

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article9322>



Indonesia

When past and present collide: Indonesia 1965-2025

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP611 - December 2025 -

Publication date: Monday 22 December 2025

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At the time of the US escalation in Vietnam, Indonesia was the scene of one of the worst bloodbaths in modern history, committed under the auspices of Washington and London. [1] Sixty years later, the archipelago is at the heart of youth revolts against the privileges of the oligarchy and corruption, in defence of a democracy dearly won back since 1998. [2] A democracy that the current president Prabowo Subianto openly repudiates by making General Suharto, the perpetrator of the aforementioned massacres, a national hero. [3]

General Suharto seized power in October 1965 with a mandate to transform the vast archipelago into a bastion of Asian counter-revolution, within the framework of the "containment" policy implemented in the region by the United States. [4] A policy simultaneously applied in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. In Indonesia, the PKI [5], which held power, was closely associated with Sukarno, namely the first president of Indonesia. They enjoyed significant international legitimacy following the Second World War. The country had been occupied by Japan and independence had been proclaimed in 1945, taking advantage of the "favourable moment" represented by Tokyo's defeat. The Dutch nevertheless attempted, for four years, to reconquer their former colony. Ten years later, Sukarno was one of the main figures at the Bandung Conference (1955), embodying anti-imperialist Third Worldism. [6]

The social trauma of white terror

Indonesia was then a country that counted on the international stage, with a strong progressive aura. All the more reason to break the regime. Sukarno was sidelined during the coup d'état of October 1965 (he would be forced to resign in March 1966, formally giving way to General Suharto), then the army committed what must be called a political, anti-communist genocide (complemented by an anti-Chinese dimension). [7] The PKI was then the largest communist party in the capitalist world; its social base numbered in millions. It had close, historic ties within the armed forces, but these proved powerless at the decisive moment. The massacres claimed between 500,000 and one million victims (possibly more). [8] Unable to defend themselves, the party and its mass organisations were methodically decimated. Their members, their relatives, anyone suspected of sympathy towards them, were hunted down, murdered, imprisoned in camps, with survivors sinking into complete oblivion. No trials, nor often even charges.

The generals had long-standing close ties with the United States. They knew that Washington would be grateful to them for "resolving" the communist question in the best possible way. "Kill them all" became a reference model that Latin American dictatorships drew inspiration from. [9] Furthermore, at the time of the coup, the army had already become a sprawling politico-social body, ensuring its presence down to the village level. It had penetrated the administration and could exert pressure from within on all levers of the state, whilst also benefiting from a parallel governing capacity through its territorial commands. The senior officer corps had enriched itself, becoming a component of the bourgeois oligarchy. To carry out the repression, it too could count on militias, notably Islamic ones. [10]

An intellectual blanket of silence weighed on the country until the regime's fall in 1998. During his 32 years of rule, Suharto undertook to eradicate even the memory of the country's progressive past by ensuring tight control of communications and the rewriting of its cultural history. An entire generation was cut off from this pluralist past in favour of a monolithic vision of the past, demonising the left, progressive ideas, Marxism, communism, but also critiques of patriarchy, feminist struggle, defence of minority rights, self-organisation, basic literacy, and so on. [11]

The denunciation of "communism" serves as a catch-all; it actually covers a generalised attack on the freedoms of those "from below".

The place of women in society occupied a central position in this reactionary assault. Gerwani [12], a feminist movement of three million members linked to the PKI, was decimated on the basis of entirely fabricated propaganda: its members had allegedly tortured and castrated the generals—autopsies proved the contrary. [13] Rapes and executions of activists followed. The New Order then imposed the ideology of *kodrat wanita* ("feminine nature"): submissive wife, devoted mother, guardian of the home. State organisations like Dharma Wanita aimed to re-subordinate women, not to emancipate them. Even today, calling an activist "new Gerwani" aims to discredit her.

Present struggles show the extent to which part of so-called civil society, the political left and social movements have reconnected the past to the present. The response of those in power, on the other hand, illustrates the army's determination to put a stop to the democratisation of the archipelago. History remains a major field of confrontation: in early 2025, the #IndonesiaGelap ("Dark Indonesia") student demonstrations [14] explicitly denounced the return of authoritarianism "in the style of the New Order", targeting the increased role of the army in civilian governance and the rehabilitation of Suharto's legacy by Prabowo.

In East Timor and West Papua

The Indonesian regime committed particularly serious crimes in East Timor (or Timor-Leste), a former Portuguese colony located in the eastern half of the island of Timor, the western part, a former Dutch colony, being integrated into Indonesia. After the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, on 22 November 1975, its independence was internationally recognised. On 7 December, the Indonesian army invaded the country and annexed it in 1976—an annexation that was never recognised by the UN—considering it the 77th province of the state.

Armed resistance to this new colonisation was essentially led by Fretilin [15], the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor, which had already fought for the territory's self-determination during the Portuguese dictatorship. Paramilitary forces, with the support of the Indonesian army, waged a particularly bloody war against East Timorese, pursuing a policy of mass terror aimed at provoking a massive exodus of population towards provinces under Indonesian jurisdiction, notably the western part of the island. To achieve this, anything was acceptable: massacres, rapes, torture, sacking of urban centres... In total, according to historians' estimates, at least 200,000 people were killed in two years, more than a quarter of the population.

In 1998, the International Monetary Fund opened a regime crisis in Indonesia by maintaining its debt repayment demands whilst the region was suffering from a major financial crisis, inadvertently provoking Suharto's fall. This helped change the situation in Indonesia itself.

Faced with international pressure, Jakarta organised a referendum in 1999, in which the East Timorese population voted 78.5% for independence. A remarkable result under occupation! The ballot was followed by a new wave of massacres. Nevertheless, it created a political situation that led to the recognition of independence on 20 May 2002. This resounding victory for the independence movement was unforeseen by the UN. In fact, it committed the Security Council well beyond what it would have wished. The international emotion aroused by the massacres also gave a boost to solidarity, reinforcing its effectiveness, particularly in Portugal and Australia.

In West Papua, annexed in 1969 following a sham referendum (1,026 hand-picked delegates, voting under military coercion), the same violence continues. [16] In 2024, extrajudicial executions reached a peak of 18 documented cases, cases of torture numbered 53, and some 70,000 Papuans were displaced. Anti-Papuan racism structures this

internal colonial oppression. [17] Yet it is precisely in Papua that Prabowo Subianto cut his teeth: in 1996, he led military operations there marked by massacres of civilians—which resulted in his being expelled from the army and banned from entering the United States. [18]

17 December 2025

First published: [ESSF](#).

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[1] On the direct role of British intelligence in inciting the massacres, see Nicholas Gilby, Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, "Revealed: how UK spies incited mass murder of Indonesia's communists", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, October 2021. Available at:

<https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article59675>

[2] The *reformasi* movement that brought down Suharto emerged from mass student protests in 1998 amid the Asian financial crisis. See Kontras, "Indonesia: End the romanticism of reformasi, it's time to fight", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, May 2025. Available at:

<https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article74869>

[3] On these attempts to rehabilitate Suharto's legacy, see "Indonesia's new official history whitewashes the crimes of Suharto", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, September 2025. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article76085>

[4] The US policy of "containment" sought to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Indonesia's strategic importance—as the world's largest archipelago nation and fourth most populous country—made it a priority target. The CIA poured millions of dollars into supporting anti-communist army officers and right-wing groups. See "Book Review: October 1965 and Washington's Anticommunist Crusade – the 'Jakarta Method'", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, June 2020. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article58434>

[5] The Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), founded in 1920, was the oldest communist party in Asia outside Soviet Russia. By 1965 it claimed three million members and influenced mass organisations with a combined base of some 20 million supporters.

[6] The Bandung Conference brought together 29 newly independent African and Asian nations, laying the foundations for the Non-Aligned Movement. It represented the first major international gathering of post-colonial states asserting their independence from both Western and Soviet blocs.

[7] On the scale and systematic nature of these crimes, see "Final Report of the International People's Tribunal 1965 – On crimes against humanity committed in Indonesia in and after 1965", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, July 2016. Available at:

<https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38727>

[8] See "1965 to 1966: Indonesia's Red Slaughter", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, October 2018. Available at:

<https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44703>

[9] This became known as the "Jakarta Method"—a blueprint for anti-communist mass killings that was subsequently applied in Brazil, Chile, Argentina and elsewhere. The US State Department provided lists of PKI members to the Indonesian army to facilitate the killings.

[10] The Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, and its youth wing Ansor played a significant role in the killings, particularly in

East and Central Java.

[11] On efforts to preserve this erased heritage, see "Preserving Revolutionary Heritage: How Indonesia's Socialist History Institute Challenges Decades of Political Erasure", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, February 2025. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article75619>

[12] Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Indonesian Women's Movement), a feminist mass organisation linked to the PKI.

[13] On the destruction of Gerwani and the fabrication of anti-communist propaganda targeting women, see "The rise and fall of Indonesia's women's movement", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, January 2010. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article17226>

[14] The *IndonesiaGelap* protests erupted in August 2025 against parliamentary corruption, excessive allowances for politicians, and police brutality, drawing tens of thousands into the streets across the country. The response was brutal repression that killed at least eleven people.

[15] Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), founded in 1974, combined anti-colonial nationalism with socialist politics.

[16] On the continuing situation in West Papua, see "Indonesia Can't Quell West Papua's Growing Independence Movement", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, October 2021. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article59928>

[17] Papuans, predominantly Melanesian and Christian, face systematic discrimination and violence from the Indonesian security forces. The United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) has campaigned for an independence referendum, gaining support from several Pacific Island states.

[18] Despite this record, Prabowo was elected president in 2024. On the contradictions of former activists now serving in his government, see "What are Indonesia's PRD leftists doing in the Prabowo government?", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, December 2024. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article72390>