

Antonie C. A. Dake. *The Sukarno File, 1965–1967: Chronology of a Defeat*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006. 503 pages.

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It would seem fair to say that, in the history of independent Indonesia, no single event has been more pivotal than that of September 30–October 1, 1965. It was that critical moment in Indonesian history when the course of politics was irrevocably altered, fundamentally shaping the context for events that were to follow. The study of events of this period therefore remains central to understanding what went after.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, there has been some controversy and considerable disquiet about what might most neutrally be called “the September 30 affair.” The official account of the day’s events neatly fit the New Order’s then-developing rationale, but likely are less than entirely accurate. That those events were claimed to constitute an “attempted coup” appeared to suit a New Order rendering of history, which now seems to be overdue for reconsideration.

A book, therefore, claiming to be “the full story for the first time” of the September 30 affair should be a welcome addition to the literature on Indonesian political history. Antonie Dake’s *The Sukarno File, 1965–1967: Chronology of a Defeat*, on the surface, promises an account of the full process by which Suharto replaced Sukarno as president. Yet the book deals primarily with events leading up to and concerning the September 30 affair. Such activities set in train events that led to Sukarno’s political denouement, and much else, but the defeat came when he was deposed from office on March 12, 1967. Sukarno’s stage-managed fall from office is barely discussed. Further, given that the author himself notes that the opening of “hitherto still hermetically sealed” government files on the subject would shed more light on the subject, Dake’s account is by his own admission not quite “the full story.”

Even if not quite the full story, Dake’s book has strengths, which are threefold. The first strength is the relatively clear chronological account of events. This helps make Dake’s story relatively easy to follow, and there is a sense in which the narrative is constructed as leading up to an almost inevitable outcome. The book’s second strength is its substantial appendices, in particular its reproduction of key documents, which are a valuable resource to students of the subject.

Beyond its accessible structure, the third and main strength of *The Sukarno File* is its generally convincing argument that responsibility for the September 30 affair lies directly with Sukarno. While Sukarno might not have plotted the details of the affair (he could have; we do not really know), Dake argues with reasonable success that he almost certainly knew of it and probably ordered or agreed to its basic elements. Dake claims this aspect of the story was suppressed by Sukarno’s emerging successor, Suharto, as it countered the official “attempted coup” account, which constituted the grounds for the suppression of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia—PKI), and which helped shape subsequent events. Further, once the transition of power was complete, Sukarno’s role was irrelevant to that transition, and would just have muddied the by-then official version of events.

However, if one accepts Dake's argument that Sukarno was directly involved, then the official version of events—that a putsch against senior generals and the establishment of a revolutionary council constituted an "attempted coup"—no longer makes sense. Sukarno cannot have ordered a coup against himself, and, indeed, did not do so. It is puzzling, therefore, why Dake continues to employ the term "coup" or "attempted coup" in his book. Perhaps the New Order regime's grip on conceptualizing Indonesian history continues to hold sway even with scholars who challenge some of its most fundamental details.

Less convincing than Sukarno's complicity, however, is that the appendices which support much of the rest of the story appear compromised. That is, Dake's narrative supports itself with references to the appendices, but these are in places open to question, especially where there is a greater rather than lesser amount of interpretation about the meaning of events.

This, then, leads into the book's three weaknesses. The first weakness does not address the book's substance, but English is clearly not Dake's first language. His choice of expressions is often awkward or ill-conceived. An illustration of this is Dake's referring to army chief-of-staff Yani as Sukarno's "former blue-eyed boy" (p. 25). Instead, "former favorite" (or similar) would have avoided the literal error. So, too, describing the events after September 30 as a "shipwreck" (p. 29) is an odd metaphor, and there are numerous other examples of difficult or unfortunate phrasing and malapropisms.

This matter of language use segues into Dake's broad assumptive style. For example: "...Arief can therefor [sic] quite possibly have thought..." (p. 67); "He wanted to carry out a check or something of the sort" (p. 104); "He must have thought optimistically..." (p. 107); and so on. One can surmise about events and reasons one does not know about, but, despite allowing for narrative neatness, it is problematic to assume the accuracy of what amounts to guesswork. Describing deputy premier Subandrio as "an evil genius" (p. 155) further illustrates Dake's colorful if not always enlightening use of language.

The issue of referencing then segues into the third and most substantive problem with Dake's book, which is that it relies heavily on a limited number of documents, including an account of events by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), testimonies from trials, and, most disturbingly, transcripts of interrogations.

The CIA's account of events reflected a number of considerations, among which were the regional strategic and political preferences of the United States, its own sources, and the completeness or otherwise of information available to it at the time. As for trial transcripts, as Dake notes, evidence presented by defendants may have been designed to ameliorate their punishment, which calls into question the information's accuracy. More to the point, however, is that in an atmosphere of escalating fear, some testimonies may have been provided with the hope of receiving lighter subsequent treatment. We do not know this is the case, but, if actual events did not match what was becoming a carefully crafted official account, it would be surprising if some defendants were not encouraged or did not volunteer to provide politically convenient testimonies.

Finally, in the contemporary debate about the use of “coercion” and torture, there is a view that the veracity of information provided in such circumstances is likely to be compromised by the informants’ strong desire to resolve their situations. That is, torture victims (and even those “coerced”) will often say whatever is requested of them, regardless of accuracy. It is not clear if torture was used in the interrogations in question. But, given the circumstances, the distinct possibility that there was at least some coercion must leave open to question the veracity of these testimonies and thus compromise their usefulness as scholarly (and legal) evidence.

Indeed, given the reliance on such sources, it is not surprising that apart from Dake’s identification of Sukarno as having initiated events, his book otherwise corresponds closely to the New Order’s official account. Perhaps, then, this explains, on the book’s back cover, Suharto’s endorsement of the text as “a positive contribution to the history of Indonesia.”

Usually a publisher places supportive quotes, like Suharto’s, where prospective readers will see them as an encouragement to buy the book. These days, however, Suharto’s endorsement might be viewed somewhat less positively. But more interestingly, below Suharto’s comment, is a comment from Sukarno’s daughter and one of Suharto’s presidential successors, Megawati Sukarnoputri: “...this is character assassination,” she says; “...this is absurd!” One can only wonder what the publisher was thinking when this quote was added to the back cover. But, if it was intended as favorable, or perhaps just controversial, then perhaps the last, double-edged “endorsement” from *The Jakarta Post* summarizes Dake’s book the best: “The book’s potency stems from the straightforward presentation to recount in linear fashion *a story saturated in political and personal bias*” (my emphasis).

Dake’s account of the September 30 affair is a useful, if in places flawed, contribution to the study of Indonesian political history. But it is unlikely to be accepted into the canon as “the full story.” Given the passage of time, the deaths of many of its key actors, and the “hermetically sealed files” that may or may not exist, “the full story” might, quite possibly, never be written.