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The Suharto Years

Preamble

Sukarno’s days were numbered: from the Western perspective he was not a ‘sound’ leader, and would have to go. Throughout the 1950s efforts had been made to get rid of him – in favour of a more pliable leader who could be intimidated or bribed into sympathy with Western interests. The exigencies of the Cold War demanded no less. It was essential, judged Washington, that Indonesia be brought in line with the strategic agenda of ‘rollback’, whereby all the social and political gains of the Left – and even of Sukarno-style neutrality – could be crushed in favour of free-market exploitation and enforced subservience to US hegemony. It was an ambitious American scheme. Indonesia had so far resisted all the Western pressures: the US-encouraged coups and rebellions, the endless propaganda. Soon, through a terrible ocean of blood, Indonesia would be brought on board at last.

The US role – II

In late October 1994 The Los Angeles Times reported an admission by the US State Department that the CIA had been involved in covert operations in Indonesia during the 1950s. Washington had feared possible Communist (PKI) influence over Sukarno and so judged it necessary to take action. Now a 600-page documentary history was being released showing that the Eisenhower administration had mounted major covert operations to support anti-Communist revolts in the Indonesian islands. Washington was continuing to maintain diplomatic relations with Jakarta while secretly supporting military actions against Sukarno (see Chapter 4). According to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Sukarno
was ‘dangerous, untrustworthy and by character susceptible to the Communist way of thinking’. How could such a leader be tolerated in a world that must be made free for American capitalism?

*The Los Angeles Times* revealed what many observers had known (or at least suspected) for some time: in 1958 the United States had been driven to supply and support dissident military groups in Sumatra and Sulawesi (see pp. 165–7). Historians had already indicated that the CIA had mounted clandestine operations in Indonesia (despite the Eisenhower–Dulles assertions to the contrary). In 1991 the US Congress ordered the CIA to cooperate with State Department historians by allowing them access to data about foreign-policy decisions. William Slaney, the Department’s official historian, observed that the new Indonesian revelations were the first of their kind – apart from the release of information about intelligence activities during the Vietnam conflict.

The United States was now (1994) admitting earlier lies, and a significant body of diplomatic duplicity in the 1950s over Indonesia. All that had come to nought. But it was not long before a new phase of military disaffection, in the mid-1960s, coupled with CIA activity, would bring an end to Sukarno’s career. Here, as in so many other places, the American initiatives had nothing to do with democracy. The Washington planners were primarily concerned with the securing of capitalist strategic advantage in the fraught circumstances of the Cold War.

**The coup pretext**

The subsequent official line on how General Suharto came to power was simple enough: an attempted Communist *coup d’état* had been put down, leaving loyalist army officers no option but to take charge. The full truth behind these events, including the scale of foreign involvement, has never emerged.¹

On 1 October 1965 a special statement was read out over Indonesia Radio stating that ‘a military movement has taken place within the army assisted by troops from the other branches of the Armed Forces’. The ‘30th September Movement’, led by Lieutenant Colonel Untung, had arrested the CIA-sponsored Council of Generals in a move to block the planned Council *coup* scheduled for 5 October, the Armed Forces Day. President Sukarno was reportedly safe ‘under the protection of the 30th September Movement’.² A decree, in the name of Untung and other officers, announced that a Revolutionary Council had taken power pending elections. Many of the 45 members of the Council (which