

Australian government strikes deal with Indonesia to release “Bali Nine” survivors

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The five remaining members of a group of formerly young people dubbed the “Bali Nine” drug smugglers were released from Indonesian prisons and returned to Australia this week after nearly 20 years of incarceration.

This was reportedly as the result of an agreement first discussed between Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, Peru last month.

Now middle-aged men, Si Yi Chen, 39, Michael Czugaj, 38, Matthew Norman, 38, Scott Rush, 39, and Martin Stephens, 48, touched down in Australia on commercial flights on Sunday evening.

The group’s supposed drug-running “ringleaders,” Andrew Chan, 31, and Myuran Sukumaran, 38, were executed by firing squad in 2015, despite widespread public opposition in Australia. Another young member of the group, Tan Duc Thanh Nguyen, died in prison from stomach cancer in 2018. Renee Lawrence, the only female member of the group, was released in November that year for good behaviour.

Throughout the corporate media, there has been barely a mention of the circumstances in which the Bali Nine were arrested and imprisoned.

These low-level young drug “mules,” mostly from working-class backgrounds, paid a heavy price after being deliberately handed over by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to the Indonesian authorities in 2005 to face the risk of the death penalty for attempting to bring about eight kilograms of heroin into Australia from the Indonesian tourist resort island of Bali.

By contrast, the wealthy business operators who dominate the multi-billion dollar drug trade internationally in cahoots with elements of the police, remain at large. They continue to prey on the desperate

situations of the poor, usually young people, who act as couriers.

Lee Rush, the father of Scott Rush, had alerted the AFP to the drug smuggling plan before the group left Australia for Bali, and was reassured that his son would be prevented from departing.

The police could have stopped Scott Rush at the airport before leaving for Bali because he was on bail at the time, facing stealing accusations. Instead, the AFP handed his information over to their Indonesian counterparts and advised them to “take what action they deem appropriate.”

The AFP’s actions were backed by both the Howard Liberal-National government and the then Labor Party opposition, in the interests of strengthening strategic and military ties with the then Indonesian administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a Suharto dictatorship-era general. Relations had been strained by Australia’s 1999 military intervention into East Timor.

In 2006, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer even lauded the Yudhoyono government after four of the Bali Nine’s sentences were initially increased to the death penalty. “We actually urged the Indonesians to be tough on drug trafficking,” he stated. Following Downer’s comments, Labor Party leader Kim Beazley backed the government and the AFP. “We are in the business of supporting them,” he said.

This betrayal also received judicial approval in 2006. In *Rush v Commissioner of Police*, a Federal Court judge dismissed a lawsuit by Lee Rush over the AFP’s broken promise. The judge ruled that the AFP had acted legally and owed no duty of care to the father or son, regardless of its promised intervention. That was despite Australia officially opposing the death penalty.

In 2015, in the face of public anger over the

executions of Chan and Sukumaran, the AFP defended its decision to place the nine young people in the hands of the Indonesian regime in the full knowledge that they could face execution. AFP chief Andrew Colvin declared that the “harsh reality” was that the AFP would do the same again in the future.

There were some crocodile tears from the Abbott Liberal-National government and the Labor opposition over the fate of Chan and Sukumaran. But three days after they were executed, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop stated: “It’s time for us to seek to move on... I think we need to look at the long-term future of the relationship.”

The remaining members of the Bali Nine continued to languish in prison for almost another decade.

A degree of secrecy has surrounded the release of the Australians. The precise details of the agreement have not been made public. Sources reportedly told the *Australian* that the released Australian prisoners are prohibited from speaking to the media.

Whatever the exact nature of the deal, it is part of a strengthening of ties between the Prabowo administration and the Labor government. On Monday, Albanese publicly thanked the Indonesian president for his “act of compassion.”

He emphasised the Labor government’s respect for Indonesia’s “sovereignty and legal processes,” pledging to continue to work with Jakarta to tackle narcotics trafficking and transnational crime. The two governments and their military and police forces are also working closely together to block desperate refugees from reaching Australia.

On Prabowo’s part, the release is part of a broader attempt to provide his presidency, which began in October, with a phony democratic and humanitarian facade.

The Australians’ release came alongside arrangements between Prabowo’s administration and the Philippines government of President Ferdinand Marcos Jnr for the return of Filipino woman Mary-Jane Veloso, another drug trafficking prisoner. Last Friday, Prabowo promised to pardon close to 44,000 prisoners to help relieve pressure on Indonesia’s crowded jails. That is about 30 percent of the total prison population.

The public relations exercise is necessary, because Prabowo is a particularly notorious military figure. An ex-special forces general and son-in-law of the former

dictator Suharto, he had a long and murderous career in the military before transitioning to politics. Now an extremely wealthy businessman, he is a representative of the political-military elite that came to power during Suharto’s New Order dictatorship.

Prabowo has been implicated in atrocities in East Timor, West Papua, Aceh Province, the suppression of protests in the 1990s, and the kidnapping and murder of activists as Suharto’s regime came to an end in 1998.

For its part, the Labor government is seeking to deepen ties with Indonesia, not only because it is an increasingly important trading partner. Acting in close collaboration with Washington, the Albanese administration is seeking to line Indonesia and other southeast Asian nations up behind American imperialism’s vast military build-up in the region, aimed at preparing for war with China. That has included frequent visits to the archipelago nation by Labor ministers over the past year, as well as expanded military collaboration and war games between the two countries.

The release of the Bali Nine came amid a deepening crisis of the Labor government, in the lead-up to a federal election that must be held by May. Albanese may hope that the freedom of the men will provide a minor boost to his government’s image, under conditions of mass anger over the social and cost-of-living crisis and the government’s complicity in the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and the broader eruption of imperialism militarism.

Not a single major figure from Labor or the Liberal-National Coalition has repudiated their filthy record, which left the surviving Bali Nine youth to remain in prison until they were middle-aged men.



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