

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Suharto is dead: Don't whitewash his brutality.

Indonesia's wayang shadow plays reflect many of the mysteries and complexities of Indonesian culture. Nevertheless, Suharto's decades-long brutality is a reality, and no mystery at all. Former decades-long brutal Indonesian dictator Suharto died today. In 1982, I was introduced to Indonesian politics and history through the deeply disturbing film *Year of Living Dangerously*, which focused on the events surrounding the bloody 1965 coup in Indonesia; I followed up by visiting the country, learning some of the basic language, and learning much more about the nation's actual history, politics, and culture. *Year of Living Dangerously* was shot in Australia and the Philippines, which was ironic seeing that the brutal Filipino dictator Marcos was fully in power at the time. The film also intrigued me very much by highlighting such rich aspects of Indonesia's culture as the wayang puppet play tradition. The film introduced me to Linda Hunt, who delivered a stellar performance three years later as the scary Kissinger-loving character in *Aunt Dan and Lemon*. It also continued my interest in Mel Gibson, shortly after *Mad Max* and long before his 2006 bigoted tirade after his traffic arrest. Sigourney Weaver, who also starred in *Year of Living Dangerously*, at some point pursued human rights defense (whether or not influenced to do so by the film) by joining the board of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (by today renamed Human Rights First), where she still sits on its board. In 1989, I attended an LCHR event supporting survivor Li Lu and other Chinese democracy movement leaders, where I met both Mr. Lu and Ms. Weaver. In 1949, Indonesia gained independence from the Netherlands, which apparently ruled Indonesia with full ruthlessness, there to stake out its colonial interests and to reap (or is that rape?) its natural resources. Indonesia's independence created such challenges as uniting the nation of several thousand inhabited islands whose people had previously identified themselves with their regions rather than with any nation (which had just been born), and moving to have all citizens learn and speak the unifying Indonesian language where so many people only spoke other Malay-based dialects. After four Indonesian generals were assassinated in the mid-1960's, military man Suharto maneuvered himself to the top and the toppling of founding president Sukarno, who apparently remained under house arrest until he died a few years later. A bloodbath followed with executions apparently of hundreds of thousands of suspected government opponents, including actual and suspected communists. Suharto's government ultimately seized and annexed East Timor (in 1975, with the green light from Ford and Kissinger) and western Papua New Guinea (naming it Irian Jaya), leaving Suharto's government often occupied trying brutally to crush independence efforts not only in East Timor and Irian Jaya, but also in Aceh province, as well. As only a for instance, in 1991, Suharto's soldiers fired on thousands of unarmed people in East Timor, killing over two hundred fifty, with Democracy Now's Amy Goodman there and only being saved -- after being beaten along with her colleague -- after insisting she was a United States citizen. Suharto continued relying on trying to control the population through executions and fear, including -- through Suharto's admission in his 1991 autobiography *My Thoughts, Words and Deeds* -- summary executions of suspected thieves often followed by leaving their corpses on the streets as a warning to others (without any court trial, imagine the number of wrongful conclusions of who had committed theft, and whether the only witness to the alleged "theft" was a shopowner, soldier, or cop with a vendetta against the executed person). Suharto remained in power through such approaches as permitting his cronies and government officials to fatten their income with bribes (which led me to look for the most inexperienced-looking customs officer on my arrival at the Jakarta airport, whom I annoyed with mentioning that I had forgotten to clean my underwear strewn on the top of my suitcase, to the point that the exasperated official waved me along almost as soon as I had arrived), enabling the middle class to earn a solid living, and paying much more than lipservice to raising the standard of living of the poor (although a huge percentage of the poor continued living in highly abject misery, and employers had a field day hiring dirt-cheap manual labor with few real legal protections for workers). However, in the late 1990's the Indonesian economy collapsed, which left no reason for people to refrain from taking to the streets (unfortunately, often with extremer violence, which often was religious- and race-based against Christians and ethnic Chinese). Suharto stepped down from power (a panel of judges said he was too ill to stand trial, but one wonders whether those judges benefited from Suharto's rampant corruption), and avoided prosecution while many around him got prosecuted, including one of his sons who was convicted of directing the assassination of a judge and served five years of his sentence. When I arrived in Indonesia in 1988, and during my entire stay there -- where I visited Jakarta, Jogjakarta, Bandung, and Bali -- I did not witness firsthand any human rights violations, which either meant that the government was shrewd about not violating rights as openly as that, or that I had just missed it. I do recall a shopkeeper one day asking me how I liked Indonesia, which was his mistake, because I answered honestly that I loved much of the nature and culture, but not the government's human rights violations (and I could have added my disdain for the ongoing historical brutal racism in society, including against ethnic Chinese). He replied in a hushed tone: "We don't discuss that." Well, if you don't discuss it, don't ask my views. Interestingly, I found myself in a bird sanctuary outside Jakarta one day wearing my Amnesty International 1986 "Conspiracy of Hope" concert t-shirt. I had not done it intending to make any political statement, but it was just one of my favorite t-shirts. No secret police officer appeared to confront me about the

t-shirt, which I wore for the rest of the day. Â Certainly, Indonesia has a tremendously vibrant culture (and amazing food, including for vegetarians), including the arts, music, and interactions among people; and some extraordinary nature, to the extent not already destroyed by pollution and reckless "development", removal of natural resources, and squeezing out oil for valuable exports. Unfortunately, Suharto (and Sukarno before him, as I understand)Â censored, across the board, the late Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who apparently was Indonesia's greatest writer of theÂ twentiethÂ century into the twenty-first. I met Pramoedya in 1999, and write about himÂ here.Â Â Â Â My obsession about present and historical human rights violations in the United States, Indonesia, and worldwide -- which led to my activism with Amnesty International in college and law school, followed by working with the American Civil Liberties Union thereafter -- helped feed my drive to go to law school and to try to do my part to stop such violations. When other lawyers from time-to-time ribÂ me for practicing law for any reason other than their overarching goal of lining pockets with money, I easily remember why I became a lawyer in the first place. Â As people google Suharto after his death, I hope this blog entry helps avoid amnesia about his brutality and any whitewashing of hisÂ obituary or biography.Â Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00