

Review Article

SUHARTO: FATHER OF DEVELOPMENT?

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Biography and history are not the same. Writing them requires overlapping but distinct skills, and the works must have a different focus. Their readership may make different calls. In a biography some readers – and publishers – seek for the intensely personal, even indulge a contemporary prurience that is often poorly in accord with the attitudes that prevailed during the subject's life and the evidence it preserved and opens the way to misinterpretation. For others biography is a way to history, either because it is more entertaining, less dry as dust, or because personality is perceived as central to the historical process. That concept lay behind the 'life and times' approach, though often the outcome might be some kind of hagiography or an epistolary exchange, sometimes bowdlerised.

'It abstracts a man whose public action should not be abstracted', Maurice Cowling wrote of the contribution political biography might make to understanding British politics in the 1920s. 'It implies linear connections between one situation and the next. In fact connections were not linear. The system was a circular relationship: a shift in one element changed the position of all others in the relation to the rest.' (*The Impact of Labour*, Cambridge, 1971, 6). But a sophisticated version of the approach has its validity for historians who wish to explore the role of humans in history. It is possible – and some would say necessary – to analyse events in terms not only of conditions and circumstances but of decision-making. Statesmen are, to borrow Bismarck's phrases, those who wait to hear 'the step of God sounding through events, and then spring forward and seize the hem of his garment' (M. Balfour, *The Kaiser and his Times*, London, 1964, 106). Men shape history but are also shaped by it. A biography gives the historian a special chance to measure those dimensions.

It is not surprising that, while there are some who specialise in biography, historians who have not done so are attracted by the prospect of turning their hand to it. Professor Elson has now joined their ranks. His previous work has dealt more with the mass than the individual, more with

production than politics. It has always been well-researched, keenly argued, presented with a kind of sober eloquence, as *Village Java under the Cultivation System* (Sydney; Allen and Unwin, 1994) and *The End of the Peasantry in Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) amply demonstrate. His new biography of Suharto is sustained by those same qualities. At the same time it is extremely readable and persuasive. It is described as a political biography, perhaps to deflect those who do not want to take biography too seriously. But ultimately – by sound judgment and inspired inference – and certainly not by psycho-babble – Elson is able to convey some understanding of Suharto's personality, almost impenetrable as it often seems behind that disarming smile.

Relatively few biographies of major Indonesian figures have appeared in English, though some have been of the finest quality. Among those that spring to mind are Bob Hering's of Thamrin, John Legge's of Sukarno and Rudolf Mrazek's of Sjahrir. Some autobiographies have been translated, Tan Malaka's by Helen Jarvis, for example. One cannot help feeling that for the most part we have here more attractive figures than Suharto, and one can imagine a biographer or a translator feeling a greater identification with men who were both highly intelligent and eminently human.

Taking on Suharto must surely have been a task more difficult to sustain by sympathy or empathy. Even the task of being fair and objective is a testing one, since it is only a few years since the regime he built crashed to the ground. We cannot help seeing his life and his work from a vantage point where it is easier completely to discredit it than to offer a fair judgment: 'the popular foregrounding of his sullied reputation makes longer-term assessment of his legacy more difficult' (vi). Elson manages to make Suharto more human than one might have thought possible. He manages at the same time to be remarkably objective.

In this case, indeed, a refined sort of life-and-times approach is eminently justified. Here was a man who dominated a vast and populous country for over thirty years, shaping its history and being shaped by it. Part of his tragedy, indeed, was that he came to identify its fate too closely with his own, though they had begun to go different ways. The author's talents, evident throughout the book, are at their strongest in the closing chapters of the book. Narrative, analysis, sympathy and judgment are deployed with enviable power.

It is indeed by the tried approach of the traditional historian that Elson elects to proceed. His subject can best be understood and analysed, he believes, through 'narrative history – the detailed, nuanced exposition of the complex and changing dialectic of idea, circumstance and milieu in Suharto's career' (viii). The kind of sources an historian or an historical biographer might normally turn to are, however, not available. In the autobiography of 1989 Suharto 'appears in a lonely moonscape populated only by himself', and the so-called diaries are unhelpful: 'presenting himself so fully formed, so much in control, he denies us insights into his true strengths: his nimbleness of mind, his patiently modulated indecisiveness, his voracious capacity to learn from his personal past and from his contemporaries' (ix). No archives are accessible,

and the material gained from interviews – either in the stultifying New Order or in the succeeding years of blame and attempted exculpation – is problematic. Historians, as Elson puts it, must do their best with a ‘mountain of grist’ (ix). His best is considerable, a testimony to his talents, and to the historical method itself.

At the height of his power, Suharto insisted on his peasant origins – priding himself on ‘being the simple son of a Javanese villager’ (235) – and was indeed apparently at his happiest when with peasants in the countryside. He rejected the gossip that he was of noble birth or even of royal origin when it was repeated in a Jakarta magazine in 1974. He wished to present a different image and a different example. Yet, while he had a troubled youth that in a measure supported his claim that he had suffered and been hardened by suffering, he was educated to a level quite exceptional for a Javanese peasant. The combination of privilege with a disturbed family background leads Elson to think that there may have been something in the rumour the President was at pains to deny. He may have been illegitimate, his real father possibly a person of some means.

His first job was in a village bank. Losing that, he became a labourer, and then, ‘probably with some desperation’ (8), sought three-year enlistment in the colonial Dutch army, KNIL. He began his service in June 1940, and the following year was accepted into the cadre school at Gombong for training as a sergeant. A week after he took up his posting, the Dutch surrendered to the invading Japanese. Suharto abandoned his uniform and fled back ‘home’ to Wuryantoro. Towards the end of 1942 he joined the occupation police force, and a year later was accepted into the newly-formed Peta, Defenders of the Fatherland, a Japanese-trained and Indonesian-officered defence force, even though, unlike most of its officers, he was not of the *priyayi* class. What was important in officer selection was leadership qualities, spirit, and physical fitness, and the training the Japanese gave passed on the bushido qualities their own training had enjoined.

Elson suggests that it was at this time and by these means that Suharto began to share ideas of a nationalist kind, originally propagated by a somewhat older generation of civilian leaders such as Sukarno and Hatta. At the same time, as he rightly points out, the Peta, entirely independent of civilian control, offered a model for positioning the army in society that was in general deeply influential in independent Indonesia, and no doubt influential in Suharto’s case too. At all events, he was in post-war Indonesia ‘to fight tenaciously in the cause of a nationalist ideal with which he had hardly been acquainted in the pre-war years’ (11).

In the initial localised struggles against the Allies, Suharto displayed his leadership quality. ‘As a leader he was certainly aloof’, Y.B. Mangunwijaya later recalled, ‘calm, never gossipy, never engaging in jokes. Even when he was chatting in a relaxed way with his officers, he was in charge’ (15). In the fighting around Magelang, he attracted the attention of the newly installed commander of the Republic’s army, Sudirman, and was appointed Commander of the Third Regiment, based in the Yogyakarta area. ‘It seems

likely', Elson writes, 'that Suharto, notwithstanding his generally apolitical attitude at the time, drew inspiration from Sudirman's attempts to construct an Indonesian army with a populist flavour which emphasised the institution's separateness from and disdain for the comings and goings of civilian politicians and which celebrated the virtue of unalloyed struggle for the national goal of independence' (16).

In a later phase of the struggle – following the second Dutch "police action" – Suharto was less successful. His troops put up no effective resistance to the Dutch attack on Yogya, and Nasution later criticised the future president for being 'slow to implement orders, indecisive' (29). Elson suggests that he attempted to assuage a sense of guilt by subsequently mounting a series of attacks on the city. Evidence of Indonesian morale, to which the attacks contributed, were to be a factor in the reluctant Dutch decision to negotiate. Suharto, Sudirman told Nasution, was 'a flower of battle' (38).

For many Indonesian leaders these years of struggle were a formative experience, deciding their future role in the history of Indonesia. The formative experience for Suharto – a somewhat younger man – may rather belong to the 1950s. Obviously he was shaped by his Japanese training and its ethos, and by his involvement in the armed struggle post-occupation. The events of the following decade, and his part in them, seem, however, to have set patterns which endured into and perhaps indeed throughout his presidency.

It was a foregone conclusion that he should remain in the army. 'His army career had provided him ... with an undreamed-of rise in terms of social standing, influence and proximity to power' (44). It had probably helped him to win a wife of superior social standing, Siti Hartinah, member of a minor aristocratic family from Solo (23). His education, though good for a peasant, was not good enough to win him a place in the civilian bureaucracy equivalent in status to his position as lieutenant-colonel in the army. But the opportunities open to army officers in the 1950s were to be quite exceptional. Suharto took them, and the experience continued to influence him.

After a spell dealing with rebels in Makasar – where he got to know the Habibies – Suharto returned to Central Java as commander of one of the brigades of the Dipo Negoro division, engaging in the unwelcome task of demobilisation and rank reduction that the army rationalisation of these years involved. Subsequently posted to Salatiga, he had to deal with a rebellious battalion influenced by the Darul Islam movement. It proved a laborious task, and once again, indeed, Nasution criticised him.

The Nasution group was overthrown as a result of affair of 17 October 1952. Suharto was posted to Solo as commander of Infantry Regiment 15 in March 1953. Many of his troops were under leftist influence. He was disconcerted to find that one of his battalions was receiving ideological instruction from the veteran communist Alimin. Among its members was Untung, who was to be a leader of the 'coup' of 30 September 1965 that precipitated Suharto's rise to supreme power.

Just as significant for the future, however, were his determined efforts to

find funding for his troops, starved of central funding, and his promotion of cooperatives among them. His wife turned her hand to business: 'she helped out with family finances by making and selling Solo batik and retailing discounted factory cloth to the wives of soldiers' (55). The limited funding that civilian governments afforded the army, coupled with its consciousness of a special role in the Republic, stimulated its attempts to 'live off the land', it might be argued. That enabled it to escape the control of government, to become, like the Weimar Reichswehr, a state within a state. It may also be argued that Suharto carried through the experience of these years into the years when he was head of state.

In a sense these two concepts came together in Suharto's mind. The troops for which he was responsible in Solo were leftist because of conditions in Solo, a region long 'a site of fierce ideological tension and confrontation' (55). The stability he believed the new Republic needed must rest on the enhancement of the welfare of the populace in general as well as the army in particular: 'the kind of political quietude which he deemed to be the proper mode of life could most easily be accomplished in the face of the threat presented by the PKI – and other disruptive forces – if society were empowered to develop the material conditions of life, at the same time solidifying the strength and unity of the nation' (60). This, surely, was the origin of his emphasis on 'development', and it gave a new slant to the unwillingness or inability to draw a distinction between what was good for the army and what was good for the people which he shared with so many officers with experience of the Japanese and post-war phases. It may also have encouraged him to avoid drawing a distinction between the public and the personal, which was to have long-term consequences when he came to act on a wider stage and the sources of finance dramatically expanded.

In the meantime his appointment first as acting *panglima* and then as *panglima* of the Diponegoro division in 1956-7 allowed him to develop these concepts. In Semarang in September 1956 he explained that his duties did not spare him 'from the task of development. And the task of development cannot proceed without the help of the people' (59). Sukarno's proclamation of the state of war and siege in March 1957 – pressed on him by Nasution and Gatot Subroto as a result of the regional revolts – greatly expanded the role, wealth and autonomy of the army. Martial law gave Suharto and his colleagues vast powers to intervene wherever and whenever they wished, in economic affairs as well as political and administrative. What he did seems clearly to form a precedent for what he was to do as president.

Two foundations were set up during 1957. One was the Fourth Territory Foundation (YTE), which was 'intended to raise money specifically to help pay for and improve the conditions of Suharto's troops, and to assist retired military personnel of the Division' (62). A larger foundation, the Fourth Territory Development Foundation (YPTE), created in July 1957, was 'the vehicle for "all sorts of efforts in the areas of economy and finance to make it possible to help the farmers, the people in the villages"' (62). 'The basis of foundation activities was their capacity to place levies on goods and

services – for example, ownership of a radio or use of electricity – and to expect charitable assistance from established companies who saw that their interests would best be served by close association with the pre-eminent force in regional affairs’ (62-3). Funds would be loaned to peasants, ‘to be repaid over long periods from the income gained from their investment’. The foundations invested in private companies, in association with prominent business figures, one of them ‘Bob’ Hasan, Sino-Indonesian foster-son of Gatot Subroto. A number of officers had shares and took positions which gave them a percentage of profits, but Elson finds no evidence that Suharto did himself. The system clearly, however, expanded his powers of patronage, tying the military into business circles in ways that adumbrate those of his presidency. What may have seemed justifiable at a time of national crisis was not, however, a sound foundation for a national government.

Indeed at the time there were allegations of corruption. In general civilians were increasingly criticising the army for its improper involvement in business, and Nasution, himself of puritanical bent, was particularly concerned about the smuggling that developed during the phase of regional revolt. In 1959 an army inspection team looked into the affairs of the Fourth Territory foundations, and Suharto was subsequently removed from his command, and ordered to attend a course at SSKAD, the Army Staff and Command School, later Seskoad. Elson finds – and solves – two problems in this episode. Why was Suharto punished when so many were not? The answer seems to lie in differences with his chief of staff, Pranoto Reksosamudro, who was thought to be sympathetic to the PKI and had links with Sukarno. Nasution felt he had to do something. That also answers the second question: why did he do so little? Indeed Suharto was promoted to brigadier-general in January 1960.

If there were differences with his chief of staff, another feature of Suharto’s later style was also evident in this phase. A small group of senior officers ‘coalesced around him’ and shared his hopes and outlook. ‘Suharto’s attachment to his troops was that of the generous and concerned lord towards his servant’ (75). The small group he put on a different footing, trusting them implicitly, allowing them considerable autonomy. The three closest to him in the Diponegoro were to play important roles in the New Order: Yoga Sugama, Ali Murtopo, and Sujono Humardani.

If intended as a mild punishment, the posting to Seskoad was in fact a positive help to Suharto. Never sent abroad for training, he was now brought into touch with officers who were thinking about the role of the army in a more sophisticated way, Suwanto, the deputy commander, for example, a PSI-leaning Siliwangi officer, who stressed the army’s role in an underdeveloped nation contending with communism. He was also brought ‘into everyday, collegial and intimate contact with a new and influential range of acquaintances from different regions and backgrounds’, expanding ‘his still sharply limited realm of social experiences’ (78). Only in 1961 – after he had been appointed to Army HQ in Jakarta – did he undertake his first overseas trip. In Germany, he again met Habibie, studying for his doctorate at Aachen.

Early in 1962 Suharto was promoted major-general and, already

commander of the army's new central reserve, was appointed theatre commander for the liberation of West Irian. His style in Makasar mirrored his style at Semarang: he trusted a small clique of officers who responded with respect and loyalty. The initial infiltration into Irian was a failure. Under pressure from superiors who wanted to demonstrate Indonesia's determination, Suharto responded by preparing a risky offensive and began to gather a large force off southern Sulawesi. Perhaps fortunately for Suharto, the Dutch yielded to US pressure before the expedition set out.

Back in Jakarta Suharto was, crucially as it turned out, appointed to command the reconstituted general reserve, now called KOSTRAD. These appointments were testimony not only to the recognition of his military ability, but also to the general belief that he was above all a professional soldier, not politically ambitious, not a political threat. It was from that post, however, that he was to secure power, taking advantage of the unexpected circumstances created by the September 30 movement.

In the meantime Indonesia had turned from successfully confronting the Dutch to unsuccessfully confronting Malaysia. Whatever it might have achieved against the Dutch, the army was ill prepared to take on Britain and the Commonwealth, while at home the political campaign only benefited its major antagonist, the PKI. It had to look enthusiastic, but it could not act enthusiastically. In the stalling operation, Suharto had a major role. Moreover he initiated contacts with the other side that in other circumstances at least might be seen as treasonous. Suharto's KOSTRAD intelligence assistant Ali Murtopo and his OPSUS team initiated covert contacts with Malaysian leaders, in order to assure them and the British that the army's support for the conflict was 'neither born of conviction nor conducted with enthusiasm', that it had no wish for extended conflict, and that it was seeking ways of ending the dispute (93). KOSTRAD went further: it smuggled produce to Malaysia.

Elson gives a valuable account of the much-discussed coup and, of course, of Suharto's role in this phase. He does not believe he was implicated in the attempt. But as events unrolled, he finds Suharto's performance 'nothing short of startling. His capacity to move coolly and in carefully measured ways was outdone only by his extraordinary ability to modulate his action with a keen sensitivity to the context in which the drama was being played out' (109-10). No doubt, as Elson adds, he had unquestioning support from his staff. What he cannot tell us – and we can only surmise – is how much his tactics owed to the advice of men like Ali Murtopo and Sujono. That makes it more difficult to judge whether, when he became president, his attitude shifted, and whether indeed even those who were capable of offering good advice believed that it would be well received.

Suharto's tactics after the coup attempt were – whether as a result of personality or advice or both – for the most part cautious: he moved, Elson writes, 'in carefully considered, short-term phases' (120). That certainly applied in respect of President Sukarno, who made persistent attempts to avoid the destruction of the shaky balance in politics on which he had relied. It hardly applies, however, to the PKI. Suharto and the army leaders were

determined on its demise. ‘Whether Suharto really believed at this point that the PK was ultimately responsible for Gestapu is difficult to decide; what is certain is that he saw the opportunity wholly to destroy the enemy and he took it avidly’ (124). He had no remorse for the massacres that ensued, though he bears responsibility. Deliberately encouraged, they certainly destroyed the PKI. Elson does not discuss the suggestion, made by Robert Cribb (*The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966*, Clayton, Monash University, 1990, 36-37), that they also created a sense of complicity with the new regime, which somehow contrived to blame them on the old order; nor can we readily assess whether this was a factor in the deliberation or an *ex post facto* advantage.

The new regime sought economic rehabilitation through the economic reform measures suggested by University of Indonesia economists, many of whom taught at Seskoad. The “technocrats” were to play an important role in the early years of the New Order and their “orthodoxy” helped to win foreign aid and investment. But, as Elson says, ‘strict observance of a rational economic policy’ was qualified from the start by ‘the distorted economic behaviour practised by key figures’, in particular by their continued rent-seeking, often through the mediation of Sino-Indonesian businessmen. The expanded power of the army provided ‘unlimited opportunity to enhance the reach and depth of their endeavours’, and they were not going to be checked by Suharto, whose record demonstrated ‘an enthusiasm for the military to embed themselves in business activity, and a proclivity to allow close associates who demonstrated energy and entrepreneurial flair to have their heads’. Indeed he needed off-budget sources of income – provided, for example, by Ibnu Sutowo as head of the state-owned oil company – in order ‘to gather and cement political support in the Armed Forces and elsewhere’ (151).

In the Philippines ‘technocrats’ looked for a strong man who might implement their policies. Instead they got Marcos, and were dependent on his favour. His aims were fundamentally political. If, therefore, economic development had been freed from the interference of Congress, it was now subjected to that of the cronies. In New Order Indonesia, too, the technocrats appeared to be stronger than they were. Alongside them, there were those who had a different vision of economic reform, men like Sujono and Ali Murtopo, whose models were not those advocated by the US-trained, but rather Meiji Japan or modern Singapore. But there were also those who were less concerned with principle than profit, and who valued privilege and contacts above competition, Ibnu Sutowo for example. There was in fact a ‘secret economy’, and the budget was never the real budget. Not only Pertamina but military foundations and other kinds of army business escaped the technocrats’ control. Methods that had seemed necessary, if not desirable, to army leaders in the fragmented and crypto-federal Indonesia of the 1950s were now being applied in the Republic as a whole.

Suharto, Elson suggests, did not really regard what happened as corruption. He was ‘the product of a culture and life experience that drew no sharp division between public and private spheres and public and private

property'. In Semarang he had taxed the people in the interest of the welfare of his soldiers. 'The same logic could easily be turned to favour the business interests of those he knew could deliver results. If they could progress his beloved development, then they should be allowed to do so and be paid adequately for their efforts' (196). Though such methods might build support for the regime by enhancing patronage, they were not suited to building a state. Suharto sought to depoliticise Indonesia by curbing and retooling political parties, making *pantjasila* into an ideology, limiting political campaigns, creating a government party. The idea of democracy nevertheless survived. What was perhaps even more destructive – and made the revival of democracy more problematic – was his failure to see that the state which he and his predecessor had by one means or another held together needed building. It needed a reliable legal system, an objective police force, a salaried bureaucracy. His was a remarkable performance. His people benefited in many ways from 'development'. But he rates as a state-destroyer rather than a state-builder.

Yet money was at hand: perhaps indeed too much of it. The surfeit of oil money in the 1970s, Elson suggests, created a 'bonanza mood' that 'critically weakened the capacity of the technocrats to influence the directions of economic policy' (210). But it went beyond that. It enhanced the possibility of behaving irresponsibly: as in the Philippines, any customary restraints on corruption disappeared. That was in the end fatal to the regime. But in the meantime it had no need to create or continue the kind of institutions that sustain or develop the responsibility of a government and its relations with the people it rules. 'The New Order, refined and consolidated, worked as the state in Indonesia had never worked since the period of high Dutch colonialism in the 1920s', Elson writes of the 1980s. It might be better to write regime rather than state. Or perhaps to emphasise the similarity of Suharto's rule with that of de Jonge, where 'citizens' were unequal before the law, development benefited the few, Islam was curbed, intelligence gathering was well developed, democratic institutions a shadow? Neither really built a "state" in any modern sense. The colonial power could not. Should we say Suharto did not or could not?

That question may raise one of a more general application. The building of West European states was, as Charles Tilly has argued, done only at tremendous cost 'in death, suffering, loss of rights and unwilling surrender of land, goods, or labor'. The main reason was 'its beginning in the midst of a decentralized, largely peasant social structure. Building differentiated, autonomous, centralized organizations with effective control of territories entailed eliminating or subordinating thousands of semiautonomous authorities.' The process provoked tax rebellions, food riots, movements against conscription. 'Even if we consider that the arrival of effective policing greatly increased the day-to-day security of the average individual, we shall have to weigh that against the coercion the average individual endured along the way, and the long-run increase in his exposure to death and destruction through war' (Tilly in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States*,

Princeton University Press, 1975, 71). It is hard to wish this process on others. If there is an alternative, it must surely lie in the resources often now available through means other than exploiting a peasant society. Yet governments seem instead to have been tempted to use the flood of foreign capital to avoid the creation of state institutions, even to destroy what there was. Remarkable though his career was, Suharto was no exception. A major state cannot be built on 'foundations'. Indeed they stand in its way.

'The fiscal origin of representation is obvious', Gabriel Ardant writes (in *ibid.*, 231). A government awash with foreign funds – with an army sustained by off-budget activities – has no need to seek consent in any serious way. Can democracy find a foundation in post-Suharto Indonesia by the assertion of fiscal control? The urgent need to renew the flow of foreign investment in Indonesia – at a time, moreover, when fashionable ideology challenges the role of the state and limits its claim to tax – does not suggest that the Republic will pass through this process either. Can democracy be based only on international example and on the aspirations of a somewhat insecure middle class? The superb book under review might at least serve as a cautionary tale.