

Indonesia to rebrand dictator as 'national hero'

Suharto's 31-year rule was brutal and corrupt. Yet now they want to honour him

By Sholto Byrnes

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As General Suharto lingered on his deathbed in January 2008, the former president of Indonesia, who had ruled his country from 1967 to 1998, was surrounded by regional leaders and garlanded with tributes from other local luminaries. Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, expressed sadness that his "very old friend" was not receiving "the honour that he deserves". Malaysia's long-term Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, shed a tear as he held the dying man's hand. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines praised his "pioneering vision... founded on respect and understanding", while even East Timor's Jose Ramos-Horta asked the Pope to pray for him.

Of US or European dignitaries, there were none. By the time his 31-year rule finally came to an end amid riots and demonstrations in 1998, Suharto had become one of the most reviled dictators of the late 20th century. He was charged with the murder of half a million suspected Communists in the 1960s after he put down a coup against his predecessor, Sukarno (a restoration of order that also led swiftly to the then Major-General's ascent to power). He stood accused of genocide in East Timor, more than one-quarter of whose population perished after his 1975 invasion and subsequent occupation of the former Portuguese colony. Free speech and democracy in Indonesia were crushed, with dissidents jailed or summarily shot. As if that were not ignominy enough, he also had the distinction of being branded the most corrupt world leader of all time by the NGO Transparency International, which estimated he looted up to \$35bn from the state coffers.

On his death, it may have been said "he will never be forgotten", but one would have thought most Indonesians would fervently wish the opposite. However, in a move that has caused consternation to human rights activists and heated debate in the country's media, the Indonesian government is now proposing that the former dictator be formally declared a "national hero". His is one of 10 names on a shortlist drawn up by the social affairs ministry, which must first be vetted by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono before being decided upon by an expert committee. SBY, as the President is known, will then announce who is to join the illustrious 138 already honoured each year on Heroes' Day, 10 November.

The suggestion has been condemned as "an insult and an outrage" by Fadjoel Rachman, one of the thousands of activists imprisoned under Suharto's New Order regime. The talk-show host and political analyst Wimar Witoelar said: "It is a shame to the nation." But there is no shortage of support: not just from Golkar, the puppet political party whose election "victories" allowed Indonesia to maintain a semblance of democracy under his rule, but also from the Prosperous Justice Party, PKS – an Islamist grouping that could never have aspired to be part of a governing coalition, as it is now, under the New Order. Indonesia's 240 million population may be 87 per cent Muslim, but Suharto was a firmly secular Caesar who kept God strictly in His place.

If his name goes forward, the announcement could prove very uncomfortable for SBY, whose guest on Heroes' Day will be none other than President Obama. Ahead of his visit, the White House has said that the US President will talk of the "tolerance and pluralism" of the country where he spent four years as a boy, but it is doubtful that his warm feelings towards Indonesia extend to a man whose "tyranny and corruption" he criticised in his 2006 memoir, *The Audacity of Hope*.

It is only 12 years since the fall of Suharto and his despised authoritarian regime, since when Indonesia's progress as a nascent democracy – the third largest on the planet and beginning to emerge as the player its size and abundant natural resources would suggest in the G20 – has been hailed as an example to developing countries. "If you want to know if Islam, democracy, modernity and women's rights can coexist, go to Indonesia," said US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a visit to Jakarta last year. How is it, then, that in so short a time, so many can be so willing to overlook the crimes of their ex-dictator?

Fadli Zon, secretary general of Gerindra, the Great Indonesia Movement Party, is one who takes a benign view of Suharto. Earlier this year, I interviewed him at the modestly named Fadli Zon Library in the Indonesian capital, where he showed me photographs of him talking to the man dubbed "the smiling general" in retirement at his comfortable home in the Jakarta suburb of Menteng. Suharto, he said, "had good intentions". He had tried to bring "stability, growth and redistribution of wealth". Mr Zon compared him to other regional strongmen, "like Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Mahathir, Hu Jintao, Deng Xiaoping". Even the corruption, he suggested, was not so bad. "Then it was centralised," he said. "Only Golkar, the Suharto family and the military benefited. Now it's been decentralised – it's everyone. If Suharto was corrupt, who's not corrupt in Indonesia today?"

What about the killings, the human rights abuses, the refusal to hold free and fair elections? Mr Zon smiled expansively. "In the West, you remember everything," he told me. "Here, we forget very easily."

A certain degree of amnesia can be useful for a country coming to terms with a violent past. After the Japanese occupation in the Second World War, Indonesia fought a bitter war against the Dutch, who tried to reclaim their East Indies empire, and many short-lived republics were announced, including a Soviet and an Islamic state. The mainly Christian islands of the South Moluccas declared independence, and rebellions broke out in Sumatra and Sulawesi. Such were the long-running animosities between Muslims and Communists that responsibility for the atrocities after the "attempted coup" of 1965, which is usually and conveniently pinned solely on Suharto, should in truth be shared by religious groups happy to take revenge for earlier Communist-wrought massacres.

More recently, many now at the top of politics were closely associated with the New Order regime. Ex-military men, such as SBY, abound: Gerindra's nominee



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Siti Hardiyantu Rukmana, daughter of ex-president Suharto, reveals her father's face to Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as the former dictator lies in state in 2008

for the presidency was Prabowo Subianto, a former general married to Suharto's daughter, while Golkar's vice-presidential candidate in last year's elections was General Wiranto, who also served under Suharto and has, like Mr Prabowo, been accused of human rights violations while in uniform.

The award-winning Malaysian author Tash Aw, who grew up partly in the country and whose second novel *Map of the Invisible World* is set just before Suharto assumed power, agreed that there is a desire to forget the dictator's excesses. "I think it is in many ways a typically Asian way of dealing with the trauma of history: we have to ignore the ugly truth of what happened in the past in order to move forward. The newspapers are full of comments like 'sure, mistakes were made' and 'no one is perfect'. You hear echoes of this all throughout the region. It's as if we can't bear to confront the brutal reality of what we have inflicted on ourselves, and we need to gloss over things and concentrate on the present."

Such a gloss also suits the Western powers that armed and supported Suharto, giving him the nod to invade East Timor and being so grateful for his anti-Communist stance during the Cold War that Mrs Thatcher was to laud him as "one of our very best and most valuable friends". The former Australian prime minister Paul Keating is said to have regarded Suharto as a father figure, while even in 1995 the Clinton White House lined up all its top officials to welcome him on a visit to Washington. "He's our kind of guy," explained an official.

Proud though the Indonesian intelligentsia are of their democracy, to the millions of poor the freedom of the ballot can seem scant compensation for the disruption of their previous lives under Suharto. When GDP per capita is still only just over \$2,000, it is not hard to understand why some may view the unregulated, sometimes chaotic nature of elective democracy as a poor substitute for the stability dictatorships tend to be good at providing. And older people, especially, still give Suharto credit for raising their wages to even that level. On the advice of the "Berkeley Mafia", a group of Indonesians trained at the California university, Suharto took a liberal approach to the economy which instantly paid dividends – inflation went down from 650 per cent in 1966 to under 20 per cent in 1969 – and, following their guidance, instituted a policy of deregulation in the 1980s.

Even stern critics, such as the poet and writer Laksmi Pamuntjak, concede the results. "For most of his 30-year rule, our country experienced significant growth and industrialisation, and there was remarkable progress in people's welfare. Infant mortality declined; public infrastructure was overhauled. Education, health care and living standards improved greatly," she said. "Despite the systemic corruption, economic inefficiencies and the hubris of Suharto's children and cronies, poverty was reduced dramatically."

Suharto fell only after he had lost control of the economy in the Far Eastern economic crisis of the mid-1990s, and a narrative that this, rather than the barbarous repression he inflicted, was his only substantial failing seems to be gaining ground. "Suharto's most significant contribution is our country's development," said PKS secretary general Anis Matta, explaining his party's startling support for the "national hero" accolade on Monday. Mr Matta acknowledged that enormous foreign debts were incurred in a desperate attempt to prop up the economy, but added: "Besides, not all heroes are purely innocent."

Such insouciant sleight of hand does not impress Wimar Witoelar, who was jailed for three months in 1978 for his political activism, and was later the spokesman for Abdurrahman Wahid, who became President after the 1999 general election – the first democratic national poll to be held in Indonesia since 1955. "It is outrageous, unspeakable, unacceptable," he said. "There is no question that the atrocities were real."

Why have no major political figures spoken out against the proposal, such as the leader of the opposition PDI-P, the former president Megawati Sukarnoputri – who, as the daughter of Sukarno, the man Suharto overthrew, has extra reason to have no affection for him? "Well, they should," said Mr Witoelar. His theory is that the move is "a distraction from the issues of the day" and a ploy to legitimise the vast sums plundered from the state by Suharto and his cronies. "None of it has been retrieved. Much of it was invested abroad."

Indonesia may eventually have its own truth and reconciliation commission, but even setting that up has proved troublesome, and legislation to promulgate it is still in draft form. If Suharto is declared a national hero in the meantime, it will be too late – his reputation will officially have been cleansed, polished and sealed in the amber of official approval.

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