

Remembering Suharto

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For all the problems that he left behind, he left Indonesia healthier and wealthier than he found it in 1965

By JAMES CASTLE

A GIANT has died. We will not see his like again. Former Indonesian president Suharto proved himself to be one of the most powerful, effective and feared leaders of modern Asia during the three decades (1966-1998) that he ruled Indonesia with an iron fist and an actor's smile.

It will take many years to put his era in its proper perspective and understand what his iron rule meant to Indonesia and the region. His passing has sparked numerous bitter and emotional debates that will not end soon. Whatever the ultimate verdict, he is most likely to be remembered by history as the last great Asian despot, one who shaped modern Indonesia much the way Bismarck shaped Germany a century earlier.

Dictionaries define 'despot' simply as 'tyrant, oppressor, absolute ruler'.

All these appellations apply to Mr Suharto. Indeed, the skill, cunning and ruthlessness that characterised his domination of Indonesia for over thirty years were typical of the leadership style that created the powerful colonial empires of the 19th and 20th centuries and the great feudal states of Asia they replaced.

These traits served him well in leading Indonesia from chaos and poverty to stability and growth. They failed him when confronted by the demands for more equity, participation and transparency that emerged from the more educated and prosperous generation that was born from his initial successes. And they were only one side of this subtle leader.

To assess the Suharto presidency, one must begin before his bloody rise to power in the wake of an abortive coup attempt in 1965. In the rush to condemn the human rights abuses that characterised Mr Suharto's rule, it is rarely noted that he did not emerge from a vacuum to subvert a pristine, well-governed state. It was not Mr Suharto who destroyed Indonesia's first great experiment with democracy in the 1950s.

The democracy of that period was sabotaged by the plethora of intellectually and financially corrupt parties and politicians that emerged in the wake of the country's independence struggle (1945-1949). The coup de grace was administered by Mr Suharto's charismatic but ineffective predecessor, Sukarno, who promulgated a self-serving concept of 'Guided Democracy' in 1957 that was every bit as cynical as the worst aspects of Mr Suharto's 'New Order' that followed.

Much remains murky about this violent chapter in Indonesian history. What is clear, however, is that Mr Suharto, a then little-known, poorly-educated and seemingly marginalised military officer, emerged as the man of the hour. He skilfully seized control of a chaotic situation and within only a few weeks, had begun to lay the groundwork for an era of authoritarian rule which was to last for over 30 years.

But these events were not the real measure of the man. After all, many military warlords and civilian tyrants have seized power only to lose it themselves after several months. Many others have endured, only to impoverish their countries and leave their people poorer, if not wiser, when they depart the stage. Mr Suharto, on the contrary, endured and his country experienced its most prolonged period of growth in a century.

Even with the country's disastrous economic collapse in 1998, there is no doubt Indonesia was much better off economically at its lowest point during the Asian Crisis than it was in the 1960s when it faced crushing poverty and inflation rates of 600 per cent and more. For all the problems that Mr Suharto left behind, there can be no doubt he left Indonesia healthier and wealthier than he found it in 1965.

Despotism implies authoritarian control of the instruments of power and the suppression of human rights. This was certainly true of Indonesia under Mr Suharto. Still, one cannot but stand in awe of the single-minded efficiency with which this peasant general cajoled, co-opted and coerced not only the country's best and brightest, but also its multitude of frequently contentious ethnic groups, religious faiths and factions into an integrated nation-state where, to a remarkable and unprecedented degree, the writ of Jakarta prevailed from Sabang to Merauke.

Effective and far-sighted

The administrative system he established was effective and far-sighted. And that he was able to attract the services and retain the support of brilliant and selfless Indonesian nationalists like Widjojo Nitisastro, Muhamad Sadli and Ali Alatas among many others, is proof that something much more important and sophisticated than simple ruthless tyranny or political gangsterism was taking place in Mr Suharto's Indonesia.

On the dark side, he exploited crony capitalism which continues to obstruct democratic Indonesia's efforts to reform and modernise. Crony capitalism so characterises the Suharto Era that it has its own Indonesian acronym - KKN or Korupsi, Kronisme dan Nepotisme - an acronym that is so embedded in the culture that it retains its currency.

Today, a decade later, KKN remains Indonesian shorthand for the continued power of corrupt elements at the highest levels of government, politics and business.

The tragedy of Mr Suharto is that for all his economic achievements, he failed in the end to capitalise on his own success. Instead of planning for a reasonable and institutionalised succession in the 1990s like his contemporaries, Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew, an ageing Mr Suharto further entrenched the KKN system upon which he had relied for so long in a misguided effort to protect his legacy and advance the fortunes of his children and their minions.

This failure was due in perhaps equal measure to his supreme self-confidence and his inability to understand when enough was enough, the yin and the yang of so many great men. These traits and the failure to restrain the greed of his family and their retainers as his own days at the helm were clearly drawing to an end, assured that his reign would end in trauma and tears.

One must also include Mr Suharto's disastrous East Timor adventure on the black side of his ledger. Probably the greatest single blunder of his presidency, the invasion of East Timor was an unmitigated disaster for both Indonesia and the people of Timor.

The devastation of East Timor is well known. The cost to Indonesia was also high. During Mr Suharto's rule, the annexation of East Timor created a wedge in the relationship between Indonesia and many of its Western supporters, Australia in particular, and, to a lesser extent, the United States and some European countries.

Most poisonous, the rancour generated by Indonesia's occupation of East Timor put added heat and emotion into the ultimately sterile 'Cultural Values' debate, which was embraced most publicly on the Asian side by Lee Kuan Yew and Mohammad Mahathir, but which was equally deeply, if more silently, felt in Indonesia which, since its independence, had been much more closed and insecure than Singapore and Malaysia.

By creating a false dichotomy over the virtues democracy and its appropriateness in different cultures, the Asian Values wedge exacerbated a cultural, if not a racial, divide and created a sense of grievance among much of the Indonesian elite, even those who were genuinely pro-Western and who had become increasingly disenchanted with other abuses of the Suharto family later in his rule. They felt that they were being held to a double standard by 'the West'.

They believed that the 'Western Values' countries had expanded their own hegemonies through even more brutal oppression of indigenous minorities than anything Indonesia was attempting in East Timor which was, in their minds, a natural part of Indonesia in any case. It hardened many against liberal reforms and undermined the proponents of reforms that might otherwise have been contemplated. This sterile debate is still frequently used by opponents of liberal reform who claim that Indonesia is 'not ready' for democracy or is 'demo-crazy'.

But there was another side to Mr Suharto - that of the visionary leader who took five-year plans seriously and focused the bulk of his efforts for the first decade of his rule on establishing order and security, rebuilding Indonesian agriculture and instituting the most successful, non-coercive family planning programme in the developing world, this last despite significant opposition early in the programme from conservative religious leaders. Indeed, Mr Suharto was a genius in deconstructing complex development goals and converting them into clear, simple programmes that he then pursued with tenacity and consistency. In addition to driving the family planning programme for which he was awarded the United Nations' annual population award in 1994, he relentlessly promoted Panca Sila - Indonesia's Five Principles that, among other things, unequivocally recognise freedom of religion. He also developed and drove an irrigation reconstruction programme that ultimately led to years of self-sufficiency in rice, Indonesia's staple food crop.

Prior to the Asian Crisis, the incidence of Indonesians living beneath the poverty level had dropped from around 50 per cent to nearly 10 per cent under Mr Suharto's leadership. The average life span had increased from the 40s to well over 60. Literacy rates exceeded 90 per cent and the number of Indonesians completing elementary and secondary schools steadily increased. Per capita income growth had propelled Indonesia into the World Bank's list of middle income countries.

Peace and cooperation

And let it not be forgotten that it was Mr Suharto who brought Indonesia back into the United Nations. He sought peace and cooperation with his neighbours, and halted the military adventurism of his predecessor. He made Indonesia a cornerstone of Asean which helped provide the security and confidence that propelled the economies of its member states forward to reap the benefits of globalisation and growth for a quarter of a century while many of their neighbours kept their borders closed and languished.

In the end, Mr Suharto was the victim of his own success. Because of his development successes, Indonesia changed greatly but he did not. The country was already chafing under his rule when the Asian Crisis arrived - a crisis that neither started in, nor was caused by, Indonesia. Clearly in his own personal end game, however, for the first time in 30 years, Mr Suharto's response to a crisis was woefully inadequate.

His health had begun to fail and, a recent widower, he had become increasingly isolated from the high quality advisers who had served him so ably throughout his rule. Instead, trusting fewer and fewer of his surviving colleagues, he surrounded himself with his spoiled children and their retainers who could not see beyond their own short-term greed.

Mr Suharto made his last great contribution to the country by surrendering power peacefully instead of instituting a bloody crackdown to preserve his reign. Like his rise to power, events surrounding Mr Suharto's last days are not yet clear.

Fortunately, however, attempts by other parties to incite civil insurrection by fomenting a vicious anti-Chinese pogrom failed in May 1998 and a new government came to power that calmed the country and began a march to democracy.

Only time will tell if the country has the resilience to overcome the negative aspects of his legacy and ultimately build on the improvements that occurred in health, infrastructure and education under his rule.

One week after his death and 10 years after his fall, democracy is thriving in Indonesia. Aceh is at peace. Violent sectarian radicals are on the run. The economy is growing at its highest rate since the pre-crisis boom. The nation is united. Indonesia's prospects are excellent indeed.

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