



Heroes and villains

by Scott Burchill

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In his first lecture on Indonesian soil after being banished for 26 years, Benedict Anderson spoke about the bewildered expression on the faces of his Indonesian students over the years at Cornell University whenever he asked them "who in Indonesia today do you admire and look up to?"

For Anderson the inability of his young Indonesian students to name their national heroes is a terrifying indictment of a deformed political culture, dominated in recent years by monsters such as Suharto, Murdani and Wiranto.

However, the same question posed to young Americans or Australians would have elicited a similar response. In the media of both countries, Indonesia has been a regular source of bad news. This is not entirely surprising, given the brutality and corruption of the Suharto dictatorship and the occupation of East Timor.

But why have we not heard about the inspiring and courageous dissenters who, at great personal risk, resisted the New Order regime and everything that it stood for? Why did they remain anonymous when their counterparts in Eastern Europe - the 'refuseniks' - were so publicly lauded in the West? The answers to these questions tell us much about our own diplomatic culture.

While Alexander Solzhenitsyn was feted in the West for his personal indictment of Stalin's gulags, Indonesia's Pramodya Ananta Toer never appeared on the radar screens of Western political elites. The author of the acclaimed *Buru Quartet* and *The Mute's Soliloquy*, which recounts his horrific experiences while incarcerated on Buru Island from 1969 to 1979, wasn't the kind of political prisoner that interested Washington or Canberra during the Cold War - he was a man of the left.

No-one who has read Pramodya's memoirs would be under any misapprehensions about the true nature of the Suharto regime, which probably explains why his books never found their way onto the shelves of the Jakarta lobby in Australia: for them, Suharto's crimes were always a case of see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil.

Similarly, Carmel Budiardjo's detention without trial (1968-71) and her efforts to free her fellow political prisoners, detailed in *Surviving Indonesia's Gulag*, was unlikely to be reviewed by those promoting the closest possible relationship between Canberra and the dictatorship in Jakarta.

Budiardjo also founded TAPOL to campaign on behalf of Indonesia's prisoners of conscience, remarkably an organisation and a cause almost unknown in Australia and the US. Given his predilection for quoting the number of human rights representations he made while Australia's foreign minister, it would be interesting to know how many Gareth Evans made on behalf of tapols (Indonesian political prisoners) during his term. One suspects not many, and possibly none.

There are hundreds of others with even lower profiles, such as the elderly sisters who run the Research Institute for Victims of the '65-'66 Killings outside Jakarta while under constant harassment and the threat of attack. They work quietly with extraordinary courage to account for the crimes of their country's leaders. These remarkable people deserve the support of Australia and the United States, but are unlikely to ever receive it.

Pramoedya, Budiardjo, Colonel Abdul Latief and thousands more were not only the victims of a cruel and sadistic regime, they shared another unfortunate fate. They had the misfortune to be the political prisoners of a government ideologically allied to the West. By definition they became invisible.

Suharto was not only anti-communist, he was also admired in Australia for bringing "stability" to the region. According to Opposition leader Kim Beazley, "Australians pay far too little attention to the value ... of the stability" which he "brought to the Indonesian archipelago" - without detailing just what was being "stabilised" there, such as political repression, the denial of basic human rights, endemic corruption, sadistic cruelty, torture and mass murder. Over 32 years Suharto's "stability" took a minimum of 800,000 lives and possibly as many as 2 million in both Indonesia proper and East Timor, a record as vile as Pol Pot's and infinitely worse than Saddam's or Milosevic's.

A reckoning is due, if not immediately. An editorial in *The Jakarta Post* last April puts this and Suharto's forthcoming corruption trial in their proper perspective: "If the goal is to show that justice will be upheld in this country, then surely corruption, as bad as it is, is the least sinful misdeed that Suharto committed during his 32 years of tyrannical rule. What about the atrocities, from the summary executions of suspected communists to the killing of people in East Timor, Irian Jaya, Aceh and Tanjung Priok? If the government wants to show that justice the rule of law prevail in this country, then these and other heinous crimes committed during his reign should be the reasons for the prosecution of Suharto. Not corruption."

Even if Gough Whitlam still believes that "Suharto is a reasonable and honourable man" and the foreign editor of *The Australian* thinks that "in human rights there is a case for Suharto" (Greg Sheridan), a growing number of courageous Indonesians are no longer frightened of speaking and confronting the truth. They are the real heroes of their country. To find them, however, our leaders will need to stop consorting with "the elite...that implemented fascism and ran the country by terror" (Pramoedya Ananta Toer) and focus their attention on those Indonesians struggling against enormous odds to restore pride and honour to their country.