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The Suharto Legacy – As He Lay Dying

Andre Vltchek

Jakarta~ At 4 PM on January 13, 2008, the main entrance to Pertamina Hospital in South Jakarta is besieged by scores of journalists. Almost all are local, as Indonesia rarely attract international media conglomerates, unless there is a deadly landslide, tsunami or airplane crash. Some reporters place the lenses of video and photo cameras against the glass of the hospital entrance, hoping to spot at least some action.

Pertamina Hospital, waiting for news (Photo A. Vltchek)

But there is hardly any detectable movement inside. General Suharto, the 86-year old former military dictator who ruled Indonesia for more than 3 decades, is lying somewhere deep inside this concrete structure, dying or more precisely in a "very critical condition" after almost all organ functions failed, as his doctor told a news conference that day. He was rushed to the hospital nine days earlier suffering from anemia and low blood pressure due to heart, lung and kidney problems.

AP Photo

Suharto's daughter Siti Hardiyan Trukman at the hospital on January 8

There is no end to the flow of dignitaries offering support or early condolences to his family. On 13 January arrived the stone-faced and tight-lipped former Singaporean Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto's close friend and fellow authoritarian ruler. Lee, who refused to answer questions of Indonesian journalists, later loosened up to his countrymen, offering his sentiments to Channel News Asia and other Singaporean media: "I feel sad to see a very old friend with whom I had worked closely over the last 30 years, not really getting the honors that he deserves. Yes, there was corruption. Yes, he gave favors to his family and his friends. But there was real growth and real progress," Lee was quoted as saying. Among other international visitors who followed Lee were former Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, and the Sultan of Brunei, Hassanl Bolkiah. Indonesian visitors included former President Habibie - who replaced Suharto and was supposed to begin the new era after the dictatorship was toppled. Habibie, who flew to Jakarta from his home in Aachen, Germany, told the Jakarta Post, "My wife and I came from Germany, we arrived at the Soekarno-Hatta Airport and went straight to the hospital."

Pertamina Hospital under media guard (Photo A. Vltchek)

Nine years after Suharto resigned, Indonesia remains dominated by the military force that he empowered and one of the world's most corrupt nations. Berlin-based Transparency International ranks it in 143-146 place out of 180 countries ranked, tied with Gambia, Russia and Togo (The 2007 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index).

According to the United Nations and World Bank, which joined forces in September 2007 in a Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=3616330 in an attempt to recover billions of dollars stolen from developing countries, the corruption and nepotism during and after Suharto's reign were on a scale with few if any precedents: Suharto tops the list of embezzlers with an estimated 15-35 billion dollars spirited out of the country, well ahead of former Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, former president of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) Mobutu Sese Seko, and Sani Abacha of Nigeria. An impressive achievement considering that Suharto's salary in 1999 - the year he was forced to resign after massive demonstrations that shook Jakarta - was only US$1764 a month. Critics say that Suharto and his family actually amassed more than 45 billion dollars. The family is said to control some 36,000 km² of real estate in Indonesia, including 100,000 m² of prime office space in Jakarta.

Entrance to a Suharto estate, this one in Solo (Photo A. Vltchek)

But even to allude to such information can still be illegal in Indonesia. The UN and World Bank report on Suharto embezzlement arrived in September 2007, just one week after Indonesia's Supreme Court ordered Time Magazine to pay 106 million dollars in damages to the former dictator for defaming him in a 1999 article accusing Suharto and his relatives of amassing billions of dollars during his regime. Indeed, Indonesian journalists hew to the unwritten rule that critical reporting on the three crucial issues of religion, the military and corruption are taboo.

Offers made by international organizations to the Indonesian government - to help to identify, freeze and repatriate money from accounts held by Suharto's family abroad - were spurned and issue simply disappeared from the media.

Suharto was charged with embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars of state funds following his resignation, but the government quietly dropped the case on grounds of the dictator's poor health. In 2007, state prosecutors filed a civil suit seeking to recover $440 million of state funds and a further $1 billion in damages for alleged misuse of funds held by one of Suharto's charitable foundations. But President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who had risen as a general under the Suharto regime, instructed Attorney General Hendarman Supandji to seek an out-of-court settlement of the civil case with the Suharto family, since the former dictator was fighting for his life in Pertamina Hospital.

Like almost all mainstream Indonesian politicians, President Yudhoyono has consistently refused to criticize Suharto openly. "Pak Harto was a leader of this nation. His contributions to this nation are not small. As a human being, however, like other people, Pak Harto has weaknesses and mistakes," he told Reuters on January 16, referring to Suharto by his endearing name.

The once opposition news magazine Tempo - arguably the most influential in Indonesia - ran several articles sympathetic to Suharto in its January 15-21 issue. An unsigned "Opinion Piece" (the cover story) ends with these words:

...Suharto has lost the chance to explain that he does not own a cent overseas, as he has insisted many times. He has not had the opportunity to respond to accusations by the people he led for 31 years. We cannot turn back the clock. So what is the point of discussing something that is most unlikely? This is also not the time to negotiate a civil case against the former president. Let the man who is at the end of life's long journey have some peace."

Since Suharto was hospitalized, not a single leading Indonesian political figure has dared to mention the former dictator 's responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians. No demonstration shook Jakarta. The Tempo headline speaks of "A Chorus of Forgiving Voices."

The Jakarta Post, the pro-establishment English language daily newspaper, on January 12, captioned its front page photos: "In Their Prayers: Vice President Jusuf Kalla… visits former President Soeharto at Pertamina Hospital in South Jakarta on Friday." Even human rights activists made the pilgrimage to the hospital in the political ritual of the moment. "Suciwati…, the widow of human rights advocate Munir Said Thalib, and relatives of other victims of human rights violations place flowers in the lobby of Pertamina Hospital on Friday. They said they would continue with their legal battles against former president Soeharto for human rights crimes that occurred during his rule. All the visitors said they were praying for Soeharto."

What the Jakarta Post 'forgot' to mention was that many human rights activists, as reported by the Indonesian language daily Kompas, wished for Suharto's recovery so that he could stand trial.

Garda Sembiring, head of PEC—the Indonesia NGO which seeks to disclose human rights crimes, including the mass murders that took place during the 1965 military coup that brought Suharto to power – was himself a prisoner of conscience during the Suharto era. In a phone interview he expressed outrage at the present situation: "Everybody is now talking about Suharto's illness. I am in shock! Political elites are turning the situation into a political drama. They have a motive: they want the Indonesian people to forget the past. And me personally? Why should I forgive him? I'd love to see him recover, so he could be brought to justice. That's why it would be better for him and for all of us if he survives."

Attempts to try Suharto on charges of genocide have failed above all because of the unwillingness of the post 1999 political establishment to openly deal with the past. Unlike South Africa and the 'Southern Cone' of South America, Indonesia experienced no profound political change in the wake of Suharto's ouster. The country has continued to be ruled ever since by the same business and military elites, with the exception of the brief presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid who was forced out of power when he sought to separate religion from the state, apologize to the victims of the1965 massacres, and introduce social changes in Indonesia's market-driven system. While it belatedly became necessary for both the United States and top Indonesian military leaders to force Suharto's recognition after three decades of rule, precisely that recognition paved the way for protecting their interests under a new electoral regime.

Human rights organizations as well as almost all leading historians have long accused Suharto of playing a key role in the 1965 US-supported military coup designed to sideline the charismatic, anti-Western President Sukarno, a founder of the non-aligned movement, and destroy the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), then the third largest communist party in the world.

On the night of September 30/October 1, 1965, a group of Sukarno's personal guards kidnapped and murdered six right-wing anti-Communist generals. Sukarno's guards claimed that they were trying to stop a CIA-backed military coup, which was planned to remove Sukarno from power on "Army Day". Suharto joined surviving right-wing general Abdul Haris Nasution to spearhead a propaganda campaign against the PKI and Sukarno's loyalists.

Museum representation of communist murder of generals (Photo A. Vltchek)

What followed was a military takeover and a months' long orgy of terror, the mass murder of PKI members, citizens of Chinese origin, progressive men and women, intellectuals, artists and anyone who was denounced by neighbors or foes. Massacres were mainly performed by the military and by anti-communist religious groups and their youth affiliates who went on a rampage against "atheists". Serious estimates of the pogrom range from 500,000 (Australian author Hamish MacDonald, Suharto's Indonesia) to 2 million deaths (novelist and long-time political prisoner Pramoedya Ananta Toer). What is certain is that Indonesia's killing fields were among the most blood-stained in world history. Tens of thousands more were imprisoned for decades or longer.

The US supported the coup, the CIA supplying Suharto and his allies with a list of 10,000 suspected communists. A subsequent CIA study of the events concluded that "In terms of the numbers killed the anti-PKI massacres in Indonesia rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century." (George McT. and Audrey R. Kahin, Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia.)

Political dissent was destroyed. So were the trade unions and peasant unions. Indonesia became "open for business", mainly for multi-national mining and oil companies willing to take advantage of a scared and docile work force and prepared to pay undisclosed amounts in bribes in exchange for access to the country's plentiful raw materials including oil, gas and timber.

Thousands of teachers were murdered. Artists were silenced, film studios closed. Places where intellectuals of different races had mingled were destroyed and replaced by anonymous concrete walls of shopping malls and parking lots. Books were burned, including those of Southeast Asia's greatest novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who became a long-term prisoner of conscience in Buru concentration camp, which housed 14,000 political prisoners. Pramoedya, until his death in 2006, never forgave Suharto. Not for his personal suffering, but for "having no culture; for turning Indonesia into a market; for destroying Sukarno's spirit of enthusiasm."

Indonesia after 1965 was experiencing its "Year Zero", like Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. It closed itself for several years, until those who were targeted were rounded up and slaughtered. The Brantas river in East Java, as well as others throughout the archipelago, were clogged with corpses and red with blood, according to eyewitnesses.

The West did not protest. Suharto was welcomed as a valuable ally by the United States, Britain, Australia and other nations who were delighted to have the leader of Indonesia a free-marketer and an ally in the Cold War rather than the populist and non-aligned movement proponent, Sukarno.

Official commemoration of the 1965 coup (Photo A. Vltchek)

In the wake of the coup and bloodbath, people throughout the far-flung archipelago were kept in ignorance, bombarded with propaganda, and isolated them from the rest of the world. No films but Hollywood and local production, with some syrupy soap from all over the world. No serious topics. Only pop, outdated music. The Chinese language was banned, and so were words like "atheism" or "class". For much of the rest of the world, it was easy to believe the mass media, which hailed Suharto as an ally and statesman. It was the time of the Cold War and the major American preoccupation was Vietnam. When the dust settled, bodies buried, washed away or decomposed, Indonesia opened again for business and tourism. The Indonesian people, for the most part, were terrorized into silence, with no memory and no desires except to move rhythmically to the latest pop tunes and prayers, close to starvation but grinning as ordered: lobotomized.

Suharto, the man now fighting for his life, was in charge.

Then came East Timor. In 1975, General Suharto sent troops to the newly independent nation that had long suffered from Portuguese colonial neglect; a country that had just won independence after several hundred years of Portuguese colonial rule. What followed was a massacre performed by many familiar faces. 200,000 people – one third of the entire nation - vanished. But the "time" – the Cold War – again played into Suharto's hands. He justified invasion of the defenseless little nation by a bombastic "We will not tolerate a Cuba next to our shores" and received applause and a green light once again, from the US, Australia and others. Repression in Aceh and Papua followed.

Whatever the scale of Suharto's embezzlement, he may be responsible for more deaths than any other dictator since World War II.

"I am very disappointed with SBY (President) and the Attorney General", Ditasari, leader of the only progressive opposition party in Indonesia – Papernas – commented. "Their Statements make no sense. We shouldn't hesitate to go on with the legal process, despite Suharto's illness. But the government is scared of those who support Suharto."

Even as he lay dying, Suharto continued to hold the entire country hostage. With fear and opportunism, business and political leaders prostrated beforehis bed. In Central Java, country folks say that he sold his soul to black magic, which is why he cannot depart from this world. Everybody seems to be petrified about saying anything that might be deemed inappropriate or offensive.

Behind the windows of the hospital, the decaying city is covered by smog. Contrary to official statistics, more than half of Indonesians live in misery (even the World Bank classifies 49% of Indonesians as poor). Beyond the hospital windows lies an enormous, poverty-stricken, uncompetitive and uneducated nation, suffering from decades of fear and a legacy of blind obedience.

Tens of millions of Indonesians can still hear cries of terror of those who were hacked and beaten to death, decades ago. But they have learned to doubt their own eyes and ears and, finally, to obey.

Culture of fear (Photo A. Vltchek)

Suharto may die a free man, surrounded by elites offering servile compliments. But perhaps, even in a coma, he will not be able to suppress some memories. It is not easy to forget a million people, a million deaths. Standing next to each other, they can fill enormous space and their screams, coming in unison, can break the walls of any - even a private – hospital.

Andre Vltchek wrote this report for Japan Focus. Posted January 16, 2008.

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