

# The Tragic Death of Suharto

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We here at *Fifth Estate* feel that a few words of remembrance are necessary to mark the passing of “Smiling General” Suharto. Beginning in 1967, this brutal terrorist’s “New Order” military regime was as vicious as the similarly well-funded US client-state dictatorships of Saddam Hussein, Augusto Pinochet, and the Shah of Iran. His government was a particularly spectacular showcase of nepotism and cronyism that rivaled that of Ferdinand Marcos thanks to hundreds of millions of Cold War dollars in US aid and crazily lucrative exclusive corporate concessions (with Chase Manhattan Bank, US Steel, British American Tobacco, General Motors, ICI, and a number of US petroleum combines) that allowed his closest friends and family to build monopolies and amass fortunes. Almost all of Indonesia’s current environmental disasters can be linked directly to the Suharto ruling clique’s industrialized pillaging of the archipelago. When he was finally forced from power in 1998 after the Pacific Rim economic crisis, Suharto had hoarded away more than \$10 billion in personal wealth in foreign bank accounts, an inconceivable amount of money equivalent to more than 10% of Indonesia’s total foreign debt.

Suharto’s kleptocratic regime was an impressive display of corruption that was matched only by its relentless bloodthirstiness. He rose to prominence in 1949 (after spending World War II fighting alongside the occupying Imperial Japanese army) by ruthlessly crushing a rebellion in South Sulawesi during Indonesia’s independence struggle against the Dutch. He came to power less than two decades later on a wave of mass murder and hysterical paranoia directed against Indonesia’s Communist Party that led to the state-sanctioned murder of between 600,000 and 1 million people—in a leaked report, the CIA called it a period of “the worst mass murders of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” and they would know. Untold hundreds of thousands more enemies of all political stripes were imprisoned without trial, banished as internal exiles to desolate corners of Indonesia, or disappeared into penal colonies and labor camps where rape, torture, medical neglect, and starvation were the standard amenities. (Many experts believe that the blowback from Suharto’s violent suppression of Muslim communities during that period explains the sharp rise of violent Islamist extremism in Indonesia in recent years.) Anti-communism was also the excuse used for the ethnic cleansing of Chinese in Indonesia which continued in intensity right up until 1998.

One day after meeting with US President Gerald Ford and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in December 1975 at which he was given the green light for “rapid or drastic action” against East Timor, Suharto’s army invaded and ended up butchering 200,000 people during its occupation. (Mention should also be made of Kissinger’s connection with the Freeport copper mining company in Papua New Guinea whose interests are currently being protected by the Indonesian army to the tune of 10,000 dead Papuans.) The atrocities in East Timor (especially the mass slaughter of civilians in 1991 killings in a cemetery in Dili) brought increased international scrutiny and condemnation of Suharto’s government despite the best efforts of US presidents to protect it. Ultimately, all efforts to try Suharto for genocide and crimes against humanity have failed because of his deteriorating health.

The saddest and most tragic thing about Suharto’s death on January 26<sup>th</sup> is that it came about four decades too late. We invite *Fifth Estate* readers to join us in pissing on his grave.

# fifth Estate

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