Attorney General Hendarman Supandji to seek an out-of-court settlement of the civil case with the Suharto family, since the former dictator was fighting for his life in Pertamina Hospital.

Like almost all mainstream Indonesian politicians, President Yudhoyono has consistently refused to criticize Suharto openly. "Pak Harto was a leader of this nation. His contributions to this nation are not small. As a human being, however, like other people, Pak Harto has weaknesses and mistakes," he told Reuters on January 16, referring to Suharto by his endearing name.

The once opposition news magazine Tempo - arguably the most influential in Indonesia - ran several articles sympathetic to Suharto in its January 15-21 issue. An unsigned "Opinion Piece" (the cover story) ends with these words:

...Suharto has lost the chance to explain that he does not own a cent overseas, as he has insisted many times. He has not had the opportunity to respond to accusations by the people he led for 31 years. We cannot turn back the clock. So what is the point of discussing something that is most unlikely? This is also not the time to negotiate a civil case against the former president. Let the man who is at the end of life's long journey have some peace."

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Since Suharto was hospitalised, not a single leading Indonesian political figure has dared to mention the former dictator 's responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians. No demonstration shook Jakarta. The Tempo headline speaks of "A Chorus of Forgiving Voices."

The Jakarta Post, the pro-establishment English language daily newspaper, on January 12, captioned its front page photos: "In Their Prayers: Vice President Jusuf Kalla... visits former President Soeharto at Pertamina Hospital in South Jakarta on Friday." Even human rights activists made the pilgrimage to the hospital in the political ritual of the moment. "Suciwati..., the widow of human rights advocate Munir Said Thalib, and relatives of other victims of human rights violations place flowers in the lobby of Pertamina Hospital on Friday. They said they would continue with their legal battles against former president Soeharto for human rights crimes that occurred during his rule. All the visitors said they were praying for Soeharto."

What the Jakarta Post 'forgot' to mention was that many human rights activists, as reported by the Indonesian language daily Kompas, wished for Suharto's recovery so that he could stand trial.

Garda Sembiring, head of PECthe Indonesia NGO which seeks to disclose human rights crimes, including the mass murders that took place during the 1965 military coup that brought Suharto to power was himself a prisoner of conscience during the Suharto era. In a phone interview he expressed outrage at the present situation: "Everybody is now talking about Suharto's illness. I am in shock! Political elites are turning the situation into a political drama. They have a motive: they want the Indonesian people to forget the past. And me personally? Why should I forgive him? I'd love to see him recover, so he could be brought to justice. That's why it would be better for him and for all of us if he survives."

Attempts to try Suharto on charges of genocide have failed above all because of the unwillingness of the post 1999 political establishment to openly deal with the past. Unlike South Africa and the 'Southern Cone' of South America, Indonesia experienced no profound political change in the wake of Suharto's ouster. The country has continued to be ruled ever since by the same business and military elites, with the exception of the brief presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid who was forced out of power when he sought to separate religion from the state, apologise to the victims of the1965 massacres, and introduce social changes in Indonesia's market-driven system. While it belatedly became necessary for both the United States and top Indonesian military leaders to force Suharto's recognition after three decades of rule, precisely that recognition paved the way for protecting their interests under a new electoral regime.

To be continued.

Suharto, the second president of Indonesia, died on January 27, 2008. This article was first published in Japan Focus on January 16, 2008.

Andre Vltchek wrote this report for Japan Focus. Posted January 16, 2008. Reprinted by permission.

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