



FLOWERS IN THE WALL
Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Melanesia
by David Webster

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The Touchy Historiography of Indonesia's 1965 Mass Killings: Intractable Blockades?

BERND SCHAEFER

On the morning of 30 September 1965, a handful of members of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and sympathetic army officers orchestrated a coup against the leadership of the Indonesian army, only to be crushed by surviving army leaders that night. In the aftermath, the Indonesian army took bloody revenge with the encouragement and support of Western countries. Nevertheless, some surviving communist cadres, inspired by the rhetoric of Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong, still dreamed of a successful armed revolution. Over a period of many months, the army and its political supporters organized the killing of hundreds of thousands of real and alleged communists across the country. An even higher number of Indonesians were imprisoned, lost their employment and possessions, and were discriminated against by government authorities for decades to come. In 1967, General Suharto officially deposed President Sukarno, who had not been involved in the 30 September coup attempt, and replaced him with a military junta that ruled Indonesia in a dictatorial fashion until 1998.¹

At the time, Western political observers identified Indonesia as “the West’s biggest success” of the Cold War; the political and economic course of an officially non-aligned but “communist-tilting” major country was

reversed to “pro-Western.”² As can be demonstrated, the 1965–66 events also had significant international origins and dimensions. The US and its various Western allies, the People’s Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and others, had major interests at stake and were each involved to various extents.³

The violence of 1965–66 is both a domestic and an international issue. It cannot just be reduced to the fact that Indonesians were killing Indonesians, and therefore labelled an Indonesian affair and an Indonesian tragedy. That is only part of the story. It is also an international story: many countries bear responsibility, particularly the United States and its various allies at that time, first and foremost the United Kingdom, but also Australia, West Germany, Canada, France, and others.

Telling an Indonesian Story

On 23 July 2012, the Indonesian National Commission of Human Rights (Komnas-HAM) publicly presented a report on the results of its investigations into “grave violations of human rights during the events of 1965/1966.” It called the events of those years “a human tragedy, a black page in the history of the Indonesian people.” It also stated that the “events occurred as the result of a state policy to exterminate members and sympathizers of the PKI, which was deemed to have conducted resistance against the state. This state policy was accompanied by acts of violence against citizens who were accused of being members or sympathizers of the PKI on a truly massive scale, which took the form of inhuman acts resulting in loss of life and injuries.”⁴

The current state of research on the domestic dimension of the 1965–66 events can be described briefly. For most of the last forty-six years, official Indonesian narratives of “the events” and their contexts remained distorted, misleading, or incomplete at best. Only a combination of sources that are now available in Indonesia and other countries, including painstaking oral history research with Indonesian perpetrators and survivors, have cleared up much of the history of “the events.” The now-established scholarly narrative debunks the propaganda of the military junta, which began with the latter’s assumption of control over the Indonesian media on 2 October 1965 and has dominated ever since. Yet it also casts doubts on communist retellings. In addition, it contests various conspiracy theories

involving Indonesian president Sukarno and his successor, General Suharto, in different scenarios before, during, or after the aborted coup attempt of 30 September.

In 1965 a simmering conflict reached its peak, with the PKI and army leadership vying for dominant political power and influence over the country. Both forces simultaneously worked with and cajoled the ailing President Sukarno into siding with them. Both sides hoped to succeed him in power during his foreseeable last years in office or after his death. Both political antagonists vied for complete dominance, and both suspected each other of plotting to decide the political struggle through a coup during Sukarno's lifetime. The army longed for a pretext to attack the PKI, but apparently made no efforts to act first. However, it did not deny rumours of an imminent right-wing coup. In any case, the PKI and some of its supporters in the military expected a rightist army coup, regardless of the rumours. Thus they made efforts to "pre-empt" this through a coup of their own. Some PKI leaders and their military supporters planned to humiliate the army leadership through kidnappings, meant to force Sukarno into their political boat. They struck first, but seriously blundered; they killed the kidnapped generals and significantly altered their political message between the morning and afternoon of 30 September. The surviving army leadership swiftly retaliated. Over the coming months, in alliance with anti-communist political forces it relentlessly used this pretext to eliminate the PKI, its sympathizers, and untold others once and for all. In March 1966, the army sidelined Sukarno and basically established direct military rule.

This newly emerged, complex narrative conflicts with the elaborate but simplistic anti-communist version officially told and propagated for generations by the Indonesian military, its political supporters, and by thousands of educators and media outlets. However, the new narrative also contradicts widespread conspiracy theories, as well as leftist refusals to acknowledge any communist hand in the events of 30 September.

The murders of 1965–66 must be placed in the contemporary Cold War context of global American-Soviet rivalry, the fierce intra-communist Sino-Soviet split, and Indonesia's grandiose global ambitions under Sukarno. This is not about diminishing, or even exculpating, the Indonesian actors, especially those involved in organizing and committing mass murder. To the contrary, the international dimension adds to the picture

and exposes some stunning international complicity, compliance, and shared responsibility.

Telling a Cold War Story

The Western anti-communist rollback, in particular the active role played both by the US embassy in Jakarta and the CIA, is well known due to the declassification of American records and subsequent publications based on them.⁵ There is no doubt that the support given by American and British, and to a lesser extent Australian, French, and West German intelligence services were helpful to the Indonesian army in tracking and killing many real or alleged communists in the country.⁶

The role of the international communist movement provides the other side of this story of foreign involvement. By 1965, the communist world was split between the Soviet and Chinese camps. As the world's third-largest communist party, the PKI openly opted for and sided with Chinese communism during the Sino-Soviet split, to the point of insulting the Soviet Union and its allies. The inclusion of this international dimension clarifies why it was more important for the Soviet Union and its allies to denounce Chinese-inspired strategies than to engage in a sincere humanitarian appeal against the mass killings. The laudable declassifications of documents leading up to 1965 by the Chinese Foreign Ministry still left certain questions unanswered; now the archive has been shut down completely for an unforeseeable length of time due to reasons unrelated to Indonesia. Maoist China undeniably had a major ideological impact on the PKI's political and military strategies from 1963 until well into 1968.⁷ In September 1965, for example, it was privy to the PKI's planning. But China has been extremely careful not to release material dealing with Chinese reactions to briefings by PKI leader D. N. Aidit. The Sino-Soviet split rendered the pro-Chinese PKI helpless without any foreign intervention or assistance during the Indonesian military's anti-communist campaign in 1965–66. In the face of mass violence against the PKI, China could do nothing. The Soviet Union and its allies, meanwhile, were largely silent as the PKI was annihilated. The attitudes and (non)actions of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies with regard to unfolding events in Indonesia are intriguing. To phrase it provocatively: would the Indonesian army and its Western

supporters have dared to launch such deadly and persistent attacks on the PKI and others had the latter been pro-Soviet and supported by Moscow?

Recent studies have clearly debunked the former belief that the United States was just a sympathetic bystander rather than an actor.⁸ It is also worth considering China's role. The army and the Suharto government justified their actions for decades by saying that they had to react to a communist coup. On the leftist side, this is seen as military propaganda, a pretext to kill communists. But while this was certainly used as a pretext, it also had some grounding in reality because part of the PKI leadership—not the entire party, but the leader and others—did consider staging a coup because they were convinced at some point in 1965, with Sukarno being ill, that the army would carry out a coup to eliminate them. In order to pre-empt the army, then, the PKI leadership considered its own coup to take out the army leadership and establish some sort of new regime. This was quite elaborately planned by some members of the PKI. As we now know, they went to China and shared their thoughts with Chinese leaders. A Chinese government document from this period released in the 1990s to some Chinese scholars without an archival citation reveals that there was a meeting between Aidit and Mao in 1965 at which the PKI leader outlined a coup plan. This document does not detail the Chinese reaction; the Chinese archives did not release that information. From the Chinese perspective today, the document does not officially exist; it is not declassified, and none of the scholars who have seen it are allowed to quote it.⁹

In the meantime, China has completely closed down its Foreign Ministry archive. Even when the archive was open, it painstakingly checked that none of the files on Indonesia contained any evidence on Chinese government reactions. Those reactions can be deduced, however, based on the record and the huge personality of Mao Zedong, who tended to lecture revolutionaries from all over the world. It was not a case of revolutionary leaders coming to Mao, discussing their plans, and Mao sitting silently. Usually he said a great deal, making recommendations and providing guidance.¹⁰ This is one of the problems behind getting to the truth of 1965; what, after all, was China's role?

The international context also mattered in 1965–66, beyond the domestic rivalry between the PKI and the army leadership. President Sukarno's ambitious foreign policy earned the wrath of both Western powers and the Soviet Union. During his policy of *konfrontasi* (confrontation, or

low-level conflict short of full war) with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965, Sukarno openly sided with China and its communist allies in Asia to build a global movement of under the Conference of Newly Emerging Forces (CONEFO) for the Third World guided from Jakarta and Beijing. This simultaneously challenged the Western capitalist powers, the Soviet bloc, the Non-Aligned Movement led by India and Yugoslavia, and even the United Nations, which Indonesia had left in 1965. Sukarno also confronted the International Olympic Committee, which had expelled Indonesia in the lead-up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. In response, Indonesia and China organized the Games of the Newly Emerging Forces (GANEF) in Jakarta. This globally ambitious Indonesian foreign policy, undertaken in cahoots with China, was one of the most daring challenges to global superpower bipolarity during the Cold War. On top of it lay nuclear ambitions and efforts by Sukarno to acquire nuclear weapons with Chinese help.¹¹

In the showdown year of 1965, this placed the country in the crosshairs of international attention and the global Cold War struggle. Moreover, it explains many of the actions and reactions from both the American and Soviet camps.

In the future, political, economic, ideological, and cultural reasons will have to be further explored as to why the bloody 1965–66 massacres in Indonesia were ignored, condoned, or supported by international actors around the world. Attempts to answer these questions, which frequently arise in Indonesia today, will reveal an array of ideological, geopolitical, cultural, and racial motives. They will also show the extent to which Indonesia under Sukarno had become internationally isolated by 1965, and why Chinese protests against the massacres had no effect. Furthermore, they demonstrate how eagerly leading Western countries promoted and furthered the physical elimination of communists, even to the point of expressing serious concerns that the Indonesian army might leave some communist networks and structures intact.

The economic promises made to the Indonesian army by Western intelligence officials and diplomats in Jakarta were a major factor in explaining the large scope of the killings in 1965–66. Only by completely eradicating real and alleged communists, and ultimately deposing Sukarno, did the Indonesian army garner Western support and sympathy that the military junta deemed necessary for the development of the country. Though perpetrated domestically, the killings in Indonesia were committed under

the auspices of international actors that viewed Indonesia as a vital pawn in the Cold War. The organizers of the massacres also complied with Western expectations in order to receive promised economic and financial support.

It is still difficult to discuss the “events” of 1965 in Indonesia today, as Baskara Wardaya’s chapter recounts. In 2011, when the Goethe Institute sponsored a conference on 1965 in Jakarta, it was met by demonstrators who portrayed the gathering as an attempt to restore the Communist Party.¹² This is usually the general mantra of those who have tried to attack anything that was related to 1965. However, the conference continued and produced a book.¹³

Can there be a Truth Commission on 1965?

The following section will discuss the major intractable barriers that currently stand in the way of an Indonesian truth commission and then try to address them from the perspective of what a truth commission might do. It would have to take the form of a historical commission because many witnesses, actors, and perpetrators are no longer with us, so a truth and reconciliation commission (which is usually formed pretty close to the actual events) would be more difficult. A historical commission is not directly related to the actual date of the events in question and can potentially establish a wider scope.

The intractable barriers begin with access to information. To do something substantial on this issue, Indonesian archival records from the period are needed, but these archives are not being opened. Elite groups block access to ensure that Indonesian files are not open to research—even though they are available in the archives, and some Indonesian archivists would be willing to share them. Another issue is the Chinese files, which would provide valuable information to understand the 1965 events more fully.

If there was a commission to address these events, it should seek a broad scope so as to prevent either side from dismissing the inquiry. This means a commission should look into the period of 1963–65, the last two and a half years of Sukarno’s time in power, and the policies of those years. Consequently, it could examine in detail those two very fateful days in 1965, 30 September and 1 October. After 2 October, the military seized power, which led to the formation of a military dictatorship. Beyond that,

there are the atrocities committed over more than a year and the systematic massacres, the total victims of which we still do not have precise numbers, but which were likely between five hundred thousand and a million. Each of these periods is important.

The period between 1963 and 1965 establishes the international context—the extent to which Indonesia was at the crossroads of the Cold War, and why the events of 1965 became an international issue. This was a period in which for the first and only time the Indonesian government, in alliance with China, was a global player with a clear political and ideological agenda. It had a huge communist party, the world’s third-largest (after the Soviet and Chinese parties) in terms of membership, with hopes of succeeding Sukarno in power. Meanwhile, the Indonesian army was also waiting to determine the post-Sukarno future. While Sukarno was still in power, numerous international events made Indonesia a country of focus for the United States in particular and for its Western allies in general. Sukarno was believed to be seeking a close alliance with China and trying to establish a third global centre of geopolitical gravity alongside the Western world and the Soviet bloc. This putative third bloc was essentially the anti-Soviet communist bloc, led by China, seeking other Asian governments as allies. The PKI was very much in the Chinese camp, which turned out to be one of its greatest strategic mistakes. In this period Sukarno’s policies increasingly antagonized the West, starting a conflict with Malaysia and its British allies. China and Indonesia also moved towards an alliance, a horrifying prospect for the United States. These years are vital if we are to understand what followed.

After the fateful days of 30 September and 1 October, the army took power, initiating a series of massacres. Western governments’ archival files from the time, and even Western media reports, hailed the military takeover as the biggest Cold War success of the Western camp because it succeeded in transforming Indonesia from its previous pro-communist leanings to a pro-Western orientation, thereby laying the groundwork for the permanent eradication of the PKI and thus any prospect of communism coming to power. Many confidential documents from Western sources reveal a concern that after Suharto established his regime in October he might fail to seize this great “opportunity” to destroy the Communist Party. Indeed, there were concerns that the army did not kill enough communists, and that Suharto might not deliver the final blow to the

PKI. Of course this is a case of stunning international complicity, actively supported by US, British, and other intelligence forces. This international complicity is a vital part of the story.

The question is whether there is a chance to establish a commission, which must be primarily Indonesian. This cannot be imposed from the outside, although foreigners may consult or be involved in some marginal way. If a commission broadened its scope by looking into the events in their context, rather than leaving things out on the grounds that it might offend one side, and if it was able to consult Indonesian archival records, it could address the conspiracy theories that still abound in Indonesia about the roles of Sukarno and Suharto, Chinese and Soviet involvement, and American agency. This is a huge challenge, one that begins with the co-operation of Indonesian elites and those in the still-powerful Indonesian army. Otherwise, we risk being stuck in the situation where there are meetings of survivors, where there is internal discussion, but those who take part in it are in danger of reprisals. International involvement could help reduce that danger. One thing is certain: only the recognition of historic facts and truly sincere respect for the suffering and dignity of countless Indonesians will beget understanding and, perhaps, steps toward reconciliation.

Notes

- 1 See John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) and Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton, AU: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990).
- 2 For the role of the United States, see Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 3 Bernd Schaefer and Baskara T. Wardaya, eds., *1965: Indonesia and the World / Indonesia dan Dunia* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1965).
- 4 “Statement by Komnas-HAM (National Commission for Human Rights) on the Results of its Investigations into Grave Violations of Human Rights during the Events of 1965–1966,” TAPOL translation, 23 August 2012, <http://www.tapol.org/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/pdfs/Komnas%20HAM%201965%20TAPOL%20translation.pdf> (accessed 5 March 2016).
- 5 Edward C. Keefer, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2000).

- 6 Bernd Schaefer and Baskara Wardaya, *1965: Indonesia and the World*, contains chapters on some of this assistance.
- 7 The so-called Interkit meetings organized by the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies to coordinate its ideological struggle against China are obviously biased but also reveal much information on Chinese global activities. The January 1969 meeting in Berlin in particular looked at Indonesia and the ties between China and the PKI. Its lengthy transcript is still available in German only; for an English summary, see <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113294>.
- 8 Simpson, *Economists with Guns*.
- 9 See Taomo Zhou, "Ambivalent Alliance: Chinese Policy towards Indonesia, 1960–1965," CWIHP Working Paper (August 2013), 20, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_Working_Paper_67_Chinese_Policy_towards_Indonesia_1960-1965.pdf (accessed 5 March 2016).
- 10 Odd Arne Wested et al., eds., "77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977," CWIHP Working Paper (May 1998), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ACFB39.pdf> (accessed 5 March 2016).
- 11 See various documents from 1964–65 on Sino-Indonesian nuclear issues at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/105/chinese-nuclear-history/2>. See especially the following Chinese report from 21 September 1965, about the visit of an Indonesian delegation to China a few days before cataclysmic events unfolded in Indonesia and changed the equation: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121566> (accessed 5 March 2016).
- 12 "Conference on 1965 Tragedy Overshadowed by FPI Threat," *Jakarta Post*, 19 January 2011, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/01/19/conference-1965-tragedy-overshadowed-fpi-threat.html#sthash.Blh8o9Z2.dpuf> (accessed 1 March 2016).
- 13 Schaefer and Wardaya, *1965: Indonesia and the World*.