
SUHARTO

(JUNE 8, 1921–JANUARY 27, 2008)

John Roosa

Taciturn, reserved, reclusive, emotionless, Suharto ruled Indonesia for thirty-two years as a mystery man, a dictator who presented himself as a faceless, replaceable figure in an apolitical administration. His speeches were dull, forgettable affairs filled with mind-numbing bureaucratese, worn clichés, and pious homilies. There is not a single statement by which he is remembered today. If asked, Indonesians struggle in vain to recall some memorable phrase from him, while even the youth can quote Sukarno, the president he overthrew in 1965. Suharto has left behind a wordless memory.

Rarely interviewed but frequently photographed, Suharto is remembered by a gesture: a smile. It was how he wished to be known, and so his 1969 authorized biography is titled *The Smiling General*.¹ It was a Cheshire cat smile, fixed in place, concealing, not expressing his emotional life, prompting instead puzzlement about the intrigues and violence that were being conjured up in the mind behind it.

Given Suharto's character, it is only fitting that his parentage is also a matter of mystery. In his "autobiography," co-written by the man most responsible for crafting Suharto's public image, Brigadier General G. Dwipayana, Suharto claims he was born to a poor peasant family in the village of Kemusuk, near Yogyakarta.² Yet a magazine associated with his trusted military intelligence czar, Ali Moertopo, claimed in 1974 that Suharto's father had been an aristocrat. In what was perhaps a pre-planned response, Suharto invited journalists to his office in the presidential palace to explain his lineage and produce witnesses who could vouch that he was the true salt of the earth.³ Despite his protestations, his genealogy remains suspect. Among Indonesians it is widely rumored that he was the illegitimate child of a Chinese businessman.

Whatever Suharto's origins and childhood experiences, his adulthood was clearly that of a career soldier. He enlisted in the Dutch military in 1940, an event he mentions in his autobiography as "the key to opening a door to a pleasant walk of life."⁴ The

¹ O. G. Roeder, *The Smiling General: President Soeharto of Indonesia* (Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1969).

² Soeharto, *Soeharto: Pikiran, Ucapan, dan Tindakan Saya*, seperti dipaparkan kepada G. Dwipayana dan Ramadhan K. H. (Jakarta: PT. Citra Lamtoro Gung Persada, 1989), pp. 6–8. The publishing company was owned by one of Suharto's daughters.

³ Angus McIntyre, *The Indonesian Presidency: The Shift from Personal toward Constitutional Rule* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 108–9.

⁴ Soeharto, *Soeharto*, p. 19.

pleasant life of marching and drilling continued under the Japanese occupation when he became a member of that colonial state's militia. Like all other militiamen, he joined the newly created Indonesian national army once the Japanese military surrendered, in August 1945. There was no question of going back to serve with the Dutch—they had already been stripped of all their power and wealth by the Japanese and had suffered the war years in squalid concentration camps.

Because of his military training, Suharto was given a high rank (lieutenant colonel) in the new Indonesian army that organized itself to fight a guerrilla war against the returning Dutch troops. By 1948, he had become the commander of a brigade of troops stationed in and around Yogyakarta, the capital of the Republic. The army's guerrilla attacks did little to slow the advance of the Dutch troops. Despite having the home-field advantage, Suharto was caught by surprise on December 19, 1948, when Dutch troops invaded Yogyakarta and captured it the same day without facing any resistance. Inexplicably, all four of Suharto's battalions were outside the city. It was one of the worst setbacks for the Republic: its two highest leaders, Sukarno and Hatta, were captured.

Suharto had a chance to redeem himself when he led an attack on Yogyakarta in March 1949. The attack inflicted only minor damage to the Dutch troops occupying the city and was repulsed within six hours. Suharto and other army commanders, however, claimed that they had temporarily held the city and thereby proved the might of the Republic's forces to the world. After Suharto took power in 1965, the event was turned into the decisive victory of the war for independence, with a film made about it, *Janur Kuning* (1979), and a grand monument built in the city (1985).

As a man who served in three different armies within the span of a decade, Suharto wore his political commitments lightly. One of his army colleagues later told a journalist that Suharto said in 1948, "My politics are at the end of the bayonet."⁵ No wonder that Sukarno and his left-leaning defense minister, Amir Sjarifuddin, had introduced political commissars into the army. Like many soldiers trained under Dutch and Japanese officers, Suharto had no experience in the popular nationalist movement that had struggled against imperialism.

After independence was won in 1949, Suharto rose up through the ranks: colonel, brigadier general, major general. His one setback came in 1959, when he was removed from the command of the Central Java troops for corruption. But the affair was hushed up, and he was quickly rehabilitated. Thereafter he was put in charge of the operation to seize West Papua from the Dutch in 1962—an operation that was aborted after a last-minute diplomatic agreement. He was then shifted to Jakarta, in 1963, and given command over the army reserves, Kostrad. With an undistinguished record, rudimentary education, and no ability in a foreign language, he was a prime candidate for the highest position in the army by 1965, serving as the replacement for the army commander, Yani, whenever he traveled abroad.

Suharto had risen to the top of an army that was becoming a kind of parallel government, using its territorial commands, originally designed for defense against

⁵ David Jenkins, *Suharto and His Generals: Indonesian Military Politics, 1975–1983* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1984), p. 33.

foreign invasion, for ruling over civil society. Most of his fellow generals, including the senior-most, A. H. Nasution, were strongly anti-communist and determined to check the rising power of the communist party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) in the early 1960s. To rival the party, they sponsored trade unions, artists' associations, and newspapers. They met with religious organizations and political parties and assured them that the army would use force if need be against the PKI.

Suharto did not clearly associate himself with either side. A former PKI member of the parliament told me that D. N. Aidit, the head of the party, believed that Suharto was a “democratic” officer because in 1963 he had supported the ending of the army’s martial law powers.⁶ But Suharto was also collaborating with the anti-communists in his covert effort to put the brakes on Sukarno’s anti-Malaysia campaign, begun in 1963.

Suharto’s fence-sitting ultimately proved to be what brought him to power. When the pro-PKI and pro-Sukarno army officers decided to strike against their rival officers, they assumed Suharto would support them. A group of junior officers organized the raids to kidnap seven army generals on October 1, 1965. Two of the conspirators, Colonel Abdul Latief and Lieutenant Colonel Untung, were good friends of Suharto. Latief, when put on trial in 1978, claimed that he had told Suharto beforehand about the plot. The abductors, calling themselves the September 30th Movement, wound up killing six generals, among them the army commander, Yani. It was Suharto’s lucky day. In Yani’s absence he became army commander. The September 30th Movement had not been masterminded by Suharto, but it played into his hands perfectly.⁷

As army commander, Suharto immediately began defying presidential orders and implementing the long-standing agenda of the anti-communist officers, which was to reduce Sukarno to a figurehead president, destroy the PKI, and establish a military dictatorship. Suharto’s anti-communism did not stem from any deep-seated ideological commitment. If the September 30th Movement had succeeded and the communists had gained more power, one can easily imagine the ever-opportunistic Suharto accommodating himself to the new regime. He was such a nondescript, unremarkable officer that many observers believed in the first weeks of October that he was merely following General Nasution’s lead.

Sidelining President Sukarno turned out not to be too difficult. The grand old man of Indonesian nationalism, the “extension of the people’s tongue,” kept voicing protests but did nothing concrete to stop Suharto’s guns. He confirmed Suharto as army commander, raised his rank, and gave him emergency powers. The coup de grâce of this gradual coup d’état came in March 1966, when Suharto used a vaguely worded order from Sukarno about “guaranteeing security” as a justification for arresting fifteen ministers and dismissing Sukarno’s cabinet—as if the president had ordered his own overthrow.

The destruction of the PKI—the precondition for imposing a new military-dominated polity—turned out not to be too difficult, either. The PKI leadership, in disarray after October 1, urged its followers not to resist so that President Sukarno

⁶ Oey Hay Djoen, personal communication, January 9, 2008.

⁷ John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto’s Coup d’État in Indonesia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), chapter 6.

could arrange a political resolution to the crisis. But the president had no power over Suharto's army. Working with civilian militias, the army organized one of the worst bloodbaths of the twentieth century, rounding up over one million people and then secretly executing many of them. Detainees disappeared at night. Mass graves holding uncounted corpses lie unmarked all over Sumatra, Java, and Bali.

No document exists proving that Suharto ordered any killing. In later years, on the rare occasion when he mentioned the killings, he blamed civilians for running amok. Serious investigations into the "who, where, when, and how" of the killings reveal that the army was primarily responsible and that Suharto must have at least approved of them if he did not give an explicit oral or written order for them.⁸

In taking power, Suharto and his fellow army officers realized that the long-term stability of their rule would depend on their ability to improve Indonesians' living standards. They looked to foreign aid, investment, and markets to provide the main stimuli for economic growth. Western capitalists, who had been boycotting Indonesia because of Sukarno's policies, found the welcome mat laid out. Suharto personally intervened in late 1965 to stop Sukarno's minister of industries from nationalizing the oil sector. With the army's terror campaign against unionists working at oil wells, rubber plantations, and factories, Western capital was assured a docile labor force.⁹

One reason for Suharto's remarkable ability to stay in power for so long lies in his expansion of public-sector employment. By the end of his reign, 4.6 million people were on the state payroll, about triple the number in the early 1970s. Millions more were dependents of these salary earners. The security of the monthly paycheck was attractive, even if the income was low. Also, some government jobs came with chances to earn more money through corruption. These civil servants and their relatives were the regime's key base of support, voting and campaigning for the government party, Golkar, in every election. Those who did not support Golkar were denounced for biting the hand that fed them and stood little chance of earning a promotion.

Suharto's habitual response to dissent was, to use today's lexicon, shock and awe. In Papua, he maintained an occupation army that treated the indigenous population as sub-humans whose loyalty had to be won through violence. For years, the only face of Indonesia that Papuans saw was that of the army. Suharto was responsible for the tens of thousands of Papuans killed in the counterinsurgency campaign from the late 1960s to 1998. He was also responsible for the war of aggression against East Timor in 1975, where over 100,000 people died. He was also responsible for the deaths of thousands of Acehnese who were victims of yet another counterinsurgency campaign (1990–1998) designed to terrorize civilians into not supporting the guerrillas, instead of offering the civilians a more positive alternative.

Suharto stubbornly pursued the same strategy even when it proved to be counterproductive, for instance, when the terror inflicted in Papua, East Timor, and Aceh generated widespread resistance. Only after Suharto's downfall have Indonesian

⁸ See Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, pp. 21–31.

⁹ Brad Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). Also see the collection of US government documents about Suharto that Simpson has posted at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB242/index.htm, the National Security Archive website.

politicians had the chance to pursue wiser, more humane diplomatic and political resolutions to these wars: President Habibie allowed a UN-administered referendum in East Timor in 1999 and President Yudhoyono concluded a peace treaty with the Acehese nationalists in 2005.

In evaluating Suharto's rule, the so-called "balanced" approach of many Western scholars has been to criticize Suharto for human-rights violations but to praise his economic performance. Those impressed by the country's high annual growth rates (6.6 percent was the average over his three decades) are like gullible investors in a Ponzi scheme, convinced that the high returns are irrefutable evidence of success. The economic growth of the Suharto years was largely accomplished by wildly selling off the country's natural resources. It was a predatory, unsustainable type of growth. The leading sectors were oil and timber. Both were terribly mismanaged because of the corruption. Today, Indonesia imports more oil than it exports, and much of its forest cover has disappeared. What forest remains is being rapidly cut down by loggers or burned up by palm oil plantation owners. The revenues from all those exports were not reinvested in other sectors; they disappeared into the personal bank accounts of Suharto family members, their cronies (such as the "king of the jungle," the timber tycoon Bob Hasan), and state officials.

Suharto's proudest moment came in 1985 when the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) presented him with an award for having raised rice production in Indonesia to the point that the country no longer needed to import rice. The first chapter in his "autobiography" was an account of his speech at the award ceremony in Rome. For Suharto, it was a moment when a simple peasant from Central Java had attained international recognition for improving the lives of his fellow peasants. The award turned out to be undeserved. The growth rates in rice production had risen during the 1977–82 period but had begun declining thereafter.¹⁰ The government consistently neglected the agricultural infrastructure and encouraged the conversion of Java's paddy fields into suburban and industrial zones. By the 1990s, Indonesia was back to importing large quantities of rice.¹¹

The entire agricultural sector was mismanaged during the Suharto years, partly because the state procurement agency, Bulog, was a major source of the officialdom's slush funds. The production of nearly all staple foods failed to meet domestic demand. Today, Indonesia imports massive quantities of soybeans, sugar, and wheat. Meanwhile, villagers are fleeing from the fields in droves, seeking employment as migrant workers in the Mideast, East Asia, and neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. Sukarno used to say that Indonesia was a nation of coolies. Sadly, after three decades of economic growth à la Suharto, it remains that. In a globalized world of ruthless competition, the country remains locked in its age-old position as supplier of raw materials and poor laborers for the world market. An absurd myopia afflicts those today who nostalgically recall the "better" economic conditions of the Suharto years without seeing how Suharto's policies contributed to the current, seemingly unsolvable problems of high unemployment, high prices, and mass poverty.

¹⁰ P. Simatupang and C. P. Timmer, "Indonesian Rice Production: Policies and Realities," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 44,1 (2008): 65–80.

¹¹ L. P. Rosner and N. McCulloch, "A Note on Rice Production, Consumption, and Import Data in Indonesia," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 44,1 (2008): 88–89.

When he resigned in 1998, Suharto left the government heavily in debt and the economy without a domestically financed industrial base. To get an idea of the wasted opportunities, one can simply compare the record of Malaysia's state-owned oil company, Petronas, with Indonesia's Pertamina. With smaller oil reserves, the former outperforms the latter in nearly every way (e.g., profitability, transparency, size of its investments in foreign countries). It is fitting that Suharto, whose parliament of minions anointed him with the title "the father of development" in 1983, passed away in the hospital owned by Pertamina, a company his family and cronies (such as Ibnu Sutowo) milked with abandon.

The Suharto regime lived by foreign capital and it died by foreign capital. With encouragement from the United States, the regime liberalized the country's financial system further in the late 1980s by relaxing regulations, removing government oversight, and opening it up to foreign capital.¹² For many of Jakarta's business oligarchs, practiced in the arts of rent-seeking, banking became a new way of stealing money. As they went on a borrowing spree, racking up billions of dollars in bad loans, Indonesia became much more vulnerable to sudden shifts in international capital flows. In 1997, the money that had flowed into the hands of Suharto's caste of kleptocrats and their phony banks suddenly flooded out. The grand Ponzi scheme collapsed with the Asian economic crisis.

The only legitimacy that Suharto had enjoyed was his apparent ability to engineer economic growth. Once that ended, the usually compliant middle-class citizens turned on him, unwilling to tolerate his corruption, greedy children, and obscenely wealthy cronies. The spontaneously formed movement for *reformasi* declared its main enemy to be KKN: Korupsi, Kolusi, and Nepotisme. The Suharto family's own "I Love the Rupiah" campaign, coming from those who held the most dollars, did not quite have the same cachet.

Suharto and his family's extensive stable of paranormals could not save them, and neither could their obsequious army generals, not even Lieutenant General Prabowo, Suharto's son-in-law, who commanded elite troops in Jakarta and was always flush with money from his brother who owned the country's one steel mill. Suharto resigned on May 21, 1998, as Jakarta was still smouldering from the mysterious riots during which stores owned by Indonesian-Chinese were torched.

Perhaps the best that can be said of Suharto's thirty-two-year reign is that it could have been worse. He did not opt for the strategy of the Burmese generals and close off the country. Dependent upon foreign capital, he was vulnerable to international pressure. The release of tens of thousands of political prisoners in the late 1970s was largely due to pressure from outside the country. He did not opt to legitimate himself through religion and impose Islamic law. The Indonesian state remained largely secular. He did not promote a cult of personality around himself. When faced with mass protests in 1998, he did not opt to stay in power at all costs.

The late, great Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a political prisoner of Suharto's for fourteen years, once wrote that he could not bring himself to write about

¹² J. Pincus and R. Ramli, "From Showcase to Basket Case," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 22 (1998): 723-34.

the Suharto regime. While he wrote many historical novels about precolonial Java and the Indonesian nationalist movement, he thought nothing interesting could be said about the man responsible for imprisoning him and banning his books. For him, Suharto was a negativity, what he called a “minus x,” a reversion back to Java’s colonial-era aristocrats who bullied their subjects for the benefit of European business interests, yet prided themselves on their great cosmic powers, and remained narrow-minded and indifferent to the science and arts of the Europe that had conquered them.¹³ No doubt some will remember Suharto for something positive, but, as Indonesia struggles to overcome Suharto’s terrible legacies, one wonders whether anyone will be able to consider his title, “father of development,” as anything other than a cruel joke.

[A shorter version of this obituary originally appeared on the website of the online magazine *Inside Indonesia*: www.insideindonesia.org—Ed.]

¹³ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, “My Apologies, in the Name of Experience,” trans. Alex Bardsley, *Indonesia* 61 (April 1996): 1–14.