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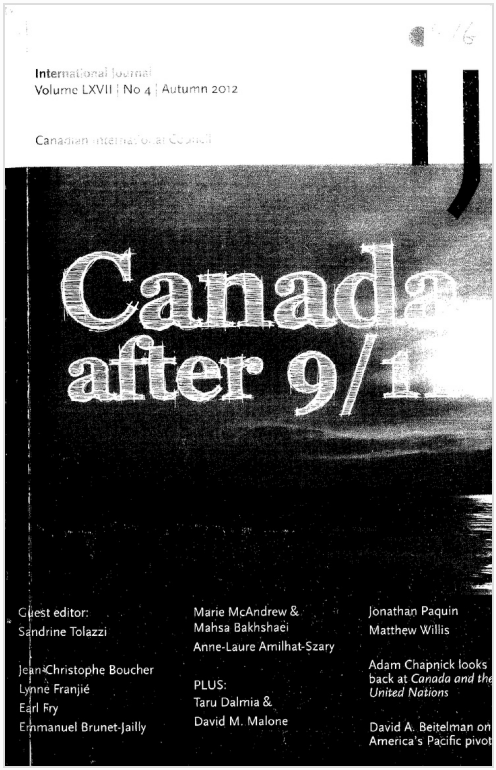

Diplomacy and Cultural Understanding: Learning from US Policy Toward INdonesia under Sukarno

by Fx. Baskara T. Wardaya

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Sunrise over Buffalo, New York, from Fort Erie, Ontario, May 2011
Photo by David Leadbitter

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Sandrine Tolazzi

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Sandrine Tolazzi is an associate [illegible] teaches Canadian and Australian studies in the Department of Modern Languages. She is a member of the research group on modes of representation in english studies (CEMRA) and the deputy director of Grenoble's interdisciplinary Centre for Canadian Studies. She also sits as an elected member of the administrative board of the French Association for Canadian Studies (AFEC), a member association of the International Council for Canadian Studies.
The title of this article refers to a conference organized by Grenoble's Centre for Canadian Studies that took place in Grenoble, France, in September 2011. The author gives warmly thanks to Alain Faure and Eric Tabuteau, who took part in organizing this conference, as well as to the Government of Canada, Stendhal University's Scientific Council, and the CEMRA and Pacte research centres for their support. She also thanks David Haglund and Joseph Jockel, the co-editors of International Journal, *for publishing these articles, as well as Naomi Joseph, the journal's managing editor.*

Baskara T. Wardaya

Diplomacy and cultural understanding

Learning from US policy toward Indonesia under Sukarno

During the first two decades of the Cold War, especially during the administration of the United States presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) and Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), relations between the US and Indonesia were marked with suspicion, ambiguity, and antagonism. This was in part due to the failures of many US policymakers in understanding—let alone respecting—Indonesia's culture and politics, especially as they manifested in the political views and personality of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno. Failing to see Sukarno as a Javanese-Indonesian leader whose views on domestic and international politics stemmed from his Javanese background, many Cold War US policymakers considered him a communist demagogue who threatened US interests and world peace.

The failure brought far-reaching consequences. Despite attempts by President John F. Kennedy and his administration (1961-1963) to be friendly toward Sukarno, greater pressures against the Indonesian president in the US policymaking formulation remained dominant. One of the results of such pressures was US support during President Johnson's administration

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for Indonesia's massive anti-communist purge in 1965, which was followed by the removal of President Sukarno from power. The US Cold War policymakers succeeded in their anti-Sukarno course of action, but their "success" was achieved at the expense of the lives of untold numbers of Indonesians.

There are important lessons to draw from this tragic implementation of diplomatic policy, especially with regard to today's post-Cold War international politics, in which foreign policy makers are often challenged to deal with global issues that require diplomatic and military involvement.

THE COLD WAR, THE US, AND SUKARNO

By most of the US media and policymakers, particularly since the second half of the 1950s, Sukarno was perceived and depicted as a pro-communist, pro-Soviet Union demagogue who "deserved" to be pressured in order to comply with US interests. These policymakers acknowledged Sukarno's popularity among his people, but they also believed that the Indonesian president was pushing his country to side with the Eastern bloc, the main foe of the US. The US policymakers recognized Sukarno's prominence among the newly-independent nations, but they were also convinced that the Indonesian leader, if left alone, could ignite worldwide anti-American sentiment among those nations.

Thus many US policymakers began to seek ways to pressure or even unseat the Indonesian president. Following debates and argumentation among themselves, these policymakers decided to help anti-Sukarno forces in Indonesia in removing him from power.

JAVANESE CULTURE AND THE IDEA OF POLITICAL POWER

In the introduction of his book, *The Religion of Java*, Clifford Geertz reminds his readers that it is not easy to characterize Javanese culture with a single label or dominant theme: Javanese culture (one of the most influential cultures in Indonesia) is complex.[1] Java, the most populated island and home of the country's largest ethnic group, has been influenced by many other cultures over the centuries, including cultures that came from India, China, the Middle East, Portugal, the Netherlands, and neighbouring nations.

The influences of foreign cultures made Javanese culture rich and adaptable, able to absorb, incorporate, learn, and develop elements from others. At the same time, these influences contributed to the Javanese

1 Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1959), 7.

tendency to combine elements of one's own culture and tradition with those of other cultures. Not surprisingly, Javanese culture is often described as having a strong tradition of syncretism.

Javanese people are typically proud of their culture's richness. Indeed, many Javanese believe that Javanese culture is not only "better" than other cultures in the Indonesian archipelago, but also the culture against which other cultures of the world should be measured. Based on such confidence, the Javanese believe that Javanese kings should not only use their power to govern fellow Javanese people, but also to influence the world at large.

Traditionally, the Javanese have their own way of understanding power, especially political power. To them, power is something that exists in itself, independent of human beings, but at the same time is realized in the person who has the right to hold it, namely the legitimate ruler.[2] The ruler, therefore, gains power not merely from the people but from his or her right and legitimacy to hold power. Instead of coming from the people, the right and legitimacy come from the ruler's ancestral line of power. He or she can hold it as long as he or she has the ability and legitimacy to have it in his or her hand. There are no administrative time limits on Javanese rule.[3]

Moreover, for the Javanese ruler—and the Javanese people in general—the idea of unity is highly important. The power of the ruler as a unifying force is absolute. Opposition is not allowed, or is only given little space, because it is considered a threat to unity. Dispersion or sharing of power is not highly regarded. The concept of oneness (often translated into *eka* or *tunggal*) is central in the Javanese concept of power. Any political move or tendency—whether it comes from within or without—that could threaten the unity of the kingdom is not tolerated and should be crushed.[4] Domestic

2 Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 38.

3 The Javanese concept of power is basically male-centered, but there were Javanese kingdoms that were ruled by queens, such as the Kalingga kingdom's Queen Shima (d. 732 CE) and Majapahit's Queen Tribhuwana Wijayatunggadewi (1328-1351CE).

4 Anderson, *Language and Power*, 36-37. As Anderson noted, "The urge to oneness, so central to Javanese political attitudes, helps to explain the deep psychological power of the idea of nationalism in Java. Far more than a political credo, it expresses a fundamental drive to solidarity and unity in the face of the disintegration of traditional society under colonial capitalism, and other powerful external forces.... Nationalism of this type is something far stronger than patriotism; it is an attempt to reconquer a primordial oneness."

opposition and foreign intervention are considered dangerous and therefore should not be accepted.

The Javanese also believe that there is certain logic in the pattern of foreign relations. This pattern is reflected in the concept of *mandala*, which the Javanese derived from an Indian political theory.[5] The belief in *mandala*—a circle that symbolizes the dynamics of influence, interests, or ambition—reflects the Javanese idea of the struggle for expansion in the pursuit of world-domination and universal peace under a sole and supreme ruler.[6]

SUKARNO AND JAVANESE CULTURE

Sukarno was deeply influenced by Javanese culture, especially by the Javanese concept of political power. Although his father was a Muslim Javanese and his mother a Hindu Balinese, he grew up in Java and was mostly raised as a Javanese. This is an important factor in explaining why he thought and acted as he did throughout his political career. Javanese culture influenced his philosophical and political views and approaches—how he viewed political power in general, practiced domestic politics, and conducted international relations.

Like Javanese culture, Sukarno's influences were diverse. His ideas and actions were clearly inspired by traditional Javanese ideas, but at the same time he borrowed from other cultures and traditions. He often used Javanese concepts, but to them he added ideas from different religious traditions, European philosophy, communism, and modern concepts of power. His origins were humble, but he liked to build grandiose buildings and edifices. He thought and acted as modern leader of a democratic republic, but following the custom of traditional Javanese kings, he officially had several wives.

In many of his writings and speeches Sukarno liked to blend elements from different theories and religious traditions such as Marxism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.[7] He also sought to reconcile different revolutionary theories with the realities of colonial Indonesia. The result was a typically Javanese synthesis of various beliefs and thoughts. Thus in 1926 Sukarno began to promote the idea of NASAKOM. The term is an acronym for

5 Ibid., 43.

6 Soemarsaid Moertono cited in Anderson, *Language and Power*, 43-44.

7 Bernhard Dahm, *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 39.

the Indonesian words *NASionalisme* (nationalism), *Agama* (religion), and *KOMunisme* (communism). In his writings Sukarno argued that nationalism, Islam, and Marxism together provided the basis for Indonesia's struggle for independence.

As he grew up in the town of Blitar, East Java, Sukarno became familiar with Javanese culture and Javanese views of power. As a young boy he very often watched *wayang*, puppet show performance and narration of the Indian Ramayana and Mahabharata epics, which had shaped Javanese values. From the epics he developed his understanding Javanese concepts, including concepts of power, politics, and government.

As a leader with a Javanese cultural background Sukarno later claimed to have the ancestral links that gave him the right and legitimacy to lead Indonesia. This perhaps helps explain why on one hand, he embraced a style of a modern national leader—that of a president of a democratic republic—but on the other hand, he often acted like a Javanese traditional ruler, not allowing any rival to his presidency and agreeing to be named president-for-life.

Sukarno did not follow Javanese concepts and tradition blindly. As Benedict Anderson puts it, Sukarno knew that "the mode of social transformation must be adapted to traditional ideas," in this case to Javanese ideas. He was also aware that "such a strategy presupposes a leadership sophisticated enough to be deeply familiar with these ideas, yet not bound by them, and disciplined enough to use them without succumbing to them."[8] He familiarized himself with Javanese ideas in order to use these ideas as long as they confirmed to his notions of how to best govern Indonesia according to modern system of government.

As a teenager Sukarno learned of anti-colonial activists' ideas that would continue to influence him: self-respect as a free Indonesian, the spirit of nationalism and anti-imperialism, and socialist ideas. When he continued his study in the city of Bandung, West Java, he met like-minded young intellectuals and formed a study club, and against the will of the Dutch colonial government, even established a political party, called PNI (*Partai Nasional Indonesia*, or Indonesian National Party).

During this time Sukarno came to the syncretic idea of combining Marxism and Indonesia's colonial reality. Sukarno observed that while according to Marxist theory, the worker in the capitalist society is poor

8 Anderson, *Language and Power*, 73.

because he lacks control over the means of production, in colonial Indonesia the farmer owns some means of production but remains poor.[9]

As per Javanese values, Sukarno regarded unity and balance as integral to Indonesian politics. He harshly suppressed regional rebellions. When in 1956-1958 a number of regional military commanders rebelled against his government, Sukarno took strong actions to suppress them, knowing that the rebels were supported by the United States. In the early 1960s, when the British and Malayan governments declared their intention to form the Federation of Malaysia—and thus, according to Sukarno, threaten the unity and security of Indonesia—the Indonesian president fiercely fought against the idea. Sukarno had the Javanese cultural emphasis on unity on his side.

Also in line with Javanese culture was Sukarno's belief that foreign relations were necessary to Indonesia's survival—and to his own political survival. He believed that his power as Javanese king was not limited to Indonesia. Although legally he was leader of Indonesia only, he wanted to extend his influence outside the Indonesian borders. He was convinced that international relations were not merely a matter of having good diplomatic relations with other countries, but also of collaboration among equal parties working to address global issues.

Sukarno emphasized the notion of equal relations among countries in order to improve his standing among leaders of the world's great powers. Moreover, he wanted to demonstrate that Indonesia was not only able to govern itself, but was also able to lead other newly-independent nations in common international progress. Sukarno was eager to show that although Indonesia gained freedom from colonialism almost 170 years after the US declared its independence, it had the right to be considered the equal of any other country in the world. Hence he believed he had the right, as leader of Indonesia, to be treated as an equal by other national leaders, including American presidents.

As the Cold War divided the western capitalist bloc led by the United States and the eastern communist bloc led by the Soviet Union, Sukarno sought to find an alternative to hostility and antagonism, rather than take a side. Sukarno supported the idea of building a coalition of neutral countries that refused to side with either of the blocs. Hence he hosted the 1955 Bandung Conference of newly-independent countries and supported the idea of forming the Non-aligned Movement. In Sukarno's view, the two

9 Sukarno, *An Autobiography as Told to Cindy Adams* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company,1965), 61-63.

opposing blocs of the Cold War were pursuing their own interests at the expense of other countries. Sukarno fostered friendly relations with both the US and the Soviet Union and its allies, including China, as he aspired to unity on the international level.

SUKARNO AND US RELATIONS

Failing to understand the Javanese background and the complexity of Sukarno's worldviews, many American policymakers viewed Sukarno merely as a left-leaning, anti-US demagogue, who wanted to turn his nation into a communist state.

When Sukarno intended to build close relations with the US, for instance, President Eisenhower and his foreign policy makers had a lukewarm response. The president himself appeared to be ambivalent. On one hand, he publicly welcomed Sukarno to the US on a state visit in 1956, but on the other hand he gave the Indonesian president the cold shoulder.[10] In his autobiography Sukarno remembered that his conversation with Eisenhower during the visit was "going nowhere" and that the American president refused to talk to him about important matters. Eisenhower, instead, only wanted to talk about films. Recalling the visit Sukarno noted: "At the White House he could manage only to discuss our mutual love for motion pictures."[11] And when Sukarno tried to explain that Asia was in the stage of euphoria from recently-gained independence and that the US should not interfere with Asian affairs, Eisenhower hardly reacted.

When in 1960 Sukarno visited the White House again, Eisenhower insulted Sukarno by keeping him in an anteroom for a period of time without any formal explanation or apology.[12] Sukarno saw that Eisenhower was unwilling to take him seriously, let alone to view him as an equal. Indeed, Eisenhower refused to understand or even show interest in Sukarno's views regarding international relations. On the contrary, in 1956 the Eisenhower administration began to fully support a major CIA clandestine operation

10 The American public was also enthusiastic about the visit. When Sukarno gave a speech to US Congress, congressmen reacted to the speech with a standing ovation.

11 Sukarno, *An Autobiography*, 277.

12 Sukarno said, "I waited and waited. Finally, when it was close to an hour, I spoke sharply to the Chief of Protocol, 'Have I to wait any longer? Because if so, I am leaving right now.' The man went pale. 'Please, I beg of you... wait just a minute, Sir,' he stammered and raced inside. Out came Eisenhower. He had no excuse. He didn't even bother to offer one when I ultimately was ushered in." Ibid., 295.

for supporting a rebellion against Sukarno and his government. The administration considered Sukarno pro-communist, and therefore an obstacle to US interests in Indonesia.

Unlike President Eisenhower, President Kennedy appeared to understand Sukarno. Kennedy had met Sukarno when he came to Indonesia as a visiting congressman from Massachusetts in 1957.[13] The visit had helped Kennedy understand Indonesia in general as well as Sukarno's views on domestic politics and foreign relations. On that basis Kennedy tried to build a relationship with Sukarno different from that of his predecessor.[14] In response, Sukarno felt that Kennedy respected him and his political views.[15] Once he said to Kennedy, "After all, what is international relations but human relations on a larger scale?"[16]

In the context of the Cold War, Kennedy's cordial relations with Sukarno were strategic in wooing Sukarno away from the Soviet bloc. But it was not Kennedy's policy to unseat Sukarno from power or to support a rebellion against him. On the contrary, Kennedy wanted to check the spread of communism in Indonesia by winning Sukarno's heart and the hearts of the Indonesian people. In other words, he wanted to minimize the influence of communism in Indonesia by understanding Sukarno's political views and standing.

With the demise of Kennedy and his administration in 1963, however, US attitudes toward Indonesia changed. Washington returned to the unfriendly approach of the Eisenhower administration—if not worse. President Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's successor, paid less and less attention to Indonesia, while his foreign policy makers became increasingly hostile toward the Indonesian president.

The beginning of President Johnson's administration coincided with the increasingly close relations between Sukarno and the Indonesian

13 John F. Kennedy, Personal Papers, Boston Office 1940-1956; Political Miscellany, 1945-56; Asia Trip, 1951; John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts. See also Baskara T. Wardaya, *Cold War Shadow: United States Foreign Policy Toward Indonesia, 1953-1963*. (Yogyakarta: PUSdEP and Galangpress, 2007), 294-295.

14 John F. Kennedy, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security files, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

15 Sukarno, *An Autobiography*, 7. Sukarno also remarked on Kennedy, "Here was a man with a progressive mind. When I discussed my aid problems with him, he understood. He agreed. Perhaps if Mr. Kennedy were still here our countries might not have drifted so far apart." Ibid., 296.

16 Ibid., 7.

Communist Party (PKI). For Sukarno, building closer relations with the PKI (while controlling it) was important to maintaining Indonesia's unity. In the minds of the Johnson administration's foreign policy makers, however, such an idea was merely a disguised move by Sukarno to push Indonesia into becoming a communist country. And if Indonesia became a communist country, they feared, it would become a serious threat to US interests in Indonesia and in Southeast Asia in general, as indicated by developments in Vietnam.

Soon these policymakers began to seek ways to pressure Sukarno, or even to rid him from Indonesia's political arena. One of the steps they took was to replace US Ambassador to Indonesia Howard Jones—who respected Sukarno's views and personally got along well with him—with Marshall Green, a staunch anti-communist diplomat. As soon as Green began his task as the new US ambassador to Indonesia, he replaced Jones's policy of "getting along" with a policy of "collision course" between Indonesia and the US.

REMOVING SUKARNO FROM POWER

The golden opportunity to bring that "collision course" into full swing came when, in the early hours of 1 October 1965, six high-ranking Indonesian military generals were kidnapped and killed in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta. Before the real culprits behind the kidnapping and killings were found, General Suharto—head of the Indonesian Army's Strategic Reserve Command and an anti-communist—declared the Indonesian Communist Party leaders to be the masterminds of the killings. He and his supporters also implied that Sukarno had quietly supported the murders.

Three weeks after the killing of the generals, violence erupted in Central Java, East Java, Bali, and to a lesser degree, in several other parts of Indonesia. Many accused of communism were massacred.[17] In many cases these people were rounded up, summarily shot, and buried in shallow graves or thrown into the river. In total, between half a million and a million Indonesians were killed during the three-month-long purge. Thousands of people were taken into different prisons located throughout the country, and many of them were later sent to the notorious island-prison of Buru, located in a remote part of the country. They were killed and imprisoned without any legal procedure whatsoever. Many more victims were to be stigmatized and

17 See Baskara T. Wardaya. *Bung Karno Menggugat: Dari Marhaen, CIA, Pembantaian Massal hingga G30S*, 7th edition (Yogyakarta: Galangpress, 2009).

marginalized in Indonesian society long after the 1965 events.

While the killings were taking place, the US embassy in Jakarta reportedly provided a list of 5,000 names of individuals who should be killed.[18] The purpose of the mass killing, as later studies suggested, was not only to eliminate the communists in Indonesia, but also to deprive Sukarno of his nationwide grassroots support and his legitimacy as Indonesia's president. Many US foreign policy makers expected that by depriving Sukarno of his support and legitimacy, they would weaken his hold of the presidency.[19] In the wake of the 1965 mass killings and imprisonment, Sukarno indeed was replaced by General Suharto, who was friendlier toward the US and its interests.

LEARNING THE LESSONS

US policymakers succeeded in helping anti-Sukarno groups in Indonesia to remove the Indonesian president. The removal, however, was violent—it cost innumerable human lives. From the Cold War perspective, the violent removal was partly the result of fear among American foreign policy makers—especially during the Eisenhower and Johnson administrations—that left alone, Sukarno would turn Indonesia into a communist state, thereby jeopardizing American interests. To some extent, this fear was the product of the foreign policy makers' failure to understand and respect the Indonesian president's personal and cultural background, particularly his Javanese-Indonesian background.

The tragic events surrounding Sukarno's removal from the Indonesian presidency were certainly too complex to be attributable solely to US policymakers' failure to understand Sukarno's political attitudes and cultural background. There were more pressing factors, such as Indonesia's domestic power struggle and the ever-increasing east-west tension of the Cold War. However, US foreign policy makers' misapprehension of Sukarno's politics and culture aggravated their fear of Indonesia siding with the Soviets.

By understanding Sukarno's concepts regarding politics, national unity, and international relations in the context of Javanese culture and tradition, US policymakers might have pursued peaceful ways of preventing Sukarno and his nation from becoming antagonistic toward the US and its interests,

18 Edward C. Keefer, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume 26* (Washington: United States Government), 386-387.

19 See, for instance, Peter Dale Scott, "The United States and the Overthrow of Sukarno, 1965-1967," *Pacific Affairs* 58, 2 (summer 1985): 239-64.

saving the lives of so many Indonesians. The US's failure to gain such understanding, we lately learn, unnecessarily helped to create a political situation that led to Indonesia's 1965 bloodbath.

US foreign policy towards Indonesia under Sukarno provides important lessons in foreign policy formulation. One lesson is the that the use of one-sided and fear-driven views as the basis for formulating policies toward a foreign country and its leader can bring tragic consequences to both the country's leader and its people. The Cold War is over, but many foreign policy makers—in the United States and in other countries—still tend to view foreign leaders in simplistic terms, failing to understand them in the context of their personalities and cultural backgrounds. As a result, many foreign policy makers often see the removal of a national leader or military engagement as the only solutions, though these solutions can cost countless military and civilian lives. US military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001 are just two examples.

There are lessons, too, for US-Indonesia relations in the age of the "War on Terror," which both countries claim to be waging. Needless to say, in international diplomacy, sensitivity to local traditions and culture remain important. Perhaps the fact that President Barack Obama spent part of his childhood in Indonesia helps US foreign policy makers better understand Indonesia and prevents the use of violence in dealing with the country—its leaders, and its people.

Diplomacy and Cultural Understanding: Learning from US Policy Toward INdonesia under Sukarno

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