

The Indonesian Massacre of 1965

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Indonesia was estimated in the 1950s to be the fifth richest country in the world in natural resources, and had long been the target of a drive by US imperialism to dominate its natural wealth and to win its rulers to become part of Washington's worldwide anticommunist alliance. This was the era of a series of military coups to produce 'regime change' in semi colonial countries such as Mossadegh was removed in Iran in 1953, Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954.

The US feared that, under its post-independence leader, Sukarno, the country was drifting towards communism. It was determined to stop this. Vice President Richard Nixon referred to Indonesia as the 'greatest prize' in the region.¹ The presence of the huge Indonesian Communist Party, and its close alliance with Sukarno, suggested that Indonesia might be the 'next domino to fall'. To avoid this at all costs, the US cultivated a close relationship with, and gave extensive resources to, the Indonesian army military establishment, a total of \$64 million between 1959 and 1965. The army, particularly its generals, were seen as a force the US could rely on against Sukarno and his PKI allies. The arms provided to them by the US were key to the violence they inflicted on the Indonesian workers' movement.

Meanwhile, the Stalinist bureaucracies in the Soviet Union and China both hailed the Indonesian bourgeois nationalist regime led by Sukarno as revolutionary and encouraged the PKI's subordination to it. The emergence of a privileged caste of bureaucrats in the USSR from the 1920s, terrified of the consequences of workers' democracy and world revolution that would have overturned them, spurred the development of Stalin's theory of Socialism in One Country. Bolshevism as a political tendency had always maintained a clearly internationalist perspective concerning the necessity of a world revolution, but Stalin rejected this, arguing that despite Russia's economic backwardness it was perfectly capable of developing socialism in national isolation. As a consequence, the task of communists worldwide was no longer the overthrow of the capitalist ruling classes of their own countries, but the maintenance of international stability in order that Russia could get on with 'building socialism' in peace. This led to the Stalinisation of the Communist International which, by 1933, Trotsky characterised as being no longer fit for the purpose of creating world revolution. Parties such as the PKI systematically subordinated the working class to the national bourgeois leaders, the contemporaries of Sukarno, who sought to reach settlements with the colonial powers in order to maintain capitalist rule.

Stalinism held that the communist parties in the colonial world should not struggle for socialism, but, instead, fight for a democratic 'stage', which meant the creation and maintenance of a stable bourgeois government and a struggle against colonialism. The pretext for this subordination in Indonesia in the 1950's and 1960's was the nationalist or 'anti-imperialist' aims of Sukarno. The PKI supported the betrayal of the national liberation struggle by its determination to confine its working class and peasant fighters to 'peaceful democratic' forms of struggle. This was known as the 'two stage theory' of Stalinism. It was a theory that would lead to the bloody defeat of the Indonesian workers' movement.

The Development of the PKI

The PKI was the oldest Communist Party in Asia. It had unusual origins. A Dutch rail union militant and revolutionary socialist, Henk Sneevliet, blacklisted in Holland, came to work in Indonesia, then the Dutch colony of the East Indies. He founded the Indonesian Social Democratic Association (ISDV) in 1914. At its foundation, the ISDV had around 100 members, only three of whom were Indonesian. All its publications were in Dutch. In 1917, the reformist minority of the ISDV broke away and the organisation launched its first publication in Indonesian, Soeara Merdeka (The Free Voice). Sneevliet quickly rallied to the support of the October Revolution, regarding the Bolsheviks as a model to follow in Indonesia. The group made rapid inroads among Dutch sailors and soldiers stationed in the colony. 'Red Guards' were formed, and within three months they numbered 3,000. In late 1917, soldiers and sailors revolted in the major naval base of the archipelago, Surabaya, and formed soviets. The colonial authorities eventually crushed the Surabaya soviets and brutally repressed the ISDV. Its Dutch worker leaders, including Sneevliet, were forcibly deported back to the Netherlands. Now, the ISDV had to work clandestinely under a new, Indonesian, leadership.

In 1911, the Dutch East Indies had seen its first mass political movement on a national scale founded, Sarekat Islam. Founded originally to protect Javanese batik merchants from competition by Chinese traders, it rapidly spread to the poorer population of the towns and into the rural areas and took up social questions. Sneevliet and the ISDV developed close relations with its more radical leaders and entered it, without dissolving the ISDV. Sarekat adopted a more and more socialist and anti-colonialist programme. As a result of this work, the ISDV soon recruited an Indonesian majority. By 1919, thanks to the deportation, on the one hand, and recruitment from Sarekat, on the other, it had only 25 Dutch members, out of a total of around 400.

In May 1920, it changed its name to Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia (PKH; the Communist Association of the Indies). PKH was the first Asian communist party to become a section of the Communist International. Sneevliet represented the party at the second congress of the Communist International in 1920. Thus, Indonesia had a Communist Party before Britain. In 1924, the name was formally changed, to Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Communist Party of Indonesia).

In November 1926, the party led uprisings against the Dutch rule in Western Java and Western Sumatra. These were savagely put down. Thousands were killed and 13,000 were arrested. In 1927, the Dutch East Indies government outlawed the party. The PKI cadres, shattered by the repression, went underground and the party was not really reconstituted till the mid-1930s. By then, Stalinism had triumphed in the Communist International and the PKI's policies were totally subordinated to serving the alliances of the Soviet Union.

This meant that it had to observe Stalin's orders to form an alliance with the 'democratic imperialists' (including the Dutch colonialists) from 1935 to 1939 and again from 1941 to 1946. Throughout World War II, the PKI leadership followed Stalin's line of co-operating with the Dutch imperialist government against Japan, and called for an 'independent Indonesia within the Commonwealth of the Dutch Empire'. These gross opportunist turns were interrupted by adventurist left turns in 1939-41 and 1947-51, when ill-prepared insurrectionary actions drew down terrible repression. In 1945-6, the PKI did turn to resistance against the British and Dutch attempts to recolonise the country but it suffered heavy repression from the right wing of its former bourgeois nationalist allies, with thousands of party cadres killed.

Overall, the combination of policy zigzags and the changes in party leadership that went with them, plus repression from the right, severely disrupted the Stalinised PKI.

However, the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War, the triumph of the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) under Mao in 1949, the eruption of the Korean War in 1951 and the successful expulsion of the French colonialists from Indo-China by the Vietnamese Communist Party, all increased the prestige of the PKI as part of a World Communist movement, seemingly advancing unstoppably to power, especially in Asia. The PKI was re-organised under the leadership of Dipa Nusantara Aidit in the early 1950s.

D N Aidit's policy, supported by both Moscow and Beijing, was to enter a strategic alliance with the leader of the independence struggle, Sukarno. The PKI eventually not only participated in the government led by Sukarno, but also warmly embraced his 'NASOKOM' programme, the alliance of nationalism, Islam and communism as three supposedly compatible trends. The PKI was, however, simply following the Stalinist line, supported by Mao, of the revolution by stages. Aidit explained it as follows:

'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. After all, the national capitalists in our country are both weak and disorganised. At present, in our national democratic revolution, we are siding with them and fighting a common battle of expelling foreign economic domination from this soil?'

The programme of the PKI, adopted in 1962, set the Party's goal as the establishment of a 'people's democratic state.' This was to be carried through by the workers, the peasants, the urban petit bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie and 'patriotic elements' generally. This was the Indonesian expression of Stalin's 'popular front' or Mao Zedong's 'bloc of four classes.'

Mao had described his policy thus: 'Who are the people? At the present stage in China they are the working class, the peasantry, the urban petit-bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie. These classes, led by the working class and the Communist Party, unite to form their own state and elect their own government; they enforce their dictatorship over the running dogs of imperialism, the landlord class and the bureaucratic-bourgeoisie, as well as the representatives of those classes, the Kuomintang reactionaries and their accomplices.'

Of course, Mao was writing in the aftermath of his triumph over Chiang Kai-shek, achieved by former guerrilla forces that had been transformed into powerful standing armies, equipped by Stalin with surrendered Japanese war material. These conditions were hardly applicable to the PKI. But the lesson the Chinese Communists taught the PKI leaders was not the centrality of arming the working class but the importance of supporting 'the national bourgeoisie.' Its progressive or national character was determined by its degree of independence from US imperialism and its willingness to develop friendly relations with the USSR or China. Moreover, this national bourgeoisie was not a disarmed, ghostlike appendage to the Communist Party, as it was in China once Chiang was defeated, but the ruling class of Indonesia, with its own army. Indeed, it was the PKI that was disarmed.

If Sukarno came increasingly to rely on his alliance with the PKI he balanced it with the support of the fiercely right-wing generals of the Indonesian army. In short, he played a Bonapartist role similar to that of many leaders in the semi colonial world of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Nasser in Egypt.

There are even more striking historical parallels to this strategy in the relations between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the nationalist party, the Guomintang (Kuomintang) in the mid-1920s. The Guomintang was led first by its left-wing founder, Sun Yat-Sen and, after his death in 1925 by the right-wing general, Chiang Kai-shek. In 1923, the Communist International, under the leadership of Zinoviev, advised the Chinese Communist Party to enter the Guomintang as a means of strengthening Sun and ensuring his allegiance to the Soviet Union. This tactic was maintained, and strengthened, by Bukharin and Stalin after 1925, under the pretext of carrying through the national-democratic 'stage' of the revolution.

But, as the CCP got stronger and stronger, Chiang decided to strike it a pre-emptive blow starting in 1926. Despite this, the Communist International insisted on caution and continued CCP submission to the Guomindang. This led to the Shanghai massacres of 12 April, 1927, when Chiang's army entered the city and carried out bloody purges, slaughtering 6,000 Communists. Months later, too late, Stalin directed the CCP into the Autumn Harvest Uprising, a series of adventurist local insurrections in which tens of thousands perished and which opened the way to three years of the White Terror whose victims were measured in hundreds of thousands.

Stalinism had thus long dictated class collaboration with the 'patriotic' army and the bourgeois nationalists as the policy in the PKI, allowing the communist movement to be used as a social base supporting Sukarno's regime. It would have been against Sukarno's interests to exclude the PKI from government, given their enormous implantation in Indonesian society. In his own words, he could not and would not 'ride a three-legged horse'.⁴ Instead, he co-opted the PKI within his government, granting some concessions to them and some to the army while balancing one force against the other. The PKI primarily orientated itself to parliamentary elections, denouncing any violence carried out by its members.

The PKI accepted the role Sukarno assigned it, to provide a mass base of support while repeatedly instructing its members and supporters to hold back the class struggle and quell pre-revolutionary situations in order to preserve the 'national united front'. One of the clearest examples of this approach, which set a deadly precedent for 1965, was the PKI leading and then demobilising a huge wave of workers' and peasants' struggles in 1957. This shook imperialist economic domination in Indonesia as factories, plantations, banks and ships were seized and occupied. In fact, Sukarno himself had previously called for a general strike against all Dutch enterprises, seeking to use the masses' anti-imperialism to his advantage. His intention was to use the call for a general strike as a threat to bring the Dutch colonialists to the negotiating table. But the scale of the workers' response to this call took him completely by surprise, and he immediately ordered the military to take control of the enterprises the workers had seized. Likewise, he called on the PKI to slam on the brakes.

Rather than supporting the uprising against Sukarno's repression, and offering support for its progression to a full revolutionary situation, the PKI insisted that the masses hand over the property they had seized to the US-backed army that Sukarno sent in to take control. The survival of Sukarno's regime through this crisis was due to the PKI's sabotage of the mass movement.

Events leading to the Massacre

The PKI's class collaborationist policies continued into the 1960s as workers' and peasants' struggles grew against a background of declining export income, high rates of inflation, extensive unemployment and plunder of state property by the army. In response to their declining standards of living, workers and peasants took part in mass actions, seizing imperialist property, occupying factories and plantations, and dividing landowners' holdings. While rank-and-file PKI members increasingly clashed with the police and military, the party's leadership sought to discourage this; incredibly, they stressed the 'common interests' of the police and 'the people'.

This divide, between the party's membership and a small bureaucratic leadership, stemmed from the PKI policy of concentrating all its efforts into mass recruitment and making little attempt to cadreise the vast majority of its members. The majority of the party was not given serious training in Marxist theory and revolutionary practice. This led to a real divide between a small layer of cadres at the top of the PKI and the mass of its membership who were not familiarised with the party's real policy, giving the party a highly bureaucratic character.

It cannot be denied that the mass recruitment drives led to truly impressive growth. From a membership of

only 10,000 in 1952, the PKI increased to 1,500,000 by 1959. By 1965, it consisted of 3,000,000 members and had more than 10,000,000 sympathisers. It established a firm base in various mass organisations such as the All-Indonesian Central Labour Organisation, the Indonesian Women's Movement and the Peasants' Front of Indonesia. At its height, the party and its front organisations represented roughly 20 per cent of the entire Indonesian population, yet it was smashed and reduced to ruins in the space of a few weeks in October 1965 at the hands of the generals.

In 1965 the economic situation worsened with inflation rocketing upwards and the living standards of the masses worsening. Rumours about a coup has been circulating since the end of 1964, with the Murba Party being banned for accusing the PKI of preparing a coup. A few months before the massacre, Aidit moved to the left, calling for the seizure of imperialist and nationalised properties and the formation of a 'fifth force' of workers and peasants within the armed forces. In July the Politburo discussed a prospective of a right-wing coup and started training 2,000 PKI militants for military combat.

The PKI leadership, despite being aware of the impending reactionary attack by the army high command, failed to organise thoroughly against it. They did not even support the mass struggles of the party's membership, let alone prepare them for the struggle to take power. As soon as the generals' plans became clear, the PKI should have called unequivocally for mobilisation against the military threat but, instead, they hesitated, confusing the mass movement with the deceptive line that the military and state apparatus was being modified to isolate the 'anti-people's aspect' of state power as late as May 1965.

In September the PKI called a two-day blockade of the US embassy and began to initiate demonstrations against the economic crisis. On 30 September, two PKI-associated organisations, Pemuda Rakyat and Gerwani, held a mass protest in Jakarta against the inflation crisis. That night, a rebellion by a group of army officers led by Lieutenant Colonel Untung arrested and executed six leading generals including the army chief of staff, seized strategic points in the capital city, Jakarta, and announced the establishment of a Revolutionary Council to prevent a putsch by a 'Generals' Council' planned for army day, the 5 October. This was done ostensibly to prevent an anti-communist, anti-Sukharno coup from taking place.

However, there were many very suspicious features about this 'coup'. The officers involved, despite having the opportunity to do so, made no attempt to arrest or take power from Suharto, the commander of the strategic reserve forces. By the end of 1 October the armed forces, under Suharto's leadership, had easily crushed the rebels. Immediately, they blamed the PKI for instigating this 'coup attempt'.

Many bourgeois historians have parroted the line that the PKI had, indeed, attempted a conspiratorial coup against the government. This runs counter to the whole political method of the PKI previously. The three officers in charge of the alleged PKI coup attempt were also close to Suharto and trustworthy army officers in elite units. One of them had even received training at Fort Bragg, another at Fort Leavenworth. Both of these officers would have had to undergo CIA reviews before training began.

Anti-communist historical sources claim the PKI tried to seize power with a force of several hundred militia in Jakarta, but that the coup 'never gained momentum'. If the PKI leadership had seriously wanted to organise a coup, then the fact that they could marshal a million members and millions more supporters would have no doubt given them all the momentum they needed to smash the state.

Some commentators have attributed the coup to the CIA, who were certainly involved in other important ways in preparing planning for the massacre: over 1,200 officers in the army responsible for butchering communists had been trained in the USA. The US army had played a major role in preparing the Indonesian military for taking power, setting up a programme called SESKOAD which trained generals in economics and political theory, preparing them for governmental posts. US diplomats later admitted their

systematic compilation of lists of around 5,000 suspected communists, from the leadership to rank-and-file village members, which they handed over to the Indonesian army who then hunted down and killed each one. As Howard Federspiel, Indonesian expert at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research in 1965, later stated: "No one cared, as long as they were communists, that they were being butchered."⁶

An American academic expert on Indonesia, professor emeritus Benedict Anderson of Cornell University, has argued that the so-called PKI coup was, in fact, an internal conflict within the military with the PKI playing hardly any role.⁷ He argues from contemporary sources, that the right-wing generals assassinated on 1 October 1965 were planning to assassinate Sukarno and install themselves as a military junta. The coup of 30 September 30 was made by officers loyal to Sukarno who carried out their pre-emptive strike believing it would preserve, not overthrow, Sukarno's rule. Anderson also believes that Suharto was privy to the assassination plot, let it happen, and then used it as the pretext to massacre the PKI, using intelligence supplied by the CIA and the British, and bring himself to power.

Overall, Aidit and the other PKI leaders were taken totally by surprise and failed to act either consistently or decisively against the armed forces; the few warnings they gave came long after they knew of the forthcoming attack and neither made the dangers clear nor called for the necessary response, an independent mobilisation of workers and peasants to take on the army. Their class collaboration led them to the naïve and absurd belief that the responsibility for stemming the forthcoming attack could be left with Sukarno and the "progressive officers" who would act within the army against the generals. The events of the following days were to prove them utterly and tragically wrong.

The Bloody Days of October

Once Suharto and the Generals had finished crushing Untung's rising, they led a massacre to eliminate every suspected communist in Indonesia, every leader, member and sympathiser of the PKI that they could lay their hands on. These murders were carried out in the most gruesome and horrifying ways. The number of dead is disputed; Sukarno admitted 78,000 dead, but some sources claim the death toll reached a million. While, during the massacre, the US embassy was delighted to receive frequent updates on the PKI leaders being tracked down and killed, from their "shooting list" of 5,000 people, a CIA study later noted 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."⁸

This reactionary drive was not executed solely by the armed forces, but joined by anti-communist groups and individuals, particularly religious organisations. In areas such as central and east Java, gangs of youths from right-wing Muslim organisations carried out mass killings, spurred on and helped by the army. Time Magazine reported on the role they had taken: "Armed with wide-bladed knives called parangs, Moslem bands crept at night into the homes of communists, killing entire families and burying their bodies in shallow graves". The same article went on to describe in more detail just how gruesome the killings and their aftermath had been:

"In parts of rural East Java Moslem bands placed the heads of victims on poles and paraded them through villages. The killings have been on such a scale that the disposal of corpses has created a serious sanitation problem in East Java and Northern Sumatra where the humid air bears the reek of decaying flesh. Travellers from those areas tell of small rivers and streams that have been literally clogged with bodies."⁹

Islamic youth organisations, in conjuncture with the army, also took this opportunity to murder thousands of Chinese immigrants across rural areas, burning many more out of their homes. Bali, previously considered a communist stronghold, was also affected severely, with killings being carried out in the name of

Hinduism. A report from a special correspondent of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on the situation on this island described bodies lying along roads or heaped in pits and half-burned villages.

The murders created such a climate of fear and paranoia that PKI members were forced to kill their alleged comrades to clear their own names. The chasm between the PKI rank-and-file and its bureaucratic leadership, along with the cowardice of the latter, was clearly demonstrated during the massacre. At this time, more than ever, the leadership needed to provide clear guidance on how to fight back against the waves of reaction but, rather than do this, they fled to Sukarno's palace and other places of refuge and left the rest of the membership to fend for themselves. Then, when Sukarno called for "national unity" on 6 October, the PKI's Political Bureau fell in line behind this, following their collaborationist traditions and stating that their party recognised "only one head of state, one supreme commander, one great leader of the revolution, President Sukarno". Consequently, they urged all members and mass organisations to support "the leader of the Indonesian revolution" and offer no resistance to the military. Unbelievably, they declared "full support for the appeal", that is, the killing of their members, and called on party committees, members, sympathisers and related mass organisations "to facilitate the carrying out of this appeal"!10

A similar call for PKI members to offer no resistance to the mass murders came from the Stalinists in the Kremlin, and from Beijing and the Communist Party of Australia. Indeed, the USSR had supplied a substantial proportion of the arms with which the army carried out its butchery against workers and peasants. The Kremlin continued its betrayal of the struggle by denouncing the rebellion around Untung as a "provocation" while making no mention of the generals' preparations for a reactionary coup. It called repeatedly for the "unity" of the Indonesia "revolution" around NASOKOM, which would have meant "unity" between those carrying out the massacre and their victims.

Even after the horrors of the new regime and the mass murder it had inflicted were evident, it took the Kremlin until 26 December to publish a clear condemnation of it. The Chinese bureaucracy's denunciation was a little less belated, but failed to openly criticise Sukarno because they needed his support in pursuing their foreign policy. Then, at a conference held in February 1966, in Havana, the Soviet delegation went to great lengths to block a public condemnation of the counter-revolution still raging against the Indonesian workers and peasants. Just as the diplomatic needs of the Stalinist bureaucracies had led them to block the PKI's development into a revolutionary communist party and an understanding of the need to fight for workers' power, so it prevented them from clearly condemning the destruction of the party and massacre of its members, or even from admitting the magnitude of the events. This, of course, had a terrible effect on the response of the world working class movement to the repression. Neither at the time, nor since, has the full magnitude of this horrendous defeat for the workers and poor peasants been publicised or analysed. Naturally, the imperialist media downplayed it. Thus if one compares the impact of Pinochet's coup of 11 September 1973 in Chile, reported and mobilised around by the world's communist and socialist parties alike, the indecent obscurity of 1965 in Indonesia is outrageous.

The armed forces did not overthrow Sukarno immediately after 1-2 October, as they could not be sure of the reaction of the rural masses and did not want to be blamed for the country's dire economic situation. Instead, they allowed mass demonstrations to be staged and used these to push Sukarno into signing the Supersemar, a document that handed over dictatorial powers to General Suharto.

Those lucky enough to escape death were persecuted in other ways, with 250,000 activists and sympathisers of the far-left being thrown into concentration camps. By 1969, around 110,000 suspects were still held as political prisoners. The reactionary terror unleashed by the generals, far from being confined to the days and weeks of mass murder in October 1965, was to haunt Indonesia for years to come.

Repression. Fear and Silence

Not content with having killed hundreds of thousands of communist suspects and imprisoned tens of thousands more, Suharto's dictatorship went on to repress any expression of communism. The Communist Party was officially banned throughout Indonesia, along with its press and mass organisations, which included the country's main trade union federation. Additionally, its suspected members were sacked en masse from posts in the media, businesses and, particularly, the public sector. In North Sumatra alone, 4,000 public sector workers were fired on suspicion of being communists. In effect, this condemned the families of these suspects to starvation.

Discrimination in employment also extended to the relatives of those killed in the massacre who were denied posts in the civil service because they could not pass the requisite screenings. Obtaining any job at all was effectively impossible for those released from the concentration camps, as they were given special ID cards that made it clear that they had been political prisoners. Additionally, after their release they had to continue to report to local military officers and to attend brainwashing sessions for several years.

Rossie Indira, the daughter of a former prisoner, argues that post-1965 culture is marked by a pervasive obedience to power, family or religion that has its roots in tremendous fear. It is also marked by silence; she notes 'Sons and daughters would never find out what 'crime' their formerly imprisoned or killed father or mother had committed. Many of them just had to learn how to live with the trauma of being sons, daughters and relatives of those who were persecuted'•11.

This culture of silence is pervasive. When Indira and her husband Andre Vltchek made a documentary about the events of 1965 almost 40 years later in 2004, they asked residents of Jakarta aged from 20 to 50 their opinion on whether the Communist Party should be legal or allowed to participate in elections. Each answered identically that the party should not be legal or be allowed anywhere near the voting booths, because of the terrible deeds in which it had been involved in 1965 and the coup it staged on 30 September. Not one of them suggested that the coup might have been carried out by the military itself, and there was no mention of the hundreds of thousands of Indonesians who were murdered and sent to concentration camps. Indira calls this *terlena*, which translates roughly as a state of false happiness or oblivion bordering on amnesia.

The Indonesian people are obliged to perpetuate this culture of silence. Understandably, families have suppressed the truth about what happened in 1965 in case one or more of their family members had been involved in the PKI, which was considered threatening and shameful by Suharto's regime. More shamefully, some kept this silence in order to conceal the identity of those who became murderers during and after the massacres. However, the primary factor in bringing about this collective silence and amnesia has been the campaign of intensive propaganda designed by those who carried out the coup, and inflicted on the population for several decades. It began immediately in the days after the coup, when all national newspapers were banned for a week excluding two that put forward the view that the coup was carried out by the PKI. In order to inspire further anger against the PKI, they were accused of killing the generals in a gruesome way and mutilating their bodies. Unsurprisingly, the western media and leaders largely continued their silence regarding the generals' role in the Indonesian tragedy, as did the Soviet bureaucracy up to its demise.

The aftermath of the massacres saw a complete paralysis of the workers' movement in Indonesia and, partly as a consequence of this, gross inequalities in Indonesian society between a few extremely rich city dwellers, and many extremely poor people. It also had international reverberations that encouraged the forces of counter-revolution across the world, enabling a massive escalation of the US invasion of Vietnam and strengthening the bourgeois regimes in the Indian sub-continent. The defeat of the communist movement in Indonesia crushed the hopes of workers and peasants in struggle across the region,

particularly those in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.

This far-reaching legacy of defeat exposed the views of the Stalinists on the supposed quick recovery of progressive movements after a defeat. They argued that, in colonial and semi-colonial countries like Indonesia, factors such as the weakness of capitalism and the stagnation, or even reduction, of living standards would mean that the failure of a single revolutionary wave would not necessarily lead to relative social or economic stability, even temporarily. This downplayed the criminal nature of the severe misleadership of the workers' movement by parties like the PKI, complacently implying that even where this misleadership led to crushing defeats and betrayals, the masses would soon rise again. The severity and longevity of the damage caused to the workers' movement by the catastrophe in Indonesia shows how naïve and mistaken these views were, and makes it all the more necessary to examine in detail the reasons for the defeat.

How Stalinism Paved the Way to Defeat

As a party guided by the Soviet and Chinese bureaucracies, the PKI took on the reactionary methods of Stalinism, rejecting the struggle for working class power in favour of class collaborationism and participation in a Popular Front government. The PKI leadership's decision to subordinate to Sukarno's bourgeois leadership and acceptance of NASOKOM stemmed to a large extent from the Soviet theses defended by Stalin and Khrushchev on the 'national democratic state', which was seen as a necessary stage of development before moves towards socialism could begin.

Accordingly, the PKI developed the view that Indonesia's 'semi-feudal' society was composed of three forces: the 'diehard' feudalists and compradors, the 'middle of the road' national bourgeoisie and patriotic forces, and the 'progressive forces', that is, workers, peasants, petit-bourgeoisie and revolutionary intellectuals. The first remarkable point about this is the failure to differentiate within the latter category, between workers and poor peasants who had a clear material interest in overthrowing capitalism, and the petit-bourgeois and intellectual forces who might take part in this struggle but could equally turn against it if it threatened their privileges. Additionally, the PKI's formula proclaimed it necessary to unite with the 'middle-of-the-road forces' in general; however, this unity was not to be built on a clear class basis, a method therefore developed of subordinating the struggles of 'progressive forces' to the national bourgeoisie.

This meant that, in the words of Aidit, 'The basic principle we must adhere to in the conduct of the national struggle is to subordinate the class struggle to the national struggle.' The PKI leadership went to extreme lengths to pursue this subordination to Sukarno's party although that party consistently took the side of reactionaries in times of crisis. They even expressed support for Sukarno's nationalist Pantja Sila or five principles, even though one of these was 'belief in a single god' (contradicting the most basic philosophy of Marxism, materialism) and their over-riding theme was 'unity in diversity', the idea that differences between Indonesians would be applicable forever. This was essentially the policy of the Popular Front introduced in France in 1935, in which the French Communist Party looked to an alliance with the 'democratic' capitalists in the struggle against fascism, a struggle which Trotsky made clear could only be won by the working class.

The PKI had similar misguided hopes, intending that the alliance would 'isolate the diehard forces', presumably by taking away the national bourgeoisie's support for them. In reality, the national bourgeoisie were weak in numbers and, being closely tied to the landowners, were unable and unwilling to wage a consistent struggle against them. The PKI's view that they would lead the agrarian revolution that was needed to break Indonesia from feudalism was mistaken; it was the poor peasants, who made up 60 per cent of the Indonesian population, that constituted the real ally of the working class in the overthrow of

feudalism.

The Stalinist 'two stages theory' was a flagrant violation of the Leninist tactic of the anti-imperialist united front, which emphasised the progressive nature of national liberation mass movements and the duty of communists to support them against imperialism, but equally insisted that it was essential to maintain the independence of the working class within these struggles. The working class must be instilled with a distrust of the bourgeoisie and encouraged to organise their own organs of power.

The PKI leadership did not follow these principles or push for these classes to wage an uncompromising struggle against their oppressors because they believed that it was possible to slowly 'transform' the character of the state and conquer state power by infiltrating sectors of the army and bureaucracy. Collaboration at the top was considered the best way towards socialism, although it was at the expense of the mass struggles, as has been discussed above. For example, the PKI did not protest the banning of strikes in industry, because industry was considered to belong to a NASOKOM government.

Aidit argued that state power in Indonesia composed two antagonistic sides, one progressive and one reactionary, either of which could win out. He thus ignored the Marxist view of the state as 'a product and manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms' which is 'an organ of class rule, an organ for the suppression of one class by another'¹² and the understanding that, whatever antagonistic interests might be given representation within the state mechanism, the mechanism as a whole serves the interest of one class only, the ruling class. The misguidance from the leadership that ignored this crucial characterisation was highly damaging and confusing to the vanguard of the working class, who were being told that they did not need to build up a movement against the state that was oppressing them but rather to work within it.

The PKI squandered opportunities to mobilise workers and peasants into militias to eliminate the reactionary elements in the Indonesian army. They believed that, since the Indonesian Armed Forces consisted of sons of workers and peasants, they must be 'forces of the people'. In the Indonesian conflict with Malaysia, between 1962 and 1966, the PKI played a central role in mobilising the masses, but its leadership did not raise the idea of armed struggle for socialist revolution.

In fact, the party was not officially in favour of armed struggle at all, its constitution stating that 'To achieve its goal, the PKI follows peaceful and democratic ways' in the face of the propaganda of the reactionaries, we feel it necessary to affirm the possibility of a transformation to socialism by peaceful means'. This pacifism stems from 1945 when they were instructed by Stalin to cooperate with the Dutch imperialist government to carry out 'joint actions' against Japanese imperialism in the hope of winning independence for Indonesia. Even after this episode was finished, they retained the policy of compromise, establishing Indonesia 'within the Commonwealth of the Dutch Empire'.

The PKI's foolhardy pacifism and trust of the army meant that they were unprepared for armed struggle, even in self-defence against the Generals. This was fully evident to the reactionary forces who drew confidence from the PKI's lack of preparation in preparing their attack. The fact that the Communist Party was following the legal and peaceful road did not make them any less intent on eliminating it, but simply made it much easier for them to do so. The PKI had said in 1951 that, 'If there is the use of force, the spilling of blood, a civil war, it will not be the communists who start it but the ruling class itself'. How right they were. The ruling classes started it, finished it, and finished the workers' movement because of its attachment to a counter-revolutionary pacifist strategy.

In 1966, the Political Bureau of the PKI, which existed in exile, published a far reaching self-criticism of their actions during the massacre. They attributed their failures to three main points, the lack of education of their cadre in 'Marxism-Leninism', the bourgeoisification of their party which occurred through entering

into a united front with the bourgeoisie, and the political line that socialism can come through parliament. It stated:

‘Modern revisionism began to penetrate into our Party when the [party] uncritically approved a report which supported the lines of the 20 Congress of the CPSU, and adopted the line of ‘achieving socialism peacefully through parliamentary’•.13

However, the Political Bureau’s criticisms are not rooted in an understanding of the correct theory of permanent revolution, the methodology of which can be seen in the workers’ revolution in Russia in 1917. Instead they argued that: ‘In the case of colonial or semi-colonial and semi-feudal countries like Indonesia, socialism can only be achieved by first completing the stage of the people’s democratic revolution’•.

This is the political line of Maoism, that the peasants, middle classes and the workers form the revolutionary ‘people’• that must wage an armed war against the armed counter-revolution. The PB document argues that the Indonesian revolution ‘must also follow the road of the Chinese revolution’•. However, the Maoist revolution itself is a populist one, not a working class one, in China it led to the subjugation of the workers by a bureaucracy around Mao and created a degenerate workers’ state, not a healthy one. The Maoists in China supported both Sukarno and the PKI until 1965. Following its bloc of four classes theory, sowing illusions in Sukarno’s ‘anti-imperialist’ credentials, the PKI subordinated the class interests of its members to maintaining the NASAKOM consensus instead of waging a real class war against the imperialists and the Indonesian capitalists.

The Strategy for Victory

As we have seen, Indonesia was a semi-colonial country that needed to be liberated from the yokes of Dutch and US imperialism. Its popular masses, therefore, faced the task of democratic and national emancipation, and its largely agrarian economy made the mobilisation of the peasants central to succeeding in this task. Trotsky first developed the theory of Permanent Revolution as a guide to action for Marxists confronting the task of overthrowing the similarly economically backward Tsarist state in Russia. It is, therefore, a theory that could equally be applied in developing a strategy for Indonesia.

Permanent Revolution emphasises the weakness of the national bourgeoisie in the liberation struggles of semi-colonial countries, because of the tremendous pressures and power of imperialism, As we have seen, this was true for the Indonesian bourgeoisie because of its numerical weakness and its ties to the landlord class. As the revolutionary masses are mobilised in struggle against imperialism, this brings them into conflict with the class position of the national bourgeoisie as exploiters of their ‘own’• working class and peasantry. The bourgeoisie are then pushed into an open bloc with the imperialists, showing their impotence to lead a genuine national liberation struggle.

The tasks of national liberation, land redistribution, democracy and development in economically backward countries, like Indonesia, can only result from a struggle that is led by the workers and draws in the peasant masses. This need not stop at the democratic revolution or the ‘stage’• of a bourgeois democracy, but can push the struggle to the higher level: proletarian revolution against the propertied classes and the establishment of a socialist state with a planned economy. This is the revolutionary alternative to the mechanical ‘stages’• view advocated by the Stalinists, and the Mensheviks before them, in which the struggle for socialism can only proceed once a bourgeois democracy is already established.

Indeed, liberation from imperialism is impossible without the victory of a socialist revolution led by the proletariat, as Trotsky clarified in 1931: ‘With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is

conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation?•.

Suharto's dictatorship was finally ousted in 1998 by a massive wave of demonstrations and riots¹⁴, and a bourgeois democracy was established within which workers' and social movements have developed. These include the People's Democratic Party (PRD), which was originally formed in 1996 as a party of struggle against the New Order. The party is led by the prominent anti-sweatshop campaigner, Dita Sari, who has been courageous in organising women textile workers and criticising the new bourgeois government. However, the party has made little mention of the events of 1965 and consequently has not digested its crucial lessons such as the need for the independent mobilisation of the working class.

Since the overthrow of Suharto in 1997, the opportunity exists once again to build a revolutionary working class party, though this still takes place under the eagle eye of a military fundamentally unchanged from that which supported Suharto for so long. All progressive movements face important tasks in the period ahead, and must strive to build mass opposition to neo-liberalism and capitalism among the working class and poor. They must militantly resist the continued attempts of the military to re-assert their power, fight the rise of reactionary political Islam, and build the opposition to imperialism and the war on terror. In doing so they must confront the lessons of the historic tragedy of 1965.

Endnotes

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Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/indonesian-massacre-1965>

Links:

[1] <http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/pembantaian-di-indonesia-pada-1965>

[2] <http://www.marxist.com/Asia/indonesia1965.html>

[3] http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Blum/Indonesia57_KH.html

- [4] <http://www.wsws.org/news/1998/may1998/coup-m20.shtml>
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/communist_Party_of_Indonesia
- [6] <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/1965coup/coup-1.htm>
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