

THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT SOEHARTO

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Paul Keating's article on the death of President Soeharto of Indonesia, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, lays out the case as to why Soeharto had been Australia's principal strategic benefactor between 1965 and 2005. How Soeharto had provided the strategic ballast to Southeast Asia at a time when he was rescuing 100 million Indonesians from abject poverty.

Paul Keating takes to task the Australian media, especially the Fairfax press and the ABC, for what he calls their get-square policy on Soeharto over the death of five Australian journalists in Balibo in Timor. He reminded readers that the *Sydney Morning Herald* in its rabidness had actually editorialised in favour of Australia mounting a military invasion of Indonesian East Timor. The article paints a portrait of Soeharto at odds with the stereotypical one common to the Australian media.

The death of Soeharto, the former President of Indonesia, gives all Australians a chance to assess the value of his life and the relationship between Indonesia and Australia.

More than any figure in the post-Second World War period, including any American president, President Soeharto, by his judgement, goodwill and good sense, had the greatest positive impact on Australia's strategic environment and, hence, on its history.

In the 40 years since he came to power in 1965, Indonesia has been the ballast in Southeast Asian stability and the foundation stone upon which ASEAN was built.

Soeharto took a nation of 120 million people, racked by political turmoil and poverty, from near disintegration to the orderly, ordered and prosperous state that it is today.

In 1965, countries like Nigeria and Zimbabwe were in the same position as Indonesia then. Today, those countries are economic and social wrecks. By contrast, Indonesia is a model of harmony, cohesion and progress. And the principal reason for that is Soeharto.

We can only imagine what Australia's strategic position would be like if Indonesia's 230 million people degenerated into a fractured lawless state reminiscent of Nigeria or Zimbabwe.

For the last 40 years, we have been spending roughly 2 per cent of GDP on defence—about \$20 billion a year in today's dollars. That figure would be more like seven to eight times that, about \$150 billion today, if Indonesia had become a fractured, politically stricken state.

Had General Soeharto's New Order Government not displaced the Sukarno government and the massive PKI Communist Party, the postwar history of Australia would have been completely different. A Communist-dominated Indonesia would have destabilised Australia and all of Southeast Asia.

So why have Australians regarded Indonesia so suspiciously, especially over the last quarter century, when it is evident that Indonesia has been at the fulcrum of our strategic stability?

Unfortunately, I think the answer is Timor and the wilful reporting of Indonesian affairs in Australia by the Australian press.

That press has, in the main, been the Fairfax press and the ABC. Most particularly and especially the *Sydney Morning Herald* and, to a lesser extent, *The Age*.

This rancour and the misrepresentation of the true state of Indonesian social and economic life can be attributed to the get-square policy of the media in Australia for the deaths of the Balibo Five. The five Australian journalists who were encouraged to report from a war zone by their irresponsible proprietors and who were shot and killed by the Indonesian military in Timor.

This event was sheeted back to Soeharto by journalists of the broadsheet press. From that moment, in their eyes, Soeharto became a cruel and intolerant repressor whose life's work in saving Indonesia from destruction was to be viewed, and only viewed, through the prism of Timor.

Rarely did journalists ever mention that Soeharto was President for ten years before he did anything about Timor. He was happy to leave the poverty-stricken and neglected enclave in his archipelago to Portugal, with its 300-year history of hopeless colonisation. Soeharto had enough trouble dragging Indonesia from poverty without needing to tack on another backward province.

But in mid-1975, Communist-allied military officers took control in Portugal and its colonies abroad were taken over by avowedly Marxist regimes. In Timor, a leftist group calling itself the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, or Fretilin, staged a coup, igniting a civil war.

When Fretilin overran the colony by force, Soeharto's government became alarmed. This happened at the height of the Cold War. Saigon had fallen in April of that year. Fretilin then appealed to China and Vietnam for help. Fearing a Cuba on his doorstep, Soeharto reluctantly decided on military intervention.

In his 33 years as President, he embarked upon no other foreign exploit. And he would not have bothered with Timor, had Fretilin not made the going too rough. Indeed, Ramos Horta told the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1996 that 'the immaturity,

irresponsibility and bad judgment of the East Timorese provoked Indonesia into doing what it did'. Xanana Gusmao also told anyone who would listen that it had been a 'bad mistake' for Fretilin to present itself as a Marxist outfit in 1975.

But none of this stopped a phalanx of Australian journalists, mostly from the Fairfax stable and the ABC's *Four Corners*, from reporting Indonesian affairs from that time, such that Australians could only view the great economic transformation of Indonesia and the alleviation of its poverty and its tolerance primarily through the warped and shattered prism of Timor.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* even editorialised in favour of an Australian invasion of Timor, then Indonesian territory. That is, right upfront about it, the *Sydney Morning Herald* urged the Australian government to invade Indonesia. So rabid has Fairfax been about Indonesia and so recreant of Australia's national interest has it been.

Even as late as this week, the *Herald* claimed the achievements of Soeharto's New Order Government were built on sand, nominating Indonesia reeling from crisis to crisis after 1998 when the *Herald* knows that Soeharto did precisely the right thing in calling the IMF in to help and that the IMF, operating under US Treasury prescriptions, kicked the country and Soeharto to pieces.

The decline in Indonesia after 30 years of 7 per cent compound growth under Soeharto had little to do with Soeharto and everything to do with the Asian financial crisis and the short-sighted and ill-informed IMF.

But, more than that, Australian journalists knew but failed to effectively communicate that not only did Soeharto hold his country together, he insisted that Indonesia be a secular state; that is, a Muslim country but not an Islamic or fundamentalist one. In other words, not an Iran.

Wouldn't you imagine that such an issue would be a matter of high and primary importance to communicate to the Australian community? That on our doorstep, there is a secular Indonesian state and not a religious one, run by Sharia law? And wouldn't you, in all reasonableness, give Soeharto full marks for keeping that vast archipelago as a civil society unrepressed by fundamentalism?

Look what happened to us in Bali at the hands of a handful, literally a handful, of Islamic fundamentalists. Imagine the turmoil for Australia if the whole 230 million of Indonesia had a fundamentalist objection to us. But this jaded bunch of Australian journalists could only report how Soeharto was corrupt because his son Tommy might have elbowed his way into some carried equity with an American telephone company or his daughter something with a road builder. True as those generalisations might have been, in terms of the weight of Australia's interests, the deeds of Soeharto's public life massively outweigh anything in his private affairs.

I got to know Soeharto quite well. He was clever and utterly decisive and had a kind view of Australia. The peace and order of his country, its religious and ethnic tolerance, and the peace and the order of Southeast Asia came from his goodwill towards neighbouring states and from his wisdom. He was self-effacing and shy to a

fault. One had to tease him out of himself to get him going, but once he got going, his intellectualism took over.

Soeharto lived in what we would call in Australia a rather old and shabby McMansion in Jakarta. I have been there on a number of occasions. He lived as simply as anyone of his high standing could live.

But *Time* magazine claimed that Soeharto has stashed away \$30-billion-odd, as if those ning-nongs would know, presumably so he could race off to live it up in Miami or in the Bahamas. Errant nonsense. Soeharto was an Indonesian who was always going to remain an Indonesian. He lived a simple life and could never have changed that.

I do not doubt that his rapacious family had the better of him and got away with lumps of capital that they had not earned. Soeharto was a disciplined leader, but not a disciplined father. But to compare him with the likes of Marcos is nothing short of dastardly.

The descriptions of Soeharto as a brutal dictator living a corrupt high life at the expense of his people and running an expansionist military regime are untrue. Even Soeharto's annexation of Timor was not expansionist. It had everything to do with national security and nothing to do with territory.

Like all leaders, Soeharto had his failings. His greatest failing was to underestimate the nature of the society he had nurtured. As his economic stewardship had led to food sufficiency, education, health and declines in infant mortality, so too those changes had given rise to a middle class as incomes rose. Soeharto should have let political representation grow as incomes grew. But he distrusted the political classes. He believed that they would not put the national interest first, had no administrative ability and were utterly indecisive, if not corrupt. He told me this on a number of occasions. He would not let the reins go. Partly because he did not want to lose them, partly because he really had no one to give them to.

Soeharto's problem was he had too little faith in his own people, the very people he cared for most.

Whatever political transition he may have wished to have had, it all blew up on him with the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98. He had no democratic transition in place and in the economic chaos, political forces wanted him to go.

In January 1998, nearly two years after I had left the prime ministership of Australia, at my own initiative and my own expense, I flew to Jakarta to see him the day he signed the IMF agreement with the IMF Managing Director, Michel Camdessus.

The IMF had tragically overplayed its hand the previous November and Soeharto was giving it a chance to dig itself out of a hole. He had a small window of opportunity. I thought that as a former head of government who was on friendly terms with him, I at least owed him advice of a kind I knew he would never get inside Indonesia: to take the opportunity of the IMF interregnum to say that he, Soeharto, would contest the next election but that he would not complete the term. That he

would stay long enough to see the IMF reforms into place and then hand the presidency over to his Vice President.

Had he taken this advice, the process of political transformation would have been completely orderly. And a new administration could set up the organs of democracy.

I discussed this issue with Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, both of whom had Soeharto's and Indonesia's best interests at heart. Both gentlemen believed that I was in a better position to broach this subject with President Soeharto than either of them. For two hours I had President Soeharto in his house with his State Secretary Moerdiano and his interpreter Widodo. Fifteen minutes into the conversation when I was making the case why he should step down, he stopped Widodo's translation and took my advice in English directly. Moerdiano said to me in an aside at the door, 'I think you have got him'.

Soeharto followed me to the door, put his arms around my shoulders and said 'God bless you' as I left. As it turned out, I didn't quite have him, and he hung on thinking he could slip through one more time.

But the crisis and the behaviour of the IMF with the American Treasury had marooned him. Completely determined to act constitutionally, he turned over his singular power, at his own initiative, to his Vice President to avoid any upheaval of the kind Indonesia had experienced during earlier transitions.

The new president, Habibie, then, by all due process, picked up the reins of government to deal with the ongoing financial reconstruction and the long process of democratisation.

When the Attorney General Robert McClelland and I arrived in Indonesia for his funeral last Monday, we drove the 30-odd kilometres from the airport at Solo to the mausoleum where he would be buried alongside his wife. For not one metre of those 30-odd kilometres was there no person present. In some places they would be six and eight deep, all holding their baskets of petals to throw at his cortège. They all knew they were burying the builder of their society and all felt the moment.

How many Australian leaders would have a million or so people to grieve for them beside the roadway? Soeharto's funeral was a tribute to what his life truly meant. I felt honoured to have been there but more than that, to have known him.