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Sukarno and the idea of Indonesia

A history of Indonesian
nationalism

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The perspective

This book was originally written as an essay for my studies at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. I was majoring in political sciences and had chosen anthropology as one of the two minor subjects. That was sixteen years ago. Back then I was immersing myself in the history of Indonesia. My studies took me into the analysis of the post-colonial state and the political imagination of emerging new nation states. During a number of sojourns in Indonesia I traveled to the historic places where Indonesia had built its modern identity: Lubang Buaya, the crocodile's pit, the place where the bodies of the seven generals were dumped on 30 September 1965; the Selamat Datang Monument on Bundaran H.I., the epicenter of the Indonesian nation; the Sarinah department store on Jl. Thamrin as well as the national monument Monas and the old town of Kota in Jakarta, the formerly Dutch Batavia. I sauntered down Pasar Baru and passed the offices of Antara, the Indonesian news agency. The old Hotel Indonesia with its huge swimming pool still existed. I walked down the avenues and major arteries of Jakarta named after the generals and freedom fighters mentioned in the following chapters. During my first stay in 2002 I rented a pavilion on Jl. Cianjur in Menteng, one of the most affluent and most centrally located neighborhoods of the capital city, ibu kota. The place was walking distance from Menteng Plaza and Bundaran H.I., even though I was the only one walking, Jakarta being a driver's city. Wherever I went, the smell of Jakarta was the same, and it was also the smell that welcomed you to the terminal building of Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport: kretek, Indonesia's clove cigarettes. The guards of

the mansions of the wealthy in Menteng would smoke kretek cigarettes, their blue smoke dissolving in the hot and humid air of Jakarta. Many times did I pass the well-guarded housing complex of Suharto, the nation's second President, in Menteng. When Suharto finally passed away in 2008 it was exciting to see in how far Indonesia would come to terms with its past and get some "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" done. Ten years earlier, when "krismon", the Indonesian abbreviation for "krisis moneter", the financial crisis of 1997-98, had helped bring down Suharto and his regime after 31 years in power, the world held its breath, unsure if the country would make a peaceful transition into a Western model of democracy, or whether the archipelago would fall into a bloody civil war and ethnic cleansing, as it had when Suharto had come to power. Suharto murdered, killed and incarcerated millions of his own people, and he embezzled billions of dollars during his reign, while the West looked away. The CIA had lifted Suharto into power to create a devote regime as bulwark against the advance of communism from within and without. Sukarno's flirt with the East was unacceptable to the West, and as in many other places around the world, it was better to have a brutal yet West-leaning dictator in power, a so-called puppet, than to accept a nation's freedom of choice. "We have to remember that the genocide, the military dictatorship which followed (after Sukarno), the present day impunity for gangsters and thugs and the use of them by corporations and by the government, this is the West's vision for Indonesia, and for many places like Indonesia," says Joshua Oppenheimer.¹ Suharto's dictatorship lasted for more than 30 years, and cost Indonesia much of the freedom envisioned by Sukarno. Not only was corruption rampant, but a whole new system was in place: KKN. KKN is short for *korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme*, in English corruption, collusion and nepotism. To

this very day Indonesians use KKN as a verb or noun to describe the unlawful making-it happen of something that would otherwise never have happened, or would have taken ages.² Even though Suharto promised to fight KKN, he and his regime thrived on KKN, were the machine behind it. The dictator and his inner circle and family benefited from selling out his country to Western powers and corporations - KKN on the highest level. With the CIA backing Suharto, the West gave Suharto a carte blanche to kill and plunder his own people and their property, under the pretext of defending Indonesia against a Communist threat. This had been the CIA's third attempt to change the political landscape in Indonesia. First, one of the CIA pilots sent in a B-26 bomber in 1958 to help a rebellion of certain parts of the Indonesian military had embarrassingly been shut down and captured. And secondly a ruse to bring the Muslim Sukarno down with a fake porn movie, shot in Hollywood featuring the President himself, could not bring the Indonesian people nor the establishment to abandon Sukarno.

Against the background of the developments of the second half of the 20th century the unique story of the birth of the fourth largest and most populous Muslim country in the world is often forgotten and overlooked. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, one of Indonesia's foremost writers, wrote in 1999 that "Sukarno was the only Asian leader of the modern era able to unify people of such differing ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds without shedding a drop of blood."³ This could not contrast stronger with his successor who had to use extreme violence to consolidate his power, called "The New Order." Sukarno was a President of the people for the people. The independence movement and nation building happened mainly during the final phase of the Dutch era as well as the Japanese occupation of the islands during the Second World War. Only two days passed between the

surrender of the Japanese Tenno and the Declaration of Independence of Indonesia on 17 August 1945. Yet another five years had to pass before the last of the Dutch political structures were dissolved; the Dutch had officially recognised Indonesian independence only in 1949 under pressure from the UN and the international community. There were more Europeans killed in the guerilla and resistance battles after the end the World War II then during the war. So fierce were the Indonesians, so weak the Dutch. It was a predecessor that showed that no Western nation would be able to win a guerilla war in Asia.

The becoming of Indonesia is a prime example of nationalistic studies in colonised territories. By sheer size this archipelago dwarfs all the other nine member states of the ASEAN as well as most other nations world wide. We can only guess at what would have happened had Sukarno remained in power and had the failed coup by the 30 September Movement (*G30S PKI, Gerakan 30 September PKI*) and counter coup of the military in 1965 never taken place - or had the outcome been different. Instead of speculating about what could have been, the last part of the book focuses on the harsh reality after Sukarno's demise, when Suharto took over power in Jakarta and diminished much of the freedom Sukarno had envisioned, as well as been fighting for. Sukarno, the *dalang* , the puppet master who for a long time had balanced the PKI and the military against each other, especially during the last period of the Guided Democracy, had failed at restoring his regime after the developments of 30 September and was subsequently put under house arrest. Suharto became acting President in March 1967, and was officially appointed President one year later. *Bung Karno* , older brother Karno, as he was lovingly called by his people, died on 21 June 1970.