

Covert support of violence will return to haunt us

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Unless we hold our government to account for murderous foreign policy, the innocent will continue to pay the price

As bloodshed mounts each day in Iraq, what prospect is there that British ministers will be held accountable for the illegal invasion and occupation that triggered this carnage? If past precedents are anything to go by, not much. But the likelihood is that, as in London earlier this summer, it will be we who pay the price for that failure to hold our leaders to account.

This week is the 40th anniversary of one of the postwar world's worst bloodbaths, which took place in Indonesia. Yet British ministers and officials in the then Labour government have never been held accountable for the covert role they played, along with the US, in supporting this slaughter - and the 30-year dictatorship of General Suharto it brought to power. The long-term blowback from that support was felt only last weekend in the bomb attacks on the Indonesian island of Bali, carried out by militant Islamist groups nurtured for years by Suharto and the Indonesian military.

In early October 1965, a group of army officers in Indonesia led by Suharto took advantage of political instability to launch a terror campaign against the powerful Indonesian Communist party (PKI). Much of the killing was carried out by Islamist-led mobs promoted by the military to counter communist and democratic forces. Within a few months, nearly a million people lay dead, while Suharto removed President Ahmed Sukarno and emerged as ruler of a brutal regime that lasted until 1998.

"I have never concealed from you my belief that a little shooting in Indonesia would be an essential preliminary to effective change," Sir Andrew Gilchrist, the British ambassador in Jakarta, informed the Foreign Office on October 5 1965. The declassified files show that Britain wanted the Indonesian army to act and encouraged it to do so.

British policy was "to encourage the emergence of a general's regime", one intelligence official explained. Another noted that "it seems pretty clear that the generals are going to need all the help they can get and accept without being tagged as hopelessly pro-western, if they are going to be able to gain ascendancy over the communists". Therefore, "we can hardly go wrong by tacitly backing the generals".

The Wilson government described the campaign as a "reign of terror", while information landed on its desks about hundreds of thousands of deaths. Yet propaganda operations were authorised from the MI6 base in Singapore, which planted fabricated stories about arms shipments from China in the international media. The purpose, one intelligence officer wrote, was to "blacken the PKI in the eyes of the army and the people of Indonesia". "The impact has been considerable," one official noted. Denis Healey, defence secretary at the

time, makes no mention of this British role in his 660-page memoirs.

At the time, Britain had thousands of troops in Borneo, bolstering Malaya against Indonesian claims to the territory. British officials passed covert messages to the Indonesian generals saying that they would not attack them in Borneo and “distract” them from their “necessary task” at home. It was the need to end the “confrontation” with Indonesia that motivated planners to support the slaughter and change of regime. But the foreign secretary Michael Stewart wrote that it was also the “great potential opportunities to British exporters” that were on offer from a new regime, so Britain should “try to secure a slice of the cake”.

The year 1965 also marked an escalation in Vietnam – the US launched the Rolling Thunder campaign, the bombing of North Vietnam became routine policy and the number of US combat troops was doubled. But which British ministers have been held to account for their role in supporting one of the most devastating assaults on a civilian population in history? Myth has it that the Wilson government was a critic of US policy, but the declassified files reveal it secretly supported every stage of the US escalation.

When the US attacked North Vietnam, Stewart informed his embassy in Washington of the “military necessity of the action” and told Wilson that “I was particularly anxious not to say anything in public that might appear critical of the US government”. Britain’s ambassador in Saigon welcomed the bombing as “a logical and inherently justifiable retort to North Vietnamese aggression” and said it provided a “tonic effect” in the south of the country. As about 100 daily sorties were flown by 500 aircraft carrying 3,000 to 5,000 bomb loads, British officials were well aware that 80% of the victims were civilians, the files show. Yet no opposition was expressed.

British ministers were complicit in the deaths of millions of people in Vietnam and Indonesia 40 years ago, as they are now with perhaps more than 100,000 in Iraq. In Iraq and Indonesia, these policies have rebounded on us, in the form of anti-western terrorism. Until secretive and unaccountable policy-making is democratised, disastrous foreign policies will continue to be conducted in our name, and our leaders will continue to get away with murder.

- [Mark Curtis](#) is the author of *Unpeople: Britain’s Secret Human Rights Abuses*

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