Volume 6 | Issue 2 | Article ID 2657 | Feb 01, 2008

Indonesia After Suharto—The Last King of Java Forgiven (By Elites)

Andre Vltchek

Indonesia After Suharto – The Last King of Java Forgiven (By Elites)

Andre Vltchek

In his brilliant and hilarious short story – "Winding Road To Heaven" – Tongan writer Epeli Hau'ofa unwittingly described Indonesia: ..."And not so long ago, when five very, very important men discovered that they had together helped themselves to half a million dollars of public money to which they had no right to help themselves, they prayed for God's forgiveness, they forgave each other, and they neither had to resign from their very important jobs nor return any money to anyone."

After Suharto's death, the Western mainstream media rediscovered, occasionally critically or ironically, the zeal with which it and the Western powers had supported the Indonesian dictator throughout his killing sprees of 1965/66 and the twenty-four year occupation of East Timor that began in 1975. Interestingly, the Chinese media gave his rule a fairly accurate if low-key assessment. *People's Daily* commented on January 29:

> Tens of thousands of people lined the roads in Jakarta and around Solo in Central Java, hoping to catch a last glimpse of the man who came from a humble background but ruled his subjects like a Javanese king. The body was flown from the capital to Solo, then driven to the family mausoleum at Giribangun, 35 km northeast of the city, close to the burial grounds of Solo's kings."

People's Daily coverage continued with the further laconic paragraphs:

> "'Father is only human, who has weaknesses and strengths and is not exempted from mistakes. If he has done good, may Allah multiply the goodness. If he has made mistakes, may Allah forgive,' Suharto's eldest daughter, Siti Hadijanti Rukmana, also known as Tutut, said at the funeral.
>
> 'Ladies and gentlemen, if father has made any mistakes, please forgive him. Farewell father,' she said, tears running down her face."

Suharto's coffin was lowered into his grave, next to that of his wife, who died in 1996, and one salvo was fired at the funeral ceremony, led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Suharto's steps immortalized

'I on behalf of the nation and the Indonesian military, surrender the body and soul of Haji Muhammad Suharto to the soil of the motherland,' said Yudhoyono."

With this, Haji General and President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono forgave Haji General and former President of Indonesia Mohammed Suharto, on behalf of the Indonesian nation. It seems that the former dictator had been forgiven by many – by former leaders of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, by the entire top military brass of Indonesia, by the business elites, by the leaders of the political parties that are all staunchly pro-business (except Papernas, which did not "forgive him"), by the religious clergy (after all, he did kill hundreds of thousands of "atheists", and NU as well as other religious movements gave him a helping hand during the massacres), by Western governments that supported him from the beginning, and, of course, by his entire outrageously corrupt family. It also seems that he had been forgiven by most of the mass media at home, in most ASEAN countries, in the United States, Europe and Australia.

Like any good king, he left behind no strife that might engender independent thought, no real opposition and no alternative interpretation of his reign. Dirt-poor Indonesians lined up to catch a glimpse of his hearse in Jakarta and in Solo. There were no mass demonstrations and no demands to return the billions stolen from the desperate nation.

Although most Indonesians had heard about the massive corruption involving Suharto and his family, they had also been told that during his reign the economy had done much better than before he grabbed power and after he was forced to step down.



New sculpture

Although some know that massacres occurred in 1965/66, the taboo on public mention of the massacres remains strong. The nation was forced-fed propaganda about a communist coup and about the army that saved the nation. Hatred directed towards leftists, atheists and people of Chinese origin became the main pillar of Suharto's governance. And there is no

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

general awareness about the genocide in East Timor or the massacres in Papua. Even, especially, the upper middle class and elites that have full access to foreign media continue to downplay reports on the subject of Javanese colonialism.

But let us return to the success story of the Indonesian economy, to "the miracle" that helped this once poor nation to embrace market forces and uplift tens of millions from misery. After all, without Suharto, "Indonesia would not be as wealthy" as it is now, as Professor Michael Hitchcock of London Metropolitan University explained on BBC World.



Press image of the new Jakarta



Jakarta street scene

What is significant is that the great majority of Indonesians do not even realize that they and the nation remain desperately poor. In Indonesia only elites travel abroad and they have little to complain about, with an underpaid and obedient labor-force of nannies, maids, drivers, gardeners and cooks serving them upon their return home.

The Indonesian government and media claim that "only" 17% of citizens live below the poverty line. But their calculation defies even the inadequate international poverty norm. In Indonesia the poor are those whose monthly income is below 17 dollars while the international criterion for extreme poverty is those who live on less than 1 dollar a day, and for poverty it is 2 dollars a day. In 2006 the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) set the poverty line at Rp 152,847 (below 17 dollars) per person per month, which, by official calculation, gives a poverty rate of 17.8 percent equal to 39.1 million of the 220 million population. Unmentioned is the fact that over 49% of Indonesians are surviving on less than 2 dollars a day (according to the World Bank) and are, therefore, poor by international standards. Many local and international experts believe that in fact the great majority of Indonesians are poor or extremely poor.

Indonesian economic "success" had its bases in massive privatization, above all of the nation's rich natural resources. Suharto opened the doors to multi-national mining and oil interests, taking substantial cuts for himself from every lucrative deal, amassing in the process what the UN and the World Bank believe to have been over 35 billion dollars. His decisive hatred towards the Communist Party (PKI), trade unions, intellectuals and progressive forces generally, guaranteed crucial support from the US, which supplied him with a list of alleged members of PKI 1965/66, as revealed in declassified US government documents.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The terrorizing and plundering of Aceh, Papua and East Timor were not opposed by major western powers, whose companies had access to Indonesia's natural resources. Independence, after all, could bring the potential danger that mining and oil and gas contracts would have to be re-negotiated with the new states.



Acehnese showing how he was tortured in water by the Indonesian military

Instead of developing an educated, research- and production-oriented nation, Suharto turned Indonesia into a supplier of raw materials and an assembly line for multi-national companies. After 1965/66, as much as 40 percent of teachers in some parts of the country were massacred; many others were imprisoned, leaving the Army to substitute in the classroom. Quality of education nose-dived and to date it remains one of the poorest and most under-funded school systems in Asia and the world.

> "Indonesia is arguably Asia's least well-educated country, and the government is largely to blame", reported Bill Guerin in *Asia Times* on 31 August 2006. "With 30% of its 242 million population school-aged, the world's largest Muslim country ranks lowest among its Asian neighbors in terms of public education expenditure. A minuscule 0.03% of the Indonesian workforce has earned a university degree, according to government statistics... In 2003, Indonesia's education spending stood at about 1.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), compared with 5.3% in South Korea and 2.8% in comparatively underdeveloped Vietnam, according to World Bank data. Thailand, which spends 3.7% of GDP on education, announced this week plans to increase that to 4.5%-5% beginning next year to improve Thai students' analytical abilities. This year China will spend 13% of its total national budget on education, India 12%, the Philippines 17%, Malaysia 20%, Hong Kong 23% and Thailand 27%. Indonesia's education budget this year, in comparison, represents less than 10% of the government's budget, while the draft budget for 2007 proposes a tiny upgrade to 10.2% of total national spending."



Indonesian students

One year earlier, T*he Economist* reported that the country spends the third lowest amount in the world on education after Equatorial Guinea

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Ecuador (in the latter, the situation is now rapidly improving with a new progressive government).

After the 1965 military coup, books were burned (including those of world-famous novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer), and film studios and theatres closed down. Progressive culture and critical thought almost disappeared, substituted by imported and native pop. Most intellectuals vanished or were silenced.

Indonesia sold off its forests, oil and gas. But it was unable to produce almost anything that it could sell abroad. The Bandung-based civil airplane project simply failed: the twin engine short-haul aircraft never made it to international markets. Instead of designing, the automobile industry settled for assembling outdated foreign models, mainly Toyotas. The labor force was so badly educated, and corruption was so rampant, that in the end most foreign electronic companies moved elsewhere – first to Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, later to China and Vietnam.

Originally dreaming about competing with its neighbors, post-Suharto Indonesia in 2008 can't even begin to keep pace with Vietnam, once one of the poorest and the most devastated country in Asia.

All social indicators reveal a similar story.

"Hunger and malnutrition remain the most devastating problems facing the majority of Indonesians, particularly the poor", Atmarita, MPH, Ph.D., reports in a 2005 analysis of "Nutrition Problems in Indonesia". "Hunger and malnutrition exist in some form in almost every district in Indonesia. At present, about one half of the population is iron-deficient and one third is at risk of iodine deficiency disorders. Vitamin A deficiency still affects around 10 million children. The prevalence of LBW (low body weight) infants in Indonesia is in the range of 7-14%, even reaching 16% in some districts. The high prevalence of LBW is commonly a result of maternal malnutrition.... In 2003, 27.5 percent of children under five in Indonesia suffered from moderate and severe underweight."



Life behind the malls

A brief visit to any state hospital in the country is enough to shatter any dream of social progress under Suharto and after. State hospitals have 3 classes (yes, like the old European trains). The 3rd class is for the majority, the poorest. There, medical treatment should, in theory, be free. But is it? Service is so appalling that relatives are forced to move in with the patient, to keep him or her afloat. Free medicine becomes miraculously unavailable right after being prescribed. Relatives are then approached in the hallways by nurses or doctors, offering the medicine for half or three-quarters of the market price. Bribes are openly extorted whenever surgery or analysis are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prescribed. As a result, the majority of Indonesians never enter hospitals or clinics. Faced with serious or terminal illness, they opt for alternative healers, and many die in agony.

Random visits to the countryside (where the majority of people live) reveals that Indonesia is still one of the poorest countries in Asia with extremely unequal distribution of wealth. But even the major cities are suffering from profound ills. Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya and other large urban centers have almost no waste management; garbage is "recycled" manually by scavengers, many of whom are small children. What remains is then burned, often in the middle of poor neighborhoods. Clean water supply is far worse than that in Dhaka, Bangladesh or any major Indian city. According to a researcher at the Indonesian Academy of Science, only 30% of city dwellers have access to relatively clean water.



Rural still life

Pollution and traffic congestion are reaching epic proportions.

The mass media continue to describe Jakarta as a "sprawling and modern metropolis". There seems to be outright denial about the state of Indonesia and its capital. True, Jakarta is "one of the best golfing destinations" in Southeast Asia. But that's precisely because public spaces have been cannibalized. Instead of building parks and playgrounds, luxury clubs have been built for the elite.

True, you can see more luxury BMW's and Mercedes Benz sedans than in Tokyo. But that is because Indonesia has one of the highest corruption rates in the world.



Total gridlock

Several luxury malls feature brand designers from Italy and France in their marble premises. Jakarta has dozens of chain luxury hotels and hundreds of fast food chain restaurants. The city's skyline consists of endless skyscrapers. But the same is true of Khartoum, capital of Sudan – oil-rich but one of the world's most desperate countries.

Jakarta's skyscrapers, shopping centers and hotels are disconnected; each surrounded by walls. Sidewalks are almost non-existent and the only way to navigate between the buildings is by vehicle.

One turn from the main streets and the real Jakarta exposes its wounds: filthy narrow alleys, channels clogged with garbage, makeshift stores selling unhygienic food, children running barefoot; thousands of big and small mosques, but not a single decent playground for children. Garbage accumulates at every corner and polluted air penetrates throat and eyes. Little girls are offering themselves for a pittance, while boys are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sniffing glue from plastic bags.



Jakarta street children

In 2006 (according to the UN) Indonesia became the world's most disaster-prone nation. Not necessarily because it is on "the ring of fire" as the mass media never tires of repeating, but because housing construction is of despicable quality. Each year, Indonesia destroys more forests than any other country in the world. Deforestation causes landslides and as a result thousands of people die annually as their houses slide into ravines.

Another legacy of the Suharto era is infrastructure – one of the worst in Asia. Indonesian few motorways are overpriced and compete with Ceausescu's Romanian highways in quality and length. All Indonesian airlines have been banned from flying to the European Union since 2007 because of their safety records – a terrifying number of accidents in recent years. Ferries are sinking at a much higher rate than even in Bangladesh.

The train system has not been overhauled since Dutch colonial administration. Trains are regularly derailed. Passengers trying to save money on fares occasionally fall to their death through the rusty roofs (on which they are traveling). No Indonesian city has an acceptable public transportation system. Some, including Bandung (with 3 million people), are served only by a few dilapidated buses and "angkots" – private minivans.

In 2005, just 6.9% of the Indonesian population had access to the internet, compared to 16.8% in Vietnam. In 2006 Indonesia had only 14.8 million phone landlines, compared to 15.8 million in 3 times smaller Vietnam. The majority of Indonesians have to rely on overpriced and low quality mobile services, which are good enough for text messaging but usually not for calls or data transmission.



As long as we have mobile phones

Despite outright denial from officials, Indonesia is experiencing religious tensions and intolerance, although western mass media without exception call the nation a "tolerant and moderate Muslim country".

Oppression of movements promoting self-determination is epic. Despite that, many parts of Indonesia, including Papua, Aceh, Bali, Malukus, parts of Sulawesi and Nusa Tenggara would probably opt for full independence, if their citizens were allowed to vote on the issue. What is holding Indonesia together as one country is fear, as well as the fact that the country has no organized opposition and independent media.

Whatever the problems confronting its citizens, the owners of luxury villas and condominiums in Central and South Jakarta have forgiven Suharto. They forgave him for stealing from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poor, for killing hundreds of thousands of its citizens, and for bringing the nation to intellectual collapse. Leaders of the countries that were, in the name of freedom and democracy, savagely destroying Indochina at the time of Suharto's rise to power forgave him too, with the bright exception of Helen Clark, Labor Prime Minister of New Zealand.



What it takes to defend luxury villas

And not only was he and his family forgiven; the present President of Indonesia quietly decided not to take up the offer made by the UN and World Bank – to help Indonesia to repatriate the multi-billions of dollars that Suharto and his family are keeping in foreign banks. That's boundlessly generous. Especially considering that Suharto and his family stole an estimated 35 billion dollars. That means that, if recovered and equally distributed, each of Indonesia's 220 million people would receive almost 160 dollars. A family of 5 would receive an injection of 800 dollars, an enormous sum in the present state of near social collapse.

> In its damning obituary, The Economist correctly pointed out that it was not only Suharto who kept his hands on the loot: "Only $16 billion of the total, more or less, was his personal fortune. The rest had been selflessly distributed to his wife, six children, half-brother and grandsons in the form of licences and monopolies, usually handed out for nothing. His wife Tien held, through the Bogasari flour mills, the state monopoly on the import and milling of wheat. Tommy, a son, controlled the clove trade. Tutut, a daughter, had a grip on the toll-roads; Bambang, another son, held the licence for mobile phones. TV networks were slipped like sweets to various relations. Those who had cheered Mr Suharto's first ventures in economic policy in the 1960s, breaking up decrepit state monopolies and inviting foreigners in, could only watch in horror as privatisation took a predictable course".

Even after Suharto's death, it is still possible for the state to recover a few billion from his family.

But will it? There is every indication that the establishment will instead lavish compassion on the surviving members of Suharto's clan – almost all of them multi-billionaires – rather than assisting the more than one hundred million desperately poor Indonesians who scrape to survive without adequate food or medicine, and for the most part without a decent roof over their heads.

It is doubtful that the surviving prisoners of post 1965 jails and camps forgave him. Or family members who lost between 500,000 and 2 million relatives in anti-Communist, anti-Chinese, anti-atheist, anti-intellectual, anti-unionist massacres.

But this report is not about the massacres. It is about the social situation in Indonesia. Suharto supporters like to credit him with improving the lives of the Indonesian people.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

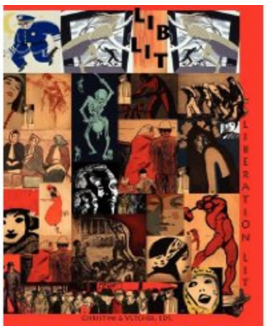
The system is surviving on false nationalism, lies, deception, and disinformation. Common citizens have no place to turn for protection or for objective information. Indonesians are not consulted as government and business decide the future of the country, as well as who gets what share of the pie. Blueprints and plans are not shared or open to the public. Local and foreign mass media call it "vibrant democracy".

Indonesian rulers will not criticize Suharto. He reversed the clock of history in their favor. In 1965 he sidelined Sukarno and re-introduced military-backed feudalism and the hegemony of the Western powers.

Since 1965, here and abroad, we have been told that oppression is democracy, that poverty is development, that censorship is freedom of expression. And that the collapsing nation that we see all around us, far from collapsing is economically strong and thriving. And that everything is forgiven and the nation is grateful to Suharto – the departing king of Java – who saved capitalism, the nation and this entire part of the world.

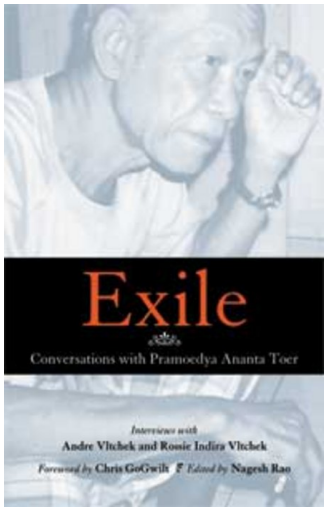
Andre Vltchek– novelist, journalist, playwright. Co-founder of Mainstay Press (www.mainstaypress.org), publishing house for political fiction. Editorial director of Asiana Press Agency (www.asiana-press-agency.com). Author of several novels and plays, he also directed a 90 minute documentary on the Suharto dictatorship "Terlena – Breaking of a Nation". Andre lives and works in Asia and South Pacific and can be contacted at: andre-wcn@usa.net

He provided the text and photographs for Japan Focus. Posted February 5, 2008.

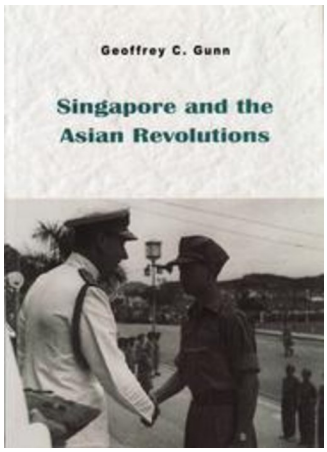


Click on the cover to order.

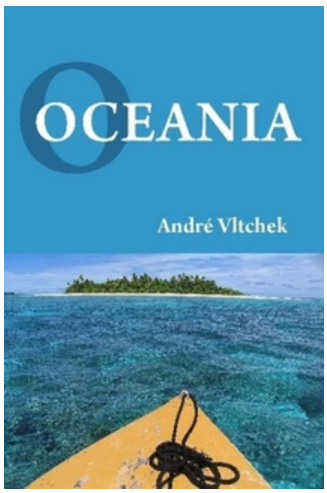
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Click on the cover to order.

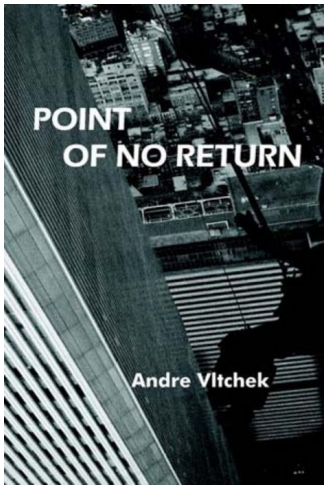


Click on the cover to order.



Click on the cover to order.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Click on the cover to order.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466008005846 Published online by Cambridge University Press