



Time for truth of bloody rule

FOR many Indonesians, the New Order did not end when its elderly founder, President Suharto, resigned in May 1998, after 32 years of repressive rule.

Amid rioting, looting and political and economic chaos, Suharto left the palace and moved to the family compound. Although frail and reclusive, he remained intimidating, hovering over Indonesian politics like a spectre.

The Indonesian enthusiasm for conspiracy theories imagined him as a scheming "dalang", or shadow puppeteer, still secretly manipulating national politics.

With his death yesterday, aged 86, Suharto leaves a mixed legacy. Over decades of authoritarian dictatorship backed by violent armed intervention, he achieved massive economic development and delivered basic social services across the archipelago — especially health and education — and improved living standards for most Indonesians.

But it all came at a high cost. In addition to human rights abuses and the loss of basic rights and freedoms, his inner circle became obscenely rich, with his spoiled-brat children granted vast state monopolies to fund their indulgent lifestyles.

His youngest son, Tommy, became little better than a gangster.

But Suharto was no fool — his successor, President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, often referred to him as "Super Genius" — and his ministers spoke of his extraordinary capacity to absorb a vast array of facts and then act decisively, and ruthlessly.

So it was that he learned to run smuggling and corruption rackets as a young officer during the Indonesian revolutionary war against the Dutch.

But then he treated Indonesia like the regiment writ large, turning the world's fourth-largest nation into a vast personalised corruption franchise.

It all fell apart in 1997.

The Indonesian economy, weighed down by sleaze, fraud and blatant public graft collapsed, as the Asian



economic crisis revealed that more than 80 per cent of banks and companies were insolvent.

Suharto was never held legally responsible for the looting of Indonesia or its long-lasting financial collapse. This was not for want of trying. Criminal charges were laid against him, but he used poor health to be excused from trial.

Civil claims were then brought to recover his allegedly corruptly obtained millions as well, but it seems his death leaves most of the money permanently out of reach.

More significantly, however, Suharto will never have to answer for his role in Indonesia's own home-grown genocide of the mid-1960s, when between 500,000 to perhaps one million alleged Communists were killed and another million detained.

It is one of the ironies of Indonesian life, however, that no one seems to know anyone who did the killing or who ran the prisons or detention camps.

In part, this was because the very legitimacy of the New Order was based on the official story of an attempt by Communists to violently seize government in September 1965.

This, it was said, forced a military response to protect the republic, led by General Suharto (who soon afterwards seized government himself).

The result was a long period when to publicly question this version of events was itself subversive.

But this public secret — the greatest mass slaughter in modern South-East Asian history apart from the Khmer Rouge killing fields — must be faced up to publicly, if Indonesia is to move forward.

This will not be easy.

Investigating the killings properly would involve a whole host of unresolved, complex and explosive questions, such as whether the Left can ever have a role in Indonesian

public life again, or what the consequences should be for Islamic groups who were involved in the massacres as army proxies.

And it would reopen the shocking human rights record of the army.

It could also throw into question the legitimacy of Suharto's political heirs, including his Golkar organisation, the largest political party in Indonesia.

The killings must be dealt with openly if Indonesians are to consolidate their new rights-based democracy. This is why Indonesian human rights activists have long argued for a peace and reconciliation process along the South African model.

This could never happen while Suharto remained alive.

If the victims of the violence and their families can win the support of human rights activists, the media and the few genuine reformers in government and the legislature, then maybe Jakarta can be persuaded to properly investigate these atrocities and all the other "off-limits" bloodbaths of the New Order.

These were numerous. The best-known included the "Petrus" murders of suspected gangsters by security forces, the Tanjung Priok massacre of Muslim protesters, the military-backed raid on opposition party PDI headquarters that led to hundreds of deaths and, of course, the Semanggi shootings of students in the final months of the New Order.

Suharto was responsible for all of these events: some indirectly, some directly — such as Petrus, as he boasted in his autobiography.

If the truth of these bloody events can be established, then perhaps the real history of the New Order can be finally written.

Suharto's final escape from justice would then allow tens of millions of his people to claim it for themselves, at last.

How he would hate that.

— with Julia Suryakusuma

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