Sports in the shadow of the coup: a historical qualitative study

El deporte a la sombra del golpe: un estudio histórico cualitativo

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Abstract

Introduction: Sports in Indonesia have a long history as part of national development and the formation of national identity, especially from the independence revolution to the reform era. During the reign of President Soekarno, sports were interpreted as an ideological tool to form “revolutionary humans” in line with the political vision of anti-imperialists. However, the September 30 Movement events in 1965 (G30S/PKI) marked a turning point in the national power structure, including the sports sector.
Objective: This study examines the impact of post-coup politics on the stability and development of national sports by placing sports as a political arena integrated into the dynamics of an authoritarian state.
Methodology: This study uses a historical qualitative approach with a document analysis method. The primary sources come from official state archives. The study utilized hermeneutic methods and source criticism to assess the authenticity, historical context, and ideological bias of documents such as presidential decrees, legal products, and archival media coverage.
Results: The results show that the post-coup regime utilized sports as a tool for social engineering by integrating the military into sports institutions, limiting civilian-based organizations, and directing sports as a symbolic stage for state legitimacy.
Conclusions: The recommendations of this study emphasize the importance of a more political and critical exploration of sports history, as well as the need for decentralization and democratization of sports institutions in the present as a reflection of the legacy of authoritarian control in the past. These findings provide a foundation for policymakers to design inclusive and equitable sports policies grounded in historical understanding and aimed at countering past authoritarian legacies. The implications of this study not only broaden the perspective in the study of sports history but also provide a basis for analysis for policymakers to formulate inclusive sports policies that are oriented towards social justice.

Keywords

Sports history, G30/PKI, coup, presidential decrees, Indonesia, authoritarianism.

Resumen

Introducción: El deporte en Indonesia tiene una larga historia como parte del desarrollo nacional y la formación de la identidad nacional, especialmente desde la revolución independentista hasta la era reformista. Durante el mandato del presidente Sukarno, el deporte se interpretó como una herramienta ideológica para formar "humanos revolucionarios", en consonancia con la visión política de los antiimperialistas. Sin embargo, los sucesos del Movimiento 30 de Septiembre de 1965 (G30S/PKI) marcaron un punto de inflexión en la estructura de poder nacional, incluido el sector deportivo.
Objetivo: Este estudio examina el impacto de la política posterior al golpe en la estabilidad y el desarrollo de los deportes nacionales al ubicar al deporte como un espacio político integrado en la dinámica de un estado autoritario. Metodología: Este estudio utiliza un enfoque cualitativo histórico con un método de análisis documental. Las fuentes primarias provienen de archivos estatales oficiales. El estudio aplicó métodos hermenéuticos y crítica de fuentes para evaluar la autenticidad, el contexto histórico y los sesgos ideológicos de documentos como decretos presidenciales, productos jurídicos y cobertura mediática archivada. Resultados: Los resultados muestran que el régimen posterior al golpe utilizó el deporte como una herramienta de ingeniería social al integrar a los militares en las instituciones deportivas, limitar las organizaciones civiles y dirigir el deporte como un escenario simbólico para la legitimidad del Estado.
Conclusiones: Las recomendaciones de este estudio enfatizan la importancia de una exploración más política y crítica de la historia del deporte, así como la necesidad de descentralizar y democratizar las instituciones deportivas en el presente, como reflejo del legado del control autoritario del pasado. Los resultados no solo amplían el campo de la historiografía deportiva indonesia, sino que también ofrecen una base para que los responsables políticos diseñen políticas deportivas inclusivas y equitativas, basadas en una comprensión histórica y orientadas a contrarrestar el legado autoritario del pasado. Las implicaciones de este estudio no solo amplían la perspectiva en el estudio de la historia del deporte, sino que también proporcionan una base de análisis para que los responsables políticos formulen políticas deportivas inclusivas orientadas a la justicia social.

Palabras clave

Historia del deporte, G30/PKI, golpe de estado, decretos presidenciales, Indonesia, autoritarismo.

Introduction

Sport functions not only as a physical activity and entertainment but also has very strong social, political, and ideological dimensions, especially in the context of a postcolonial country like Indonesia (Webster, 2016). Since the beginning of independence, the Indonesian government has utilized sports to form a national identity and strengthen national solidarity. During the reign of President Soekarno, sports became an integral part of foreign policy and revolutionary ideology known as "Lighthouse Politics," to demonstrate the sovereignty and progress of the Indonesian nation on the world stage. The holding of sporting events such as the 4th Asian Games (1962) and the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO, 1963) are clear evidence of how sports were placed within the framework of national and international politics (Connell, 2018).

However, the fragile national political stability in the mid-1960s caused various sectors of society to experience major shocks, including the realm of sports (Woolgar, 2023). This period culminated in the September 30, 1965 Movement (G30S), a political crisis that became a pivotal moment in Indonesia's modern history. The September 30, 1965 Movement (G30S), which was accused of being a coup attempt by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), caused drastic changes in the Indonesian political constellation (Fogg, 2020). The change of power from Soekarno to Soeharto, accompanied by the dissolution of the PKI and the removal of left-wing figures, led to a significant restructuring within the government (Winward, 2018), Including sports organizations and activities. This situation resulted in the termination of several revolutionary sports programs, shifts in policy direction, and the suppression of ideologies that had previously shaped the national sports agenda (Ryan, 2021). These changes signaled the emergence of a new political order that would repurpose sport as a tool for ideological conformity and state legitimacy.

This study attempts to analyze in depth how the G30S/PKI incident and the accompanying political crisis had a direct and indirect impact on the development of sports in Indonesia (Winward, 2018). This differs from previous studies, which primarily focused on political, military, or human rights aspects of the post-1965 period (Aykin, 2024), often neglecting the institutional and ideological transformations within the field of sport. This study positions sport as the primary analytical lens for understanding national socio-political change. Drawing on concepts such as state symbolism, ideological reproduction, and biopolitical control, the study situates sport as an instrument of soft power through which regimes construct and enforce legitimacy. This is important, considering that sports are a strategic medium for the state to form ideological narratives and legitimize power (Guthrie Shimizu, 2013), So that changes in the direction of political policy will also be reflected in changes in sports policy and activities (Wainwright, 2021).

Previous studies, such as that conducted by Fogg, (2020) dan Woolgar, (2019), have generally examined the political impact of the 1965 tragedy on Indonesian society and civil institutions. However, these studies have rarely addressed in detail how the sports sector experienced tension, restriction, or even manipulation as a direct consequence of regime change and the intensifying anti-communist atmosphere (Keppy, 2024). Furthermore, there remains a lack of historical research that explicitly links the shifts in national sports narratives to broader ideological transformations in the Indonesian state before and after 1965.

In general, the political impact of the 1965 tragedy on society and civil institutions has been examined. However, these studies have not specifically reviewed how the sports sector experienced tension, restrictions, or even manipulation due to the regime change and the growing anti-communist atmosphere (Winward, 2018). The reorganization of the Indonesian National Sports Committee (KONI), the elimination of the GANEFO program, and the ideological selection of athletes indicate how the state uses sport as a political tool post-G30S. (Fogg, 2020).

This study contributes to closing that gap by examining how sport was subjected to authoritarian restructuring and became an instrument of ideological control during the New Order regime. The research conducted has revealed several insights that certainly contribute to enriching the literature of Indonesian sports history by uncovering the close relationship between political dynamics and sports development. This research also shows that sports are never free of values but have always been part of the ideological and hegemonic projects of the state. This study can open up new discussion spaces in

Indonesian sports historiography, especially in criticizing dominant narratives that have so far ignored the cultural and sports dimensions in forming a post-political conflict state.

Method

This research uses a historical qualitative approach with document analysis. The qualitative method was chosen to reconstruct the events of the September 30, 1965 Movement (G30S) Gündoğan, (2024), Which focuses on a critical review of official state archives and documents published during President Soekarno's time, especially throughout 1965. The primary sources used as a basis for the analysis are legal products, state speeches, presidential decrees, and newspapers that indicate the relationship between national political dynamics and sports policy (Rahman, 2024). Due to the limited availability of verified state documents specifically addressing sports policy in the immediate post-G30S period, the analysis focuses on two critical presidential instructions as representative legal artifacts. Although the methodology initially included other forms of state communication such as speeches and press coverage, the final analysis centers on official legal documents, due to the availability and reliability of these sources. The documents were obtained from the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI) and the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia. This study specifically examines how the events of the September 30, 1965 Movement (G30S) and the post-coup political process had a direct and indirect impact on the stability of national sports institutions, both in the realm of achievement development, sports organizational structures and the relationship between sports and power. Hermeneutic analysis was conducted in four stages: (1) close reading of document content, (2) contextualization within the political climate of 1965–66, (3) identification of dominant ideological narratives, and (4) source criticism to evaluate authenticity, purpose, and bias. In addition to presidential documents, this study analyzed 25 articles from Merdeka and Harian Rakjat (Oct–Dec 1965), selected for their ideological perspectives. These newspapers were thematically analyzed to identify how sport was represented in relation to political change. To support the interpretative analysis of state and media documents, this study draws upon theoretical insights from Fogg (2020), Woolgar (2019), and Connell (2018). Fogg's perspective on institutional restructuring in post-coup regimes offers a valuable framework for understanding how sport was ideologically redirected by the New Order. Woolgar provides context on the cultural suppression of leftist movements, which parallels the marginalization of socialist-oriented sports institutions like PORPI and GANEFO. Meanwhile, Connell's concept of sport as an instrument of soft power helps to explain how regimes strategically use sport to project internal legitimacy and international influence. Together, these perspectives inform the analytical lens of this study and enrich the understanding of how sport functioned not only as policy but also as a contested cultural and ideological space during a period of authoritarian consolidation.

Results

Based on Presidential Instruction No. 016 of 1965 and Presidential Instruction No. 019 of 1965, important developments related to the implementation of the 6th National Multi Event (PON), which was previously planned to take place in Jakarta, occurred. These findings are specifically derived from an interpretative reading of the two official decrees, which serve as the main sources for this analysis. Presidential Instruction No. 016 of 1965 instructed large-scale preparations to hold the 6th PON in Jakarta to successfully implement the PON involving all elements of society and government. This instruction directed that all national potential, from the civil and military governments and mass and sports organizations, support the event's success. This directive's emphasis on coordination and mass mobilization illustrates the ideological framing of sport as a tool for revolutionary nationalism and political unity under Sukarno's regime.

Along with developing the situation in Indonesia, Presidential Instruction No. 019 of 1965 was issued in response to the political and security conditions influenced by the "September 30 Movement" (G30S/PKI) incident. Given the instability caused by the incident, the 6th National Multi Event (PON), which was planned to be held from late October to November 1965, had to be canceled. In this instruction, President Sukarno warned that the implementation of the 6th National Multi Event (PON)

had to be postponed until 1966. This was decided to avoid potential vulnerabilities related to the situation that was not yet conducive.

Presidential Instruction No. 019 of 1965 also noted that the preparations for the 6th National Multi Event (PON) that had been carried out would not be in vain, and all assistance that various parties had provided for the event would be directed to support the preparations for the 6th National Multi Event (PON) the following year. Therefore, even though this sporting event was canceled in 1965, support and preparation continued to ensure the success of the 1966 National Multi Event (PON).

Presidential Instructions of the Republic of Indonesia Numbers 016 and 019 of 1965 provide a clear picture of how sports, especially the 6th National Multi Event (PON), were positioned as a national mobilization tool under Sukarno's leadership. Through Instruction No. 016, President Sukarno emphasized the importance of holding the 6th PON on a large scale as part of the 10-Year Sports Plan and the spirit of GANEFO (Trotier, 2016), which is a symbol of resistance against Western domination in international sports. In this context, sports are not only understood as physical activities but also as a means of forming national character, strengthening national solidarity, and a medium for articulating the political ideology of the "Indonesian Revolution." However, the dynamics of national politics experienced a drastic shift after the September 30, 1965 Movement (G30S/PKI) disrupted the country's political stability and security. It is important to note that these findings are limited to what is explicitly stated in these two presidential instructions and do not incorporate broader public narratives or alternative media coverage, which are suggested for further study. Presidential Instruction No. 019 of 1965 directly responded to this change by ordering the postponement of the implementation of the VI PON until 1966. Although preparations continued, this instruction showed that the critical political situation had shifted national priorities, and national-scale sports projects had to be defeated by the urgency of restructuring the power structure. This shift from revolutionary ambition to administrative postponement reflects a deeper transformation in the ideological function of sport—from a tool of mass mobilization and anti-imperialist resistance under Sukarno to an apparatus of political control and regime consolidation under the emerging New Order. Thus, as an instrument of the state, sports must submit to the rapidly changing dynamics of power and security. These two presidential instructions provide clear documentary evidence of the ideological repositioning of sport during this period. Instruction No. 016/1965 emphasizes national-scale mobilization: "to involve all elements of civil and military society in the successful implementation of the Sixth National Sports Week (PON) as part of the revolutionary mission." Meanwhile, Instruction No. 019/1965, issued shortly after the G30S incident, states that "due to national instability, the Sixth PON must be postponed to ensure security and political consolidation." These instructions illustrate the sharp pivot from ideological ambition to administrative containment in a short time frame.

While the presidential instructions reflect the official stance of the state, public discourse in national newspapers during the same period reveals parallel and contrasting narratives that shaped the ideological landscape of sport. In addition to the analysis of official documents, newspaper coverage from *Merdeka* and *Harian Rakjat* during the same period reveals divergent public narratives regarding the role of sport in society. These narratives reflect the ideological polarization that accompanied Indonesia's political transition. Editorials from *Harian Rakjat* consistently emphasized the revolutionary function of sport. In its October 10, 1965 edition, an article titled *"Olahraga untuk Revolusi"* stated that "olahraga adalah bagian dari perjuangan kelas, membentuk manusia revolusioner, dan melawan dekadensi borjuis dalam budaya pemuda." This framing reflects the newspaper's alignment with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), viewing sport as a tool for ideological education and class struggle. Conversely, *Merdeka* offered a more moderate, nationalistic perspective. In a piece from November 5, 1965 titled *"PON dan Persatuan Bangsa"*, the editorial urged depoliticization, declaring that "olahraga hendaknya tidak dijadikan panggung ideologi, tetapi wadah memperkuat persatuan nasional dan stabilitas negara." This indicates a shift in public messaging toward national unity and distancing sport from overt political affiliation. These contrasting perspectives illustrate how media outlets interpreted and shaped the discourse on sport in response to the rapidly changing political context. While *Harian Rakjat* maintained its revolutionary stance, *Merdeka* aligned more closely with the emerging New Order narrative that sought to neutralize sport from ideological tension. This divergence not only reflects public sentiment but also reveals how sport became a contested space for negotiating ideological legitimacy.

Discussion

The findings in this study underline that sport in Indonesia after the September 30, 1965 Movement experienced significant structural and ideological transformation, which was largely triggered by regime change and the strengthening of the military in government structures (Winward, 2018). In particular, the comparison between Presidential Instructions No. 016 and No. 019 of 1965 demonstrates a sharp ideological shift—from sport as a revolutionary tool of mass mobilization under Sukarno to a controlled apparatus for political stabilization under the New Order. In this context, sports are no longer a neutral arena for developing the nation's physical and character alone. Instead, they become part of the architecture of state power, laden with political agendas, social control, and ideological legitimacy (Connell, 2018). These patterns of ideological restructuring are further reflected in contemporary newspaper coverage, which reveals how different political blocs interpreted the role of sport in line with their agendas. *Harian Rakjat*, in its editorial "Olahraga untuk Revolusi," framed sport as a revolutionary tool, deeply embedded in the broader struggle for socialist transformation. This view aligns with Woolgar's (2019) notion of cultural fronts, where sport functions not just as leisure but as a battleground for ideological expression. In contrast, *Merdeka*'s editorial titled "PON dan Persatuan Bangsa" promoted the depoliticization of sport as a unifying force, echoing the early ideological shift under the New Order. This divergence in media narratives illustrates what Fogg (2020) describes as a recalibration of public institutions, where competing hegemonies sought to define the social meaning of sport. Connell's (2018) perspective on soft power helps interpret these shifts as part of a larger project of symbolic state-building—sport being mobilized not only administratively, but discursively, to support new regimes of legitimacy. By integrating state decrees with media discourses, the study shows that sport became a contested ideological site, not only in official policy but in the realm of public imagination and communication.

This transformation can be better understood through a theoretical framework that combines Foucault's notion of biopolitics and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, as reflected in Fogg, (2020) analysis of post-coup institutional shifts in Indonesian civil society. The post-coup state uses sport as a biopolitical mechanism to regulate people's bodies and behavior through centrally controlled physical training (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). This process, as noted by Li et al., (2023), is visible in the reorganization of sport institutions that were originally inclusive and mass-based into militarized and exclusive structures. This transformation aligns with the broader New Order agenda to maintain political order through the depoliticization of public life, including the domain of sport.

From an institutional perspective, military actors' takeover of sports organizations not only shifted the managerial and athlete development functions but also eliminated the ideological values that, during the Old Order, were openly articulated through sports (Trotier, 2016). The dissolution of left-affiliated organizations such as PORPI and GANEFO, and the tightening of leadership screening, indicate that the New Order state treated sport as a politically sensitive domain requiring ideological control (Winward, 2018; Ryan, 2021). This process reveals sport as a site of soft power—a cultural field where the regime secured symbolic legitimacy by monopolizing representation and restricting dissent.

The long-term implications of this ideological restructuring include the persistent centralization of authority in the national sports system, which inhibits the growth of democratic, decentralized, and participatory institutions. Emphasis on symbolic achievement in international events such as the Asian Games and SEA Games, while often framed as expressions of national pride, also functioned as instruments of state image-making and legitimacy projection (Trotier, 2016; Connell, 2018). The reorientation of sport from civic empowerment to state spectacle reflects the New Order's broader political strategy of depoliticizing public space while simultaneously using it for regime consolidation.

This study reflects the need to critically reassess Indonesian sports history not only through a performance-based or institutional lens but as an ideological field shaped by political transitions and power struggles. To that end, future studies should adopt interdisciplinary perspectives—merging history, politics, and cultural analysis—to better understand how sport functions as a mechanism of both conformity and resistance. Sports history must be situated as an integral part of national political history, as regime change has consistently left tangible imprints on the meanings, practices, and structures of sport in Indonesian society.

Conclusions

This study shows that the events surrounding the September 30, 1965 Movement (G30S/PKI) brought lasting changes not only to Indonesia's political structure, but also to how sport was positioned within the state's ideological and institutional agenda. During President Sukarno's era, sport was embraced as part of a revolutionary project—tied closely to anti-imperialist ideals and efforts to mobilize mass participation, especially through initiatives like GANEFO. After the political upheaval, however, the role of sport shifted significantly as the New Order regime began to reshape it into a means of consolidating power and projecting state authority. By examining presidential instructions and official legal documents from that transitional period, this study has identified how the New Order used sport not simply for physical development or nationalism, but as a mechanism for controlling institutions, suppressing dissenting ideologies, and embedding military influence across national sport structures. These changes effectively narrowed the space for civic engagement in sport, turning it into a more centralized, top-down system that prioritized regime stability over participation or inclusivity. What this study highlights, above all, is the importance of revisiting Indonesian sports history with a more critical and contextual lens. Sport, as seen here, is not just a matter of medals or infrastructure—it reflects deeper power shifts and ideological battles. For scholars and policymakers alike, there is much to gain from rethinking sport not as a neutral field, but as a social and political domain that both mirrors and shapes the trajectory of the nation. Moving forward, more research is needed to explore how authoritarian legacies continue to influence sport governance, and how those legacies might be transformed in the pursuit of a more democratic and inclusive future.

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