

Official commemoration of the 1965 coup (Photo: A. Vltchek)

According to the United Nations and World Bank, which joined forces in September 2007 in a Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative in an attempt to recover billions of dollars stolen from developing countries, the corruption and nepotism during and after Suharto's reign were on a scale with few if any precedents: Suharto tops the list of embezzlers with an estimated 15-35 billion dollars spirited out of the country, well ahead of former Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, former president of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) Mobutu Sese Seko, and Sani Abacha of Nigeria. An impressive achievement considering that Suharto's salary in 1999 - the year he was forced to resign after massive demonstrations that shook Jakarta - was only US$1764 a month. Critics say that Suharto and his family actually amassed more than 45 billion dollars. The family is said to control some 36,000 km² of real estate in Indonesia, including 100,000 m² of prime office space in Jakarta.

But even to allude to such information can still be illegal in Indonesia. The UN and World Bank report on Suharto embezzlement arrived in September 2007, just one week after Indonesia's Supreme Court ordered Time Magazine to pay 106 million dollars in damages to the former dictator for defaming him in a 1999 article accusing Suharto and his relatives of amassing billions of dollars during his regime. Indeed, Indonesian journalists hew to the unwritten rule that critical reporting on the three crucial issues of religion, the military and corruption are taboo.

Offers made by international organizations to the Indonesian government - to help to identify, freeze and repatriate money from accounts held by Suharto's family abroad - were spurned and issue simply disappeared from the media.

Suharto was charged with embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars of state funds following his resignation, but the government quietly dropped the case on grounds of the dictator's poor health. In 2007, state prosecutors filed a civil suit seeking to recover $440 million of state funds and a further $1 billion in damages for alleged misuse of funds held by one of Suharto's charitable foundations. But President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who had risen as a general under the Suharto regime, instructed