

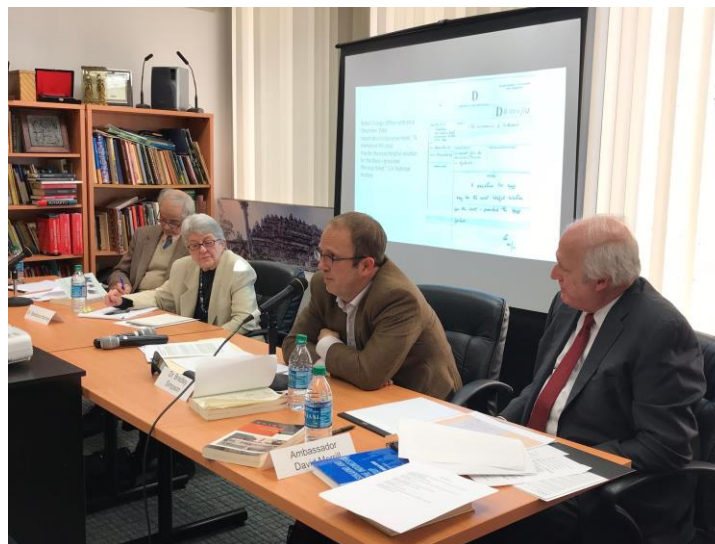
Special Open Forum

USINDO History Series

*Indonesia's September 30, 1965 Movement
and the Beginning of the Suharto Era:*

*Enhancing our Understanding Drawing
on Recently Released U.S. Records*

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Speaker: Dr. Bradley Simpson

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Discussants:

Dr. Barbara Harvey

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Ambassador Robert Pringle

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Introduction and background: It has been over 50 years since September 30, 1965, a date that dramatically changed Indonesian history. A small group of Indonesians identifying themselves as the September 30 Movement, believed to be working in collaboration with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), launched an overnight strike against Indonesian generals whom they alleged were planning a coup against President Sukarno. Six top generals were killed, but General Suharto, who was not targeted, thwarted the September 30 Movement and subsequently began a military-led program to crush the PKI, which resulted in the execution of both its leaders and followers. In the ensuing power struggle with President Sukarno over Indonesia's political and economic future, Suharto consolidated his control, leading to his New Order government that lasted for 32 years.

The domestic and international environment in the period leading up to September 30; the events of the night itself; the extent and nature of the actions that followed; the roles and motivations of the parties; and the knowledge, stance, and actions of the U.S. and other governments, have long been matters of historical inquiry and debate.

Recent documents declassified by the U.S. government and made available through requests of the National Security Archive, a Non-Government Organization, shed light on these important subjects. This program was held to enable the leader of the project that obtained release of the documents, Dr. Bradley Simpson, to share his findings and opinions, and to provide for audience discussion and deeper historical understanding of this period in light of both the documents and the context provided by those with contemporaneous experience.

Summary of Dr. Simpson's presentation:

In the last 20 years, especially since the Suharto era ended, it has been possible to do more research on the September 30 Movement. This includes research by Indonesians, oral histories, demographic research, discussions, and documentary research, including documents recently released by the US Government. Indonesian documents include records of the trials of the September 30 leaders, as well as newly available Indonesian documents.

Although more information is becoming available, the period remains controversial and incompletely understood. Large questions still being examined include what the recently released US documents show about the aims of US policy before and after September 30, whether the US gave signals to the army about their actions against the PKI, and if so, their nature and intent. Research from Indonesian documents is still under way. Dr. Simpson requested those in the audience, particularly those present during those times, to provide context that the documents alone cannot.

According to Dr. Simpson, US documents and historical research show the Eisenhower administration in the late 1950's began to re-arm the Indonesian army to provide a counterweight to the PKI and reduce the possibility of its gaining power.

However, in 1961 the new Kennedy administration took a two-pronged stance. On one hand, it sought to try to develop a relationship with President Sukarno and see if it could work with his brand of Indonesian nationalism. This included giving support to Sukarno's claim to West Irian. The Kennedy administration at the same time continued US support to the army, particularly in the form of civic action programs, which fit the theme of "military modernization" as a path to economic development. These programs also served the purpose of further developing the US relationship with the Indonesian army.

After President Kennedy's assassination, the Johnson administration was much less willing to explore whether it could work with Sukarno's style of nationalism. The personalities of the two US presidents were different, as were the historical circumstances. By 1964-65, the Johnson administration was pre-occupied with the war in Viet Nam. Also, the PKI had become more powerful than in 1961. The US was very concerned about developments in Indonesia taking a pro-communist turn.

Dr. Simpson presented documents showing that beginning around 1964, in diplomatic and intelligence correspondence of the US, British, and other countries about the political situation in Indonesia, there were examples of conjecture that an attempted takeover by the PKI, provided it failed, might provide a scenario for the army's effectively countering the PKI.

There was also considerable coordination at the time between the US and British with respect to the Indonesian confrontation against Malaysia, and about Indonesia. However, Britain and the US viewed issues regarding Malaysia and Indonesia with differing emphases, with Americans seeing Indonesia as their higher policy priority.

Despite the US being very concerned in 1964-65 about the situation in Indonesia, no evidence has emerged from the documents, or from historical research or personal accounts, that the US took specific actions to bring about the events of September 30. According to Dr. Simpson, it is quite clear from the present record that the US did not know in advance of the September 30 movement, and was surprised by it.

Within a few days of September 30, the embassy's analysis of the events was that the actions were caused by the PKI. The embassy viewed it not as an attempted coup but a PKI-led purge of army personnel whom the PKI believed were anti-PKI. Other researchers assert the September 30 Movement and its timing were motivated by a PKI fear of an impending coup against President Sukarno by a "Council of Generals," and by PKI concerns that President Sukarno's health was declining, so that any action taken against the army should occur while President Sukarno was in power.

Important research in the last 20 years on the September 30 Movement includes John Roosa's book, based on transcripts from the trial of some of September 30 participants. It supports the account that the Movement was conceived of and led by two members of the PKI leadership, in conjunction with middle ranking Air Force officers. There has been much research from Australia and elsewhere in recent years on the dynamics of the anti-PKI killings carried out following September 30, and the role of religious and

youth organizations in parallel with the military. Australian research that is under way of extensive military records from Aceh will contribute to understanding the army's role, including its command and control structure.

According to Dr. Simpson's presentation, after September 30 the army's contacts with the US embassy grew, though remaining low key. The US for its part did not want to be seen publicly as supporting the army against President Sukarno, but did want to maintain a relationship with the army. According to Dr. Simpson's and other research, U.S. quietly provided limited amounts of cash and commodities such as rice, radios, and some small arms to the army at that time.

The US became aware through reports of others and its own reporting that the killings were taking place, and were large in number and in several places, though the estimates varied considerably. According to Dr. Simpson, the reports showed that the killings included rank and file PKI members and PKI-affiliated organizations as well as the PKI leadership involved in the 9/30 movement. Dr. Simpson questioned why the extension to the broader membership and affiliated organizations occurred.

Dr. Simpson also noted that some have wondered whether the events after September 30 were a spontaneous uprising of the Indonesian people, a coordinated campaign, or something else. He said he believes the historical record now shows this was a coordinated campaign.

Dr. Simpson suggested an important question also is how the U.S. understood at the time what was happening, in comparison with what historians now understand.

He asked for the recollections and experience of members of the audience to add to our collective knowledge on these and other points about 1965-1966.

Dr. Harvey:

Dr. Barbara Harvey, the first discussant, said she believed Dr. Simpson's book quite rightly emphasized the Cold War context of what happened in Indonesia in 1964-66. The influence of the PKI, as well as the role of the Soviets and the Chinese Communists, were seen by Americans as very threatening to US interests. The role of Viet Nam and how that influenced US policy making related to Indonesia, as described in Dr. Simpson's book, was also important.

Dr. Harvey also cited the disastrous economic situation in Indonesia during this period as a key part of the context. Other participants in the Q and A noted the factor of the dire economic situation affecting the general population and all who lived in Indonesia. These dire conditions heightened widespread recognition of the need of some kind of political change soon.

Dr. Harvey stated that a goal of the United States in the context of the Cold War was the elimination of the PKI as a political force; but it was not at all clear that people thought of this as the physical elimination of the PKI. She said the view was that the US was looking to support whomever could guarantee opposition to the communists, political stability, and economic recovery. In the absence of other forces who could do this, the army was viewed as the force which would be anti-communist, desire stability, and potentially contribute to economic recovery.

Regarding the documents provided by Dr. Simpson showing diplomatic correspondence that a PKI attempted coup, provided it failed, might be a beneficial outcome, Dr. Harvey noted it was unclear whether these represented musings among diplomats about this scenario being a desirable outcome, or suggestive of actual plans, and it was important to be careful about that distinction. She suggested more information and evidence would be useful before one could determine the meaning of these documents.

As concerns the extent of popular feeling against the PKI, Dr. Harvey reported there was a feeling among many Moslems in East Java, about the PKI that “it was either them, or us.” This may help to explain why, once the military actions against the PKI started, religious and youth groups participated.

Dr. Harvey recalled that the PKI were seen by many at the time as a threat to the entire social order. Regarding the question of why the scope of the anti-PKI actions was extensive, important context was that the PKI had a membership of some three million people and numbered some 12 million if affiliated organizations were counted. It was perhaps not unreasonable for the army to assume that local leaders might try to oppose the actions being carried out by the army. There was also some initial fear of a civil war, especially in Central Java, where the PKI was particularly strong.

Dr. Pringle:

Dr. Pringle commented that he had not yet had the opportunity to read Dr. Simpson’s book, but he felt Dr. Simpson’s presentation had given the sense of a large and concerted American-British effort to reverse trends in Indonesia. Dr. Pringle felt this kind of large and coordinated US-British effort to be an overstatement, based on what he had seen at the time as a researcher in Borneo.

Dr. Pringle said he believed looking at intelligence or other USG documents was insufficient to get a full appraisal of the events; a full appraisal required conducting conversations with Indonesians, preferably in Indonesia.

He also believed that to understand the intensity of the actions it was also important to understand more about the underlying conflict over land and land ownership. The Government had announced a land reform policy but not implemented it, and the PKI set about to implement it by unilateral actions, in some cases by force. This conflict over land contributed to the intensity of the anti-PKI feeling, and to the role played by youth

groups. He said he believed the largest numbers of killings took place in East Java and Bali, but he believes sources on numbers are still weak. He stated that land issues played an important role in Bali.

Dr. Simpson replied to Dr. Pringle's points. He referred to his book for a full response to the points raised. Regarding the question of the extent of British involvement, he noted the British had 20,000 troops involved in their effort to protect Malaysia, including operations in Borneo, and this was the largest British post-war military operation in Asia.

Clearly, he said, conflicts over land were important, and PKI land programs raised tensions. USG reporting about that seemed very accurate. The PKI also got high level support from Beijing. PKI leaders visited Beijing several times before the Movement was launched, and were received by Chairman Mao.

Audience comments and observations:

One member of the audience, who was with the US Consulate in Medan and the Embassy in Jakarta in 1963-65, commented that to understand this period, it was essential to have an appreciation of the atmosphere and conditions in Indonesia. In the period before September 30, everything was very tense. Societal support structures were absent. People felt powerless. The PKI was felt by local populations to be threatening to overturn the traditional social structures they had been relying on. There was real fear.

Then, when the generals' bodies were discovered, there was a moment of real shock in the population. People from all walks of life who were previously afraid to speak out began speaking out for the first time in years, saying in one form or another that this was terrible, and then realizing they all felt the same way. In that moment, he felt, it was all over for the PKI and its potential position in Indonesia. The next reaction of Indonesians he knew was we are going to strike back against this, and strike back hard.

He added that in looking back at this period from the world view of today, we should be cautious in applying today's views retroactively to events as they were happening 50 years ago.

Other participants in the general discussion who had served in Indonesia at the time confirmed the context that, among the population they interacted with, there was a climate of fear and a "them versus us" mind-set. They noted many people sensed personal danger if the PKI took over the country. The persistent violent demonstrations contributed to this fear. These participants expressed the view that, beyond the documents, it was important to factor in this context to fully evaluate this period of history.

Another participant who was present in Indonesia in 1964-65 supported the view that before September 30, it was hard to get Indonesians to express political views to Americans, but that afterwards opinions came pouring out.

On the American side, the embassy policy in the year before September 30 was to keep a low profile and avoid involvement in Indonesian affairs. The AID program, military assistance program, and Peace Corps had by that time been ended or curtailed.

Information available to the Embassy was thus slight, this participant said. The embassy was totally surprised on the morning of October 1, 1965 by the events of that night. Intensive reporting began. Embassy officers saw their main duty as reporting accurately to Washington what they saw.

Another participant commented that although we know now from the historical record what happened following the failure of the September 30 movement, we do not know the alternative narrative of what would have happened if the PKI had succeeded. Also, he noted, although we apparently have some information on the plans of the army for actions against the PKI, we do not have similar information on the plans of the PKI if they had succeeded with the September 30 Movement. He noted people were aware, however, of the killings that followed prior communist victories in Russia and China.

Regarding the years following 1965, another commenter noted that in his travels in Java, it was clear that the role of local militias in actions against the PKI was highly dependent on the local context. In areas of Java where a pro-Sukarno general was in charge, killings were few.

Dr. Simpson commented that based on some recent demographic research, the assumption that the anti-PKI killings were largest in areas where the PKI was strongest may not be correct. If in those areas a pro-Sukarno military figure was in charge, it seemed correct that the numbers were less. But in other areas, particularly where there were strong anti-PKI sentiments, the figures could be higher than explained by PKI numbers.

Dr. Simpson noted that most Indonesians did not know the scale of the killings, as there was little public information about them. It was quite possible the army did not want the scale to become evident to President Sukarno, as they believed Sukarno was strong enough to try to stop them, which might have led to a civil war. Another participant observed that based on his experience, many in the population did know what was going on, but also knew not to talk about it.

Another commenter, present in Jakarta from 1967, said that based on her contacts with the embassy community, she felt the embassy was generally glad to see Suharto in power, and glad to see the PKI was gone, but she encountered no one who was in favor of the killings. She cautioned that this matter is complicated, and we should be cautious about interpreting the views of people on the scene.

Dr. Simpson agreed with the need of caution in drawing conclusions. He noted that the policy seemed to be public silence about the killings, and avoiding making estimates. Some documents from Washington sources cited as the main positive point that the PKI

was being eliminated. The Soviets were also pleased about the destruction of the PKI because they saw it as a black mark for China.

Asked about the directions for further documentary research to understand this period, Dr. Simpson said several sources such as official records and diaries have been sought for many years. Indonesian military records currently seem the most promising documentary sources. Further interviews were also needed.

The participants concluded with the view that in addition to documents and interviews, discussions such as this one contributed to understanding the history of this period in its context.