

Lessons from Indonesia should not be Forgotten

Fifty years ago, on 1 October 1965, General Suharto seized power in Indonesia, put President Sukarno under house arrest and massacred a million workers, peasants, youth and members of Indonesian Communist party (PKI), its trade unions and rural organisations. He crushed the rising movement of the people of Indonesia and established a brutal military dictatorship.

This military coup was designed and orchestrated by the notorious Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of US imperialism and Australian intelligence service under the supervision of Marshall Green, the then US ambassador to Indonesia. He personally handed over the names of thousands of PKI members from CIA's files.

The military coup in Indonesia was the outcome of the drive by US imperialism to gain upper hand in South East Asia, vis-à-vis China and to have an unchallenged control on the immense natural resources of Indonesia. It was one of the great imperialist crimes of 20th century – attack with hydrogen bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, saturation or carpet bombing of Vietnam, division of Korea, assassination of Patrice Lumumba and so on.

Following the defeat of French in Vietnam in 1954, US imperialism feared that the struggle of Vietnamese people could ignite revolutionary upsurges throughout South East Asian region and stepped into the shoes of French colonialists. It boosted the military aid to Indonesia to train and arm the pro-US officers. Col. Zulkifli, at the instigation of CIA made a failed attempt to topple the government of Sukarno in 1957. This was followed by secessionist revolts in oil rich Sumatra and Sulawesi in 1958. As the US military involvement in Vietnam escalated, the US imperialism wanted to remove Sukarno. It was able to do so in 1965.

How could it be possible? How the PKI, the largest communist party in Asia except China, was drowned in blood? How the mass upsurges were crushed by the US imperialism and its stooges? To have answers, one must know the historical background.

Centuries of Colonial Plunder

The archipelago of 3,000 islands, Indonesia is estimated to be the fifth richest country in the world in terms of natural resources. Besides being fifth largest producer of oil. It has enormous reserves of tin, bauxite, coal, gold, silver, diamonds, manganese, phosphates, nickel, copper along with the rich crops that produce rubber, coffee, palm oil, tobacco, sugar, coconuts, spices, timber and cinchona.

The Dutch colonial power plundered Indonesia for 350 years, looting its natural resources, establishing vast agricultural estates and ruthlessly exploiting the people. The British colonial power challenged the Dutch domination over the region. In 1800, the Dutch East India Company collapsed and British occupied the region from 1811 to 1816. The Treaty of London of 1824 divided the region between the two colonial powers: the British took control of the Malayan peninsula and the Dutch kept charge of 13,000 islands in Indonesian archipelago.

By the turn of 20th century, the emerging imperialist power, the US, challenged the old colonial powers, particularly after the US occupation of Philippines in 1898. The US imperialism waged a trade war over oil and rubber on Dutch monopoly. The Standard Oil Company contested the monopoly of Royal Dutch Company on oil fields. In 1907 Royal Dutch and Shell merged to face the US competitor. Using the First World War as a leverage, Standard Oil started drilling in Java in 1914 and Goodyear Tyre and Rubber of US opened rubber plantations. The US Rubber company bought Indonesian rubber plantation that was largest in the world.

The rise of Japanese imperialism and its expansion into South East Asia led to conflict with US imperialism and Indonesia became the focus of this contention. In 1942 the Dutch colonialists surrendered the control of Indonesia to the Japanese imperialism fearing the struggles of Indonesian people for national liberation.

Transfer of Power

At the end of the Second World War, there was an upsurge in the national liberation movement in the colonies and semi-colonies to overthrow the yoke of imperialism. As a part of this, the Indonesian masses raised in tides of struggles against imperialism. These struggles led to the declaration of an independent Republic of Indonesia by Sukarno on August 17, 1945. He was the leader of the Indonesian nationalist Party (PNI) since 1927. He had suffered imprisonment and exile at the hands of Dutch. The PNI was the representative of Indonesian national bourgeoisie. Sukarno was not a communist; he was anti-imperialist. As was happened in many colonies, there was only transfer of power to the native big bourgeoisie, while the imperialists continue to exploit under the new dispensation. This is the method adopted by the imperialist powers to continue their hegemony over the former colonies and in the changed circumstances of high level anti-imperialist consciousness among the masses of people. It is called neocolonialism.

Same is the case with Indonesia. The national bourgeoisie made compromises so as the Dutch and US imperialists continue to exploit the natural resources and the peoples' labour in Indonesia. After the failure of the 1957 coup and regional rebellions, the US adopted a different strategy. With the help of philanthropic foundations like Ford and Rockefeller and institutions like the World Bank, the US restored its relationship with the Indonesian army and the country's right by providing material assistance and training to Army officers and pro-Western intellectuals. But the US government's ability to influence Indonesian state policy ultimately depended on President Sukarno. Sukarno, the historical leader of the Indonesian independence movement, was very popular and essentially ruled by decree. He was not a communist, but he was a fervent anti-colonialist who dreamed of a powerful, fully independent Indonesia that would play an important role on the world stage.

Sukarno increasingly clashed with Western powers — especially the UK and US, whom he denounced as neocolonialist. In early 1965, Indonesia withdrew from the United Nations and expelled the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

As a result, Western officials were pessimistic about their ability to manipulate the political landscape in Indonesia. In early 1965, the Dutch ambassador to Indonesia, E. L. C. Schiff, said in a wire to the minister of foreign affairs that the consensus among his colleagues was that Sukarno would remain the country's leader until his death and that "it is no longer possible to keep Indonesia from slipping into the left."

The US had also decided by then that Sukarno could not be pressured to abandon the PKI, and in August 1964 decided to overthrow Sukarno. This decision was in accord with the covert plans of British officials to foment civil war or the collapse of Sukarno's government.

The Strange "Attempted Communist Coup"

Since the events of September-October 1965, every person who was a member of the Cabinet on the night of September 30 has been accused of participating in the coup; three were sentenced to death and all arrested. Foreign Minister Subandrio is probably dead. Former President Sukarno himself has been placed under house arrest. These facts in and of themselves invalidate the "Communist coup" story, since a government can hardly be accused of plotting its own overthrow.

The Indonesian military ever since independence has been composed of contradictory elements. Untung, Dhani and others like them were strongly nationalist and anti-imperialist. But there were many other officers who owed their existence to a feudal origin and collaboration with the foreign exploiters. General Haris Nasution, one of the Army chiefs who helped crush the September 30th Move, has a long history of open treason against the Republic. In 1952, he attempted a coup d'état but failed. This did not prevent him from becoming Army Chief of Staff in the years that followed and by the late 1950s he had created his own political party.

Nasution, Suharto and other officers, many of whom had been trained in the U.S., formed a secret "Council of Generals." The Council of Generals is an organization of the right-wing military clique within the Indonesian Army, which was founded to seize power from the hands of the legal Indonesian government. The founding of this Council of Generals was directly supported and planned together with the U.S. intelligence service, the CIA. Its members consist of 40 right-wing generals, among whom the important figures are General Nasution, General A. Sukendro, and General Suharto.

On September 21, 1965, they met in Djakarta with the entire armed forces chiefs of staff. At this secret meeting, which was tape-recorded by men of Foreign Minister Subandrio, a plan was drawn up to overthrow the government on October 5, Armed Forces Day, when all the crack regiments under their command would be assembled in the capital.

When Sukarno learned of this plot, he called in Untung, the Chief of the Presidential Guard. The September 30th Move was hastily formed to preempt the move by the Council of Generals. It was hoped that by destroying the leaders of the Council, the coup would be thwarted. No one denies the fact that individual members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) did participate in the September 30th Move, which was not a coup attempt but an effort to block the right-wing generals. The right-wing generals who were killed on October 1, 1965 were: General A. Yani, General Suparman, General M.T. Harjono, General Suprpto, General Sutojo and General Pandjaitan. Yet the September 30th move by General Untung was quickly crushed by the council of generals.

The failure of Untung's move gave the generals an excuse to openly begin a massive hunt of communists, and they found the people and their organizations confused and unsure about what was happening. Having crushed the September 30th Move, the Council of Generals went on to implement their coup plan, setting up a new government controlled by the military and physically wiping out the opposition.

The Massacre:

The killings of (suspected) PKI members and supporters didn't start until weeks after the September 30 coup attempt: massacres took place in Central Java in late October, then East Java in November, followed by Bali in December. In each instance the arrival of the Special Forces, commanded by Major Gen. SarwoEdhie, preceded the killings.

Many victims were first arrested by militia groups supported by Edhie's Special Forces. Prisoners were put into makeshift prison camps in remote locations and were often slain in groups, often by getting shot, stabbed, or having their skulls crushed with rocks and clubs. Much of the killing was done by young militia members of groups like Ansor, the youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, the country's largest Muslim organization.

Over four years later [in 1970], several hundred thousand political prisoners still rot in jail. There have been repeated purges of the armed forces and the civil service. The fascist military regime is debating whether or not to carry out mass executions, claiming it no longer can afford to feed the mass of prisoners.

Indonesia is made up of 3,000 separate islands, strung out for 3,000 miles along the equator. Yet the massacres were coordinated, and, almost evenly spread across all the greater islands of the archipelago.

It was Nasution and Suharto's army that systematically went from village to village, rooted out the peasant leaders, the communists and nationalists, the workers who had led seizures of Dutch and American property or feudal plantations. They hauled before the firing squad thousands of teachers, infected with ideas of "liberation." They didn't bother with trials, lawyers or laws themselves. It was the ultimate pacification program that U.S. experts in Viet Nam had dreamed of and this time it worked.

Estimates of the dead in Sumatra also range around 200,000, and a similar figure for Java is generally regarded as on the low side. When the death tolls for other islands such as Borneo and Sulawesi are added, the total may well be upwards of 600,000. Just how many of these are Communists is another question.

It appears certain that the great majority of the dead were innocent victims of political hysteria....In some areas, Communist suspects were shot or poisoned, but usually the Moslem youth beheaded its victims with the parang. . . . The heads were often impaled on fences and gateposts . . . Rivers in many parts of the country were clogged with corpses for weeks.

The P.K.I.

The Indies Social Democratic Association was formed in 1914. It transformed into PKI in 1924 in the light of Great October Revolution in Russia. It waged many a struggle against Dutch imperialism. The Indonesian workers and peasants led by the PKI came forward in upsurges in Java and Sumatra

in 1926 and 1927 by taking into control the Dutch plantations and estates. The Dutch colonial rulers suppressed the revolts. They arrested 13,000 suspected of revolt, imprisoned 4500 and interned 1308 in concentration camps in West Papua. The PKI was banned.

At the time of the coup, the PKI was the largest party except China and USSR. It had 3.5 million members; its youth movement had another 3 million; its trade union, SOBSI, had 3.5 million members and the peasant organization, BTI, had 9 million members. Together with women's, writers and artists organisations, the PKI had more than 20 million members and active supporters.

The high reputation of the PKI enjoyed in the eyes of Indonesian people had been earned through its heroic fighting on imperialism during the time of Dutch colonial rule and of the fascist Japanese occupation. Nevertheless, this high reputation of the PKI had failed to establish the PKI leadership in the democratic revolution in August 1945.

The self-criticism of the Political Bureau of the PKI noted the reasons for this failure:

The P.K.I. did not consistently lead the armed struggle against Dutch imperialism, did not develop guerrilla warfare that was inte-grated with the democratic move-ment of the peasants, thus winning their full support, as the only way to defeat the war of aggression launched by the Dutch imperialists. On the contrary, the P.K.I. even approved of and itself followed the policy of reactionary compromises of Sjahrir's Right-wing socialists. The P.K.I. did not establish the alliance of the working class and the peasantry by leading the anti-feudal struggle in the countryside, and did not establish, on the basis of such a worker-peasant alliance, a united front with all other democratic forces. The P.K.I. did not consolidate its strength, on the contrary, it even relegated to the background its own role. These are the reasons why the August Revolution of 1945 did not proceed as it should, did not achieve the decisive victory, and finally failed in reaching its objective goal.

The self-criticism noted that: modern revisionism began to penetrate into our Party when the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Fifth Congress uncritically approved a report which supported the lines of the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U., and adopted the line of "*achieving socialism peacefully through parliamentary means*" as the line of the P.K.I. This "*peaceful road*", one of the characteristics of modern revisionism, was further reaffirmed in the Sixth National Congress of the P.K.I. which approved the following passage in the Party Constitution: "*There is a possibility that a people's demo-cratic system as a transitional stage to socialism in Indonesia can be achieved by peaceful means, in parliamentary way. The P.K.I. persistently strives to transform this possibility into a reality.*" This revisionist line was further em-phasized in the Seventh National Congress of the P.K.I. and was never corrected, not even when our Party was already aware that since the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U., the leadership of the C.P.S.U. had been following the road of modern revisionism.

The self-criticism says that the mistakes of Right opportunism in the political field which are now under discussion include three problems:

1. the road to people's democracy in Indonesia,
2. the question of state power, and
3. the implementation of the policy of the national united front.

The experience during the last fifteen years has taught that starting from not explicitly denying the "peaceful road" and not firmly holding to the general law of revolution in colonial or semi-colonial and semi-feudal countries, the P.K.I. gradually got bogged down in parliamentary and other forms of legal struggle. The Party leadership even considered this to be the main form of struggle to achieve the strategic aim of the Indonesian revolution. The legality of the Party was not considered as one method of struggle at a given time and under certain conditions, but was rather regarded as a principle, while other forms of struggle should serve this principle. Even when counter-revolution not only has trampled underfoot the legality of the Party, but has violated the basic human rights of the Communists as well, the Party leadership still tried to defend this "legality" with all their might.

In order to prove that the road followed was not the opportunist "peaceful road", the Party leadership always spoke of the two possibilities, the possibility of a "peaceful road" and the possibility of a non-peaceful road. They held that the better the Party prepared itself to face the possibility of a non-peaceful road, the greater would be the possibility of a "peaceful road". By doing so the Party leadership

cultivated in the minds of Party members, the working class and the masses of the working people the hope for a peaceful road which in reality did not exist.

In practice, the Party leadership did not prepare the whole ranks of the Party, the working class and the masses of the people to face the possibility of a non-peaceful road. The most striking proof of it was the grave tragedy which happened after the outbreak and the failure of the September 30th Movement. Within a very short space of time, the counter-revolution succeeded in massacring and arresting hundreds of thousands of Communists and non-communist revolutionaries who found themselves in a passive position, paralysing the organization of the P.K.I. and the revolutionary mass organizations. Such a situation surely would never happen if the Party leadership did not deviate from the revolutionary road.

The line of Right opportunism followed by the Party leadership was also reflected in their attitude with regard to the state, in particular to the state of the Republic. The state power of the Republic, viewed as contradiction, is a contradiction between two opposing aspects. This first aspect is the aspect which represents the interests of the people (manifested by the progressive stands and policies of President Sukarno that are supported by the P.K.I. and other groups of the people). The second aspect is the aspect that represents the enemies of the people (manifested by the stands and policies of the Right-wing forces and die-hards). The people's aspect has now become the main aspect and takes the leading role in the state power of the Republic.

The self-criticism says that the Party leadership who wallowed in the mire of opportunism claimed that the "people's aspect" had become the main aspect and taken the hegemony in the state power of the Republic. It was as if the Indonesian people were nearing the birth of a people's power. And since they considered that the forces of the national bourgeoisie in the state power really constituted the "people's aspect", the Party leadership had done everything to defend and develop this "people's aspect". The Party leadership had altogether merged themselves in the interests of the national bourgeoisie.

By considering the national bourgeoisie the "people's aspect" in the state power of the Republic, and President Sukarno the leader of this aspect, the Party leadership erroneously recognized that the national bourgeoisie was able to lead the new-type democratic revolution. This is contrary to historical necessity and historical facts.

The 5th National Congress of the Party in the main had solved theoretically the problem of the national united front. It formulated that the worker-peasant alliance was the basis of the national united front. With regard to the national bourgeoisie a lesson had been drawn on the basis of the experience during the August Revolution that this class had a wavering character. In a certain situation, the national bourgeoisie took part in the revolution and sided with the revolution, while in another situation they followed in the steps of the comprador-bourgeoisie to attack the driving forces of the revolution and betrayed the revolution (as shown by their activities during the Madiun Provocation and their approval of the Round Table Conference Agreement). Based on this wavering character of the national bourgeoisie, the Party formulated the stand that must be taken by the P.K.I., namely, to make continuous efforts to win the national bourgeoisie over to the side of revolution, while guarding against the possibility of its betraying the revolution. The P.K.I. must follow the policy of unity and struggle towards the national bourgeoisie, the self-criticism says.

Nevertheless, since the ideological weakness of subjectivism in the Party, particularly among the Party leadership, had not yet been eradicated, the Party was dragged into more and more serious mistakes, to such an extent that the Party lost its independence in the united front with the national bourgeoisie. This mistake had led to the situation in which the Party and the proletariat were placed as the appendage of the national bourgeoisie.

The self-criticism states that a manifestation of this loss of independence in the united front with the national bourgeoisie was the evaluation and the stand of the Party leadership towards Sukarno. The Party leadership did not adopt an independent attitude towards Sukarno. They had always avoided conflicts with Sukarno and, on the contrary, had greatly over-emphasized the similarities and the unity between the Party and Sukarno. The public saw that there was no policy of Sukarno that was not supported by the P.K.I. The Party leadership went so far as to accept without any

struggle the recognition to Sukarno as “the great leader of the revolution” and the leader of the “people’s aspect” in the state power of the Republic. In many articles and speeches, the Party leaders frequently said that the struggle of the P.K.I. was based not only on Marxism-Leninism, but also on “the teachings of Sukarno”.

After summing up the historical experience of the Indonesian revolution, the Statement and the Self-Criticism of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Indonesian Communist Party came to this important conclusion:

To win victory for the people’s democratic revolution the Indonesian Marxist-Leninists must hold aloft the Three Banners of the Party, namely:

The first banner, the building of a Marxist-Leninist Party which is free from subjectivism, opportunism and modern revisionism.

The second banner, the armed people’s struggle which in essence is the armed struggle of the peasants in an anti-feudal agrarian revolution under the leadership of the working class.

The third banner, the revolutionary united front based on the worker-peasant alliance under the leadership of the working class.

Lessons

It is important that political lessons of 1965-66 Indonesian coup are assimilated by the proletarian parties and people of Asia and the world.

1. The coup was a demonstration of ruthlessness and brutality of imperialism. The same brutality was demonstrated by the imperialist powers during last fifty years whenever the people had risen against imperialism. The people of the world will never forget the assassination of Allende and installation of military rule in Chile; the repeated but failed attempts on the life of Fidel Castro; the bleeding of Congo for four decades; the displacement of Palestinian people from their home land; the economic sanctions that starved the five lakh children of Iraq to death; the imperialist aggressions that caused death of millions of people of countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa.
2. It was again proved in Indonesia that in countries where semi-feudal and semi-colonial system prevailed, the national bourgeoisie cannot lead the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal new democratic revolution to complete victory due to its vacillating and compromising nature. The tasks of new democratic revolution can only be achieved under the leadership of the proletariat based on worker – peasant alliance and the united front of all revolutionary classes.
3. A through going ideological and political struggle should be waged against modern revisionism which parroted peaceful transition to socialism instead of revolutionary path. Modern revisionism played havoc with the revolutionary movement of various countries.
4. Armed struggle should be waged to establish the people’s power; but it must not be waged in the form of military adventurism, in the form of a putsch, which is detached from the awakening of masses of people.

The lessons from Indonesia should not be forgotten. the Communist revolutionaries in India should keep in mind predatory nature of imperialism, subservient character of Indian big bourgeoisie, the dependency of feudal forces and the ruthless and oppressive dictatorship of exploiting classes through the state under the grab of parliamentary democracy. This was proved by the experience gained in Indonesia. They are still valuable though earned 50 years back. The Communist revolutionaries of India, should not and must not forget these lessons from history in fulfilling this task of new democratic revolution with agrarian revolution as its axis. They should follow the mass line that awakens the people and brings them into revolutionary upheavals. They should not fall prey to revisionism, ultra adventurism and right and left deviations.
