

*Sukarno and the Indonesian Coup: The Untold Story*

by

**Helen-Louise Hunter**  
**Book Launch and Discussion**

With remarks by

**Ed Masters, former US Ambassador to Indonesia**  
**Hugh Tovar and Paul Gardner, retired senior U.S. Government officers**

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At an early evening book launch, **Helen-Louise Hunter** discussed her recently released work, *Sukarno and the Indonesian Coup: The Untold Story*. The book, an elaboration of her highly regarded (and initially classified) CIA report written three years after the coup of September 30, 1965, details the involvement of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the role of Sukarno in the affair.

Introductory remarks were delivered by Hugh Tovar, retired senior officer who served at the American Embassy in Jakarta during the coup attempt. Tovar mentioned that he first met Hunter to discuss the coup about a year after returning to Washington, DC from Jakarta, and still considers her original report to be the best paper written on the topic.

Tovar began by discussing his recollections of the events in Jakarta. He first heard about it over the radio on the morning of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965, when it was announced that the “Revolutionary Council” had taken over the government, supposedly to protect President Sukarno from a CIA-backed coup by a council of generals. *Harian Rakyat*, the newspaper of the PKI, ran an editorial the next morning praising the Revolutionary Council.

Later, Tovar noted, shocking reports began to come in to the embassy from around the archipelago of bloodshed. An accurate count of the number of deaths can never be known. The embassy settled on a figure of 250,000 victims – the number from a best-guess consensus. In time, critics inflated the numbers to as high as one million deaths, but Tovar stressed the lack of evidence to support *any* figures.

Tovar noted that everyone at the embassy felt that the PKI was behind the coup. Less clear, however, was Sukarno’s role. Tovar was sure that Sukarno must have given his blessing for the coup to take place. This, he stated, is the core conclusion of Hunter’s cogent and fascinating book.

After this introduction, Helen-Louise Hunter addressed the audience. She noted that she had been an analyst at the CIA for only six years when the coup took place. She knew nothing about Indonesia at the time, but because she had written previously on another coup for the Agency (on Zanzibar), she was given the task of analyzing *Gestapu*. She had no preconceived ideas or any commitment to prevailing opinions on the subject.

Unlike today, Hunter noted, the focus on

Indonesia was not on religion or ethnicity, but rather on the communist versus non-communist struggle for leadership. In 1965, Sukarno was a well-known figure in the United States because of his radical ideas and leadership of the non-aligned movement. Americans may also have been familiar with the PKI (the Communist Party of Indonesia) and its leader, D.N. Aidit, because of the party's status as the largest communist party in a non-communist country.

Hunter described the prevailing opinion of Aidit and the PKI at the time – advanced by Ben Anderson and other Cornell University scholars – that the communists would never have used violence to seize power directly. These scholars, therefore, rushed to judgment that the PKI could not have been involved in the coup; instead it was a mid-level, internal army uprising led by a Colonel Untung to foil a coup attempt by a purported Generals' Council. This conclusion, reached as early as October 3, 1965 – far too early for accurate information to be available – is a major reason for the lingering misinformation about the affair.

No mention, however, was made of Sukarno's possible role in the coup, despite his odd behavior afterwards. For example, he did not attend the state funeral for the six generals and the aide-de-camp of the seventh and key targeted general, Nasution. He even refused to express sympathy for the death of General Nasution's five year old daughter, who had been killed in the crossfire of the attack.

Hunter noted that she had access to internal Indonesian army (TNI) interrogation reports for the writing of the book. These reports were not prepared for outside consumption, and there is no likelihood that they could have been fabricated to such detail, inasmuch as they were conducted in widely dispersed locations in Indonesia, yet substantially reinforced one another. She noted that Untung's statements were entirely believable, and he was the only conspirator

to express remorse after the event. He seems to have genuinely believed in the line that the Generals' Council planned an impending coup, and only later did he realize that he had been duped by the PKI disinformation.

The international importance of the failed coup cannot be overstated. Not only did it hamper the international communist movement, but it upset the world balance of power, bringing Indonesia closer to the western camp under the successor government of President Soeharto. Nevertheless, this has been paralleled by lingering confusion over the coup events and motivations. Hunter expressed hope that her book will finally end the controversy and mystery surrounding these events.

**Paul Gardner**, who served as a political officer in the US Embassy in Jakarta at the time, offered his recollections of the coup. He told a story of asking his Indonesian driver the reason for the troop movements in the city that he noticed on the morning of October 1. His driver explained that the soldiers were simply preparing for Armed Forces day on October 5. When the Ambassador, Marshall Green, later asked Gardner what was happening, he confidently told him the same answer. Only later, when monitoring the morning radio broadcast, did he find out what was really going on.

Former US Ambassador to Indonesia, **Ed Masters**, who was serving as political counselor in the embassy at the time of the coup attempt, was next to comment. He stated it is important to get Hunter's book on the record to offset the effort to rewrite history.

He spoke of his experiences during the coup. He arrived in Jakarta one year before Gestapu. Howard Jones, then the US ambassador, believed that Sukarno was a good person. Hoping to convince Masters of this, he arranged a small dinner party with Sukarno. But the dinner did not go as Jones had hoped in terms of swaying Masters'

opinion, as Sukarno showed no interest in substantive matters affecting Indonesia but only wanted to talk about Hollywood movie stars.

Masters came to the conclusion that Sukarno, whose speeches were peppered with references to NECOLIM (neo-colonialism, colonialism and imperialism) and proclamations that Indonesia was about to enter the “socialist stage of the revolution,” supported the communists.

He remembered that the first report from the embassy to Washington, on the afternoon of October 1, speculated that Sukarno may have died or become incapacitated and that the PKI had made a grab for power before the army could do so—a plausible but incorrect view. The first long analysis, on October 5, taking note of the discovery of the bodies on October 4 in a well on Halim Air Base, speculated that the ending of Sukarno's power was underway but the process would not be quick or easy. Actually it was over in five months, and effective power was transferred to General Soeharto on March 11, 1966.

Masters said there are two fundamental questions about the affair. First, what was Sukarno's role? He agrees with Hunter's assessment that Sukarno at the very least must have given his approval for the PKI to initiate the coup events.

His second question concerns the number of reported deaths in the aftermath of the event. Conventional wisdom seems to have settled at 500,000; although some published accounts put it as high as one or even two million. Java and Bali are among the world's most densely populated areas, and graves to hold anywhere near these numbers of victims have not been found. He said that in his view the number killed was probably somewhere between the figure of 105,000 used by an embassy officer who made a detailed study in a published article and the minimum figure of 250,000 offered by the

Australian scholar Harold Crouch in his book on the Indonesian military.

But, he said, in the final analysis we are unlikely ever to know for certain at this late date.

Other reminiscences from the audience related to the reactions of the Indonesia desk at the State Department desk in Washington to the coup events. Among U.S. officials, only former Defense Attaché Colonel George Benson knew Soeharto personally. The State Department only became aware several months afterward of the publication of the Cornell paper and its full import concerning coup events.

Another audience participant spoke of Sukarno's early ties with the PKI and his Dutch communist mentor going back to the 1920s. Sukarno in an MPR (Peoples Consultative Assembly) speech had signaled a change in doctrine toward the implementation of full socialism (codeword for PKI rule). Moreover, there were other developments presaging the coup, including controversy over arming of a people's militia to counter the Army and the importation of weapons from China.

**Q: Other than the perils of falling into the trap of misinformation, what lessons can be drawn from this coup that can be applied to the world today?**

**Hunter:** When looking in hindsight at the odd statements being made by Sukarno at the time, they are easy to understand. But at the time, the relevance of these statements was missed. Covert, clandestine reporting—human intelligence—is key to understanding events. Sukarno fell ill for nine days, and Chinese doctors had been called in and had diagnosed his possible impending death from kidney disease. This diagnosis precipitated the coup, although it was later learned that it had not been a kidney attack at all. This colossal misdiagnosis produced a major miscalculation, and was missed by

all the parties.

**Q:** There is a question of the authenticity of the transcript of an interrogation of the PKI leader D.N. Aidit that was published after the coup. Do you think that was authentic or not?

**Hunter:** I think it was not authentic. I believe he was killed on the spot by the

Army when he was discovered in hiding.

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Copies of *Sukarno and the Indonesian Coup: The Untold Story* are available for purchase online from Praeger Security International ([www.praeger.com/PSI](http://www.praeger.com/PSI)) or from Amazon.com.