

Good and Bad Genocide

Double standards in coverage of Suharto and Pol Pot

Coverage of the fall of Suharto reveals with startling clarity the ideological biases and propaganda role of the mainstream media. Suharto was a ruthless dictator, a grand larcenist and a mass killer with as many victims as Cambodia's Pol Pot. But he served U.S. economic and geopolitical interests, was helped into power by Washington, and his dictatorial rule was warmly supported for 32 years by the U.S. economic and political establishment. The U.S. was still training the most repressive elements of Indonesia's security forces as Suharto's rule was collapsing in 1998, and the Clinton administration had established especially close relations with the dictator ("our kind of guy," according to a senior administration official quoted in the New York Times, 10/31/95).

Suharto's overthrow of the Sukarno government in 1965-66 turned Indonesia from Cold War "neutralism" to fervent anti-Communism, and wiped out the Indonesian Communist Party—exterminating a sizable part of its mass base in the process, in widespread massacres that claimed at least 500,000 and perhaps more than a million victims. The U.S. establishment's enthusiasm for the coup-cum-mass murder was ecstatic (see Chomsky and Herman, *Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*); "almost everyone is pleased by the changes being wrought," New York Times columnist C.L. Sulzberger commented (4/8/66).

Suharto quickly transformed Indonesia into an "investors' paradise," only slightly qualified by the steep bribery charge for entry. Investors flocked in to exploit the timber, mineral and oil resources, as well as the cheap, repressed labor, often in joint ventures with Suharto family members and cronies. Investor enthusiasm for this favorable climate of investment was expressed in political support and even in public advertisements; e.g., the full page ad in the New York Times (9/24/92) by Chevron and Texaco entitled "Indonesia: A Model for Economic Development."

The U.S. support and investment did not slacken when Suharto's army invaded and occupied East Timor in 1975, which resulted in an estimated 200,000 deaths in a population of only 700,000. Combined with the 500,000-1,000,000+ slaughtered within Indonesia in 1965-66, the double genocide would seem to put Suharto in at least the same class of mass murderer as Pol Pot.

Good and bad genocidists

But Suharto's killings of 1965-66 were what Noam Chomsky and I, in *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*, called "constructive terror," with results viewed as favorable to Western interests. His mass killings in East Timor were "benign terror," carried out by a valued client and therefore tolerable. Pol Pot's were "nefarious terror," done by an enemy, therefore appalling and to be severely condemned. Pol Pot's victims were "worthy," Suharto's "unworthy."

This politicized classification system was unflinchingly employed by the media in the period of Suharto's decline and fall (1997-98). When Pol Pot died in April 1998, the media were unstinting in condemnation, calling him "wicked," "loathsome" and "monumentally evil" (Chicago Tribune, 4/18/98), a "lethal mass killer" and "war criminal" (L.A. Times, 4/17/98), "blood-soaked" and an "egregious mass murderer" (Washington Post, 4/17/98, 4/18/98). His rule was repeatedly described as a

“reign of terror” and he was guilty of “genocide.” Although he inherited a devastated country with starvation rampant, all excess deaths during his rule were attributed to him, and he was evaluated on the basis of those deaths.

Although Suharto’s regime was responsible for a comparable number of deaths in Indonesia, along with more than a quarter of the population of East Timor, the word “genocide” is virtually never used in mainstream accounts of his rule. A Nexis search of major papers for the first half of 1998 turned up no news articles and only a handful of letters and opinion pieces that used the term in connection with Suharto.

Earlier, in a rare case where the word came up in a discussion of East Timor (New York Times, 2/15/81), reporter Henry Kamm referred to it as “hyperbole—accusations of ‘genocide’ rather than mass deaths from cruel warfare and the starvation that accompanies it on this historically food-short island.” No such “hyperbole” was applied to the long-useful Suharto; one looks in vain for editorial descriptions of him as “blood-soaked” or a “murderer.”

In the months of his exit, he was referred to as Indonesia’s “soft-spoken, enigmatic president” (USA Today, 5/14/98), a “profoundly spiritual man” (New York Times, 5/17/98), a “reforming autocrat” (New York Times, 5/22/98). His motives were benign: “It was not simply personal ambition that led Mr. Suharto to clamp down so hard for so long; it was a fear, shared by many in this country of 210 million people, of chaos” (New York Times, 6/2/98); he “failed to comprehend the intensity of his people’s discontent” (New York Times, 5/21/98), otherwise he undoubtedly would have stepped down earlier. He was sometimes described as “authoritarian,” occasionally as a “dictator,” but never as a mass murderer. Suharto’s mass killings were referred to—if at all—in a brief and antiseptic paragraph.

It is interesting to see how the same reporters move between Pol Pot and Suharto, indignant at the former’s killings, somehow unconcerned by the killings of the good genocidist. Seth Mydans, the New York Times principal reporter on the two leaders during the past two years, called Pol Pot (4/19/98) “one of the century’s great mass killers...who drove Cambodia to ruin, causing the deaths of more than a million people,” and who “launched one of the world’s most terrifying attempts at utopia.” (4/13/98) But in reference to Suharto, this same Mydans said (4/8/98) that “more than 500,000 Indonesians are estimated to have died in a purge of leftists in 1965, the year Mr. Suharto came to power.” Note that Suharto is not even the killer, let alone a “great mass killer,” and this “purge”—not “murder” or “slaughter”—was not “terrifying,” and was not allocated to any particular agent.

The use of the passive voice is common in dealing with Suharto’s victims: They “died” instead of being killed (“the violence left a reported 500,000 people dead”—New York Times, 1/15/98), or “were killed” without reference to the author of the killings (e.g., Washington Post, 2/23/98, 5/26/98). In referring to East Timor, Mydans (New York Times, 7/28/96) spoke of protesters shouting grievances about “the suppression of opposition in East Timor and Irian Jaya.” Is “suppression of opposition” the proper description of an invasion and occupation that eliminated 200,000 out of 700,000 people?

The good and bad genocidists are handled differently in other ways. For Suharto, the numbers killed always tend to the 500,000 official Indonesian estimate or below, although independent estimates run from 700,000 to well over a million. For Pol Pot, the media numbers usually range from 1 million-2 million, although the best estimates of numbers executed run from 100,000-400,000, with excess

deaths from all causes (including residual effects of the prior devastation) ranging upward from 750,000 (Michael Vickery, *Cambodia*; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*).

Pol Pot's killings are always attributed to him personally—the New York Times' Philip Shenon (4/18/98) refers to him as “the man responsible for the deaths of more than a million Cambodians.” Although some analysts of the Khmer Rouge have claimed that the suffering of Cambodia under the intense U.S. bombing made them vengeful, and although the conditions they inherited were disastrous, for the media nothing mitigates Pol Pot's responsibility. The only “context” allowed explaining his killing is his “crazed Maoist-inspiration” (New York Times, 4/18/98), his Marxist ideological training in France and his desire to create a “utopia of equality” (Boston Globe editorial, 4/17/98).

With Suharto, by contrast, not only is he not responsible for the mass killings, there was a mitigating circumstance: namely, a failed leftist or Communist coup, or “leftist onslaught” (New York Times, 6/17/79), which “touched off a wave of violence” (New York Times, 8/7/96). In the New York Times' historical summary (5/21/98): “General Suharto routs communist forces who killed six senior generals in an alleged coup attempt. Estimated 500,000 people killed in backlash against Communists.”

This formula is repeated in most mainstream media accounts of the 1965-66 slaughter. Some mention that the “communist plot” was “alleged,” but none try to examine its truth or falsehood. What's interesting is that the six deaths are seen as a plausible catalyst for the Indonesian massacres, while the 450,000 killed and maimed in the U.S. bombing of Cambodia (the Washington Post's estimate, 4/24/75) are virtually never mentioned in connection with the Khmer Rouge's violence. By suggesting a provocation, and using words like “backlash” and “touching off a wave of violence,” the media justify and diffuse responsibility for the good genocide.

The good genocidist is also repeatedly allowed credit for having encouraged economic growth, which provides the regular offset for his repression and undemocratic rule as well as mass killing. In virtually every article Mydans wrote on Indonesia, the fact that Suharto brought rising incomes is featured, with the mass killings and other negatives relegated to side issues that qualify the good. Joseph Stalin also presided over a remarkable development and growth process, but the mainstream media have never been inclined to overlook his crimes on that basis. Only constructive terror deserves such contextualization.

A New York Times editorial declared (4/10/98): “Time cannot erase the criminal responsibility of Pol Pot, whose murderous rule of Cambodia in the late 1970s brought death to about a million people, or one out of seven Cambodians. Trying him before an international tribunal would advance justice, promote healing in Cambodia and give pause to any fanatic tempted to follow his example.”

But for the New York Times and its media cohorts, Suharto's killings in East Timor—and the huge slaughter of 1965-66—are not crimes and do not call for retribution or any kind of justice to the victims. Reporter David Sanger (New York Times, 3/8/98) differentiated Suharto from Iraq's Saddam Hussein, saying that “Mr. Suharto is not hoarding anthrax or threatening to invade Australia.” The fact that he killed 500,000+ at home and killed another 200,000 in an invasion of East Timor has disappeared from view. This was constructive and benign terror carried out by a good genocidist.