intellectuals of different races had mingled were destroyed and replaced by anonymous concrete walls of shopping malls and parking lots. Books were burned, including those of Southeast Asia's greatest novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who became a long-term prisoner of conscience in Buru concentration camp, which housed 14,000 political prisoners. Pramoedya, until his death in 2006, never forgave Suharto. Not for his personal suffering, but for "having no culture; for turning Indonesia into a market; for destroying Sukarno's spirit of enthusiasm."

Indonesia after 1965 was experiencing its "Year Zero", like Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. It closed itself for several years, until those who were targeted were rounded up and slaughtered. The Brantas river in East Java, as well as others throughout the archipelago, were clogged with corpses and red with blood, according to eyewitnesses.

The West did not protest. Suharto was welcomed as a valuable ally by the United States, Britain, Australia and other nations who were delighted to have the leader of Indonesia a free-marketer and an ally in the Cold War rather than the populist and non-aligned movement proponent, Sukarno.

In the wake of the coup and bloodbath, people throughout the far-flung archipelago were kept in ignorance, bombarded with propaganda, and isolated them from the rest of the world. No films but Hollywood and local production, with some syrupy soap from all over the world. No serious topics. Only pop, outdated music. The Chinese language was banned, and so were words like "atheism" or "class". For much of the rest of the world, it was easy to believe the mass media, which hailed Suharto as an ally and statesman. It was the time of the Cold War and the major American preoccupation was Vietnam. When the dust settled, bodies buried, washed away or decomposed, Indonesia opened again for business and tourism. The Indonesian people, for the most part, were terrorized into silence, with no memory and no desires except to move rhythmically to the latest pop tunes and prayers, close to starvation but grinning as ordered: lobotomized.

Suharto, the man now fighting for his life, was in charge.

Then came East Timor. In 1975, General Suharto sent troops to the newly independent nation that had long suffered from Portuguese colonial neglect; a country that had just won independence after several hundred years of Portuguese colonial rule. What followed was a massacre performed by many familiar faces. 200,000 people one third of the entire nation - vanished. But the "time" the Cold War again played into Suharto's hands. He justified invasion of the defenceless little nation by a bombastic "We will not tolerate a Cuba next to our shores" and received applause and a green light once again, from the US, Australia and others. Repression in Aceh and Papua followed.

Whatever the scale of Suharto's embezzlement, he may be responsible for more deaths than any other dictator since World War II.

"I am very disappointed with SBY (President) and the Attorney General", Ditasari, leader of the only progressive opposition party in Indonesia Papernas commented. "Their Statements make no sense. We shouldn't hesitate to go on with the legal process, despite Suharto's illness. But the government is scared of those who support Suharto."

Thousands of teachers were murdered. Artists were silenced, film studios closed. Places where intellectuals of different races had mingled were destroyed and replaced by anonymous concrete walls of shopping malls and parking lots. Books were burned, including those of Southeast Asia's greatest novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who became a long-term prisoner of conscience in Buru concentration camp, which housed 14,000 political prisoners.

Even as he lay dying, Suharto continued to hold the entire country hostage. With fear and opportunism, business and political leaders prostrated before his bed. In Central Java, country folks say that he sold his soul to black magic, which is why he cannot depart from this world. Everybody seems to be petrified about saying anything that might be deemed inappropriate or offensive.

Behind the windows of the hospital, the decaying city is covered by smog. Contrary to official statistics, more than half of Indonesians live in misery (even the World Bank classifies 49% of Indonesians as poor). Beyond the hospital windows lies an enormous, poverty-stricken, uncompetitive and uneducated nation, suffering from decades of fear and a legacy of blind obedience.

Tens of millions of Indonesians can still hear cries of terror of those who were hacked and beaten to death, decades ago. But they have learned to doubt their own eyes and ears and, finally, to obey.

Suharto may die a free man, surrounded by elites offering servile compliments. But perhaps, even in a coma, he will not be able to suppress some memories. It is not easy to forget a million people, a million deaths. Standing next to each other, they can fill enormous space and their screams, coming in unison, can break the walls of any - even a private hospital.

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

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