

Enabling the Indonesian Military

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This is a tale about politics, influence, money and murder. It began more than 40 years ago with a bloodletting so massive that no one quite knows how many people died. Half a million? A million? Through four decades, the story of the relationship between the United States and the Indonesian military has left a trail of misery and terror. Last month it claimed four peasants, one of them a 27-year-old mother. Unless Congress puts the brakes on the Bush administration's plans to increase aid and training for the Indonesian army, there will be innumerable victims in the future as well.

Speaking alongside Indonesia's defense minister in Singapore last month, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the White House intends "to deepen the strategic partnership" between the two countries.

Given what that partnership has led to over the past four decades, it a profoundly disturbing statement.

The Back-Story

The Washington-Jakarta narrative begins in 1965 when the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) — the Indonesian Army — massacred as many as a million Indonesian leftists in a bloodletting in which the United States was a partner. According to the U.S. National Security Archives, the United States not only encouraged the annihilation of Indonesia's left, it actually fingered individuals for the military death squads.

When Suharto, the dictator who took over after the 1965 massacres, decided to invade the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975, the Ford administration gave him a green light. Out of a population of 600,000 to 700,000, the invasion killed between 83,000 and 182,000, according to the Commission of Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation. "As a permanent member of the Security Council and superpower," the Commission found, "the U.S. consented to the invasion and allowed Indonesia to use its military equipment in the knowledge that this violated U.S. law and would be used to suppress the right of self-determination."

The United States was not alone in abetting the invasion. Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam "encouraged" the invasion, according to the Jakarta Post. Japan, Indonesia's leading source of aid and trade, stayed on the sidelines. France and Britain increased trade and aid in the invasion's aftermath, and in an effort to protect Indonesia's Catholics, the Vatican remained silent. Later, when the Suharto dictatorship short-circuited a 1969 UN plebiscite on the future of West Papua, neither the United States nor its allies raised a protest.

A Dismal Record

Through six U.S. presidents — Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Bush, and Clinton — the TNI had carte blanche to brutally suppress autonomy movements and murder human rights activists in Aceh, Papua, and East Timor. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the Justice Department, and the State Department, the TNI also engaged in violence and oppression against women, threats to civil liberties, child exploitation, religious persecution, and judicial and prison abuse.

After more than 30 years of either encouraging or turning a blind eye to the savagery of the TNI, the Clinton administration and the UN finally intervened to stop the rampage unleashed on the Timorese when they had the effrontery to vote for independence in 1999. However, before the force of mostly Australian troops could land, TNI- sponsored and led militias killed some 1,500 people, destroyed 70% of East Timor's infrastructure, and deported 250,000 Timorese to Indonesian West Timor.

Indonesia has refused to hand over any of the TNI officers currently charged for crimes against humanity for leading the 1999 pogrom or taking part in the brutal suppression of East Timor from 1975 to 1999. Indeed, many have been reassigned to places like West Papua, where Indonesia is attempting to crush a low-level independence insurgency. Col. Burhanuddin Siagian, indicted for crimes against humanity for his actions in East Timor, was recently appointed a sub- regional military commander in Papua.

"It is shocking that a government supposedly committed to military reform and fighting impunity would appoint an indicted officer to a sensitive senior post in Papua," Paula Makabory, spokesperson for the Institute for Human Rights Study & Advocacy-West Papua told the Australian Broadcasting Company. A coalition of human rights organizations is demanding that Indonesian President Susilo Yudhoyono withdraw the appointment and suspend Siagian from duty.

Friends in High Places

Starting in 2001, Indonesia began a multi-million dollar lobbying campaign — abetted by the White House — to lift the ban on military aid to Indonesia. A leading force in that campaign is Paul Wolfowitz, disgraced former head of the World Bank and ambassador to Indonesia from 1986 to 1989.

The lobbying worked, and sanctions were gradually relaxed. Military aid more than doubled from 2001 to 2004. In 2005, saying that "a reformed and effective Indonesian military is in the interest of everyone in the region," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice lifted the last restrictions on military aid. Part of the "reforms" Rice referred to require the TNI to divest itself of its vast economic network, which accounts for 70-75% of the military's funding. The TNI runs corporations, mining operations, and cooperatives.

Although a 2004 law indeed requires the TNI to divest itself of its holdings by 2009, a loophole allows the military to keep "foundations" and "cooperatives." According to Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono, 1494 out of the TNI's 1500 businesses are "foundations' or "cooperatives."

"The core problem with addressing impunity [of TNI commanders] is that the civilian government has no control over the military while they do not control

their finances,” Human Rights Watch researcher Charmain Mohamed told Radio Australia, “and on this key issue Yudhoyono has clearly failed.”

Resistance

While the military continues to resist efforts to reform, anger at the TNI’s penchant for violence is growing. In late May, Indonesian Marines opened fire on East Java demonstrators, killing four people and wounding several others, including a four-year-old child whose mother was among the dead. The protestors claimed that the TNI was illegally seizing land.

The shootings have angered some important political figures. Djoko Susilo, who sits on the powerful Defense Committee, accused the military of using “weapons, bought with money from the state budget to kill their own brothers,” and the important Islamic Crescent Star Party denounced the killings. Abdurrahman Wahid, a former president and the leader of the National Awakening Party, says his organization intends to file civil suits against the Navy. The Missing Person and Victims of Violence organization is petitioning the government to move the case from military to civilian courts.

The TNI’s track record has also angered some in the U.S. Congress. Representatives Nita Lowey (D-NY) and Chris Smith (R-NJ) are currently leading a campaign to cut the Bush administration’s proposed aid package because of Jakarta’s failure to prosecute human rights violations. But the Bush administration has been lining up allies to contain China. And there is more than 40 years of U.S. cooperation or acquiescence to the brutality of the Indonesian military. Such a blood relationship is hard to sever.

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