

# Indonesia's Political Prisoners

Lorrin P. Rosenbaum and Judith Kossy

*In many hamlets, prisoners and even whole families were stabbed and hurled into pits, rivers, wells, and ponds, where they were left to rot. In the larger villages, towns, and cities, people were dragged through the streets, their heads shattered by stones hurled by the crowds. No one knew how many men, women, and children had actually been slain. The official figure was in excess of a million. Miles of mutilated bodies lined the highways.*

*In Djakarta we were told that no international body would dare intervene to stop the mass killing. Western diplomats stationed in Indonesia did not want to be accused of intervening in another country's internal affairs....*

—Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit*

The truth about one of the worst crimes of the twentieth century has long been embargoed. Ten years ago General Suharto's accession to power in Indonesia brought the massacre of nearly a million people and the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands more. Yet continuing allegations about the murders and sweeping arrests that followed receive scant attention. Scattered articles mention conditions in Indonesia, but there is little comprehensive coverage of the ongoing repression by the present regime or of United States complicity. It was only recently that the House Sub-Committee on International Organizations, chaired by Representative Donald Fraser (D.-Minn.), began a series of hearings on the treatment of political prisoners in Indonesia. The hearings will evaluate the legality of security assistance to Indonesia under Amendment 502B of the Foreign Relations Act, an act prohibiting U.S. military assistance where there are gross violations of human rights.

In the initial hearings in December, 1975, committee

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members Wayne Hays (D.-Ohio) and Leo Ryan (D.-Calif.) were more intent on disparaging the former political prisoner who testified than on conducting an objective inquiry. The present hearings promise to be quite different.

Unlike some military governments that seize power temporarily until "order" has been restored, the military in Indonesia under Suharto have gained in strength during the last decade and show no sign of transferring authority to a civilian body. The "stabilization" of Indonesia began after a revolt on September 30, 1965. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Untung, the palace guard kidnapped and assassinated six army generals in what participants said was an effort to prevent a military takeover of the government by the rightist council of generals. A counter coup quickly established the military's control under General Suharto, reducing the then President Sukarno to a mere figurehead. Almost immediately Suharto urged an extensive campaign against all those assumed to have been involved in or sympathetic to the coup. Executions and arrests were launched against thousands of Communists, those with left-wing sympathies, and members of various peasant, labor, and women's organizations.

Executions and mass arrests did not cease in the bloody aftermath of the counter coup but continued periodically against suspected opponents of the government. In July, 1968, *The Economist* reported that the "army is enthusiastically hunting down the last communist leaders and stuffing the overcrowded concentration camps even fuller...." The government claims that these massacres resulted from tribal vengeance against a hated and feared Chinese and Communist population. But the violence was too extensive and systematic to have occurred spontaneously. Since Indonesia comprises three thousand separate islands stretching for three thousand miles across the equator, the siege, accomplished so thoroughly throughout the country, was more apt to have been carefully orchestrated. In early 1969 army and local civic guards in Central Java "were said to have killed some 3,500 alleged followers of the PKI [Indonesian Communist Party] by means of blows of

iron staves in the neck" ("Indonesian Communism Since the 1965 Coup," *Pacific Affairs*, Spring, 1970). In 1974 there were mass arrests of those participating in political demonstrations during Prime Minister Tanaka of Japan's Indonesian visit. Even now the real threat of arrest and the impossibility of appeal stifle political debate and preclude the exercise of basic freedoms. People are still being arrested for membership in organizations or for activities that were "legal" prior to the countercoup.

As head of the Command for the Restoration of Security and Order (KOPKAMTIB), General Suharto supervises the apparatus of repression. He banned all political parties except the official one, "Sekber Golkar." Military commanders who are unaccountable to any civilian body control political life. They censor and ban newspapers and arrest people on "indication of direct or indirect involvement in the "coup" or for current antigovernment activity. Arrests are usually initiated by military personnel and the ensuing process of interrogation, classification, and detention of prisoners is controlled by intelligence officers of military units. The judiciary has a role only in the rare cases when a political prisoner is actually brought to trial. According to a military spokesman, only eight hundred political prisoners detained since the coup have been tried. At the present rate it will take ten years to complete the pending trials.

With the military countercoup a new word entered the Indonesian language, *tapol*, an amalgam of *tahanan politik*, political prisoner. The government has made contradictory estimates about the number of *tapols*. In 1974 the military tried to mask the problem of political prisoners and to avoid international criticism by completely banning the word *tapol*. In April, 1975, Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik told the Council of Europe that "from a total of 60,000 [seized since 1966] there are now only about 20,000 left." But six months later, in October, 1975, Lieutenant General Ali Murtopo, speaking at the Asia Society in New York, suggested there were about 35,000 prisoners. Other press reports claim 50-55,000. Witnesses at the present hearings in Washington estimated a total of 100,000 political prisoners. Those testifying at Congressional hearings express divergent views. But Carmel Budiardjo, the Reverend Larold Schulz, Executive Director of the United Church of Christ's Center for Action, and Robert Anderson of Cornell University attested to the horrifying conditions of political prisoners and asked for Congressional investigation of the situation in Indonesia. Mrs. Budiardjo, an English economist, presented a well-documented account of the plight of Indonesia's political prisoners based on her own experience in jail, on research done by Tapol (the British Campaign for the Release of Indonesian Political Prisoners), and on information provided by other prisoners. Hers was a chilling description of the abruptness with which people are whisked away to face gruesome interrogations and indefinite terms of imprisonment without recourse to even minimal forms of justice.

An active member of the left-wing organization of

university graduates, Himpunam Sardjana Indonesia, Mrs. Budiardjo was summarily dismissed in 1968 from her post in the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, where she had worked for thirteen years under D.K. Aidit (former head of the PKI) and Foreign Minister Subandrio. Jailed in Djakarta until 1971, Mrs. Budiardjo was finally released because of her reclaimed British citizenship. In an interview she described her own arrest as well as the general features of imprisonment that she had covered in her Congressional testimony:

From the first frightening moments of my detention, when I was taken blindfolded to an interrogation camp, up to the time of my release, when I was formally handed over to an official of the British Embassy in Jakarta and ordered to leave Indonesia immediately and forever, I was never tried, formally charged, or even permitted legal advice.

Mrs. Budiardjo's husband, arrested at the same time, is still being held in Salemba Prison in Djakarta and is not permitted to write or receive letters. This restriction applies to all political prisoners, except those detained in long-term work camps. Mrs. Budiardjo explained: "The most devastating thing about imprisonment is the lack of knowledge prisoners have about their situation. They are not tried and don't know what they're charged with, or whether they're scheduled for release."

Commenting on conditions in prison, about which there has been little information, Mrs. Budiardjo said:

Interrogation camps and prisons were grossly overcrowded. We slept on stone floors with no mats or bedding. Medical facilities were totally absent in the camps, whereas in prison they were rudimentary and erratic. I myself witnessed two deaths. In both cases the prisoners died without medical attention.

Food was at all times and in all places completely inadequate. Our daily food ration amounted to only two plates of rice plus a small dish of watery vegetables and a small piece of soybean curd or occasionally a tiny portion of salted fish. Apart from this we received only drinking water, nothing else, not even soap or clothing. When Red Cross teams or other missions enter the prison to investigate, strenuous efforts are made to give them a completely false picture. Ill persons were removed altogether to ensure that visitors would see only relatively healthy prisoners.

Prisoners are kept in considerable isolation from the rest of the world. There are few facilities for reading. Except for those doing forced labor, the prisoners do nothing. Generally they just sit.

Torture is common, particularly during interrogations. Methods vary from the primitive to the more sophisticated. Some prisoners are severely beaten with anything from a soldier's heavily buckled belt to the long spiked tail of the tropical *pari* fish. Others are burned with cigarettes, dragged behind moving vehicles, confined to narrow, windowless cells, or subjected to electrical torture, often applied to a man's genitals. The raping of women detainees is not un-

common. One frequently used procedure is to strip the woman, abuse her body, and insert instruments in her vagina. One girl described how her hair had been burnt off, then her pubic hair burnt off and insertions made into her vagina, after she had been beaten all over. So deeply had she been affected psychologically by the torture that even when she related her experience years later, she became hysterical, screaming that her head was burning and yelling at her husband whom she mistook for the man who had tortured her.

Other prisoners recount similar ordeals, belying the government's insistence that prisoners are treated humanely. The following letter was written by one of eight hundred political prisoners in East Kalimantan:

We have been beaten, which more than once led to the hospitalization of the victim. Heavy tires have been tied round our necks. We have been stripped naked and our testicles punched. We have been thrown into the sea and pushed into self-dug pits covered at the bottom with glass splinters [Files, Amnesty International, London].

The anonymity of numbers obscures the human reality. Leading intellectuals, journalists, and artists are persecuted and silenced. Their cases are at least known. Thousands suffer in oblivion. Virtually anyone—peasants, trade unionists, youth leaders, housewives, doctors, lawyers, professors, even children—is subject to arrest for dissenting views, real or alleged involvement in the coup, or association with political prisoners. Typical is the case of Subadi, a farmer in Central Java imprisoned for belonging to the PKI, who was badly beaten during the interrogation. In the one censored postcard (of 20 words) he is allowed to



Indonesia, 1966. (Source: Topol)

send each month he always asks for clothes, food, and medicine. Or take the case of Siti Suratih, a forty-eight-year-old nurse and mother of four, who was never involved in politics but was arrested because her husband was a leading Communist. Years after his death in 1968, she remains in jail.

People who were never outspoken or active critics of the government are victimized. Many are trapped by events they did not cause or do not even understand. Sugiyah, for example, was arrested in 1965 at the age of thirteen and detained at the Plantungan women's detention camp in Central Java. She had not been involved in any political activity before September, 1965, when she and her friends joined the Campaign of Confrontation with Malaysia. Recruited by a PKI youth organization in her area, Sugiyah went with others to a training ground near the Halim Air Force Base in Lubang Buaya, the headquarters of the coup leaders. Since anyone there on the night of the coup is regarded as having been "directly involved" in the events, Sugiyah has been severely punished.

Throughout Indonesia there are at least 350 prison camps. A pattern of inexorable illogic characterizes the system whereby thousands are detained. Although a method of classification exists, the prisoners seldom know their category.

*Category "A" Prisoners* are defined as those who were directly involved in the planning or execution of the coup and about whom there is sufficient evidence for a trial. The acquittal rate has been less than 2 per cent. Most sentences range from fifteen years to life. There have been about fifty death sentences. Since there are no announcements, it is not known how many executions actually occur.

*Category "B" Prisoners* are alleged to be former PKI leaders or activists but who cannot be tried because of insufficient evidence. The government claims they cannot be released without endangering national security or the safety of the prisoner. The argument justifying continued detention is that if the prisoners were not Communists before their arrest, they have become "contaminated" in prison.

*Category "C" Prisoners* are thought to be Communist sympathizers but do not fit in categories "A" or "B." Originally they constituted the majority of political prisoners. According to recent government statements there may be 35,000 prisoners in this group. This category applies not only to "opponents" of the government but to thousands of accidental victims. People are still being held because they left their homes during the massacres that swept the country in 1965; because they had associated with known or alleged Communists; because they happened to be in a house where other arrests were made; or because they accompanied arrested relatives to discover where they were being taken.

Repression has become a permanent feature of Indonesian society and permeates all phases of life. The administration justifies its methods by insisting that criticism of its policies is detrimental to economic development. In New York Ali Murtopo explained that it is wrong to judge the Indonesian

political system from the perspective of a Western, industrial society. He argued that the pains of development, an antiquated legal system inherited from the Dutch, and tension throughout Southeast Asia necessitate such measures. Continuous reprisals against families and friends of political prisoners prevent effective resistance. Relatives of *tapols* are ostracized because of the pervasive fear that contact with them may lead to imprisonment. Through long separation members of a family lose track of each other. Many live on the verge of starvation, unable to find jobs. Employers and school administrators demand a "declaration of noninvolvement in the 1965 coup," rarely granted to former *tapols* or their relatives. Larold Schulz, one of those who testified before the Congressional subcommittee, reported: "The thing that was constantly before us was the fear of persons with whom we talked about discussing the problem of political prisoners and the role of the government in their everyday lives."

Security commanders also censor and ban newspapers through their administration of a licensing system. In 1965 all publishers in the immediate vicinity of Djakarta were required to obtain licenses from the Minister of Information. By January, 1974, this was extended to all Indonesia. Since 1974 only one new license was issued, and all existing newspapers are subject to continuing review. Licenses may be revoked arbitrarily at any moment.

Information about prison conditions is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. Many are *tempat tahanan gelap*, illegal places of detention unknown to the outside world and even to the local population. Prisoners who have been released seldom risk their freedom by recounting their experiences. Nevertheless there is some information because of the persistence of several organizations, including Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and Topol. These sources, some press reports, and the testimony of ex-prisoners like Mrs. Budiardjo who have left Indonesia present a grim view of prisons. The government has been generally successful in covering up the real conditions in jails and concentration camps.

The mass relocation of thousands of political prisoners to the remote penal colony of Buru Island is described by officials as an "agricultural resettlement scheme" whereby prisoners are "given the opportunity to become self-sufficient" and prepare for reentrance into society. A number of the country's best writers, artists, doctors, lawyers, mathematicians, advanced students, and skilled workers are held on Buru. The government admits that at least 34 per cent of the prisoners have at a minimum a junior high school education, far above the Indonesian average. Buru is a concentration camp located on an isolated island covered by dense jungle, where prisoners are condemned to arduous labor under the supervision of armed guards. Many of the elderly and weak have died from the grueling work imposed on everyone, regardless of age or state of health. Disease is rife, particularly malaria, tuberculosis, elephantiasis, and beri-beri. The government concedes that 145 inmates have died in the seven years since Buru's creation.

On Buru imprisonment is permanent. Instead of ex-



Exercising in a prison yard in Djakarta. (Source: Topol)

pediting trials and releases of those who cannot be formally charged, the government chooses to keep prisoners there indefinitely. Official promises of a return to society after "rehabilitation" prove illusory. To present a positive image officials allow families of prisoners to join them on Buru to participate in what they call "social integration."

A human rights lawyer, Yap Thiam Hien, the only Asian member of the International Commission of Jurists, testified in August, 1975, that "the *tapols* are treated like the dregs of society. They live a sterile life devoid of all hope and full of anxieties....Such a life leads them to break under the strain. Some have become insane, others have committed suicide, some have tried to rebel against their predicament with horrifying consequences."

Following the coup and countercoup of 1965, a *New York Times* survey of CIA activities in Southeast Asia reported that the CIA was "said to have been so successful at infiltrating to the top of the Indonesian government and Army that the United States was reluctant to disrupt CIA covering operations by withdrawing aid and information programs in 1964 and 1965." Endorsing covert operations, James Reston wrote in the *New York Times* on June 19, 1966:

There was a great deal more contact between the anti-communist forces in that country and at least one very high official in Washington before and during the Indonesian Massacre than is generally realized. General Suharto's forces have been getting aid from here through various third world countries, and it is doubtful if the coup would ever have been attempted without the American show of strength in Vietnam or been sustained without the clandestine aid it has received directly from here.

The U.S. accepted the new government and its activities without criticism. No member of Congress denounced the reign of terror. Instead, the official reaction to the bloodshed was almost one of relief. Max Frankel reported in the *New York Times* on March 12, 1966: After the army had completely asserted its control and repelled Sukarno's attempted comeback "the Johnson administration found it difficult...to hide its delight with the news from Indonesia...and the political demise of President Sukarno and the communists. After a long period of patient diplomacy designed to help the army triumph over the communists, officials were elated to find their expectations realized."

After the murders during the first bloody months of the new government little notice was given to the widespread arrests of political dissidents or to the concentration camps established in subsequent years. In fact, U.S. officials lauded the existing system. In November, 1967, then Vice President Humphrey commended acting President Suharto's leadership, saying: "We are impressed with your personal honesty and determination and courage. This remark came less than three weeks after the *New York Times* had reported that Dyak tribesmen, with the support of the Indonesian army, "brought ruin to the Chinese population over a wide area...with massive beheadings, cannibalism, and plunder." Any private apprehension concerning the massacres and repression were evidently forgotten by May, 1968, when Senator Dick Clark of Iowa told Congress that "every dollar spent in Indonesia is worth \$100 spent in South Vietnam" to defeat communism and promote stability.

United States support of the regime, which paved the way for substantial financial assistance, military aid, and American investment in the country, has not gone unrewarded. In 1974 alone the interest paid to American banks on short-term, high-interest loans by the state-owned oil company, Pertamina—which has since collapsed—was roughly double the value of direct American assistance. Low-cost labor, growing markets for U.S. goods, and valuable natural resources promise even greater returns for the American investment dollar. The U.S. financial stake in Indonesia is substantial. From 1967-73 the Indonesian Government approved nearly \$500 million of American investments. Total

U.S. interests are estimated at \$2 billion.

To secure support and investments Indonesian officials realize they must begin to pay attention to worldwide concern for human rights. Mrs. Budiardjo believes that the present plan for releasing 35,000 *tapols*, at the rate of 2,500 per year (as announced by the Indonesian Government shortly before its delegation's visit to Washington), was a concession to public opinion. She considers this a paltry gesture: "To announce a program that will take fourteen years before people already held for ten years without trial are released is an insult to the integrity of human rights advocates everywhere and a blow to *tapols*." Indeed, the commitment to expanding civil rights seems weak. Recently, General Maraden Panggebean warned that Indonesia would step up operations against underground "Communists" because of Communist victories in Indochina. Officials admit they will "increase their vigilance, particularly in dealing with the remnant of the PKI."

The Indonesian Government has been able to impose its repressive policies with little fear of criticism or outrage from the international community. What distinguishes Indonesia's political prisoners from those in other countries is the absence of concerted efforts on their behalf, efforts of the kind that are regularly made on behalf of victims in the USSR, Spain, Chile, or formerly in Greece. The United Nations maintains an adamant silence. When contacted about the matter, official U.N. spokesmen have replied that the state of affairs in Indonesia is not grave enough to warrant censure. Despite appeals, no investigatory mission has yet been sent to Indonesia. There has been no debate on the situation, and not one resolution has been introduced to condemn it. In the United States the media has shown interest only when the most blatant violence occurs. As Mrs. Budiardjo observes: "Little is heard in the world today about Indonesia's tens of thousands of political prisoners. This may be because Indonesia, despite its 120 million population and enormous size, is so little known in the West or because no meaningful resistance has yet risen to challenge the Suharto regime. They have been neglected by world opinion at a time when there is a growing concern about the infringements of civil liberties and the widespread use of torture."