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Reviews

# Indonesia as Testing Ground

- Reviews section -

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**At the start of October 1965, a U.S.-aided and abetted military coup overthrew Indonesia's left-leaning Sukarno government. Not just an account of that tragic episode and the subsequent slaughter of a million or more actual and alleged communists and the horrific imprisonment of another million, veteran journalist Vincent Bevins' *The Jakarta Method* is something far more.**

This book recounts how what transpired across the sprawling archipelago nation became a model for U.S.-assisted rightist terror across the Global South. It explores how the blood-drenched annihilation of Indonesia's left provided a blueprint for, in the author's words, a "monstrous international network of extermination" that laid foundations for future U.S.-led capitalist "globalization."

Simply put, the resource-rich and strategically located country of 140 million, deemed too valuable to be left to its own devices, had to be reined in and integrated into the U.S. imperial orbit.

With the Cold War rhetorical threat of an expanding "communist menace" providing the pretext, Washington sought out, trained, and directly assisted the willing executioners at all levels while providing them international cover through a concerted disinformation campaign in the Western press.

## Transgressions Against Empire

The country's first president and a long-standing leader of the national liberation movement that successfully resisted post-World War II Dutch attempts to reinstall colonial rule, Sukarno had to be overthrown.

His major transgressions as a non-communist anti-imperialist were several, as viewed in Washington and CIA headquarters in Langley.

Among them was the fact that he set out on a course of neutrality as an initiator of the "non-aligned movement." He certainly overstepped by hosting the April, 1955 "Asia-Africa Conference" at Bandung with representatives from 29 decolonizing nations looking to forge "Third World" development paths independent from the Cold War's East-West binary system of Moscow satellites and U.S.-dominated "Free World" neocolonial dependency.

The "Bandung Conference" drew Washington's attention and led, in 1958, to an unsuccessful CIA attempt to destabilize the regime from the outside that included the arming of outlying-island insurgents and U.S.-piloted air assaults launched from the Philippines. (Striking a familiar note, the operation was exposed when one of the planes was shot down and the American pilot captured.)

When that stratagem failed, U.S. assistance already underway to internal anti-communist forces and regime opponents, most notably in the Indonesian military, increased.

Sukarno's second major offense was that he provided space in his ruling coalition for the public and unarmed Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). By the early 1960s, the PKI was the third largest CP in the world after China and the Soviet Union, with 3.5 million members and a popular base of some 20 million non-members organized into a

broad array of popular mass organizations.

# The Overthrow

While Sukarno sought to govern through a delicate balancing act that recognized the country's major power blocs — the PKI, a Muslim establishment, and the military — there certainly was internal opposition. It included old colonial elites alarmed by the nationalization of extractive industries and the redistribution of large land holdings; more conservative anti-communist Muslims opposed to a range of social reforms including women's rights; and elements of the military command looking to expand their own political authority and increased control over varied nationalized sectors of the economy.

So what happened in 1965 and after? As Indonesia historian John Roosa has put it, "Almost overnight the Indonesian government went from being a fierce voice for cold war neutrality and anti-imperialism to a quiet, compliant partner of the U.S. world order."

It did not come from nowhere, of course, as the groundwork was laid well in advance. Already in the mid-1950s, Indonesian army personnel had begun training at various U.S. bases, most notably at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

By 1965, up to a quarter of Indonesia's Army command, some 2,800 officers, had come to receive not only technical instruction and ideological indoctrination but importantly, Bevins tells us, some intoxicating taste of the "American good life" at off-base bars and clubs.

In addition and continuing through the Kennedy and early Johnson years, on-the-ground U.S. advisors instructed the country's national police as the country became the second largest recipient of police funding, behind South Vietnam.

Such "assistance" provided not only weapons but also the technologies of surveillance, record keeping and communication that would come to play a vital role in 1965 and after.

The catalyst came on the night of September 30 when a group of regime-loyal junior army officers kidnapped and murdered six rightist generals plotting to overthrow Sukarno and impose a military junta. (Five of the six had trained in the United States.)

While the actual role of the PKI in the counter-coup would later become a topic of debate, the immediate response by the military led by the future dictator Suharto was to depose Sukarno and to open a year-long terror campaign that targeted the PKI and all those somehow associated with it, actual or alleged.

Carried out by the army, police, paramilitaries, civilian death squads and Muslim youth gangs, the wave of horrific violence also took aim at the country's ethnic Chinese, rumored to be communist.

Among those targeted by the repression were the members of Gerwani, the country's three million-strong women's organization.

As part of a U.S.-assisted propaganda campaign to incite anti-communist hysteria, military psychological warfare specialists circulated the story that a satanic, communist, witch cult of emasculating Gerwani women had assassinated the September 30 generals after mutilating and castrating them in some bizarre orgiastic ritual.

As a result, innumerable Gerwani members were rounded up, raped and executed, at times with their entire families, while countless others faced years of brutal imprisonment.

The direct U.S. role in the PKI's annihilation, long minimized or denied, was central. The Pentagon and CIA rushed in logistical support of all sorts, including communication systems that aided in the coordination of the persecution and mass slaughter across the archipelago.

The U.S. Jakarta Embassy's "political officer" provided Suharto's forces with long-compiled lists that targeted for execution thousands of known PKI members in the unions, peasant and student organizations, and among the intellectuals. As Bevins described it:

"(T)he U.S. government helped spread the propaganda that made the killing possible and engaged in constant conversations with the Army to make sure the military officers had everything they needed, from weapons to kill lists. The U.S. embassy constantly prodded the military to adopt a stronger position and take over the government, knowing full well that the method being employed to make this possible was to round up hundreds of thousands of people around the country, stab or strangle them, and throw their corpses into rivers. The Indonesian military officers understood very well that the more people they killed, the weaker the left would be, and the happier Washington would be...."

## The Murder Export Trade

Importantly, what occurred was immediately viewed in Washington as a major victory in Asia at a time when far more costly and escalating "boots on the ground" efforts in Vietnam had already long soured.

Bevins goes so far as to argue that while the Vietnam War dominated U.S. domestic politics for many years, "it achieved exactly nothing;" in contrast, the mass killings in Indonesia, done on the cheap, were possibly the biggest "win for the West" in the entire Cold War.

The lessons of the Indonesian "scorched earth" approach, what came to be known as the "Jakarta Method," were well-heeded as the "national security state" ratcheted up support for slaughter of unarmed civilians and backing of authoritarian capitalist regimes elsewhere.

Bevins tells us that some seven years after the genocide began in Indonesia, mysterious graffitied slogans "Yakarta viene" and "Jakarta se acerca" began appearing on walls across Santiago, Chile. Postcards marked with the arachnid logo of the far-right Pátria y Libertad began arriving at the homes of members of socialist Salvador Allende's government.

Foretelling the September 1973 U.S.-backed "General's Coup" and mass arrests, disappearances and killings to come, the cards simply read "Jakarta is coming."

In Brazil during the same period, security state officials plotted their own "Operação Jacarta" to execute suspected "subversives." While that plan never materialized, the military dictatorship — in power since the 1964 overthrow of the moderate João Goulart — arrested, jailed and tortured thousands.

The country's "security services" played a key role, along with their Argentinian counterparts, in the U.S.-backed

murderous campaign of cross-continent state terror, "Operation Condor."

Clearly, by the early-mid '70s, as Bevins informs us, the "Jakarta Method" had morphed into an international state-terror network under U.S. tutelage.

While researching the proliferation of "The Method" across South America in the '70s and Central America in the '80s (where in Guatemala, the primary target became entire Indigenous peoples deemed "subversive"), Bevins counted a total of 22 countries in the "U.S. camp" where murderous state terror was employed against unarmed, innocent civilians. He actually discovered use of the term "Jakarta" as a code word for such rightist violence in eleven of them.

While the bulk of the Indonesian mass murder occurred within a year of the 1965 coup, arrests and jailings continued for a decade as Suharto's "New Order" regime became an exemplar of an inherently corrupt, crony capitalist state and an IMF-backed "favorable investment climate."

The mass murder also continued as the military, with a U.S. "green light," invaded neighboring East Timor in December, 1975. The resultant 25-year occupation, amplifying the full range of "Jakarta Method" genocidal techniques, led to the death of perhaps a third of the tiny nation's population.

A savvy multilingual journalist who traveled worldwide to uncover the story of "The Method," Bevins interviewed survivors of the horror on several continents. Their stories, interwoven with the historical narrative, bring an extraordinary, human dimension and some glimpse of the long-lasting personal and collective trauma to the account.

## Human Dimensions

In one of the most moving parts of the book, Bevins pays a visit to Magdalena, an aged woman who, as a 17-year-old in 1965, was picked up and interrogated, accused of being a Gerwani "witch," tortured, repeatedly raped and imprisoned for years.

Her only crime? As a worker in a Jakarta T-shirt factory she, like all her co-workers, became a member of the PKI-associated union association.

When Bevins met her, she was surviving on meager charity and living all alone in a small shack, cut off from her family and ostracized by the local community. Why? Her life was still stigmatized by her alleged association with "communism."

In another passage, Bevins speaks with a witness to the mass butchery and burial on a beach in Bali, a local killing field that became the site of a luxurious resort. The island's tourism boom centered in that very location, we learn, started soon after the violence as the Suharto regime turned to encouraging foreign investment in today's "island paradise."

Toward the end of the book, Bevins recounts his conversation with Winarso, at the time of the interview the head of an organization for survivors of the 1965 genocide. He asked the lifelong activist who won the Cold War.

The man answered succinctly that the United States won; that capitalism had won. Bevins then asked how that took place. Winarso's answer poignantly went right to the heart of it all. "You killed us," he replied.

While it has some minor flaws (the absence of an index being one), Bevins' "Jakarta Method" is important. It should be read by anyone seeking a handle on the nature of the contemporary global system and the ubiquitous violence underlying its construction.

Source: [Against the Current](#)

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