on.

The Indonesian coup was not only a terrible imperialist crime. It was also a monumental betrayal of the Indonesian and international working class. The armed forces were only able to act because the PKI leadership had systematically subordinated workers and the rural masses to Sukarno, and thus to the Indonesian bourgeoisie, blocking any mobilisation on the basis of an independent socialist perspective. The response of the PKI to growing signs that the army intended to seize power was to promote the fatal illusion that Sukarno and "progressive" sections of the armed forces would forestall such action.

The PKI's political orientation was not simply a mistake, but flowed directly from its reactionary Stalinist "two-stage" theory, which insisted that in Indonesia, as in other less developed countries, the working class had to ally itself with supposedly progressive sections of the national bourgeoisie to carry out the bourgeois national revolution before a socialist revolution could even be contemplated. In reality, the history of the 20th Century has demonstrated again and again the truth of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: that the ruling class in countries of a belated capitalist development are organically incapable of carrying out basic democratic tasks.

Nowhere was this more tragically demonstrated than in Indonesia. In an interview in April 1964, PKI leader D.N. Aidit sought to reassure the ruling elites that the party had

no intention of carrying out a revolutionary seizure of power. "When we complete the first stage of our revolution, which is now in progress, we can enter into friendly consultation with other progressive elements in our society, and without an armed struggle lead the country towards socialist revolution," he declared.

In late 1964 and early 1965, as hundreds of thousands of peasants attempted to seize the land of the big landowners, Aidit urged the party to suppress the peasants' actions. In early 1965, as oil and rubber workers began to seize control of their industries, PKI leaders opposed the take-overs and formally joined Sukarno's government as ministers. Even as Suharto and the military took control after October 1, the PKI opposed any mobilisation of the masses and urged them to place their faith in Sukarno, who was retained purely as a figurehead. Five months after the coup, in March 1966, Sukarno handed Suharto full decree-making powers. In March 1967, Suharto formally assumed the presidency of the "New Order" military dictatorship.

Only after more than 30 years of brutal military rule, and amid the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, was Suharto finally forced to stand aside. Claims, however, that his fall in 1998 inaugurated a new era of democracy in Indonesia are a sham. Behind the facade of elections, the military-bureaucratic apparatus remains intact. All the parties that dominate the Jakarta establishment today are either directly connected to the Suharto junta or collaborated with it.

It is critical that the political lessons of the 1965–66 Indonesian coup are assimilated by the working class in Indonesia, throughout Asia and around the world. The coup was a tragic demonstration, not only of the ruthlessness and brutality of imperialism, but of the treachery of Stalinism and its apologists. The building of genuine revolutionary parties takes on added urgency amid the deepening global crisis of capitalism and the assault on the living standards of the working class in every country. It can take place only on the basis of a thorough study of the program and perspective of the world Trotskyist movement, which alone has exposed and fought the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism.

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