

Indonesia Still Hasn't Escaped Suharto's Genocidal Legacy

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The US-backed Indonesian dictator Suharto was responsible for some of the twentieth century's worst crimes. More than two decades after Suharto's death, his regime's brutal legacy is still holding back democracy in Indonesia.

Ghosts and Gramsci can help us understand contemporary Indonesian politics. Like many of its Southeast Asian neighbors, the archipelago nation-state has a robust culture of the [supernatural](#). There is even a provincial capital, Pontianak, named after the [fierce ghosts](#) of women who died during childbirth and seek gruesome revenge on young men.

The specter of General Suharto's dictatorial New Order (1966-98) continues to haunt the nation. Indeed, we could take the Pontianak to represent Indonesia since the restoration of democracy. Like this angry ghost, the New Order died before it could deliver the next generation, and it continues to seek revenge from beyond the grave.

Likewise, contemporary Indonesia resonates with Antonio Gramsci's famous concept of the interregnum: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." The era of *Reformasi* from 1998 to the present, over two decades of tense elections and stifled reforms, is proving to be one of prolonged crisis, characterized by spectral visitations from the dead who either refuse to let go or seek revenge.

Sukarno's Rise

Indonesia's political problems stem from an inability to come to terms with 1965. President Sukarno led the young and unstable republic after it gained independence from the Netherlands — formally declared on August 17, 1945, but only achieved in practice after four years of nationalist revolutionary struggle on December 27, 1949.

Sukarno was a veteran of the anti-colonial movement of the interwar years. Trained as an architect at the prestigious Bandung Institute of Technology, he built a populist ideology that he named after Marhaen, a poor farmer he had once met. Anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, Marhaenism was described as "Marxism adapted to Indonesian conditions." From 1942 to 1945, Sukarno worked with the Japanese occupiers, who released him from a colonial prison and let him declare independence from the Dutch at the end of the war.

The new Indonesian Republic faced the difficult task of unifying several hundred ethnicities and multiple religions over 17,000 islands scattered across thousands of miles. Sukarno and his supporters promoted the purposely vague *Pancasila* or Five Principles (reminiscent of the Chinese Kuomintang founder Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles). The principles were:

Belief in the Almighty God;

Just and civilized humanity;

The unity of Indonesia;

Democracy guided by inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations among representatives;

and Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia.

The emphasis was on forging a coherent state system out of the overwhelming diversity of a region only recently united by the Dutch East Indies colonial apparatus. While the first principle promoted religion, all faiths were to be tolerated in the majority-Muslim state. This alienated a faction of the Muslim community who declared a rival Islamic state. Atheism was not an option.

An outstanding orator, President Sukarno held Indonesia together by his force of will and undeniable charisma. He frequently adopted populist rhetoric and encouraged Indonesians to call him “Bung Karno” (literally “brother Karno,” but perhaps “dude Karno” is a more evocative translation). Ever the charmer, he hosted the Africa-Asia Conference in Bandung in 1955 and helped establish the Non-Aligned Movement. He happily visited Washington, Moscow, and Beijing alike, posing for photos with Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and John F. Kennedy as well as Nikita Khrushchev, Zhou Enlai, and Mao Zedong.

Guided Democracy

Although he was a star on the international stage, Sukarno faced tremendous difficulties at home. Frustrated with a series of regional and Islamist rebellions — some of which were funded and armed by the CIA — and a political impasse in the national parliament, he suspended elections, banned certain Islamic parties, and declared the inauguration of “Guided Democracy” in 1957.

Condemning neocolonial business practices, Sukarno nationalized hundreds of Dutch businesses, including Royal Dutch Shell. Utilizing their technocratic expertise, military officers began to manage operations in gas and oil, as well as many plantations. Some officers found the opportunities for graft difficult to resist.

To rally nationalist support, promote decolonization, and gain access to rich natural wealth, Sukarno pressed the Dutch to surrender their remaining colonial holdings in Papua. Indonesia’s claims to the western portion of ethnically Melanesian New Guinea, over two thousand miles from Jakarta, were dubious at best. The government ordered a certain brigadier general Suharto, veteran of the recent campaigns against Islamist separatists, to prepare an invasion force (despite Suharto’s having received a 1959 reprimand for corruption).

In the end, the Kennedy administration pressured the Dutch to decolonize Papua and hand it over to Indonesia in 1962. Jakarta deferred a promised plebiscite, and Papua’s new rulers set about exploiting resources such as the Grasberg mine, the world’s largest gold and second-largest copper reserves. Flush with success, in 1963 Sukarno declared a policy of *konfrontasi* with the West and claimed that Indonesia would “crush Malaysia,” a neighboring state that he condemned as neocolonial and imperialist (*nekolim*).

Never doctrinaire but always fond of promoting a doctrine, Sukarno called for a fusion of nationalism, religion, and communism under the banner of *nasakom*. For eight years, Bung Karno

drew support from the Indonesian National Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) and the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI). While both the TNI and the PKI were beholden to him, ideological tensions grew between increasingly right-wing generals and the PKI, the largest communist party in the world outside the USSR and the People's Republic of China.

As the PKI supported land reform and unionization, large landholders, plantation owners, and financial interests formed alliances with the officer corps. By 1964, Sukarno's increasingly radical foreign policy had alienated both the United States and the Soviet Union, leading him to forge closer ties with China. Cold War tensions manifested themselves in the country as the United States courted anti-communist officers and the Communist Party of China encouraged PKI leader Dipa Nusantara Aidit to adopt a more strident tone and confrontational attitude.

The PKI had no significant paramilitary force. After failed armed revolts in the 1920s and 1948, Aidit had followed a parliamentary path to power, doing well in elections up to 1957 and forging alliances with mass organizations for workers, peasants, artists, feminists, and other progressives. In contrast, the TNI leadership received counterinsurgency training in the USA. American anti-communist political indoctrination urged the officer corps to align with the interests of capital, both foreign and domestic.

General Abdul Haris Nasution had formed the League of Supporters of Indonesian Independence (Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia, IPKI) in 1954. Although he hoped that this right-wing nationalist party would bring the officer corps into politics, the IPKI performed poorly at the polls. In 1959, the IPKI established a paramilitary organization known as Pancasila Youth (Pemuda Pancasila). Pemuda Pancasila was staunchly anti-PKI.

Myths of 1965

The crisis turned into bloodshed on the night of September 30 and early morning of October 1, 1965. Mid-level officers angry with the corruption and lavish lifestyles of their superiors attempted to kidnap half a dozen generals.

The poorly planned coup was botched from the start. Troops murdered several generals in their homes. Nasution, the highest-ranking general, escaped as his five-year-old daughter was fatally shot. In a chaotic series of events, the other generals were also murdered.

The plotters dumped the corpses in an abandoned well on a remote section of Halim Air Force Base in southeastern Jakarta. Other rebels seized the national radio station and broadcast a message that they were acting to support President Sukarno against the decadent generals. Both Sukarno and Aidit were aware of the plot, and the two men were even at Halim Air Force Base on that night, but they quickly fled Jakarta as the coup failed.

Brigadier general Suharto, who was strangely not on the kidnappers' list, seized control of the radio station within a few hours, captured Halim Air Force Base on October 2, exhumed the bodies of the seven officers on October 4, and then addressed the nation, accusing the PKI of plotting to murder his superiors. The dead generals received a state funeral the following day, which just so happened to be Armed Forces Day. On October 6, General Nasution's daughter died. While confusion reigned, the funerals received national coverage — evidence of a TNI effort to control the narrative.

Even though Nasution outranked him, Suharto pushed him aside and took command of the military. Under his leadership, the TNI's propaganda machine immediately blamed the PKI for the coup. While Aidit and a few secret agents were aware of the plot, the millions of PKI members and supporters were completely ignorant of the affair.

As Suharto shut down the independent newspapers, the army press published a series of misogynistic stories that described the generals' murders as a grisly affair committed by members of Gerwani. One of the largest feminist organizations in the world, Gerwani was allied with the PKI but not controlled by it. Lurid articles portrayed Gerwani as a Communist-directed auxiliary force of witches who had sexually mutilated the generals with razor blades, dancing in orgasmic ecstasy before the scene descended into a gruesome orgy.

In Bali, the TNI spread rumors of prostitutes trained as assassins readying to kill the PKI's enemies. The anti-PKI media campaign was so well coordinated and so detailed that it left many people speculating that it may have been prepared in advance, possibly with guidance from some sort of centralized intelligence agency. This propaganda effort ramped up over the next three decades, leading many Indonesians to believe in the TNI's big lie.

Suharto's Killing Fields

Meanwhile, the TNI moved on the PKI throughout the country. Army units followed a preconceived plan to arrest and murder PKI members, starting in Aceh, in the north of Sumatra. In West Java, there were mass arrests and long-term imprisonment but fewer summary executions. However, in Central Java, Colonel Sarwo Edhie Wibowo led an elite para-commando force in a series of attacks on cities and towns with significant PKI membership. As his troops moved east across Java and onto Bali, they slaughtered tens of thousands of unarmed civilians.

The PKI's members were completely surprised by Sarwo Edhie's assaults, as it was a legal party with no paramilitary wing. In Sumatra, Java, and Bali, local militias, religious organizations, and even the criminal underworld worked with the TNI. From Sumatra to East Java, the right-wing paramilitary Pemuda Pancasila played a prominent role in the killings.

By the spring of 1966, the once-massive PKI was eliminated, with the final holdouts hunted down in remote corners of East Java in mid-1968. Party members were either murdered or jailed for years. So were union members, feminists, peasant organizers, artists, intellectuals, and anyone deemed leftist. A series of grim prisons dotted the archipelago. Many detainees, known as *tapol* (political prisoners), worked as slave labor for the regime.

Exact statistics are impossible to establish, but Suharto's allies murdered somewhere between 500,000 and a million Indonesians, with an even larger number incarcerated. In the bloody chaos of 1965 and 1966, bodies were thrown into rivers, dumped into caves, or hastily buried in mass graves. According to [Geoffrey Robinson](#), the bodies of mutilated women were left on the side of the road in East Java.

On the beautiful tourist island of Bali, the TNI and its local allies killed some five percent of the population. The bodies of many Balinese victims were purposely desecrated to achieve a profound cultural impact. Rumors persist that several high-end beach resorts are built on the bones of Suharto's victims. Of course, all mass graves are home to angry ghosts.

The New Order

After six months of mass murder, the violence began to taper off. On March 11, 1966, Suharto claimed that Sukarno gave him full authority to govern the nation, although many believe that the document supposedly granting him power, known as Supersermar, was a forgery. Two years later, the general assumed the presidency. Thus began the New Order.

For 32 years, Suharto — who liked to be called Pak Harto, a dignified term meaning “father” or “sir,” in contrast to his predecessor's jocular moniker — governed as a military dictator. Corruption

became rampant. In the name of national security, Pak Harto eliminated his rivals as he and his supporters amassed increasing power and wealth. Claiming that they were defending the nation against internal as well as external enemies, the TNI marginalized and emasculated the already weak Indonesian National Police (POLRI).

With a host of new domestic responsibilities, the officer corps exploited their new economic roles. As the army suppressed unions and took control of key sectors of the economy, high-ranking officers found numerous opportunities for graft. Forging an alliance with the far-right political movement Golkar (Golongan Karya, Functional Groups) and staging carefully managed elections, the general-cum-president enriched himself, his family, and his circle of cronies. Military intelligence and the special forces (Kopassus) enjoyed a close relationship with Pak Harto, becoming the real centers of power.

With a massive state bureaucracy and civil service, career success required kowtowing to Suharto's New Order state. Entrepreneurs had to strike deals with the TNI, and more prominent businesses relied on the Suharto clan's patronage. Cold War politics allowed New Order loyalists to line their pockets with US investment capital, as well as developmental and military aid. By the 1990s, Suharto's wife and adult children were fabulously wealthy.

To justify their power, the khaki-clad kleptocrats constantly repeated the big lie that the PKI were a party of murderers. New Order propaganda also became more and more grisly. Conversely, the Suharto regime suppressed the true criminal story. Because of strict censorship and domestic surveillance, it was impossible to discuss the torture and killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. By the 1980s, the killing of the generals and little Ade Nasution had become a horror story, while a gothic silence surrounded the real episodes of mass murder and mass incarceration.

The Big Lie

The TNI wrote their false narrative into the history books and named streets after the martyred generals all over the country, erecting statues of them in major cities. In a corner of the Halim Air Force Base, Suharto opened the [Museum of the Treachery of the Indonesian Communist Party](#), so visitors could gawk at the well where the bodies of the slain officers had been found. In 1983, Pak Harto commissioned a four-and-a-half-hour [docudrama](#) about the coup.

The film has the quality of a 1970s slasher flick and is full of the misogynist lies about bloodthirsty Gerwani witches torturing the good generals. It was televised every September 30, and teachers marched their classes to screenings in local theaters. The New Order's propaganda campaign was remarkably effective. As it was impossible to challenge the TNI's narrative, for most Indonesians, the big lie became the reality.

It was extremely dangerous to speak about the killing of hundreds of thousands of people or the subsequent imprisonment of even more. Some were held in urban prisons in major cities such as Jakarta and Yogyakarta, but the regime sent thousands to labor camps such as the infamous Buru Island.

A 1967 NBC [news report](#) by Ted Yates showed prisoners working on a Goodyear plantation in Sumatra under the control of Lieutenant-General Achmad Junus Mokoginta, a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. It is hard to classify such conditions as anything other than slavery. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia's greatest novelist, spent over a decade in this tropical gulag archipelago.

When Suharto's regime released the surviving political prisoners in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it labeled them as *eks tapol* (ex-political prisoners). Their state identification cards bore the mark "ET." These ET had to report to the authorities on a weekly or monthly basis. Female ET could be [sexually exploited](#) on these visits.

Denied access to education and state benefits and with most employment closed to them, the ET were alienated from society. Shunned by their fearful neighbors and hated by rabid anti-Communists, the ET might have escaped being murdered by the TNI, but they went on to suffer social death for decades afterward. Like spectral visions best not spoken of, the ET haunted towns and villages.

Conquest and Counterinsurgency

With the PKI destroyed, the state went after other forces outside of its control, both real and imagined. When economic discontent led to days of rioting in Jakarta in 1974, the regime cracked down on student groups and placed further restrictions on the press. In less than a decade, Suharto's state of exception had become the new normal. Yet the New Order system always needed an enemy — some sort of phantom menace to justify its violent rule.

Throughout the New Order, the TNI engaged in a series of military operations. In Papua, Sarwo Edhie, now a brigadier general, staged a fraudulent plebiscite in 1969. In response the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM) declared independence.

For decades, the OPM has threatened the Indonesian government and the US-owned Freeport mines with small-scale attacks. Despite the quixotic nature of the OPM's resistance, the TNI has engaged in repeated human rights violations against the people of Papua. Since access to the fortified Freeport holdings is essentially impossible, the TNI can act with impunity.

On December 7, 1975, Suharto invaded East Timor, one half of an island deep within Indonesian territory that had recently gained its independence after centuries of Portuguese colonial rule. The Catholic and animist Timorese had little in common with the majority-Muslim invaders and did not even share a language with them. Noting the recent fall of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Suharto convinced Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger that his invasion would keep the island from going communist.

Starting with massacres in the capital city Dili, the TNI engaged in decades of genocidal occupation, killing a third of the Timorese population. Key figures in the New Order leadership spent time in East Timor. The TNI's campaigns in East Timor relied heavily on US military aid but received little coverage in the Western press. Few Americans knew that their tax dollars were funding this invisible war.

In the far northwest of the archipelago, the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) launched a guerilla war to create an Islamist state free of Jakarta's control. Formed in 1976, GAM's first attack was on a group of US Mobil engineers. The 1980s saw a series of actions from the relatively tiny group.

If GAM was initially just a nuisance, Suharto decided to launch a serious crackdown in 1990. Operation Red Net (1990-98), the TNI's counterinsurgency campaign of arrests, collective reprisals against villages, summary executions, torture, and rape, may have resulted in as many as twelve thousand deaths. However, GAM continued to stage attacks well into the twenty-first century.

Ethnic Chinese faced serious discrimination under Suharto. The New Order used Sinophobia to rally support. Paradoxically, such propaganda attacked the Chinese for supposedly being tied to the PKI,

but also for being successful merchants and entrepreneurs. While he forged alliances with several ethnic Chinese business moguls, Suharto suppressed manifestations of Chinese culture such as Lunar New Year.

Chinese families came under pressure to change their names to more Indonesian-sounding ones. Shop signs with Chinese characters were banned, and it was illegal to bring Chinese-language books or pamphlets into the country. In an echo of the antisemitic pogroms in tsarist Russia, the intelligence services provoked anti-Chinese violence to distract the discontented masses who might target the state. The figure of the dangerous and mysterious Chinese served as the ideal boogeyman.

Islamic Dissent

With any form of leftist politics effectively ended, some dissidents turned to Islamist radicalism. From 1942 to 1965, Darul Islam (House of Islam, DI) had resisted the formation of the secular Republic of Indonesia, rejecting the state ideology of Pancasila in favor of an interpretation of *sharia* and declaring the Negara Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic State) in 1949. Founded in West Java, DI drew support from Aceh and South Sulawesi.

The movement peaked in 1957, before Sukarno ordered the TNI to crush it. Suharto and several of the officers who were killed on September 30 ran operations against DI. The 1965 death of its leader, Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosoewirjo, marked the end of the formal rebellion, but DI supporters then went underground.

In 1969, Muslim dissidents with ties to DI formed an alliance in opposition to the New Order. In the 1970s, they were joined by Komando Jihad. In 1972, two Javanese clerics of Hadhrami Arab descent, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar, founded a boarding school, began to preach against the Republic of Indonesia, and denounced Pancasila as un-Islamic. Suharto imprisoned them without trial from 1978 to 1982.

Soon after their release, they went into exile in Malaysia, where they recruited radicals from maritime Southeast Asia and formed Jemaah Islamiyah (Islamic Congregation, JI). Their repression came in the context of a series of terrorist incidents, such as the Komando Jihad hijacking of Garuda Indonesia Airways Flight 206 in 1981, and the 1985 bombing of Borobudur, a thousand-year-old Buddhist temple. Many experts are convinced that the Indonesian intelligence services actually encouraged and even aided the Islamists as a ruse to justify continued military rule.

Perhaps the most serious incident was the Tanjung Priok Massacre of September 12, 1984. When a soldier refused to remove his shoes as he removed anti-government literature and banners from a mosque near the north Jakarta port, a scuffle ensued, and several people were arrested. Two days later, a cleric delivered a sermon denouncing the action and criticizing Pancasila.

While the full picture of these events is still shrouded in uncertainty, we know that at least several hundred or perhaps even a few thousand people marched on the local military headquarters, killing members of a Chinese merchant family on the way. The mob demanded the release of the prisoners. Sometime near 11 PM, soldiers fired on the crowd and began to make summary arrests. Estimates of the dead ranged from two dozen to several hundred.

Murder and Metal

In the same period, Suharto encouraged gruesome attacks on organized crime that also terrorized the urban poor. Starting in Yogyakarta in 1983, gang members began turning up dead on the side of the road. The unknown killers left the mutilated bodies on public display as a warning. The operation soon extended into Jakarta, where young men living in the megacity's sprawling slums became

increasingly anxious.

Since many gangsters, known as *preman* (from “free man”), had tattoos, law-abiding men began to hide their body art lest they be murdered by mistake. Some friends of mine have told me that their uncles burned off tattoos with battery acid. As panic ensued, the authorities let it be known that there was a zero-tolerance policy for street crime.

In his memoirs, Suharto bragged that he was behind what came to be known as the Petrus killings (from *penembakan misterius*, or “mysterious shootings”). Again, numbers are impossible to confirm, but somewhere between two hundred and several thousand men were killed. The widespread trauma led to a generation of Indonesian men eschewing tattoos lest the mysterious murderers return. Recently, Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte has referred approvingly to Petrus as a successful precedent for his extrajudicial killing spree.

Unsurprisingly in the light of this history, [horror films](#) came to dominate New Order popular culture. Faced with strict censorship of sexual and political content, but with official tolerance of on-screen bloodshed, directors turned to the genre to express themselves. Scholars like [Ariel Heryanto](#) read the cinema of supernatural gore as an expression of Indonesia’s collective trauma. Despite Suharto’s efforts to promote the refined music, dance, and etiquette of elite Javanese court culture, the rural and urban lower classes loved the over-the-top imagery of blood-soaked slasher films.

As globalization brought in heavy metal music, Indonesia became one of the most metal-loving countries in the world, with fans reveling in the genre’s darkest and most macabre imagery. Deep Purple’s infamous December 1975 shows in Jakarta’s Gelora Bung Karno Main Stadium turned into riots, and one of the band’s roadies died under [mysterious circumstances](#). In the 1990s, Sepultura and Metallica drew massive and violent crowds.

Underground metal and punk scenes flourished in the cities, and bootleg cassettes and CDs also brought grinding music to small towns and villages. On my first visit to Indonesia in 1990, I bonded with another young man on Lombok over our shared love of Iron Maiden; in 2013, I saw a woman in her sixties in Central Java wearing a black Cannibal Corpse t-shirt). With the New Order regime repressing leftist politics, Islam, and sexuality, horror and metal became two of the few avenues of free expression.

And then the system collapsed. In the space of one year, the New Order fell. Triggered by the Southeast Asian economic crisis of 1997, the Indonesian rupiah plunged overnight. Fuel prices soared. Widespread discontent broke out into a series of protests and riots (including murderous Sinophobic pogroms in Jakarta and other cities with significant Chinese communities).

Suharto and the TNI leadership tried to crush the movement by disappearing activists and shooting student demonstrators, but their efforts proved fruitless. In May 1998, the disgraced president left office, stepping over millions of corpses on his way out of Jakarta’s neoclassical Presidential Palace.

After Suharto

Tengiz Abuladze’s political gothic *Repentance* offers an allegory for Stalinism that resonates with the Gramscian notion of interregnum. In the 1984 film, a dictatorial mayor suddenly dies. Yet after his burial, his corpse reappears in a garden. Despite repeated inhumations, the mayor’s cadaver keeps coming back, reminding the town of his reign of terror.

While some of the local inhabitants push for healing through truth and reconciliation, the mayor’s son and his cronies refuse to admit their complicity, obstructing a collective closure to the affair. Innocents are put on trial as scapegoats, and the reality of the mayor’s crimes lead to his grandson’s

suicide. As the town tries to move on, it is haunted by memories of the mayor.

Abuladze's film was set in the late Soviet Union, but it could just as well have been about post-Suharto Indonesia. Despite his fall from power in 1998 and political isolation until his death a decade later, Pak Harto continues to haunt Indonesian politics. Like the Georgian mayor, Suharto's ghost and his zombie-like cronies prevent the birth of a new Indonesia.

In his final decade, Suharto faced prosecution for corruption. In 2004, Transparency International listed him as the world's most corrupt autocrat. He allegedly pillaged somewhere between \$15 and \$35 billion (Ferdinand Marcos came in a distant second with \$5 to \$10 billion, while Mobutu Sese Seko could only manage a paltry \$5 billion in third place). Although Pak Harto was placed under house arrest in 2000, the court deemed him too ill to stand trial. A few months after his death, a judge posthumously cleared him of corruption, but fined his charitable organization.

One might assume the Suharto name would be toxic, but when I lived in his hometown Yogyakarta in 2012-13, I witnessed a Suharto revival that reminded me of Abuladze's political ghost story. Bumper stickers and t-shirts began to appear, with the smiling general commenting that things were better under his rule and asking if he was missed.

Suharto's family opened a museum dedicated to Pak Harto on the site of his childhood home. As an American scholar, I was invited as a VIP guest to the opening ceremony, where Suharto-era veterans gave a series of speeches praising Pak Harto's character as well as the New Order's political stability and economic growth.

Playboy of the Eastern World

Suharto's son Tommy also faced corruption charges. The flamboyant playboy happily used his father's name to line his pockets. Considered untouchable in the New Order, he had a controlling share in many companies, including the Italian supercar firm Lamborghini, which he sold to Audi in 1998 for \$110 million. He hired thugs to violently displace hundreds of Balinese villagers so he could develop a beach resort.

When the post-Suharto courts attempted to bring Tommy to justice, a series of bombings targeted the prosecutors. An attack in September 2000 killed fifteen people. After failing to bribe a judge in 2001, Tommy was found guilty, but went into hiding before he could be jailed. He then ordered the assassination of the judge who had turned down his bribe.

A sympathetic Supreme Court overturned the corruption charges. Eventually arrested, Tommy was found guilty of contract murder in 2002. He avoided the death penalty and served only four years of a fifteen-year sentence in luxury prison cells (there are reports that he made frequent trips to Jakarta and was seen golfing). His lenient treatment reminds us that many officials still in power owe their careers to a record of loyal service to his father.

Since 2009, Tommy has made a series of political moves, founded his own political party, and considered a run for the presidency. While he has failed to gain elected office, his wealth and family name ensure that he will remain a national figure. His ability to evade serious punishment shows the continuation of New Order corruption.

Jokowi and the Old Guard

The Indonesian president and the country's leading presidential candidates have many ties to the New Order. Between 1998 and 2004, there were three presidents, all selected by parliament: former vice president B. J. Habibie; Abdurrahman Wahid, who led a popular Muslim organization; and

Megawati Sukarnoputri, Sukarno's daughter.

In 2004, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also known as SBY, defeated Megawati in the first direct election since 1957. SBY was reelected in 2009. His career was deeply intertwined with the New Order, including training at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia (home of the School of the Americas), and deployment to East Timor. He was also Sarwo Edhie's son-in-law. A rare political outsider, Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi, succeeded SBY in 2014, but he soon began recruiting members of the old guard to his government.

Jokowi's political career started as mayor of Surakarta, a town in central Java, in 2005. He surprisingly won the race for governor of Jakarta in 2012, due in no small part to his uncorrupted [everyman persona](#). His few scandals have been limited to gifts of Metallica memorabilia: In 2013, he received a guitar autographed by the band's bassist, and in 2017, the Danish prime minister gave him a signed, limited-edition vinyl box set of Metallica's *Master of Puppets*.

Acknowledging the improprieties, Jokowi surrendered the bass guitar and paid \$800 for the albums. Jokowi won the presidential election in 2014 and secured reelection in 2019, after two bitter contests against a New Order ghost, Lieutenant-General Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo.

The Fort Benning-trained Prabowo served in East Timor and Papua and was the commander of Kopassus. He was also married to Suharto's daughter between 1983 and 1998. During the chaotic waning days of the New Order, he mobilized street thugs and soldiers to suppress demonstrators and had student activists kidnapped, tortured, and disappeared.

During the summer of 1998, Prabowo lost a power struggle with Wiranto, his commander, was discharged from the TNI, and divorced his wife. He then used his connections to build a massive fortune. In his presidential campaigns, Prabowo expressed his contempt for democracy and promised a return to the authoritarian days of his former father-in-law.

He even went so far as to identify as a fascist and endorse village massacres in an interview with the US journalist Allan Nairn. One of his [campaign advertisements](#) combined Nazi imagery with a heavy metal riff. He challenged both election results after his defeat, creating a potential constitutional crisis in 2014 and sparking deadly riots in 2019. Despite his bad behavior, Jokowi appointed him minister of defense in 2019.

Wiranto, who launched an unsuccessful bid for the vice presidency in 2009, is yet another New Order general haunting Jakarta's halls of power. After serving as Suharto's aide-de-camp from 1989 to 1993, he was minister of defense between March 1998 and October 1999. As head of the TNI, he oversaw the Kopassus's disappearance of student activists and Indonesia's vengeful military withdraw from East Timor, during which the TNI killed thousands of Timorese, razed scores of villages, destroyed hundreds of buildings in Dili, and displaced some 500,000 refugees.

Charged as a war criminal, Wiranto was barred from entry to the United States (as was his rival Prabowo). He also oversaw the 1998 Biak massacre of Papuan independence activists. But President Jokowi still appointed him to high office, just as he did Prabowo. He served as coordinating minister for political, legal, and security Affairs from 2016 to 2019, and has chaired the Presidential Advisory Council since 2019.

Underworld Nexus

The New Order tactic of working with shadowy figures from the criminal underworld has survived in the era of Reformasi. Politicians and TNI officers have alliances with several crime bosses. Ranging from street thugs to hyper-wealthy businessmen, these preman often come from ethnic minority

groups such as the Timorese and Chinese.

One of Wiranto's operatives in East Timor was Eurico Guterres. He was orphaned when the TNI killed his parents in 1976. Caught up in a plot to assassinate Suharto in 1988, he agreed to inform on the activists. In the 1990s, Prabowo recruited him as a secret asset and set him up as a pro-Indonesian militia leader.

Fond of heavy metal and sporting a distinctive mullet hairstyle, Guterres formed a biker gang of preman who terrorized pro-independence Timorese. During the 1999 plebiscite, this quisling led menacing motorcycle demonstrations through the streets of Dili, warning his fellow Timorese of bloodshed should they choose to break away from Indonesia. When the Timorese voted for independence, his militia went on a rampage of reprisal killings and destruction of infrastructure.

In 2002, Guterres was sentenced to ten years in prison for his crimes, but he reappeared in Papua with a militia of several hundred thugs to combat separatists. He was finally incarcerated in 2006, but the authorities released him in 2008. Guterres served as a regional leader for a major political party until 2017. Despite his well-known history of violence and war crimes, Prabowo awarded him a National Defense Patriot certificate in December of last year, and in August 2021, President Jokowi awarded him the *Bintang jasa utama* (First Class Star of Service) for civil bravery and courage in times of adversity.

Rosario de Marshal, also known as Hercules, is another Timorese asset of Prabowo. Also orphaned by TNI operations, he was "adopted" by the Indonesian occupiers. He worked for Kopassus and became a loyal supporter of Prabowo. Upon moving to Jakarta in the 1980s, he worked his way up through the criminal underworld while maintaining his official connections.

Despite having fallen from the peak of his power as a preman shot caller, Hercules reemerged as a frequent talk-show guest and supporter of Prabowo's first presidential bid. When he founded the New Indonesian People's Movement, Hercules asked Prabowo to chair its advisory board. During Prabowo's presidential campaign, he provided security and delivered crowds to fill the audience at his rallies, before receiving a three-year sentence for racketeering in 2014.

Prabowo's use of Hercules speaks volumes about the survival of the New Order's fusion of politics and criminality. The alliance between TNI officers and organized crime is most evident in Jakarta's wild nightlife. For years, rumors have circulated that self-made billionaire Tomy Winata and other ethnic Chinese businessmen formed the Nine Dragons crime conglomerate to run gambling and prostitution in the Jakarta underworld.

Born Guo Shuo Feng in Pontianak, Winata got his start by building offices for the TNI in the 1970s. Thanks to patronage from the Suharto clan, he became a major player in banking, construction, and hotels. His Artha Graha Network now wants to build a 111-floor skyscraper in central Jakarta. In 2011, documents from Wikileaks revealed that US intelligence thought Winata was closely tied to SBY, the Indonesian intelligence services, and organized crime.

Jakarta's infamous northern neighborhoods are home to nightclubs, spas, and karaoke bars that are obvious fronts for prostitution. Thanks to protection from various generals, these brothels can operate in the open with relative impunity. Stadium, a massive seven-floor complex that is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, was only shut down after a twenty-two-year-old police officer overdosed and died inside the club.

Although Jakarta's then governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama shuttered Stadium in 2014, he allowed other notorious venues such as the high-end Alexis Hotel to remain open. New Order-style

patronage continues to link organized crime to government and military officials.

Acts of Killing

The most famous example of the preman-politician nexus is the Pemuda Pancasila. After serving as death squads in 1965, its members became involved in protection and racketeering. Due to its unwavering loyalty to Pak Harto, the group has been able to operate without interference from the authorities. Led by Yapto Soerjosoemarno since 1981, the mass movement combines far-right politics and organized crime.

Joshua Oppenheimer's [The Act of Killing](#) profiled Pemuda Pancasila's members in Medan, Sumatra. The film includes interviews with Yapto, a speech in which Vice President Jusuf Kalla praises the violence of these preman, and scenes of them terrorizing local merchants. One of the members, Herman, also runs for local office. Clad in distinctive orange camouflage, Pemuda Pancasila have disrupted left-wing meetings and protested the screening of Oppenheimer's films. In 2001, Yapto formed the Patriot Party (Partai Patriot), but it folded after disastrous election results.

Figures such as Prabowo, Wiranto, Guterres, Hercules, and Yapto show that the old ghosts of the New Order continue to haunt Indonesia, be they generals or preman. After all, Suharto did not do all the killing himself. He relied upon a vast system of bureaucratic patronage in the TNI and the civil service. While Suharto was overthrown in 1998, there has been no purge of rank-and-file Suhartoists nor a systematic effort to root out New Order tactics.

In recent years, Jokowi has been the subject of attacks that drew on both lingering anti-communism and festering Sinophobia. In the lead up to the 2019 election, an absurd red-baiting whisper campaign led to an exasperated Jokowi publicly declaring that he was not nor ever had been a member of the Communist Party. In a surreal moment, he had to remind everyone that he was all of five years old when the PKI was destroyed. Meanwhile, regional TNI officers raided book vendors in 2019, inaccurately claiming that they were selling histories of Indonesia that [promoted Marxism](#).

The need for de-Suhartoization is most obvious in the country's classrooms. The history curriculum still teaches the New Order's big lie about 1965. Despite the work of brave Indonesian scholars such as [Bonnie Triyana](#), [Degung Santikarma](#), and [Yosef Djakababa](#), and the success of Western contributions such as the films of Oppenheimer and *The Jakarta Method* by [Vincent Bevins](#), there has been no official recognition of the anti-PKI mass murder.

The TNI's Museum of the Treachery of the PKI remains open to the public, but there is no government memorial to Suharto's victims. Only in Bali can one find the privately owned Taman 65 (Park 65), an open space for artists and political activists that faces a precarious existence.

Turf Wars

Tension between the TNI and the POLRI, the national police, continues to fester. In the past decade, disputes over black-market petroleum and drug trafficking have turned violent. In 2013, a bar fight in Yogyakarta led to a police officer and several preman [murdering a soldier](#). After four suspects were arrested, a team of well-trained Kopassus soldiers broke into the prison and assassinated them in their cells. As the extrajudicial murder drew national attention, General Pramono Edhie Wibowo, the son of Sarwo Edhie and brother-in-law of SBY, praised the assassins and quickly swept the affair under the rug.

There have also been reports of TNI-POLRI fighting in Sumatra and Riau. In the lead up to the 2019 election, the POLRI headquarters in Jakarta saw fit to display massive banners promoting civility between POLRI and the TNI. Yet as recently as August 2020, soldiers attacked a police station in

East Jakarta.

Yet another New Order specter is the politicization of Islam. There are terrorist groups claiming to operate under the banner of Islam. After the fall of Suharto, fighting broke out between Muslim and Christian communities in northern Indonesia, the GAM escalated its guerilla war in Aceh, and a spate of bombings rocked Jakarta and Bali.

As under the previous regime, these events were tied to Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's JI. Over the years, the authorities have repeatedly arrested, tried, and released the cleric. In 2014, he reportedly pledged allegiance to ISIS, encouraging a series of small attacks. In the early months of 2021, the octogenarian was released from prison and put into a de-radicalization program.

Suharto's destruction of the Left but half-hearted crackdown on Islamist groups helps to explain the survival and appeal of these extremists. Without a viable socialist alternative, political discontent will continue to gravitate toward radical Islamism.

Meanwhile, Islamic identity has been weaponized in more mainstream politics. In 2016, opponents of Jokowi manipulated a cellphone video to make it appear that his political ally, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, had insulted the faith. As Ahok is ethnic Chinese and not Muslim, he was vulnerable to such attacks. Political agents fanned the flames of Sinophobia and soon Ahok, who replaced Jokowi as governor of Jakarta, faced massive demonstrations and death threats.

In the lead up to his reelection campaign, Ahok was put on trial for blasphemy and eventually sentenced to several years in prison. Jokowi's enemies made use of the anti-Ahok sentiment during the 2019 presidential campaign.

Exorcism

The Indonesian state is continuing to produce fresh ghosts in Papua. The resistance in Aceh reached its bloodiest phase in the early 2000s, before the unparalleled destruction of the December 2004 tsunami opened a path to the end of the war.

GAM put down its arms and received regional autonomy, including the right to implement aspects of sharia that run counter to national laws. Although many Indonesians are appalled by the activities of Aceh's religious police and laugh at excessively pious politicians who prudishly tried to prohibit women from sitting astride motorcycles, nearly everyone welcomes the peace.

Thousands of miles away in Papua, however, the OPM continues its struggle for independence. Every few months, a new cellphone video reveals TNI atrocities with racist overtones. The incredible wealth of Papua's gold and copper mines ensures that Jakarta will never voluntarily relax its control over the province.

With so many careers forged during the brutal and corrupt New Order, Indonesia needs an exorcism to rid itself of these old ghosts and their brutal ways. Such acts of violence and corruption constitute the "great variety of morbid symptoms" of the Gramscian interregnum that is Reformasi.

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