

**John Roosa. *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. 303 pages.**

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The fall of President Suharto in May 1998 renewed interest in the events surrounding the coup attempt of 1965 and the transfer of power from Sukarno. Debates have arisen around Indonesian history and, particularly, the mystery surrounding the coup attempt and its aftermath, in which half a million people were killed. The level of involvement of members of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) in the coup attempt has been widely debated. John Roosa's book situates itself within the body of scholarly work that has examined this coup attempt and the extent of the PKI's role. This literature includes Anderson and McVey's "Cornell Paper" and the works of Harold Crouch and W. F. Wertheim, all of which are discussed in Roosa's book in terms of outlining some of the most influential and enduring theories.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the facts surrounding the coup have been established. On the night of September 30, 1965, one lieutenant and six army generals, including the army commander General Ahmad Yani, were seized from their homes in various parts of Jakarta and executed either there or in Lubang Buaya, on the outskirts of the city. The kidnappers dubbed themselves the "September 30th Movement," and their stated aim was to safeguard Sukarno from right-wing army officers rumored to have been planning a coup against him. In a broadcast on October 1, from the state radio station that they had seized, Movement activists named their leader as Lieutenant Colonel Untung, commander of the Cakrabirawa, the presidential palace guards. Thereafter several hundred soldiers mobilized in the center of Jakarta as a show of strength, however, the movement petered out and was defeated in a matter of a few days.

This movement was remarkable for the brevity of its existence, leading to much speculation about its key protagonists and their aims. Repercussions from the events, particularly the way they were used to justify an army takeover of power, the massacre of the political left (the "pretext for mass murder" of the title), and the deposing of President Sukarno, have sustained scholars' interest in what happened in those fateful few days in Jakarta.

Understanding the nature of the September 30th Movement and the extent of PKI involvement form the core themes of Roosa's book. Roosa and several young Indonesian researchers have been engaged in a large-scale oral-history project through the Indonesian Institute of Social History that involves interviewing hundreds of former political prisoners.<sup>2</sup> Through this work, he became interested in the different

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<sup>1</sup> See Benedict R. O'G. Anderson and Ruth T. McVey, *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Modern Indonesia Project, Cornell University, 1971); Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); and W. F. Wertheim, "Suharto and Untung Coup—The Missing Link," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 1,1 (1970): 50–57.

<sup>2</sup> *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65: Esai-esai Sejarah Lisan*, ed. John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004).

versions of the coup attempt that were circulating among the former political prisoners, as well as in the international scholarly community and within Indonesia itself. The question of the extent of the PKI's involvement remains central to the former political prisoners' perspectives, in their quest for the rehabilitation of their reputations and for justice. It was also through this work that Roosa was able to identify and interview several new informants for this book, whose outlooks inject it with a fresh approach to the topic.

Roosa's central argument is that a section of the PKI leadership was, in fact, involved in the September 30th Movement, possibly through the clandestine Special Bureau, linked to PKI and led by Sjamsuddin Kamaruzzaman. The Special Bureau reported directly to PKI Chairperson D. N. Aidit. It did not seem, however, that the *entire* party leadership was involved, let alone the party's membership or its affiliated mass organizations. Roosa contends that the leaders of the September 30th Movement consisted of five men: Lieutenant Colonel Untung; Colonel Abdul Latief, of the Jakarta army garrison; Major Sujono, of the Halim Air Base guards; and two civilians, Sjam (who headed the Special Bureau) and Pono (a member of the Special Bureau). There had been concerns at that time among Sukarno supporters, including those in the armed forces, that some top-ranking army leaders were against Sukarno and suspected to be conspiring with the United States. Those who were concerned wished to rid the military of these leaders. As his sources, Roosa relies on a document written after the coup attempt by Brigadier General Supardjo, an air-force officer with a distinguished career in the suppression of the PRRI/Permesta uprisings in the late 1950s, who became entangled with the September 30th Movement. Roosa found this document in Supardjo's file among the Extraordinary Military Tribunals (Mahmillub) papers. Roosa contends, and this is backed up by former political prisoners who were close to Supardjo after his arrest, that the document must have been written by Supardjo while on the run, following the failure of the Movement and as his hitherto distinguished military career lay in tatters. Supardjo wrote his document not as a party member, but as a supporter and a seasoned combat veteran assessing the outcome of a series of events in which the party played a role. This document (appended in English in the latter part of Roosa's book) can be analyzed alongside PKI Politburo member Sudisman's "self-criticism" document, tabled during his trial in 1967, in which he shouldered responsibility for the party's mistakes. In this document, Sudisman continued to maintain that the coup attempt was an internal army matter.<sup>3</sup> Roosa has also relied on a large number of interviews with former political prisoners, some of whom have made investigating 1965 their life's work, while others had access to information networks while in prison shortly after the events of 1965 and are free to speak now.

Roosa's book begins with discussing the series of events in Jakarta and in a small number of places in Central Java, where similar attempts to wrest control of the army took place. He points to their seemingly poor planning and execution. The Supardjo document indicated the disappointment of one military officer, Supardjo himself, who was not only a Sukarno supporter, but also an admirer of the PKI. Supardjo believed that the party had the expertise and the following to be able to support the initial seizure of the generals, the top leadership of the army. After the initial seizure,

<sup>3</sup> Sudisman, *Pledoi Sudisman, Kritik Otokritik Seorang Politburo CC PKI* (Yogyakarta: Teplok Press, 2001).

however, the picture began to unravel. The key protagonists, who gathered on October 1 at Halim Air Base, on the outskirts of Jakarta, seemed to have been paralyzed regarding what to do next; their perplexity increased once it became evident that Sukarno did not support the coup attempt, particularly after the injuries and subsequent deaths of the top army officers.

On October 1 several army battalions were being prepared to provide some kind of a show of strength, but there was little coordination and poor logistical arrangements, indicating that there was confusion among the planners. Roosa argues that within days the movement was finished. It had failed to seize the momentum in the early hours after declaring its existence on the state radio.

An air-force intelligence officer, retired Lieutenant Colonel Heru Atmodjo, was one of Roosa's informants for this study. Atmodjo was at Halim Air Base and accompanied Supardjo during the course of October 1. Coen Holtzappel, a Dutch scholar who had concluded that air-force officers were the key leaders of the Movement, named Atmodjo as one of the protagonists in the 30<sup>th</sup> September Movement.<sup>4</sup> Atmodjo rejected this assertion by Holtzappel, and Atmodjo was then motivated to write down his side of the story (once this became possible with the fall of Suharto),<sup>5</sup> and to agree to be interviewed by Roosa for this book.

Following an overview of the events based on the Supardjo document and Atmodjo's testimony, Roosa then analyzes in more detail each of the key protagonists in the events, starting with Sjamsudin Kamaruzzaman, or "Sjam." As well as transcripts of Sjam's own testimony at the Extraordinary Military Tribunals, Roosa has relied on sources from his oral-history work, in particular on the testimony of a man with the pseudonym of Hasan, to determine how the Special Bureau, the unit led by Sjam, functioned. The Special Bureau had existed since the 1940s as an intermediary that enabled the party to connect with and cultivate members of the military who might be "recruitable" or act as good contacts for the party, as well as a way for the party to safeguard its existence by being well-informed regarding the political situation.

Roosa's informants sketched out Indonesia's environment of top-level intrigue in the late 1950s and 1960s, where not only in each section of the army, but also within various political parties, intelligence networks existed, gathering intelligence on one another to better their positions. Therefore, the activity of the Special Bureau was not the preserve of the PKI alone, but was a product of the times. Here Roosa also points to a shift in the PKI under Aidit's leadership from 1951, as the party evolved into an open, mass party that was the fourth largest vote-getter in the 1955 general elections. The party's membership comprised various levels of political sophistication and many had no experience of the party's clandestine past under Dutch colonialism and thereafter. This shift also affected the Special Bureau and the personnel chosen for it. Roosa's informants suggested that Sjam (unlike the bureau's founder, Karto) did not have a guerilla-warfare background, and was not well-developed ideologically, thus

<sup>4</sup> Coen Holtzappel, "The 30 September Movement: A Political Movement of the Armed Forces or an Intelligence Operation?," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 9:2 (1979), p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> *Gerakan 30 September 1965: Kesaksian Letkol (PNB) Heru Atmodjo*, ed. Garda Sembiring and Harsono Sutedjo (Jakarta: People's Empowerment Consortium with Hasta Mitra and Tride, 2004).

raising the question of why Aidit chose Sjam to head the Special Bureau. Sjam and others working in the Special Bureau, such as Bono and Pono, took pains to disguise their links to the party, preferring to be perceived as business people. The debates among the former political prisoners themselves about the correctness of the course taken by the party in the 1960s and, in turn, the kind of party it needed to be, are evident in this section of the book. Was it a mistake to be a completely legal party, with no preparations to safeguard members against possible repression, in spite of the party's experiences in the past? Was it a mistake for the PKI Central Committee to allow Aidit to have the final say over the Special Bureau, without recourse to the rest of the party leadership? Roosa points this out in his chapter on Aidit, agreeing with Sudisman that the party's chief organizational mistake was to allow Aidit too much leeway in determining how the Special Bureau was to be utilized (p. 175).

In the next chapter on Aidit, the PKI, and the September 30th Movement, Roosa analyzes as far as possible the relationship between Aidit and the Movement. The nature of Aidit's power within the party is also explored, as the author seeks to determine the extent to which Aidit could have acted independently of the party. This chapter provides us with a glimpse of the radical, anti-imperialist agenda around the world at that time, some ten years after the Bandung Asia-Africa Conference, and Indonesia's relations within the worldwide communist movement at that phase of the Cold War. Aidit had spoken in favor of the 1965 Algerian coup by Colonel Boumedienne against nationalist leader Ben Bella, who was more aligned with the Soviet Union. The Algerian coup might not have introduced Aidit to "a new paradigm for political action" (p. 165), however, in the words of one of Roosa's informants, Jusuf Isak, it made Aidit less hostile to "a movement from above, so long as it was quickly turned into a people's movement" (p. 166). In the end, as Roosa argues, Sjam and Aidit wanted to keep the 30th September Movement going in spite of the initial failure, hoping for and needing that mass response from party activists, some of whom had been simply told to monitor their radios around the time of the coup attempt.

The murder of Aidit around November 1965 clearly poses difficulties that the author tries to grapple with in assessing Aidit's and Sjam's roles. Sjam survived for close to twenty years after the coup attempt. Before he was executed, he did not come across as being a political prisoner popular among his fellow prisoners. Moreover, the killings and disappearance of many PKI leaders have left a vacuum in the range of primary sources available to discuss and analyze the role of Aidit and the rest of the Politburo in 1965.

The chapter on Suharto, the army, and the United States outlines how close cooperation had been fostered between sections of the army and the US for several years prior to 1965. Roosa eschews conspiracy theories that "1965" was "made in the USA," but he cautions that "One should not jump to the other extreme and argue that US officials and army generals were surprised ..." (p. 177). He argues that the US had been preparing for a state takeover following an army showdown with the PKI (p. 177). That "showdown" did not take place, as in most instances the PKI membership went down without a fight. Nevertheless, the final outcome was the same in that the forces the US had been supporting took power. Support from the United States flowed for the regime, as Indonesia embarked on a new political and economic trajectory.

This was, however, no crude military dictatorship, for it was interested in maintaining appearances. Roosa argues that Suharto and the army's takeover was a sophisticated one based on constitutional procedures, following a strong (and successful) campaign of demonizing the enemy, admittedly backed by terror, particularly between October 1965 to approximately March 1966, a period during which half a million were killed and more were imprisoned, largely without trial. A propaganda campaign was also swiftly mounted through newspapers and other media under tight army control from October 1965 onwards, blaming the PKI for the supposedly grisly torture, mutilation, and killings of the army officers at Lubang Buaya. The myths woven around the mutilated state of the bodies have had a lasting legacy, particularly affecting members of the left-wing women's organization close to the PKI, Gerwani (Indonesian Women's Movement), who were accused of engaging in a sexual orgy while torturing and mutilating the army officers.<sup>6</sup> The total alienation of a population from left-wing ideas then also guaranteed the regime's own ideological sustainability, an important prop to ensure long years of stable rule.

Within the communities of former political prisoners and Indonesian exiles abroad from the 1965 period, there is continuing, wide-ranging debate about the levels of culpability of the party. Roosa's book provides voice to the contention within those communities that a small section of the party had been involved in the events of September 30 and October 1 together with sections of the armed forces. But those opinions are not uniformly held. This book has also proven controversial among those very same communities, arousing furor among those who hold the argument that the party should be completely absolved. Its publication comes at a time in Indonesia's history when the country is trying to address its New Order past, with the 1965 former political prisoners feeling the urgent need to tell their multiple stories and leave a mark on Indonesian history. Roosa's book makes an important contribution to what is not only an academic debate, but also a question that affects the lives of many former political prisoners and their families today. His work also shows the possibilities of using new oral sources in the post-Suharto period, perhaps to uncover what he, referring to the mass killings, terms the "many larger, more complex mysteries" beyond Lubang Buaya (p. 225).

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<sup>6</sup> Katharine E. McGregor and Vanessa Hearman, "Challenges of Political Rehabilitation in Post-New Order Indonesia: The Case of Gerwani (Indonesian Women's Movement)," *South East Asia Research* 15,3 (November 2007): 355.