

## Indonesia 1965 - The road to a bloodbath

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To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Indonesian counter-revolution, we reproduce here an account of that period first published in 1998 after the downfall of President Suharto, who led that counter revolution and was responsible for what even the CIA later described as 'one of the worst mass murders of the Twentieth Century?.'

With the fall of the Suharto dictatorship, old parties and old programmes will resurface. In the heat of battle a new generation of activists will have to learn from tragedies. Foremost among them is the disastrous strategy of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) that had its bloody denouement in 1965.

When the five year war to establish Indonesian independence was finally won against the Dutch in 1950, a troubled democratic interlude in the life of the country began. In the 1950s, Indonesia faced the same the problem as other newly independent nations after World War Two. Despite its victory over the Dutch, it was a nation still held in the economic grip of imperialism.

Oil, the second largest foreign earner after rubber, was in the hands of Anglo-Dutch Shell and a number of US companies. Rubber, tea, coffee and sugar plantations were largely owned by Dutch and British concerns. Banking was dominated by the British and Dutch, with the indigenous Chinese community as a minor partner. Inter-island shipping was in the hands of the Dutch owned KPM.

The new government was even saddled with the old colony's "debts" to the Netherlands, despite the massive profits drawn from the country by the Dutch over the centuries. The economy was in poor shape. Agriculture and transport infrastructure had been severely damaged by the Japanese occupation and the war against the Dutch. The population, especially on Java, was increasing dramatically. In 1950, it stood at 77.2 million, by 1961 it was over 97 million.

As the rural population increased, the size of family landholdings declined. Plots became uneconomic and were mortgaged or sold. Peasants became rural labourers or moved to the burgeoning cities looking for work. A new government, dominated by the major parties that had existed before the war, was established. President Sukarno had led the struggle against the Dutch. Sukarno stood "above" the parties but he possessed few formal powers under the provisional constitution.

Elections were delayed as the parties and the army jockeyed for power.

Sukarno's party, the PNI, drew its support from the aban-gan (nominal) Muslims in the rural areas as well as from the Christians of the outer islands and the Hindus of Bali.

It also had major support in the cities from the state bureaucracy and white collar workers.

The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which had been suppressed but not illegalised in 1948, made a spectacular recovery in the years of democracy. It rapidly came to dominate the urban workers' movement through its trade union organisation, SOBSI, and its Indonesian Peasant Front, (BTI) expanded rapidly

amongst the peasants and rural labourers of central and east Java.

The PKI was, however, wedded to the Stalinist theory of "stages" in the revolution.

Indonesia was correctly characterised as a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, where the struggle against imperialism and for a solution to the land question remained central.

For the PKI, however, this meant that the current stage of the struggle was to be limited to the fight to remove the remnants of colonialism. Hence, the key tasks were to win back Irian and take over the old colonial holdings, and redistribute the land to the peasants by breaking the hold of the landlords.

For this, it was argued, a National United Front was needed, a block of all "progressive" classes against the reactionary "feudalists" and those sections of the bourgeoisie tied to imperialism, the so called "comprador bourgeoisie". Above all, this meant making a block with Sukarno and the PNI who, it falsely claimed, would lead the petit-bourgeois and the progressive bourgeois forces in the fight for genuine independence. The reactionary parties were the Masyumi, linked to landlordism and feudalism, and the small socialist party, PSI, which was characterised as a stooge of western, especially American, imperialism, something its leadership certainly was.

This classic "popular front" conception of the struggle meant that the demands of the workers had to wait until the "democratic stage" of the revolution had been achieved.

This was combined with a slavish support for Sukarno who was seen as the key figure that the PKI could influence and push leftwards. The President was seen as the vehicle to achieve one of the PKI's key aims - entry into the government. The results of this policy were not slow to be seen. By March 1952 the PKI was informing SOBSI that striking for higher pay was "sectarian" as it threatened the united national front policy.

In the 1955 elections, the PNI gained the largest vote, 22%, and 57 seats in parliament. The PKI did unexpectedly well with 16.4% of the vote and 39 seats. But the results ensured the continuation of a series of coalition governments, all aimed at excluding the PKI, and all inherently unstable. In this situation, Sukarno became an increasingly influential figure and arbiter between the parties. By the 1960s, Sukarno had constructed a classic "left bonapartist" regime, by which he attempted to raise himself through control of the state above the parties and classes. But he also needed to lean on the masses and, above all, the PKI, in order to pursue the struggle with the Dutch and even up to 1961 against a rebel CIA-backed government in Sumatra.

By 1962, the PKI was growing, under Sukarno's protection, into an apparently unstoppable mass organisation. Its peasant organisation claimed 5.7 million members. SOBSI had over 3 million members and the PKI itself claimed a membership of 2 million, with youth and women's organisations adding another 3 million sympathisers. That year, two leaders of the PKI were finally appointed ministers although, in deference to the army, not in the inner cabinet.

In 1963, after a visit to Moscow and Beijing, the PKI linked itself firmly to the Chinese side in the Sino-Soviet split and immediately stepped up its work amongst the rural masses.

In 1963, the PKI launched a campaign in the rural areas under the slogan "class struggle in the countryside". It involved a series of, "unilateral actions" to enforce the land reform laws which had been passed in 1959 and 1960 but never properly implemented. These laws, which placed a maximum and minimum limit on landholdings, fell well short of the PKI's formal commitment to "those who work the land should own it". Nevertheless, because Sukarno had proposed them, the PKI had supported them in parliament.

However, even these mild land redistribution proposals were thwarted. Of the 337,445 hectares of land meant for redistribution, by 1963, only some 35,000 had been, often because leading PNI and NU figures in the localities were landlords themselves.

The BTI's occupations and seizures of land were accompanied by demands for a purge of the Agrarian Department. This campaign was partly intended as a challenge to the block on the entry of the PKI to the highest levels of government and its exclusion from key ministries and committees. The tactic backfired dramatically, despite the belated support of Sukarno.

In central Java, stronghold of the right wing of the PNI, the landlords mobilised against the BTI with unexpected force. In east Java the NU youth group, Ansor, with the connivance of the police and civil authorities, organised flying squads to attack the BTI occupations. The Muslim religious institutions, themselves owners of large tracts of land, called for a religious war against the atheist PKI/BTI.

By early 1965, after serious clashes with Police and Ansor thugs, the PKI was emphasising the need to "avoid provocation" and "improve Nasakom co-operation with all patriotic elements including the armed forces". The PKI's political retreat in its main strongholds in East and Central Java gave confidence to the reactionary forces and weakened the BTI's credibility amongst the peasants.

By the mid-1960s, Indonesia was facing an economic and political crisis. The announcement by the British of a new state, the federation of Malaysia, replete with British bases and containing parts of Borneo that Indonesia had originally laid claim to, provoked a confrontation. The announcement of independence led to mass demonstrations and the burning of the British and Malayan embassies. Military confrontations took place on the Kalimantan and Borneo border.

The PKI organised takeovers of British holdings and plantations, which the army then quickly stepped in to run and control. The PKI proposed to Sukarno the establishment of a "Fifth Force", an armed organisation of workers and peasants, alongside the armed forces and police. Zhou En Lai offered to provide arms for such a militia when Indonesian minister and leftist Subandrio visited China in 1965. Shell and the American oil companies were placed under government supervision and Indonesia withdrew from the IMF and World Bank.

By August 1965, Sukarno was declaring a new anti-imperialist axis of Jakarta, Beijing and Hanoi and accusing the army of dragging its feet on arming the people. Sukarno instituted a purge of the PNI to remove many of its right-wing, anti-PKI elements from leadership positions. The Indonesian ruling class was now deeply divided. The masses were constantly on the streets and the army feared that the PKI was pushing for power.

The airforce, under Omar Dhani, an ally of Sukarno, had started training the "Fifth Force", actually PKI cadres, at its Halim airforce base in Jakarta. Omar visited China to arrange for small arms shipments.

In September, Ahmed Yani one of the army commanders, announced that the army was against the "Fifth Force". Rumours of coups abounded as army day approached on 12 October and troops arrived in large numbers in Jakarta. It was clear that one side or the other would strike to try and resolve the duality of power that was arising within the state forces. On 5 September, an attempted coup was launched from Halim airforce base.

Sukarno quickly went to Halim for "consultations" with the 30 September Movement as the rebel forces were called.

Meanwhile, General Suharto, in the absence of the high command, had taken control of the army. The Halim forces failed to press home their attack and Suharto organised forces against them. Within 24 hours he was firmly in control of Jakarta and declaring he would crush the conspiracy. On the 2 October, the PKI's paper declared its support for the 30 September Movement which it described as an inter-army conflict. This sealed the party's fate. With the defeat of the coup and the discovery of the generals' bodies at Halim, the right wing moved in for the kill.

Although Sukarno, who had never been directly implicated in the coup, remained President, the anti-Sukarno element in the army now had the upper hand. The PKI was blamed by the army for the coup and mass arrests began. Anti-PKI student organisations were formed and protected by the army while they burnt down PKI headquarters and attacked the SOBSI. 10,000 PKI activists were in prison by December in Jakarta and West Java. The real white terror was launched in the countryside, in the PKI/BTI strongholds of Central and East Java and in Bali.

In October, Suharto sent trusted commandos into Central Java and ordered out unreliable troops. Wholesale massacres of suspected PKI sympathisers took place. Muhammadiyah proclaimed that the extermination of the PKI was a "holy war", a factor that accelerated the massacres, especially of abangan villagers. Leftists from the PNI who had participated in the land campaigns also fell victim to the terror. In Bali, it was not the Islamists but the Hindu landlords, in conjunction with the army and police, who instituted the massacres.

Within a few months, over half a million Indonesians, mostly peasants, had been slaughtered. Some put the figure as high as a million.

Mass arrests continued and even a decade later 100,000 suspects remained incarcerated in prison camps across Indonesia. The PKI was paralysed throughout, making no attempt to mount a defence despite organising over twenty million sympathisers. The PKI had never been organised as a combat party, instead, it sought to gain power through parliamentary or bonapartist methods. It was a party unprepared for revolutionary struggle and civil war, despite the fact that twice before in its history it had been bloodily crushed by the military. It had little in the way of an illegal apparatus and when its leaders were arrested, and then shot, its Central Committee remained dispersed and in hiding.

The leadership vainly looked to Sukarno to protect them, but the President himself was afraid of the high command of the army. He watched as his mass base of support was destroyed.

The PKI militants, and the peasants who supported them, paid the price for its leadership's commitment to a block with the "progressive bourgeoisie" as the route to power. Suharto's bloody destruction of the PKI still weighs heavily on the opposition movements in Indonesia.

The lessons of that bloody counter-revolution need to be learnt by a new generation of workers, poor farmers, urban poor against the native and foreign imperialist exploiters.

First amongst these lessons is never to rely on another Sukarno as the PKI did. To give no political support to Sukarno's daughter, Megawati, nor other figures like Amien Rais or General Wiranto. No section of the bourgeoisie is a national revolutionary force that can be relied on to bring democracy or fight against imperialism.

A united or popular front with such figures, one which subordinates the workers and poor peasants struggle to end their exploitation to a stage under such rulers is a noose around the necks of the oppressed as 1965 showed in the most bloody fashion imaginable.

For a more detailed account of 1965 counter-revolution and the events leading up to it, see:

<http://fifthinternational.org/content/indonesian-massacre-1965> <sup>[1]</sup>

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[1] <http://fifthinternational.org/content/indonesian-massacre-1965>