

Breaking the Silence: The U.S. and Indonesia's Mass Violence

ALTHOUGH THE MASSACRE of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 communists, leftists, ethnic Chinese, and others in Indonesia in 1965-1967 is a foundational event in modern Indonesian political history, it remains mostly a footnote for most in the United States and elsewhere. In 2012, the documentary [The Act of Killing](#) shocked audiences throughout the world as perpetrators of the mass murder reenacted their violence. The film shows sociopathic gangsters from Medan, Sumatra, who committed these acts as they are celebrated by many in modern Indonesia. The film has fueled a debate within Indonesia and drawn attention internationally to events kept out of many U.S. history books. Events that the U.S. facilitated and cheered at the time.



Killers are fawned over during an Indonesian TV talk show. Image from *The Act of Killing*.

[PBS will be airing](#) the Oscar-nominated *The Act of Killing* on October 6 and it is also available for online streaming and purchase. [The Look of Silence](#), a companion film currently showing at film festivals, focuses on the victims. It follows the investigation by Adi Rukun into the murder of his older brother who was killed during the violence. The [Guardian writes](#) that “Some subjects flinch when confronted with their crimes. Others accuse Rukun of indulging in “communist activity.” He has left Indonesia for his own safety.

These powerful films tell us much about Indonesia today as they do about the past.

However, any evaluation of the events of 1965-1967 must include a discussion of the role of Western powers in the violence, including that of the United States. The [East Timor and Indonesia Action Network](#) (ETAN) continues to call for accountability for those in the West who encouraged and assisted in the mass violence in Indonesia. The full truth must come out and the U.S. should declassify all files related to Suharto's U.S.-backed seizure of power and the murderous events which followed.

Background

INDONESIA GAINED INDEPENDENCE from The Netherlands following a revolutionary war (1945-1949). Indonesian politics were chaotic and disorderly under first president Sukarno, as three axes of power competed for influence: political Islam, the military, and the left, led by the popular Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The PKI had a long history in Indonesia, including resistance to Dutch colonialism, and many of its programs appealed to peasants trapped in a feudal society. Following independence, the PKI, the largest communist party outside of the Soviet Union and China, was viewed as a legitimate and important player in Indonesian politics.

These axes jockeyed for power, especially as Sukarno created and dissolved cabinets with regularity in the 1950s until the 1959 implementation of “Guided Democracy,” Sukarno’s plan for stability that forewent elections. The military (and its U.S. backers) and political Islamists grew concerned over the PKI’s popularity, and the military became increasingly belligerent. The PKI, led by firebrand Aidit, reacted by demanding greater political power



Special issue of Tempo magazine timed for release of *The Act of Killing*.

and creating para-military organizations. The nationalist campaigns to seize West Papua and confront Malaysia in the early 1960s were used to distract Indonesians from their domestic political and economic concerns.



Maj. Gen. Suharto, left front, with Gen. Sabur, commander of the presidential guard, October 1965.

In this context of political and economic chaos, members of Sukarno's Presidential Guard kidnapped six generals and a lieutenant on the morning of October 1, 1965. The officers were murdered, and the kidnappers - calling themselves The 30th of September Movement - said they were acting to prevent an anti-Sukarno coup d'état. A quick response and counterattack was organized in Jakarta, led by Major General Suharto, then the leader of the military's Jakarta-based Strategic Reserve (Kostrad) troops. Within a day of the coup, Suharto had gained control of the military and the PKI was blamed for the kidnappings and murder, although evidence casts doubt as to how well-coordinated the plot was.

Observers have also raised questions about what

Suharto might have known prior October 1, since he was not targeted and appeared poised to take quick advantage of the situation. An above-ground, legal, popular, and mass-based political party was criminalized overnight, with membership punishable by death.

PKI members, their families, and their associates, but also other leftists, critics of the military, ethnic Chinese, and many others, were rounded up and murdered or told to report to the government. Many did so willingly, completely unaware of the fate that would befall them – they had done nothing criminal, after all, and didn't fear for their safety.

The military, police, and Muslim groups formed citizen militias to do the dirty work. In Medan, for example, as shown in the of *Act of Killing*, local gangsters were recruited to do the killing. Throughout Sumatra, Java, and Bali, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, a bloodbath began. Rivers were choked with bodies and flowed red with blood. Canyons became the sites for group beheadings and decapitations - one site is [known as](#) the "Ravine of Tears." The "luckier" ones, frequently those whose guilt was in question, were imprisoned and tortured without trial. Within two years, hundreds of thousands were dead. Within six months, some 1.7 million [people were imprisoned](#). Suharto assumed the presidency, the PKI was liquidated, and political Islam was shunted aside, as the military took firm control of Indonesia. Dissent was suppressed in the name of fighting communism; many others were too afraid to speak out. Elections were managed to make sure only Suharto-backed candidates won. The military dictatorship would last until Suharto's resignation in 1998.

Former political prisoners and their families remained marginalized for decades; their association noted on their ID cards, employment opportunities closed off to them. Although a few victims' groups have emerged since the start of Indonesia's democratic transition, they also remain marginalized and threatened. Their meetings are attacked and their members accused of engaging in communist activity. Indonesia's official National Commission on Human rights (Komnas HAM) recently investigated the killings and [published a report](#). Although its scope and budget were limited, it found horrendous abuses associated with the anti-communist purge. The commission recommended either non-judicial action to restore a sense of justice for the victims or that the Attorney General proceed with cases. The Attorney General, Darmono, [said he could not act](#) because "The 1965 rights violations are beyond (the scope of) the existing law." No action has yet been taken on the report.

U.S.'s dark history in the Indonesia's mass violence



Presidents Kennedy and Sukarno, Andrews Air Force Base, Suitland, Maryland, April 1961. Photo JFK Library and Museum.

ALTHOUGH THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE and the resultant mass violence were the culmination of decades of conflict among Indonesians, the U.S. sanctioned, encouraged, and assisted the killings. The U.S. government was concerned that Indonesia might fall to communism as events in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos (as well as Latin America) were heating up.

The U.S. role in early Indonesian politics dates back to the revolution, when it assisted in negotiations on independence between the Dutch and Indonesian nationalists. Less than a decade later, the US was sending arms and support to rebels in Sulawesi and Sumatra who were fighting the central government in an effort to topple Sukarno.

The assistance included sending U.S. bombers from their base in the Philippines to attack targets in Indonesia. This ended after U.S. pilot Allen Pope was captured on May 18, 1958. His plane was shot down after bombing a church in Ambon. Without U.S. support, the rebellion was quickly crushed. Despite the U.S. role in the rebellion, anti-Sukarno military officers continued to discuss with the U.S. their mutual goal of toppling Sukarno and undermining the PKI.

The Kennedy administration facilitated the turnover of resource-rich Western New Guinea (West Papua) by The Netherlands, first to the UN and then Indonesia, against the wishes of its inhabitants. This was done to endear itself to Sukarno and the Indonesian military and [perhaps for economic reasons](#).

The U.S. stepped up military aid and its training of Indonesian officers and police. In the early sixties, U.S. security assistance focused on “civic action: as a nation-building exercise, as a counterinsurgency strategy, and, not incidentally, as a front for covert operations aimed at the PKI.”^[ii]

Prior to the events of October 1, Indonesian military officers speculated that a failed coup attempt by the PKI would provide a perfect pretext for eradicating the party, and this idea was shared with the US embassy staff, who encouraged it and pledged support. In January 1965, the U.S. ambassador reported to Washington that the Indonesian army was “developing specific plans for takeover of the government moment that Sukarno steps offstage.” The cable continued that some top military commanders were prepared before Sukarno’s death should the PKI form an armed civilian militia. They would act in a way that appeared to leave Sukarno in charge.^[iii]

As events unfolded in the days following October 1, American diplomatic and intelligence staff encouraged the eradication of the PKI, and closely monitored the Indonesian military’s actions. Robert Martens, head of the US embassy’s political affairs bureau, [gave the army thousands of names](#) of suspected PKI members. U.S. officials “checked off the names of those who had been killed or captured.” The embassy also transferred cash to leaders of the anti-PKI movement. As soon as Suharto’s command was consolidated, the US and other Western countries pledged millions of dollars in economic assistance, and Suharto reversed Sukarno’s policy by opening the country up to foreign investment.^[iii]

The New York Times, quickly praised the coup. In a page one story on October 11, reporter Max Frankel wrote that there was “hope where only two weeks ago there was despair about the fifth most populous nation on earth, whose 103 million inhabitants on 4,000 islands possess vast but untapped resources and occupy one of the most strategic positions in Southeast Asia.”^[iv]

In June 1966, the Times’ James Reston called the “savage transformation... a gleam of light in Asia.” Time magazine hailed Suharto’s takeover as “the West’s best news for years in Asia.”^[v]

Later, [Time Inc. sponsored](#) a closed-door "Indonesian Investment Conference" in Geneva in November, 1967, the first such conference since Suharto seized power.

In 1967, Richard Nixon argued that "The U.S. presence... was a vital factor in the turnaround in Indonesia, where a tendency toward fatalism is a national characteristic. It provided a shield behind which the anti-communist forces found the courage and the capacity to stage their counter-coup and, at the final moment, to rescue their country from the Chinese orbit. And, with its 100 million people, and its 3,000-mile arc of islands containing the region's richest hoard of natural resources, Indonesia constitutes by far the greatest prize in the Southeast Asian area."

By the end of 1968, [the CIA was downplaying](#) Suharto’s brutality, writing in a classified National Intelligence Estimate that “the Suharto government provides Indonesia with a relatively moderate leadership.” Adding that “There is no force in Indonesia today that can effectively challenge the army's position, notwithstanding the fact that the Suharto government uses a fairly light hand in wielding the instruments of power.”

Later analyses of the violence showed its often chaotic nature, despite being organized from the top. Hermawan Sulistyó’s PhD thesis^[vi], for example, shows that the anti-communist bloodletting was used by various groups to eliminate their enemies: landlords, tenants, ethnic Chinese, debtors, etc. All one had to do was accuse someone of being a member of the PKI or a sympathizer, and extrajudicial death was the result. Those who were not killed on the spot, frequently because the “evidence” of their ties to the PKI was egregiously spurious, were sent to prisons or exiled to islands that became prison camps, such as Buru. This was the fate of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia’s best known author, who detailed his experience in his memoir and suffered persecution until the end of the Suharto regime.



Presidents Nixon and Suharto meet in 1970.



Kissinger, Suharto and Ford meet.



Suharto and Clinton at the White House, October 1995.

After Effects

SUHARTO HAD CONSOLIDATED HIS RULE by early 1966, and Sukarno had been shunted aside. The tight bonds forged by the CIA and diplomatic staff in Indonesia remained during Suharto’s tenure (1965-1999). U.S.-based multinational corporations were free to plunder the country – it is said that the first MNC to engage with the Suharto government, Freeport McMoRan, wrote its own contract with immensely favorable terms – making sure Suharto received his cut.

Time Magazine wrote in 1999 that it “found indications that at least \$73 billion passed through the [Suharto] family's hands between 1966 and last year.” The New York Times [reported](#) that in 1989 the CIA estimated Suharto's wealth at \$30 billion. Freeport is Indonesia's largest foreign taxpayer. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger [told President Richard Nixon](#) in 1968 that the manner in which Indonesia was to seize the territory – in a [sham plebiscite](#) that remains widely condemned – was to be off limits in discussion, essentially giving Suharto a free hand. (Between 1988 and 1995, [Kissinger](#) was paid \$500,000 per year to be on the board of Freeport McMoRan. And the American military ramped up its engagement, free from the constraints imposed under Sukarno. In early 1976, soon after Indonesia brutally invaded East Timor, a [State Department official said](#), “the United States wants to keep its relations with Indonesia close and friendly. It is a nation we do a lot of business with.” Nearly two decades later, a White House official [called](#) Suharto “our kind of guy” after the dictator met with President Clinton. Suharto, [The New York Times wrote](#) “has been savvy in keeping Washington happy.”

The list of egregious human rights violations during [Suharto's New Order](#) is lengthy, including the “mysterious shootings” incidents of the early 1980s, the 1984 Tanjung Priok massacre, and the persecution and killings in West Papua and Aceh. Among the most egregious was the 1975 invasion of former Portuguese colony and newly declared independent state Timor-Leste (East Timor), where up to one-third of the population died in the years following the invasion. Throughout all of these human rights disasters, the United States remained firmly on Suharto's side, pledging financial and political support, encouraging investment, and perhaps most troubling, providing military aid and training, at times contrary to the US Congress' wishes and in violation of US law. At [a State Department meeting](#) on Timor-Leste, one official told [Secretary of State Kissinger](#) how “happy [Indonesia is] with the positions we have taken. We've resumed, you know, all of our normal relations with them...” [Kissinger responds](#): “Illegally and beautifully,” a reference to the fact that he had ignored the requirement to suspend military assistance to Indonesia for using U.S. weapons to invade its neighbor. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, bragged in his memoir of his ability to stymie effective UN action on the invasion of Timor-Leste.



Adi Rukun from *The Look of Silence*.

The U.S. government would occasionally condemn some of Indonesia's human rights violations, but its actions spoke louder: during the 32-years of the Suharto dictatorship the U.S. provided more than a billion dollars' worth of weapons and other military equipment. The Pentagon also provided training highly valued by the Indonesian military. Many of Indonesia's most notorious generals were trained in the U.S. Only in the 1990s, [facing congressional action and grassroots pressure](#), did the administrations start to restrict access to U.S. training

and weapons. The U.S. has never apologized for its support of mass murder and dictatorship in the aftermath of the 1965 events, nor has it expressed any regret for its support of Suharto's brutal military dictatorship that followed.

Indonesian relatives of those “tainted” with ties to the PKI – however spurious they may be – remain victims of abuse in Indonesia and portrayed as enemies of the state. [The experience](#) of Adi Rukun, the protagonist of *The Look of Silence*, is the latest example. Out of concern for their safety, he has chosen voluntary exile and his family has moved elsewhere in Indonesia, thousands of miles from their home. The Indonesian crewmembers of both films have chosen to remain anonymous for their own security.

Victims of Suharto's genocidal policies in [Timor-Leste](#) and [West Papua](#) – as well as victims of other abuses – have yet to see justice.

As you watch the films *Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, ETAN asks you to think of the victims and to reflect on the role of the U.S. in perpetrating and perpetuating these crimes against humanity. The ability of the perpetrators to make their version of the story the official one allows them to enjoy impunity for their actions, an impunity that UK-based human rights group TAPOL calls an obstacle to Indonesia's ongoing democratization. And a thorough accounting of events would also hold responsible figures in the United States and other Western countries who encouraged and supported the violence.



The World Bank gave \$30 billion to a dictator who killed 1 million. [ETAN projected The Act of Killing on World Bank HQ](#). Photo by Dakota Bell.

As Indonesia and Timor-Leste specialist Brad Simpson pointed out in a recent article in [The Nation](#), the U.S. role in the violence portrayed in the films makes it our “act of killing, too.”

Take Action

[ETAN IS URGING the U.S. government](#) to take two immediate steps: 1) Declassify and release all documents related to the U.S. role in the mass violence, including the CIA's so-called “job files.” These describe its covert operations. 2) The U.S. should formally acknowledge its role in facilitating the 1965-66 violence and its

subsequent support for the brutalities of the Suharto regime.

The [East Timor and Indonesia Action Network](#) (ETAN) was founded in 1991. ETAN supports democracy, human rights and justice in Timor-Leste, West Papua and Indonesia. ETAN is non-partisan. It works on human rights and related issues and does not support candidates or political parties in any country. Website: www.etan.org Twitter: [@etan009](https://twitter.com/etan009).

ⁱⁱⁱ Simpson, Brad, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) p. 75

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Roosa, John, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2006) p. 189

^v *Ibid.* p. 197

^{vi} Quoted in Roosa p. 16

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} “The forgotten years: the missing history of Indonesia's mass slaughter, Jombang-Kediri, 1965-1966,” (ASU, 1997)

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