



## The British government's observation of Sukarno's health condition during the Konfrontasi Era of 1964-1965

### Pengamatan pemerintah Inggris terhadap kondisi kesehatan Sukarno pada Masa Konfrontasi 1964-1965

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#### ABSTRACT

This article investigates British diplomats in Jakarta who directly observed and gathered information from inner palace circles, other foreign diplomats, and the media about Sukarno's health condition during the Konfrontasi era of 1964 to 1965. Given the importance of the credibility of information on Sukarno's health, British diplomats even requested an analysis from a trusted health expert at the FO to establish a diagnosis and prognosis for Sukarno's health condition based on the information they had compiled. Britain's politics of observing Sukarno in late 1964 and in 1965 was related to Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy towards Malaysia, in which Sukarno was the most influential figure in determining the direction of Konfrontasi policy. This research argues that, based on various methods of information gathering, the British Foreign Office believed that Sukarno was seriously ill amid the escalation of the Konfrontasi in late 1964 due to problems with both of his kidneys. However, they were very careful not to immediately believe the predictions that Sukarno would not live long due to the severity of his illness, and continued to gather information about Sukarno's health, including rumours about manoeuvring within Sukarno's inner circle over succession.

#### KEYWORDS

Sukarno; Britain; health; observation; *Konfrontasi*; succession

#### ABSTRAK

Artikel ini meneliti para diplomat Inggris di Jakarta yang secara langsung mengamati dan mengumpulkan informasi dari lingkaran dalam istana, diplomat asing lainnya, serta media mengenai kondisi kesehatan Sukarno selama era Konfrontasi tahun 1964 hingga 1965. Mengingat pentingnya kredibilitas informasi tentang kesehatan Sukarno, para diplomat Inggris bahkan meminta analisis dari seorang ahli kesehatan tepercaya di FO untuk menetapkan diagnosis dan prognosis kondisi kesehatan Sukarno berdasarkan informasi yang telah mereka himpun. Politik Inggris dalam mengamati Sukarno pada akhir 1964 dan 1965 berkaitan dengan kebijakan Konfrontasi Indonesia terhadap Malaysia, di mana Sukarno merupakan sosok paling berpengaruh dalam menentukan arah kebijakan Konfrontasi tersebut. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa, berdasarkan berbagai metode pengumpulan informasi, Foreign Office Inggris meyakini bahwa Sukarno sedang mengidap penyakit serius di tengah eskalasi Konfrontasi pada akhir 1964 akibat masalah pada kedua ginjalnya. Namun, mereka sangat berhati-hati untuk tidak langsung mempercayai prediksi bahwa Sukarno tidak akan hidup lama karena parahnya penyakit tersebut, dan terus mengumpulkan informasi mengenai kondisi kesehatan Sukarno, termasuk rumor tentang manuver di lingkaran dalam Sukarno terkait suksesi.

#### KATA-KATA KUNCI

Sukarno; Britania; kesehatan; observasi; *Konfrontasi*; suksesi

## INTRODUCTION

In early November 1964, the British Ambassador to Indonesia, Sir Andrew Gilchrist, sent a telegram to the Foreign Office in London about his first-hand observations of Sukarno's health based on his physical appearance and gestures at the reception for Malian President Modibo Keita at Kemayoran Airport. This direct observation appeared to be intended to confirm the truth of rumours circulating about Sukarno's declining health following his return visit to Vienna at the end of September 1964 due to problems with his right kidney. Sukarno had previously undergone surgery to remove a small stone from his left kidney in Vienna in 1961 and was diagnosed by a team of doctors in Vienna that his left kidney was no longer functioning. The news of Sukarno's departure for Vienna to have his right kidney examined and treated certainly grabbed the attention of the British amid the escalation of Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) politics towards Malaysia, which intensified in September 1964 following the incident of Indonesian military intervention in Pontianak and Labis. Gilchrist reported that although Sukarno looked thinner, he was enthusiastic and cheerful; Sukarno did not appear to be seriously ill and was even planning to hold a party for the Malian delegation that evening and joked with the US ambassador to Indonesia, Howard Jones, about bringing some nice girls from his embassy (Gilchrist, British Embassy Jakarta to Foreign Office (FO), London, The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/175313, 8 November 1964). British observations of Sukarno's health were particularly intense in late 1964, given widespread rumours that Sukarno was seriously ill and that politically, this was a time when the *Konfrontasi* was heightened. British surveillance tapered off considerably in 1965, at least until August, as widespread allegations that Sukarno was dying proved unfounded.

Studies on the life and thoughts of Sukarno have been extensively researched (Dahm, 1987; Giebels, 2001; Kasenda, 2010, 2014; Legge, 1985), but to date, few have investigated how Sukarno's health was observed by the British during the *Konfrontasi*. Previous studies that have covered the decline in Sukarno's health have predominantly placed this as a catalyst that had significant implications for the manoeuvres surrounding the events of 1 October 1965 (Hindley, 1968; van der Kroef, 1972; Subritzky, 2000; Hunter, 2007; Garver, 2016). Frederick Bunnell (1990, pp. 29-60) slightly touches on the issue of US diplomatic and intelligence reports regarding the certainty of Sukarno's deteriorating health in August and September 1965 in relation to the US gamble to stick to its 'low posture' policy in Indonesia in response to growing pressure on the US from leftist groups ahead of the events of 1 October 1965. Zhou (2014) work provides a fresh new perspective on Sukarno's fluctuating health condition from late 1964 to 1965, based on examinations by Chinese doctors brought to Indonesia by the Chinese government as an alternative to the Austrian medical team. This piece, among other things, can provide a comparison of the views of the Chinese doctors who treated Sukarno's health in late 1964 with diplomatic correspondence from Jakarta to London during a period considered one of the most critical in Sukarno's medical history.

This article investigates British diplomats in Jakarta who directly observed and gathered information from inner palace circles, other foreign diplomats, and the media about Sukarno's health condition during the *Konfrontasi* era of 1964 to 1965. Various methods were employed by British diplomats to collect information about Sukarno's health, as direct observation was unreliable. They needed to dig for information from figures close to

Sukarno, such as Subandrio and Johannes Leimena, and seek information from diplomats from other countries to obtain the most accurate information possible about the rumours circulating about Sukarno's failing health. Gilchrist and the Foreign Office even sought input from a trusted health expert at the FO, dr. V.C. Medvei, to establish a diagnosis and prognosis for Sukarno's health condition based on the information they had compiled. This demonstrates that the British were serious about gaining a clearer understanding of Sukarno's condition as a consideration for taking political steps amidst the antagonistic situation between Indonesia and Britain during the Konfrontasi.

Britain's politics of observing Sukarno was related to Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy towards Malaysia, in which the establishment of the Malaysian Federation in 1963 was regarded as a form of neo-colonialism to maintain Britain's strategic political and economic interests in the region which was at odds with Sukarno's anti-colonial projection of promoting national revolution and shaping a post-imperial world. Initially, Sukarno did not hesitate to support the Federation plan, which he considered as a legitimate process of decolonisation (Liow, 2004; Adams, 2014, p. 362), which was clearly distinct from Indonesia's bloody national liberation story. However, the Brunei revolt in December 1962, which sought to establish an independent state outside the framework of the Federation, reversed Sukarno previous stance. Sukarno made the issue of Malaysia's Federation the centre-piece of his anti-colonial campaign, following the successful national struggle for the liberation of West Irian from the Dutch, a struggle he also referred to as a Konfrontasi. Given the crucial position of Sukarno as the helm of the Confrontation policy against Malaysia, which also targeted Britain as its main supporter, Britain paid close attention to Sukarno's thoughts and actions in three main areas: Indonesian national politics, bilateral politics between Indonesia and Malaysia, and broader international politics, which Britain considered important to its interests in Southeast Asian region.

Amid the course of the Konfrontasi policy, Sukarno's health was certainly a determining factor in a story whose ending was still unknown. The British deemed Sukarno's declining health in the midst of the 'battle' he was leading to be valuable information, although in telegram reports sent from Jakarta to London, the British were careful not to link Sukarno's health to British interests in Malaysia. However, as historians, we cannot detach the text from its context; these correspondences, as texts, must be placed in their temporal context in order to understand why there was a need for such intensive reports, especially towards the end of 1964, about Sukarno's state of health. Therefore, it is difficult not to place these reports in the context of the Konfrontasi between Indonesia and Malaysia that haunted British policymakers in 1964 until mid-1965. Furthermore, with the slight mention in the correspondence of Sukarno's declining health in relation to the issue of succession in his inner circle, it is difficult not to interpret the gathering of information on Sukarno's health as a possible link to the future direction of Indonesian politics. The British also monitored the manoeuvring and rivalry among those with vested interests in the succession to Sukarno's leadership, even though Sukarno himself never explicitly named his legitimate heir to continue his revolutionary leadership.

## **METHODS**

To examine how the British Foreign Office observed Sukarno's health during the Konfrontasi era of 1964 and 1965, this article heuristically draws on primary sources, such as archives, newspapers and magazines collected from The National Archives in Kew, London, and the National Library in Jakarta, as well as a memoir written by a member of Sukarno's medical team. The main sources for this research are archives from the Foreign Office at The National Archives in London concerning Sukarno's health in 1964 and 1965, consisting mainly of telegram correspondence from the British Embassy in Jakarta, led by Sir Andrew Gilchrist, to the Foreign Office in London. These reports include Gilchrist's own amateur observations of Sukarno's physical condition and gestures, information he obtained from Sukarno's inner circle, and the exchange of gossip among foreign diplomats. These archives are invaluable because they provide a perspective beyond that of the superpower United States, which also closely monitored Sukarno's health and Indonesia's national politics during those turbulent years. Additionally, this source can serve as a comparison to China's perspective on Sukarno's deteriorating health, based on Chinese Foreign Ministry archives previously explored by Zhou (2014).

The data obtained from archives pertaining to Sukarno's health was then compared with data from other primary sources, such as domestic and foreign newspapers that reported on Domestic and foreign newspapers also serves as important sources in gathering information about medical examinations and treatments Sukarno underwent in Vienna in 1961 and 1964. Foreign newspapers and magazines were also utilised as sources to trace rumours circulating about Sukarno's deteriorating condition in the end of 1964. Ultimately, this study uses the memoirs of dr. Soeharto, a member of the presidential medical team who also held various ministerial positions during the Guided Democracy era, who provided testimony as a historical actor involved in Sukarno's medical treatment. These primary sources, such as archives, newspapers, and memoirs, whose information is interrelated are cross-checked to obtain a picture of Sukarno's health during the Konfrontasi in 1964 and 1965, including the rumours that circulated about it – not in order to prove the rumours true, but to ascertain that such rumours did indeed emerge.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Sukarno's Kidney Problems in the Early 1960s**

Sukarno's health received widespread attention when he was diagnosed with kidney problems in the early 1960s. This was understandable given that it was the most serious illness in Sukarno's medical history. According to testimony from R. Soeharto, a doctor who was part of the presidential medical circle and a close associate of Sukarno, Sukarno's kidney issues were the result of his intense political activities during the tumultuous era of Parliamentary Democracy and his negligence in taking care of his kidney health (Soeharto, 1982, pp. 116-118). Sukarno had suffered from excruciating pain in his waist since the Japanese colonial era in 1942, when medical examinations revealed that he had kidney stones. Sukarno subsequently was monitored by doctors for this condition, and regular and periodic medical examinations of Sukarno's urine 'showed that his urine was never free of urate crystals' (Soeharto, 1982, p. 116). However, coverage of the illness that affected

Sukarno's kidneys cannot be separated from the political context of the Guided Democracy era (1959-1965), when the spotlight was almost entirely on Sukarno, who held immense political power and was the key figure determining the direction of Indonesian political course (Lev, 1966). Since the reconfiguration of Indonesian domestic politics, marked by a substantial shift in the pendulum of power into Sukarno's hands, all statements, actions, and appearances of Sukarno drew public attention, especially if there was something unusual in his movements and appearance – particularly related to his health.

On the advice of a doctor close to him, Sukarno finally underwent a medical examination in January 1959, but the results of the examination by the team of doctors could not conclude exactly what disease Sukarno was suffering from because radio nephrograms were not yet available in Indonesia (Soeharto, 1982, p. 118). In their recommendation to Sukarno, the doctors advised that he should visit a country with modern hospital facilities and world-renowned medical specialists who could provide a proper diagnose of his kidney problem, such as Sweden and Austria. Yet, once again, his hectic political schedule from early January 1959 to September 1961 prevented Sukarno from immediately following up on the medical advice of his team of doctors. Domestically, Sukarno was busy restructuring the country's governance after issuing a Presidential Decree on 5 July 1959, while in international politics, he was eager to reorder the world political order by introducing his new world concept during his political visits to various countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as at international events at the United Nations (1960) and the first Non-Aligned Movement Conference in Belgrade (1961). Amidst his busy domestic and international activities, Sukarno's health deteriorated as he endured the pain caused by kidney stones. The Foreign press reported that Sukarno was not well during his visit to Bolivia: there were rumours that he had suffered a heart attack in La Paz, located at an altitude of 11,800 feet. However, this was denied by a spokesperson from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who stated that Sukarno had indeed felt unwell for a short while but had recovered and continued his journey to Montevideo (Bintang Timur, 9 May 1961, p. 1).

Unlike before, in early October 1961, Sukarno took seriously the advice of the presidential medical team to immediately seek medical treatment. They suggested that Sukarno visit Vienna, the capital of Austria, to meet with world-renowned internists specialising in kidney-related problems from which he was suffering. One of the presidential doctors, Soeharto, revealed that the choice of Vienna was due to the presence of Prof. Karl Fellingner, an internist and professor at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Vienna, whose name was already well-known in the international medical community, although he had not met him personally (Soeharto, 1982, 121). At the end of October 1961, Sukarno underwent surgery in Vienna to remove a stone the size of a peanut from his urinary tract under a team of doctors consisting of Prof. Herbert Henninger, Prof. Martin Kyrle, Prof. Karl Fellingner, Prof. Richard Huebelhoer, and Prof. Wal Fuchsig (Bintang Timur, 26 October 1961, p. 1). Herbert Henninger was a distinguished Austrian surgeon specialising in kidney stones and also the son-in-law of Austrian President Adolf Schärf. Sukarno was honoured as a guest of honour by President Schärf after his recovery from surgery (Bintang Timur, 1 November 1961, p. 1).

Sukarno suffered from kidney calculus, a hard deposit resembling a stone lodged in the kidney. This stone was successfully removed by a team of doctors in Vienna, who said that another operation would be needed to remove two more stones (Bintang Timur, 26 October 1961). Sukarno returned to Indonesia on 7 November 1961 after visiting Vienna since 19 October. Dr. J. Leimena, the Deputy Prime Minister, stated that Sukarno's surgery went well, his weight had decreased slightly, and the doctors had advised him to maintain this weight (Bintang Timur, 6 November 1961). However, Sukarno's return to Indonesia was accompanied by a sense of uncertainty. In Vienna, Fellingner explained to Sukarno that his left kidney was no longer functioning and suggested that Sukarno have it removed because if the left kidney was not removed, it could become infected or interfere with the functioning of the heart and blood circulation as a whole (Soeharto, 1982, p. 122).

Sukarno sought advice from his medical team concerning Fellingner's medical analysis. Soeharto provided a comprehensive explanation that humans can live with only one kidney as long as it functions properly, while living with a non-functioning left kidney would be risky if a person's activities are very intense and can impair the function of the remaining kidney (Soeharto, 1982, p. 122). Sukarno ultimately decided that he did not want to undergo surgery to remove his left kidney. Sukarno believed that the revolution was not yet complete: West Irian must be liberated from Dutch – annulling the Round Table Conference agreement, convening the Bandung Conference, nationalising Dutch companies, and severing diplomatic ties with the Netherlands were among the steps Sukarno had taken to attain this goal. As the Dutch continued to cling to its authority over West Irian, Sukarno, following his operation in Vienna, pursued a more confrontational policy towards the Netherlands with his Tri Komando Rakyat in December 1961 and military operations the following year. The year 1962 was a historic milestone for the liberation of West Irian because the New York Agreement was signed between Indonesia and the Netherlands, through the mediation of senior US diplomat Ellsworth Bunker and the assistance of the United Nations, regarding the transfer of sovereignty over West Irian from the Netherlands to Indonesia. John Legge (1985) referred to 1962 as the 'year of victory' in line with Sukarno's independence speech in August 1962, noting that 'the West Irian issue had preoccupied Sukarno from the very beginning of Indonesia's experience as an independent nation'.

Although it was only a matter of time before West Irian was returned to Indonesia in accordance with the New York Agreement, Sukarno remained unmoved by his personal doctor's advice to reconsider Fellingner's recommendation. Sukarno stated that he wanted to oversee the transfer of authority over West Irian to Indonesia until it was fully completed, thereby ensuring the ultimate goal of liberation. In addition, Sukarno believed that treatment through acupuncture and traditional medicines administered by the Chinese medical team under Prof. Wu Chieh-Ping was effective in maintaining his fitness. China assisted in Sukarno's medical care, and official documents from the Chinese government stated that Sukarno's health was fine and 'not as bad as Western scholars speculated' (Zhou, 2014). In the early 1960s, relations between China and Indonesia grew closer as both shared a militant outlook on the necessity of building an anti-imperialist bloc against imperialist powers seeking to maintain their dominance over the Third World. China even wanted to mobilise new emerging forces from Asia and Africa to oppose Soviet revisionists, who were seen as

sharing space with imperialists, and non-aligned leaders such as India and Yugoslavia, who were considered less militant (Zhou, 2019). Given that the path to forging an alliance of new emerging forces against imperialism was clearly fraught with challenges, China paid close attention to Sukarno's health so that he could carry out his revolutionary mission. Thus, in the early 1960s, Sukarno complementarily employed two models of treatment, modern from Austria and traditional from China, to maintain his health while facing his kidney problems.

### ***Konfrontasi, Britain, and Sukarno's Health***

The wish of presidential doctor for Sukarno to reduce the intensity of his political activities after the Dutch surrender of West Irian could not be realised due to the emergence of friction between Indonesia and Malaysia, which began with the outbreak of the Brunei revolt in early December 1962. Sukarno believed that the Brunei revolt, led by A.M. Azahari, who had a prior connections with Indonesian figures, aimed to establish North Kalimantan as a signal of resistance to the idea of the Malaysian Federation backed by the British. Sukarno's first comment on the Brunei incident was during a state banquet for Yugoslavian officials on 10 December 1962, when he declared that the Brunei people's resistance was a manifestation of the New Emerging Forces (Nefo) – the global anti-imperialist movement of the Third World that Sukarno was building to realise his vision of a new world (Bintang Timur, 11 December 1962, p. 1). Sukarno further argued that the Brunei revolt was proof that 'Malaysia was a neo-colonialist stratagem being imposed by British bayonets against the will of the people concerned' (Mackie, 1974). The Indonesian government officially implemented a policy of confrontation against Malaya in January 1963, marking the beginning of a prolonged conflict between Indonesia and Malaya, which also involved Britain, which considered Indonesia a threat to safeguard its economic and political interests in the region. Michael Leifer (2013) has described that Indonesia's Konfrontasi with Malaysia was a trajectory 'from confrontation to confrontation,' given that the Confrontation with the Netherlands over West Irian had only recently concluded.

In response to Indonesia's rejection of the formation of Malaysia, which was perceived a Britain's projection to continue its neo-colonial agenda in the region, the British government initially took a calm stance but firmly refused to tolerate any form of interference in its Borneo territory (Jones, 2001). However, their vigilance increased significantly when Indonesia openly announced its policy of Konfrontasi towards Malaya, which could also be seen as a direct attack on Britain, given that the remaining colonial power in the Malay world and even in Southeast Asia was the sponsor of the Federation. A strong indication that Sukarno was serious about challenging neo-colonial powers such as Britain, even though Indonesia was clearly inferior to Britain in terms of military capability, were his two speeches on 13 February and 19 February 1963. In these, Sukarno denounced the Malaysian Federation as an imperialist attempt to control rubber, tin and oil, and called upon the Indonesian people to unite once more against external encirclement in the aftermath of the successful liberation of West Irian (Malaya/Indonesia Relations 31 August 1957-15 September 1963, TNA, DO 169/516, 1964). Britain then decided to deploy its armed forces covertly to be on standby in anticipation of potential conflicts that might arise (Jones, 2001). Britain was bound by its defence commitment to Malaysia to repel foreign aggression before

and after the Federation, and throughout the Konfrontasi, Britain fulfilled its commitment to assist Malaysia militarily (Subritzky, 2000). Britain also took an important step in Cold War international politics and geopolitics by approaching the US to ensure its support for British involvement in the Indonesia-Malaysia conflict. Although President Kennedy supported the concept of the Federation of Malaysia, he was cautious not to openly show his political allegiance to Britain and chose to encourage Indonesia towards long-term political and economic modernisation to quell the radical tide within the country. However, his successor Lyndon Johnson adopted a different political approach, taking a harder line against Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy motivated by the escalating situation in South Vietnam, his personal antipathy to Sukarno, and fears of the Indonesian Communist Party's growing dominance (Simpson, 2010, 152-193).

The politics of Konfrontasi consumed a great deal of Sukarno's attention and energy; he actively campaigned and mobilised at various meetings despite his doctors' demands that he get more rest and take care of his health. After attending the Manila meeting at the end of July 1963, which brought together Sukarno, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Diosdado Macagapal to discuss a settlement of the Malaysia issue through a plebiscite to be held by the United Nations in North Kalimantan, Sukarno fell ill upon his return to Jakarta. Sukarno cancelled his plans to speak in front of members of the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) and attend the ceremony to award the title of Pramuka Agung (Grand Scout) on 15 August 1963. Sukarno was asked to rest by setting aside all his work except that related to the Independence Day celebrations (Nasional, 14 August 1963, p. 1). For Sukarno, the speech at the independence proclamation anniversary was a sacred moment in which his ideas, mission, and programs on national and international politics were shared with the public. However, Sukarno was unable to rest for long, as the politics of Confrontation escalated in mid-September 1963 following the announcement of the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia, which Sukarno regarded as having been preceded by a perfunctory UN observation mission in North Borneo (Adams, 2014, pp. 363-364). The founding of the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963 was followed by the severing of official relations between the Indonesian government and Malaya and mass demonstrations at the Malayan and British embassies, accompanied by the hurling of stones at the British embassy.

Indonesia's increasingly confrontational stance towards Malaysia from late 1963 to 1964, marked by the use of harsh slogans and the deployment of armed forces, led Britain to pay greater attention to Sukarno, the figure behind the political command of the Konfrontasi. Britain was aware that Sukarno suffered from a kidney ailment and was under the care of doctors from Vienna. Any information regarding Sukarno's health condition became valuable amid the deteriorating relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. In March 1964, R.L. Joseph from the Office of the Political Adviser to the Commander in Chief Far East in Singapore sent information to the British Embassy in Jakarta when he was transiting in Jakarta on his way back from Australia and saw a parade of Indonesians paying their respects to the Viennese doctors who were returning to their country after meeting with Sukarno. Joseph did not know whether this visit was a routine check-up or whether Sukarno's condition was deteriorating, therefore 'if Chancery has the time it might be valuable to try to discover the

latest state of Sukarno's health generally with an assessment of his prospects of carrying on' (Joseph to S.J.G. Cambridge, British Embassy, Jakarta, TNA, FO 371/175313, 13 March 1964).

Intensive observation by the British Embassy in Jakarta, including through its diplomatic channels in the Commonwealth, of Sukarno's health took place at the end of 1964. This was shaped by at least two major contexts. First, politically, *Konfrontasi*, according to Matthew Jones (2001), reached its 'high water mark' in September 1964 with the infiltration of Indonesian operatives in Pontian, the landing of paratroopers in Labis, and tensions between Indonesia and Britain over the passage of the British aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious* through the Sunda Strait. These major incidents occurred after Sukarno's annual independence speech, 'Tahun Vivere Pericoloso' (the Year of Living Dangerously) on 17 August 1964, which was filled with emotion and fervour to rally the Indonesian people to participate in the revolution against the imperialists, which was an inevitable 'historical act' within a revolutionary process. Second, medically, in September, news spread that Sukarno's health was declining, prompting him to visit Vienna to meet with his team of specialist doctors and being scheduled to attend the second Non-Aligned Conference in Cairo in October. The *New York Times* reported that a kidney stone had been successfully removed from Sukarno's body by two doctors, but it was reported that 'no surgery was required' (*New York Times*, 26 September 1964, p. 2). Meanwhile, Maulwi Saelan, deputy commander of Sukarno's presidential guard, stated that Sukarno had undergone a procedure to extract crystalline kidney stones, amounting to a small bottleful (Adam, 2014). The *Bintang Timur* newspaper reported that Sukarno's trip to Vienna was only an unofficial visit for a check-up, while the *Harian Rakjat* newspaper informed that Sukarno underwent minor surgery in Vienna (*Bintang Timur*, 22 September 1964, p. 1; *Harian Rakjat*, 28 September 1964, p. 2).

In November 1964, Sir Andrew Gilchrist, having returned from three months' leave, reported intensively to the Foreign Office in London about Sukarno's health condition based on his observations of Sukarno's physical appearance and body language. On 8 November 1964, at the welcoming ceremony for President of Mali, Modibo Keita, at the airport, Gilchrist observed that Sukarno 'is less jowly about the face and neck, slightly thinner all over, seems brisk and cheerful, and his colour is bitter' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 8 November 1964). He went on to say that Sukarno did not look like 'a dying man', perhaps contrary to rumours circulating in the Western media about Sukarno's deteriorating condition. However, Gilchrist's earlier comments to the FO were revised. He said that when he attended an event at which Sukarno gave a speech on 10 November 1964, Sukarno appeared to be 'in pain, and very possibly he was', most likely due to exhaustion from ceremonial events that could last until late at night with the President Keita (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 19 November 1964). Howard Jones, the United States Ambassador to Indonesia, agreed with Gilchrist that Sukarno appeared unwell, but he admitted that Sukarno impressed him by appearing fit and energetic the next day.

Gilchrist sought as much information as possible about Sukarno's health from key figures in the president's inner circle in order to obtain reliable information. Gilchrist obtained information from Johannes Leimena, Deputy Prime Minister and also a doctor, who stated that 'once the kidney stone is out' in a normal, successful operation, then 'Sukarno will go on for years' and it appears that Sukarno 'has reconciled himself to the operation subject

to a further attempt by Chinese acupuncturists who are said to be on their way' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, November 19, 1964). A confidential report from the Australian Embassy in Jakarta revealed that Leimena said Sukarno's reluctance to undergo surgery for his kidneys was causing headaches for his cabinet members. Leimena disclosed that Sukarno had refused to undergo minor surgery to remove stones from his bladder while in Vienna (Inward Cablegram from Australian Embassy, Jakarta, TNA, FO 371/175250, November 9, 1964).

Gilchrist also sought information from another doctor who was also one of Sukarno's closest confidants and one of the most important figures in Guided Democracy: Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Subandrio. In a telegram to the Foreign Office, Gilchrist reported that Subandrio had shared information with him that was not for public consumption: that while it was already widely known that Sukarno's left kidney contained many stones, his recent visit to Vienna revealed the presence of a large stone in his right kidney, which was considered serious and requiring surgical treatment (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 20 November 1964). Subandrio added that this condition had not yet affected Sukarno's physical condition, but he sensed that after Sukarno's return to Jakarta from Vienna, the President seemed to harbour anxiety which was having an impact on his psychological state, leading him to feel unwell and unfit for work (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 20 November 1964).

The information about a new stone in Sukarno's right kidney seemed to make Sukarno anxious, so several X-rays were taken to check it. Subandrio informed Sukarno that the latest X-ray showed that the Vienna doctor's diagnosis was probably wrong because it was not a stone but 'the shadow which had led to the previous diagnosis represented in fact no more than a pocket'. To reconfirm this, Sukarno would undergo further X-rays. Gilchrist then attempted to confirm Subandrio's 'air-pocket story' with Leimena. However, Leimena did not share any stories, instead, he highlighted the President's enthusiasm for partying late into the night recently – perhaps indirectly implying that Sukarno was fine (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 23 November 1964). Gilchrist then received the latest information from a US diplomat who had heard directly from Sukarno that the second X-ray examination had clearly shown that the Vienna doctors had made a mistake by taking the images from the wrong angle (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 3 December 1964).

Gilchrist received a report from British diplomatic circles that the information about the alleged examination fault by the Vienna medical team on Sukarno came from the Chinese physicians who had come to Jakarta. The Chinese doctors asked Sukarno to undergo another X-ray in Jakarta from a specific angle so that they could see the stone in his right kidney more clearly. After the re-X-ray, the Chinese medical team concluded that 'only an air-lock in the kidney concerned which caused a shadow and had been misinterpreted in Vienna as indicating the presence of a large stone' (M.J.T. McCann Copy of a Minute, TNA, FO 371/175313, 8 December 1964). Based on archives at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taomo Zhou also revealed that Prof. Wu, a leading urologist and head of the Chinese medical team, stated that there had been a misdiagnosis by the Vienna medical team, and that it was not kidney stones but a cardiovascular problem that needed to be treated immediately (Zhou, 2014). However, she noted that the Chinese medical team's most

intensive assistance to Sukarno began in November 1964 (Zhou, 2014), amid concerns about a stone in Sukarno's right kidney. The report from the Chinese doctors reinforced Sukarno's conviction to abandon the suggestion of surgery, an option that Sukarno feared and hence avoided. Nevertheless, Gilchrist obtained information from an Austrian diplomat that Sukarno had scheduled a trip to Vienna in late December 1964 or early January 1965 because the embassy had issued visas to two of Sukarno's personal staff and the palace doctor. The Austrian diplomat suspected that the Chinese acupuncturists had advised Sukarno to visit Vienna, but it appeared that this was not to follow up on the surgery recommendation and was only a consultation and check-up visit (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 16 December 1964). At the end of December 1964, the palace medical team was in Vienna to discuss the results of Sukarno's kidney x-ray.

Amid rumours of Sukarno's deteriorating health, Gilchrist believed that Sukarno was seriously ill, drawing on informal conversations he had with people in Sukarno's inner circle, his own amateur observations, and information he gathered from other foreign diplomats. On 15 December, 1964, Gilchrist received information that Sukarno was in poor condition at a ceremony where rumours circulated that both his legs were swollen or that only one of them was bandaged. Earlier, on 13 December 1964, Radio Jakarta broadcast news that attracted great attention in Indonesia and around the world, informing that Sukarno was 'walking with a limp from a swollen leg and looked tired from overwork' (Daily Mail, 17 December 1964, p. 2; Newsweek, 28 December 1964, p. 31). Gilchrist saw Sukarno in person at a ceremony at the palace on 17 December 1964, where, based on his observations, 'his colour was bad and he appeared unusually nervous and tense', but Sukarno stood for three and a quarter hours and shook hands with hundreds of people (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 17 December 1964). Several diplomats also seemed surprised that Sukarno was so vigorous, contrary to rumours that he was gravely ill. Sukarno even made a statement, refuting rumours that he would not live much longer. He declared: 'Sukarno is not going to die', affirming that he was in excellent condition and that his anti-imperialist enemies would be disappointed by this fact.

The precise state of Sukarno's health at the end of 1964 was unknown, given that the palace itself chose to keep information about this tightly under wraps. This was understandable, considering that Sukarno had heavy political responsibilities: leading the escalating Confrontation with Malaysia, consolidating the New Emerging Forces and the second Asian-African Conference, as well as maintaining national unity to sustain his revolutionary project. Any adverse news about him, especially regarding his health, would certainly cause upheaval domestically and in international politics. Sukarno was also expected to address the worsening economic conditions faced by Indonesian people. Rumours circulating in the foreign press about Sukarno's declining condition due to kidney problems were later revealed to have been leaked by the Vienna doctors. The Chinese medical team treating Sukarno confirmed that in early January 1965, his condition was good, and therefore they decided to return to China.

### **Rumors, Uncertainty over Sukarno's Health, and the Succession Issue**

The lack of clear and specific information about Sukarno's health condition from the palace gave rise to a swirl of rumours about his deteriorating health. An American magazine wrote that in a climate of press and radio censorship, 'any discussion of Sukarno's health has been strictly taboo' (Newsweek, 28 December 1964, p. 31). Rumours about Sukarno's deteriorating health were not only circulated by media coverage, but also discussed discreetly among foreign diplomats. For British diplomats in Indonesia, and the British government in general, rumours about Sukarno's declining health were valuable information given their position vis-à-vis with Indonesia during the Konfrontasi. In the British view, Sukarno's illness would have a major impact not only on the course of the Konfrontasi, but would also have far-reaching implications for the direction of Indonesian politics at home and abroad. Speculation arose, including whether Sukarno would relinquish the leadership due to his health problems. Therefore, amid rumours about Sukarno's uncertain health, British diplomats in Indonesia consulted relevant medical experts, asking for professional assessments about Sukarno's actual health based on the information that had been gathered. In addition, according to reports from the British embassy in Jakarta, British diplomats were making behind-the-scenes attempts to read the issues surrounding Sukarno's potential successors and their manoeuvres.

British diplomats in Jakarta and London sought the opinion of dr V.C. Medvei, a physician who had fled the Nazis in Austria and later became principal medical adviser at the British Foreign Office, on Sukarno's state of health. At the end of November 1964, Gilchrist discussed with Medvei Sukarno's kidney ailment and the claim that the large stone in Sukarno's right kidney was an air-bubble. Medvei shared his view with Gilchrist that he tended to doubt the accuracy of the latest diagnosis regarding the air-bubble in Sukarno's kidney. Medvei went on to remark that 'a competent medical man might form the opinion, on the pre-air-bubble interpretation of the evidence, plus my own observations of Sukarno's up and down physical appearance, that the correct medical solution in the interest of the patient would be to dispense with the operation' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 23 November 1964). However, this was also a risky choice. Gilchrist then arranged a meeting between Medvei and Hurustiati Subandrio, the wife of Subandrio, who was an influential women's activist and a doctor, where one of the topics of discussion was the so-called air-bubble story and Sukarno's health condition. However, Hurustiati did not share the story when Medvei asked about topics that she might consider sensitive.

In a telegram to J.E. Cable at the Foreign Office, Medvei revealed that based on information about Sukarno's current kidney condition, there was a possibility that Sukarno 'may survive a few (six to eight) months longer without an operation' (Medvei to Cable, TNA, FO 371/175313, 9 December 1964). Medvei appeared confident in the diagnosis given by the Vienna doctors and did not believe the air-bubble story from the Jakarta doctors. Nevertheless, he stated, from his perspective as a doctor, that given Sukarno's age of 63, surgeons would be worried about operating on someone of that age with 'one kidney partially functioning, and the prognosis must be guarded'. J.E. Cable then reported to the Secretary of State on Sukarno's health condition based on Medvei's analysis, which he compared with a confidential report from a reliable Austrian source. Cable said that 'our best

evidence suggests that Sukarno does not have much longer to live', but he recalled that in 1959 there had been a similar prognosis that Sukarno's health condition would allow him to survive for about five years. Therefore, Cable argued that 'it would be a mistake to base any plans on the expectation of his early death' (FO Minute J.E. Cable, TNA, FO 371/175313, 11 December 1964).

In addition to seeking the truth about Sukarno's poor health, there was also awareness of the manoeuvring among Indonesia's political elite amid the President's deteriorating health, although such information appeared only rarely in British diplomatic telegrams from Jakarta. Discussions about Sukarno's possible successor among British diplomats in Jakarta first surfaced in connection with rumours that Sukarno had a stone in his right kidney. Gilchrist discussed this with Subandrio in November 1964, saying that 'the disappearance of Sukarno, who was neither warlike nor so rash as some other Indonesians, might lead to undesirable consequences' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 20 November 1964). Subandrio agreed with Gilchrist's view, commenting that Sukarno's death in the current situation 'might lead to chaos in Indonesia and Southeast Asia'. In his telegram to the Foreign Office in London, Gilchrist further remarked that one of the undesirable consequences of Sukarno's fall was 'Subandrio's succession', but he did not elaborate on this statement further (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 20 November 1964). This statement raises questions, but also interpretations about Subandrio's position, which was considered ambitious to inherit Sukarno's throne from the British viewpoint.

The British seemed to consider Subandrio as one of the leading candidates to succeed Sukarno, based on at least two considerations: his political position and his political manoeuvring. In terms of political position, Subandrio was one of Sukarno's closest and trusted confidants: he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, the highest executive position under the President, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the State Intelligence Agency. With these various positions, Subandrio's political influence was enormous, both domestically and in Indonesia's foreign policy. His position became even more important in the national political arena after the death of Djuanda, a technocrat who served as First Minister during the Guided Democracy era and former Prime Minister during the Parliamentary Democracy era, which then led to a reshuffle in the cabinet structure. Merle C. Ricklefs (2008) argues that Subandrio, Chaerul Saleh, and Leimena, the Deputy Prime Ministers, formed a 'triumvirate' in President Sukarno's inner circle, with 'Subandrio being the increasingly dominant figure' who approached the PKI to expand his support base in preparation for becoming Sukarno's successor. In the power triangle of the Guided Democracy era between Sukarno, the PKI and the Army, the most logical manoeuvre for Subandrio to pursue Sukarno's revolutionary politics was to approach the PKI rather than the military, which was more in line with Sukarno's political agenda. This move killed two birds with one stone: Subandrio remained close to Sukarno, while at the same time securing greater backing from revolutionary forces within the country.

When seeking Medvei's opinion at the end of November 1964 regarding Sukarno's deteriorating health, Gilchrist also brought up Subandrio again, whom he considered 'a competent medical man and that he had a vital interest in the succession'. Medvei then replied that 'if it were in Subandrio's interest to defer the resolution of the succession

question, his best line of action was obviously the one which he appeared to be following' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/175313, 23 November 1964). Once again, this statement provoked interpretation because there was no explanation afterwards as to whether this was related to Subandrio's statement that the prognosis of the Vienna medical team was wrong, and that Sukarno's health did not need to be taken too seriously for him to lead Indonesia for years to come. Gilchrist responded to Medvei's statement with 'a bit speculative, I dare say, but by no means implausible'.

Another name that emerged as a potential successor to Sukarno amid his illness in correspondence between the Foreign Office and the British Embassy in Jakarta was Chaerul Saleh, Deputy Prime Minister III and Minister of Basic Industry and Mining, also a militant young figure who played a role in the Rengasdengklok Affair and was involved in the Persatuan Perjuangan under Tan Malaka during the Revolution. After Radio Jakarta's shocking announcement on 13 December 1964, about Sukarno's condition, Chaerul Saleh's name was mentioned in an article written by Anthony Cave-Brown in *The Times* newspaper as one of the potential candidates to succeed Sukarno. The article claimed that 'Sukarno will soon be compelled to hand over rule to Chaerul Saleh, a communist, with Peking orientations' (FO to Jakarta, TNA, FO 371/175313, 14 December 1964). The author of this article did not seem to fully comprehend the national political constellation and political contestation in Indonesia by referring to Chaerul as a communist, given that Chaerul Saleh's party, Murba, was in conflict with the PKI, and the PKI itself was fighting against the Badan Pendukung Sukarnoisme (BPS), which was supported by Murba figures such as Adam Malik, Sumantoro, and Chaerul Saleh, who campaigned for Sukarnoism to counter the growing influence of communist ideology (Crouch, 2007). *Newsweek* (28 December 1964, p. 31) also mentioned Chaerul Saleh as 'his (Sukarno's) personal favourite', but with a broader understanding of the political situation in Indonesia, describing Chaerul Saleh as someone 'who scorns communists and Westerners alike'.

However, Kuala Lumpur and London doubted that Chaerul Saleh was a candidate who needed to be counted on as Sukarno's successor. Nevertheless, in a telegram to Jakarta, the FO commented that there would be no change in Indonesia's policy of confrontation with Malaysia if Chaerul Saleh was a potential successor to Sukarno, given that Chaerul 'is considered strongly anti-Western and a life-long revolutionary' (FO to Jakarta, TNA, FO 371/175313, 14 December 1964). Chaerul was also described as the figure responsible for the policy of taking over British businesses in Indonesia. However, it is interesting to note that the FO wrote that there was rivalry between Chaerul Saleh and Subandrio in pursuing Sukarno's throne. After Djuanda's death, which prompted a reshuffle in the cabinet structure, Chaerul Saleh was touted as being interested in the strategic position of First Deputy Prime Minister, a position that ultimately went to Subandrio. It was Subandrio himself who whispered to Sukarno that the BPS campaign 'to kill Sukarno with Sukarnoism' was supported by the CIA, which then led Sukarno to dissolve the BPS in December 1964, followed by the banning of the Murba party in January 1965 and the suppression of newspapers in Jakarta and Medan that supported the BPS in February 1965 (Crouch, 2007; McIntyre, 2005). However, the problem with the succession of power was that Sukarno

himself never appointed a successor because he had not yet considered stepping down from leading the Indonesian revolution.

The issue of succession never resurfaced in correspondence between Jakarta and London in early to mid-1965, partly because, in the British view, Sukarno's health, as could be observed directly from his appearance, did not correspond with the predictions that were circulating. This was somewhat peculiar, for although Sukarno's health was improving, the political contest between Sukarno's inner circle, the PKI and the army to win Sukarno's favour as his next successor was becoming increasingly heated. In early February 1965, Gilchrist wrote that he had seen several reports from the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence stating that uraemia had begun to affect Sukarno's brain and body and that Sukarno was often under the influence of stimulant drugs, but he argued that 'I can only judge from his appearance but I cannot help feeling the above analysis may be wishful thinking' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/180372, 4 February 1965). Nevertheless, Gilchrist remained adamant that 'this is not to say his (Sukarno's) health is not precarious'. Gilchrist wrote that Sukarno appeared to have X-rays of his kidneys once or twice a month and corresponded frequently with his doctor in Vienna, but in his observation and that of several ambassadors, including US Ambassador Howard Jones, 'there is no perceptible deterioration in Sukarno's health'. Jones shared with Gilchrist his suspicion that Sukarno was unwilling to go to Vienna until the second Asian-African Conference, planned to be held in Algeria in June, had ended successfully (Savingram Jakarta to FO, TNA, FO 371/180372, 24 February 1965).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article reveals that amid Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy towards Malaysia, which was backed by Britain, British international policymakers in London, through information supplied by Jakarta and elsewhere, carefully monitored every development related to Sukarno's thinking and activities that had implications for British interests in the region. In this regard, Sukarno's health condition was also a matter of concern for the British as it would have a major influence on Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy towards Malaysia, of which Sukarno was the commander. In confirming the rumours of Sukarno's declining health, the British did not rely solely on amateur observations by their representatives in Indonesia, but also sought information deemed more credible from figures in Sukarno's inner circle who happened to be doctors. Information obtained or shared by foreign diplomats and Indonesian and international media was also processed by British diplomats in Jakarta. The seriousness of verifying Sukarno's medical condition was demonstrated by the British diplomats' request to a trusted internist in the Foreign Office to provide a diagnosis and prognosis of Sukarno's health.

This research argues that, based on various methods of information gathering, the British Foreign Office believed that Sukarno was seriously ill amid the escalation of the Konfrontasi in late 1964 due to problems with both of his kidneys. However, they were very cautious not to swallow rawly the prediction that Sukarno did not have long to live due to the severity of his illness, even though the prognosis was provided by a medical expert from the British Foreign Office, such as dr. Medvei. From January to July 1965, Sukarno was in a state of health that was contrary to the predictions of many parties. Nevertheless, correspondence

from the British representative in Jakarta to London became quite intense in August 1965, discussing rumours that Sukarno's condition was failing. Gilchrist reported this to the Foreign Office on 11 August 1965, and it was clearly related to the events of 5 August, when Sukarno reportedly fainted due to a suspected lack of blood supply to the brain. Some analysts consider this event to be the trigger that led to the escalation of manoeuvres for power over Sukarno's throne in the lead-up to the tragedy of 1 October 1965. On 11 August 1965, Gilchrist said that 'I now have reason to believe that he has had quite a serious turn, including a black-out ... the Americans have had similar reports which they regard as fully credible; one of them came from a man who saw Sukarno faint' (Gilchrist to FO, TNA, FO 371/180372, 11 August 1965). Yet, Sukarno's condition improved after the incident and he prepared for the grand event of delivering his annual Independence Day speech on 17 August. Gilchrist later heard gossip from a German diplomat that the presidential medical team had advised Sukarno to shorten the length of his speech, which was usually quite long. However, Sukarno spoke at length as usual during his annual speech commemorating Indonesia's proclamation of independence and completed the ceremony.

Gilchrist met Sukarno twice on 17 and 18 August and got the impression that although he believed Sukarno's condition had weakened since the previous month, he did not think that Sukarno's decline was as serious as it had been at the end of 1964. Gilchrist even argued that Sukarno 'does not look or act like a dying man and is still very much in control of his faculties and of Indonesia' (FO 371/180372, TNA, FO 371/180372, 19 August 1965). Sukarno did indeed have to appear strong due to the unstable domestic political situation, marked by increasingly fierce political contestation between communist and anti-communist groups, and the unpredictable international political situation following Indonesia's withdrawal from the UN, the failure of the second Asian-African Conference, and Indonesia's interests in organizing the Conference of New Emerging Forces. Until early September 1965, Gilchrist argued that although Sukarno's health was considered fragile, this indication could not be used by Britain to make serious predictions about Sukarno's future (Gilchrist to Peck, TNA, FO 371/180372, 10 September 1965). Gilchrist perceived that Sukarno 'seemed to be consciously giving an imitation of an iron man' and considered this impression to be sufficiently convincing that it was believed by the public. However, Sukarno's psychological condition showed instability, something that was acknowledged by his personal doctor, dr. Soeharto, who regretted that he did not understand psychology well enough to read Sukarno's behavioral changes in the crucial years leading up to his downfall. Gilchrist analyzed that it was better to allow Sukarno to continue to be preoccupied with various issues that could harm his psychological condition (Gilchrist to Peck, TNA, FO 371/180372, 22 September 1965). With this, it seems that Gilchrist believed that Sukarno's health would inevitably decline amid the heavy political burden he had to face. However, Sukarno ultimately fell not because of his illness but because he was overthrown by political maneuvers orchestrated by the military and right-wing groups supported by superpowers, including Britain. Sukarno's health subsequently crumbled as he was placed under house arrest and did not receive the medical care he deserved as head of state.

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