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Indonesia/Netherlands

The Netherlands and the 1965 mass killings in Indonesia

- Features -

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The military coup d'état in Indonesia in 1965 was the beginning of one of the 20th century's greatest crimes: the killing of over half a million of people and the torture and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands more. Much has been written about the involvement of Western powers such as the United States in the military coup. Less is known about the response of the Netherlands. Declassified documents show that Dutch authorities regarded the military coup with sympathy and sought to support it.

The Indonesian army used mass violence to crush the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and effectively destroy the Indonesian left for generations. The destruction of the party and it mass movements allowed the army to push aside president Sukarno and alter the course of the country.

It is known that the intelligence agencies of Britain and the United States helped the coup by spreading propaganda. Certainly, in the case of the CIA, there was also direct material aid; the army was handed money, weapons and lists of names of PKI members. Bradley Simpson has documented such forms of support, concluding, 'Washington did everything in its power to encourage and facilitate the army-led massacre of alleged PKI members.'

Dutch authorities also welcomed the coup, seeing it as a victory over a long-standing enemy. Indonesian president Sukarno was seen by successive Dutch governments as an enemy not only because he had been a leader of the Indonesian struggle for self-determination. In 1957, during the conflict over control of West Papua, Indonesia had seized Dutch enterprises and expelled tens of thousands of Dutch citizens.

Already in the 1940s, the idea of an impending 'communist takeover' in Indonesia strongly influenced Dutch official views of Indonesian politics. In 1948, during the Indonesian revolution, after a failed uprising by the PKI in Madiun, the Indonesian republic under Sukarno harshly repressed the PKI. After Madiun, the United States became convinced that Dutch attempts to re-assert control over Indonesia were doomed to failure. Rather than let the war continue and possibly again reinforce radical currents in Indonesian society, the United States pressured its Dutch ally to compromise.

But after reluctantly recognizing Indonesian independence, large parts of the Dutch political establishment continued to view Sukarno as a puppet of the PKI. This hostility only increased as the PKI rebuilt itself in the mid-1950s and began to draw closer to its former opponent. During the 1950s, the Indonesian president ended the compromises that the Netherlands had forced upon on the new republic. Internationally, Sukarno became a leading figure in the non-aligned movement. At the end of the decade, Sukarno concentrated power in his own hands and sidelined political parties in a system he called 'Guided Democracy'. In the eyes of The Hague, such moves signalled that Indonesia was in danger of 'going communist'.

Around this time, the PKI solidified its alliance with the popular president, growing in both terms of membership and political prominence. Under a new leadership, consisting of D.N. Aidit, Njoto, Lukman, and Sudisman, the party adopted a popular front strategy of allying with the bourgeois 'anti-imperialist' Sukarno, prioritizing international politics and the struggle against colonial remnants over class struggle inside Indonesian society. Measured in terms of votes and membership, this strategy seemed successful. In the mid-1950s, the PKI claimed to have hundreds of thousands of members and it came fourth in the elections of 1955 – the last free elections for over four decades.

The period 1957–1965 is often seen as one of unprecedented influence of the Indonesian left but it was not a period of uncontested advance for socialist ideas or the working -class movement. The PKI initially resisted the formation of

Guided Democracy. Participation in elections and parliamentary politics brought the PKI considerable success; it was a large, well-organized party. Guided Democracy, however, meant a drastic reduction in the role of parliament and of party politics. But the PKI soon realized not only that it was unable to oppose Sukarno but also that it needed his protection against the army. In return, for Sukarno the PKI and its mass base was a useful counterweight against the army. Sukarno increasingly adopted a leftist profile while the PKI presented itself as his most reliable and dedicated supporter.

Indonesian politics in the period until 1965 is usually analysed as consisting of three parts: on the left the PKI, on the right the army, and in the middle Sukarno keeping the two in balance. But the three parts were not of equal weight. The protection of the president was essential for the PKI and to keep it, the party drew increasingly close to him. In the eyes of much of its base, the PKI was first of all the party that supported Sukarno and his policies. In return for its support, the party was given only a few symbolic posts in Sukarno's government. When Sukarno's protection fell away in late 1965, the party was revealed to be extremely vulnerable.

At the end of 1965, it became dramatically clear that the period of Guided Democracy had been a period of increasing power for the Indonesian military as well. Already claiming a political role for itself on the basis of the part it played in the anti-colonial struggle, the army's political power increased during the repression of anti-Sukarno rebels in the mid to late 1950s. When Sukarno was replaced by the so-called New Order regime, state authoritarianism strongly increased, but it was already under Guided Democracy that part of the foundation of this 'counter-insurgency' state was laid. It was also during this period that the Indonesian army increasingly became an economic power. In late 1957, Dutch enterprises that had continued to play key roles in the Indonesian economy were occupied by workers as part of a nationalist campaign to 'liberate Irian Jaya' – West Papua. Management of these enterprises was quickly turned over to (retired) military officers, thereby increasing the army's economic role.

The Hague's Cold War

For Dutch governments, support for the United States and its role in the Cold War was a given. Before the war, the Netherlands, relying on its colonies, tried to steer a neutral course in world politics; but in the late 1940s, the Dutch ruling class shifted strategically to closely follow the United States. During much of the 1950s, the Netherlands was ruled by coalition governments made up of the Christian-democratic Catholic People's Party (KVP) and the social-democratic Labour Party, PvdA. Both were strong supporters of an Atlanticist orientation.

Dutch policy towards independent Indonesia was determined to a large extent by the fear of PKI influence. From the mid-1950s onwards, the Dutch Foreign Intelligence Service (IDB) sent The Hague a steady stream of reports on the political situation in Indonesia. Sometimes these summarized conversations with Indonesian informers such as journalists and politicians; at others, the IDB wrote its own analyses. The IDB was well-informed about Indonesian politics; among its informants were journalists writing for the respected newspaper Peloper and the prominent politician Ruslan Abdulgani.

All the information gathered by the IDB was interpreted according to a racist, colonial framework in which the supposed threat of Indonesia 'going communist' figured prominently. In the run-up to the 1955 elections, for example, the IDB sent a report predicting that the PKI would do well, maybe even win 5 million votes. A few months later, it turned out that the IDB had somewhat underestimated the party. In fact, the PKI scored over 16 per cent, a little more than 6 million votes. The IDB explained the appeal of the PKI as follows: 'Considering the lack of capacity for critical thinking and the strong tendency of the average Indonesian to unthinkingly follow his leaders, it could be expected that all members of PKI-aligned mass organisations and their families would vote for the party.'

In the years that followed, the PKI continued to figure prominently in the IDB's reports. Time and time again, the popularity of the party was explained by way of the supposed irrationality of Indonesians as well as their susceptibility to communist conspiracies. The IDB reports are filled with fears of communist plans to seize power through a coup. On the other hand, rumours that right-wing parties were planning a coup against Sukarno were considered to 'give hope'. Another recurring theme in the reports is anxious speculation about the army. Dutch officials increasingly put their hope in the Indonesian army as they saw it as the only force in Indonesian society with both the will and the means to defeat the PKI. Because of the crucial role that they saw for the Indonesian army, Dutch officials were deeply worried about even slight indications that Indonesian soldiers were sympathetic to the PKI.

The communist spectre in Indonesia

At the end of the 1950s, war almost erupted again between the Netherlands and Indonesia, this time over control over West Papua. It was only after the Netherlands relinquished its control to the UN (again under US pressure), that it became possible for the Dutch and Indonesian governments to restore diplomatic ties. In early 1965, E.L.C. Schiff, the new Dutch ambassador, arrived in Jakarta. His assessment too of Indonesian politics was heavily influenced by fears of a communist seizure of power, as shown by his reports to The Hague.

In late January, Schiff summarized the views of 'European and Afro-Asian colleagues' with whom he had spoken. The more 'optimistic' ones were of the opinion that through 'economic aid and technical support', Western countries could 'prevent Indonesia from sliding completely to the left'. More 'pessimist' diplomats felt it was already too late for this and considered the Indonesian army to be the only viable alternative to communist rule. But not while Sukarno was president. This was also the dominant view in The Hague: As long as Sukarno was president, the PKI would continue to grow and the army would be unable to seize power. Dutch officials expected a decisive showdown between the army and the PKI as soon as Sukarno left the political stage. Different Dutch reports mention the existence of a 'council of generals'. Before 30 September, it was rumoured to be plotting a coup against Sukarno. But according to the Dutch interpretation, the council acted more like a thinktank engaged in 'contingency' planning in expectation of a confrontation with the PKI at the end of Sukarno's rule.

A little later, in March 1965, Schiff heard another view of Indonesian politics. In an extensive conversation with General Yani, who had a reputation as a politically sophisticated right-wing opponent of the PKI, the general assured Schiff that the army was 'reliable', meaning that the PKI had no significant influence on it. According to Schiff's summary, Yani agreed that were would be no decisive battle for power as long as Sukarno was president. The key issue was who would succeed Sukarno. Yani sounded confident when he insisted that the PKI exaggerated its support. And in any case, the PKI's base was unarmed. In a direct confrontation with the army, the PKI would stand no chance, Yani emphasized. If the PKI attempted to seize power, while Sukarno was still president or after, the army was ready to retaliate. Some six months later, Yani was dead, but his political vision would come true.

The G30S and the military coup

The bloody events of the night of 30 September to 1 October have cast a long shadow over Indonesian history. At the centre of the events was the G30S, a group of pro-Sukarno officers with links to a number of PKI members, among them its leader D.N. Aidit. The group aimed to abduct a number of high-ranking officers known to be right-wing opponents of Sukarno, and to demand that the president fire them. Because of bad planning, miscommunication and the reckless use of violence, the plan quickly collapsed. The main target, army chief and minister of defence A.H. Nasution, managed to escape. A few hours later, the abducted generals, Yani among them, were killed by their captors.

As Sukarno refused to give his support to the movement, the G30S hurriedly declared that the cabinet was dissolved. Troops under the leadership of the relatively unknown Suharto quickly repressed the movement. The involvement of PKI members in the movement and the wavering of Sukarno, who could neither support a movement that killed generals nor renounce the PKI, made these events a perfect opportunity for the army leadership to implement already existing plans for a coup. The G30S became, to quote the title of John Roosa's book on the movement, the 'pretext for mass murder'.

The army quickly brought the media under its control and began a systematic campaign of slander against the PKI. The involvement of Aidit and other party members was presented as the supposed proof that the party as such had been involved in a failed coup attempt. Army-controlled media spread bizarre stories of PKI sadism. One horror story was that members of the PKI-aligned women's movement Gerwani had sexually tortured, mutilated and murdered the generals. As Saskia E. Wieringa and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana write, the architects of this psychological warfare realized that ascribing sexual perversion to Gerwani members was a potent tool to demonize the entire movement.

Encouraged by the military propaganda, crowds attacked PKI offices and the homes of party members. This was followed by a systematic campaign of murder. Not only were PKI-supporters, or those assumed to support the party, assaulted in the street – they were arrested in large numbers, held captive in improvised prisons and camps and then murdered en masse. Jess Melvin shows how this violence had been planned well in advance by the army. In the six months after the night of 30 September, at least half a million were killed. The real number is probably closer to 1 million. Part of the killing was done by gangs and right-wing militia under orders of the army. The army also engaged in systematic torture of prisoners and sexual violence against women. In 1967, according to military figures, there were still 225,000 people imprisoned because of their supposed affiliation with the G30S.

The first reference to these dramatic events by the Dutch ambassador was a passing comment: 'To what degree the events of this morning will necessitate a change of policy is not yet known.' One week later Schiff remarked that in the media, already under military control, 'the smear campaign against the PKI is continued with vigour'; 'I have the impression that this time the army is determined to seize the opportunity and finish off the PKI.' The Dutch ambassador did have one worry: 'Will the army push through?'

A few days later, Schiff described the situation as 'the best – and maybe last – opportunity for the army to assert itself politically'; 'this assessment of course is cause for optimism regarding further developments. This optimism is, as I pointed out elsewhere, shown in particular by my American colleague, who refers to impressions gathered by his military attaché in army circles.' In the following months, Schiff's hope that the army would 'push through' came true.

Dutch sympathies for the Indonesian army

The minutes from the weekly meeting of the Dutch council of ministers, chaired by the prime minster, show a similar picture. On 5 November 1965, the meeting discussed at length the possible consequences of events in Indonesia. Anne Vondeling, Labour Party minister of finance, repeated the army's narrative of the G30S and expressed his joy 'that the communist revolution had broken out too soon' – meaning, at a moment when it could be repressed. Sukarno was still president, but it was already clear that the army was concentrating power in its own hands.

The Dutch council of ministers evidently had as its criterion that action towards Indonesia should benefit the army. Thus, it was unwilling to respond positively to a request by the Indonesian foreign minister Subandrio to visit the Netherlands. Subandrio was known as a confidant of Sukarno and as pro-PKI. An international trip would have strengthened his position. The council of ministers also met to discuss whether the Netherlands should provide food

aid to Indonesia. Would such aid strengthen the position of Sukarno, or rather that of the army? ‘In the fight against communism, rice can be a good weapon,’ mused PvdA economics minister and future prime minister Joop den Uyl. The following month, on 17 December, Vondeling explicitly raised the role of the army: ‘The mood of the army is such that they have decided to fight communism to the bitter end.’ Should this not prompt a more lenient attitude towards Indonesian requests for help?: ‘Indonesia is a big country and a victory over communism there will be a very important fact’.’ Foreign minister Joseph Luns of the Christian-Democrat KVP took a more cautious stance but he too spoke of ‘hopeful factors’ such as the ‘blows being dealt at the PKI’.

A few months later, the issue of food aid, and who would take the political credit for it, became very concrete. In early March 1966, Dutch Prime Minister Cals stated that he had heard through the Indonesian ambassador that the military preferred the Netherlands not to provide aid. A week later, Luns relayed a similar message. At this point, the military coup was at a crucial stage and it was in the army’s interest to deepen the crisis in Indonesia in order to further weaken Sukarno. In February 1966, Sukarno made a final attempt to regain power but by March 1966, the military coup was nearing completion. The PKI had been destroyed and a cornered Sukarno handed over de facto power to General Suharto on 11 March. Only then did Dutch politicians talk again about providing aid.

The 11 March transfer of power prompted Schiff to urge a ‘tangible proof of sympathy for the new regime’. Earlier, he had suggested in a letter to a colleague that the Netherlands could give 50,000 guilders, ‘camouflaged’ as disaster relief. Shortly afterwards, Luns announced that the Netherlands would indeed donate 50,000 guilders as disaster aid following floods in Jolo.

The same month, Luns and Cals received two secret intelligence reports on the army’s actions. A report on ‘the execution of Aidit and other communist leaders’ put it bluntly: ‘There is no more top leadership of the PKI.’ The entire Central Bureau of the PKI ‘was 'simply killed off, even though reports say they were killed or committed suicide while attempting escape.’ The second report described ‘military operations to physically exterminate the PKI’. Since Sukarno was still officially the commander-in-chief of the army, it could not go directly against him. To undermine Sukarno, the army sabotaged the economy and, as we have seen, prevented the arrival of aid that could have softened the effects of the crisis. The army also supported student organisations that were protesting against Sukarno, providing transport and financial aid. Dutch intelligence was aware that the army was undermining the president: ‘Instead of an open revolt against Sukarno, the army acted indirectly to achieve its goal.’

By the time Luns and Cals received these reports, the military coup had been completed. Until he was toppled by a popular uprising in 1998, Suharto was to rule Indonesia as a dictator.

Cold War casualties

Recently, more information has emerged about foreign involvement in the military coup. It seems likely that the Indonesian generals also approached Dutch authorities for direct aid. In October 1965, Schiff reported, in a personal letter, a curious conversation he had had with someone claiming to speak on behalf of the army. This person, wrote Schiff, was looking for ‘cash contributions’. Schiff held off – not because of objections on principle but because he was worried that at a crucial moment it might became known that the former colonial power was supporting the army.

This was not the first time that anti-Sukarno forces approached the Dutch authorities. During the PRRI/Permesta rebellion in the late 1950s, rebels had done so to Dutch authorities in Dutch New Guinea. The Dutch were aware that the United States was providing aid to the rebels but chose to keep their distance. Reports from Dutch officials in West Papua show that they were sceptical of the rebels’ chance of success and worried that revelations about Western support for them might inadvertently strengthen Sukarno’s position. A number of rebels were discreetly

given shelter in Dutch-controlled territory but only after signing a declaration that they would refrain from political activity. In the early 1960s, backed by the PKI, Sukarno defeated the rebel movement and benefited from public outrage after US support for it was revealed.

In early 1966, news began to filter out internationally that the violence in Indonesia had cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The interpretation of this news was heavily influenced by army propaganda. According to the army, the PKI had tried to seize power by force. It was supposedly engaged in an armed rebellion and, the army claimed, provoked a popular backlash. In the archives of the Dutch embassy there is an article published in October 1965 by the Indonesian English-language newspaper Indonesian Herald. Originally a publication of the Indonesian ministry of foreign affairs, the paper was already under army control when it published the article claiming that ‘certain forces’ (a reference to the PKI) were trying to destroy the country by sowing disunity and causing ‘communal violence’.

Military propaganda that the violence was ‘spontaneous’, a ‘horizontal’ conflict, was to colour much of the international reporting on events in Indonesian. Another aspect of the army’s propaganda was that this was a two-sided conflict, with the army waging a counter-insurgency against PKI-led guerrillas. Western journalists such as Arnold C. Brackman echoed the army’s claims. In reality, there was hardly any armed resistance by the PKI and its allies, as the party was unprepared for armed struggle. It was only after some time that PKI members attempted, without much success, to organize armed resistance.

The claim that the violence in Indonesia was a spontaneous outbreak of ‘communal violence’ easily connected with European racist ideas. That such violence could be on such a large scale was explained with the same ideas about irrational Indonesians that had previously been used to ‘explain’ the PKI’s popularity. Typical was an article in a Dutch newspaper politically close to the PvdA, Het Parool. The February 1966 article, written by PvdA member Sal Tas, described the violence as ‘hysterical outbursts of rage’ and the work of ‘a people lacking cohesion’.

Although the generals continued to use nationalist language, and Indonesia remained a member of the non-aligned movement, the country effectively returned to the Western camp. Time Magazine’s claim in April 1966 that the destruction of the PKI was ‘the West's best news for years in Asia’ became infamous. Another low point was the July 1966 description by a columnist of the largest-circulation Dutch newspaper, De Telegraaf, of the killing of 50,000 people in Bali as an act of a ‘sombre beauty’.

After the army seized power, lingering conflicts between the Netherlands and Indonesia arising from the expropriation of Dutch firms under Sukarno were quickly settled. In his memoirs, Luns, by then NATO secretary-general, praised how Suharto had ‘cleverly’ sidelined Sukarno. In 1967, the PvdA parliamentarian Jacques de Kadt praised Suharto’s Indonesia, where a famous fellow PvdA-member, the economist Jan Tinbergen now advised the regime, as an example of the transition from ‘hysterical communist nationalism to a healthy nationalism’. Particularly striking was the citing of a well-known euphemism for colonial relations that year by Udink, the Christian-Democrat minister responsible for development aid. Udink claimed a large share of the credit for international help in stabilising the new regime for the Netherlands: ‘After all, there is still, or perhaps more precisely there is once again, a special relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands.’

The reports sent by Schiff and the IDB and the minutes from the council of ministers all give a similar picture. The Dutch were expecting a confrontation between the army and the PKI, and hoped this confrontation would end with the military seizing power. The events of the night of 30 September came as a surprise, but Schiff quickly realized that the army had taken the opportunity to attack the PKI. When making decisions regarding diplomatic contacts or aid, the Dutch council of ministers looked for ways to support the army. When the final victory of the army became clear, the Dutch authorities gave financial aid to the new regime. Such aid, as well as the earlier decisions regarding food aid, were not decisive for the success of the coup d’état. Its importance was more political: it signalled to the new regime that the Netherlands was on its side.

To this day, there has been no justice for the victims of the military's mass murders. Most mass graves in Indonesia have remained secret; mourning could only take place in secret. No one has ever been held accountable for the genocidal violence. For the 'democratic West', the suffereing of the victims was an acceptable price for a victory in the Cold War.

Archives

Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken
Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Ministerie van Financiën
Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Raad van Ministers [Ministerraad]
Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Ministeries voor Algemeene Oorlogvoering van het Koninkrijk (AOK) en van Algemene Zaken (AZ): Kabinet van de Minister-President

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