

Protests defy Suharto's repression

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Indonesia is in political and social turmoil in the lead-up to next week's meeting of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR).

The country's ageing military dictator General Suharto confidently expects the 1,000-member assembly, dominated by government appointees and ruling Golkar Party representatives, to rubber-stamp his nomination for a seventh five-year term as president.

But the basis of his regime is being undermined by growing opposition within many layers of Indonesian society.

Demonstrations have been banned in the capital, Jakarta, until after the assembly session, yet thousands of students from the city's prestigious University of Indonesia defied police this week and held campus rallies against the Suharto regime.

On February 26 3,000 students rallied at the Depok campus calling for democratic political reforms. Some carried banners proclaiming "reform or death," others derided the MPR as a joke. Facing rows of troops, the students appealed for soldiers to join them rather than fire on them.

The previous day, about 150 graduates and 500 students at the university's city campus vociferously denounced the Suharto regime for its corruption. They cheered when a white mourning cloth was draped over a giant billboard identified with the Suharto junta.

In addition, the students distributed the results of a university survey showing that 72 percent of those polled on the campus had no faith in the presidential and vice-presidential "elections" to take place at the national assembly.

They issued a statement appealing to the government to voluntarily stand aside: "The people had fully trusted the government to develop our beloved country, but instead the economic and political conditions cause the people misery. That is why the New Order Government must voluntarily withdraw from the governance of our country."

Authorities treated the protest with caution. Troops did not enter the campus area, although military intelligence officers mingled in the crowd. The university's students include the

children of the political and business elite. Their protests indicate rifts opening up in Indonesian ruling circles. In the period of the bloody 1965-66 military coup, students from this institution provided important backing for Suharto.

Other protests took place in Jakarta during the week. On February 23 a small group of women calling itself "The Voice of Concerned Mothers" protested at a busy city roundabout over price rises of 300 percent for basic food items and medicines. The women were surrounded by police and army troops. Three were arrested and interrogated for 12 hours before being released.

Elsewhere in Jakarta, 24 members and supporters of Siaga—a grouping formed last year to support opposition figures Amien Rais and Megawati Sukarnoputri—held a silent vigil for about 30 minutes. Both Rais, the head of the Muhammadiyah Islamic organisation, and Megawati, the daughter of former president Sukarno, have publicly opposed Suharto, but have not supported anti-government demonstrations.

On the same day, approximately 600 students at the Pajajaran and Pasundan universities in the West Javan city of Bandung held campus rallies against skyrocketing prices. They demanded the release of a fellow student charged with distributing anti-Suharto material. Squads of riot police prevented them from marching on the provincial parliament building. Instead they burnt tires at the university's main gate. Significantly, the demonstration, organised by the Indonesian Youth Forum and Student Revolutionary Organisation, won support from local residents.

In Yogyakarta in Central Java, six Gadjah Mada University students are on a hunger strike to demand lower prices and an end to racial violence. The latter demand is particularly important. In recent weeks riots sparked by rising prices have broken out in at least 24 towns and cities across Indonesia. Many have been directed against ethnic Chinese shops and stores—a development encouraged by sections of the Indonesian media, the military and Muslim groups, all keen to find scapegoats in an effort to shield the Suharto regime.

The student demonstrations are developing despite a severe military crackdown. Indonesian human rights groups

have reported at least five deaths, 921 detentions and 14 disappearances so far this year. Amnesty International reported last week that at least 250 political activists had been arrested during the previous fortnight.

The repression is particularly heavy in Jakarta where the regime has established a special Operation Command comprising 50,000 troops and has an extensive system of satellite-linked security surveillance cameras. Police have demanded access to the operations of cellular phone companies to monitor and cut off calls deemed to be “rabble-rousing.” Throughout Indonesia police have announced that “rioters” will be “shot on sight.”

Far from voluntarily leaving the scene, the Suharto regime is seeking to entrench itself. In the national assembly all three officially-sanctioned parties—the ruling Golkar group, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) and the Muslim-based Indonesian People’s Party (PPP)—have endorsed Suharto as president and Research and Technology Minister Yusuf Habibie as vice-president.

Habibie is a staunch Suharto supporter, friend of the family and the cronies that Suharto rests and relies upon, and an advocate of national economic regulation. When Suharto first indicated in January that Habibie might fill the post, the rupiah plummeted as investors feared that the appointment might threaten the implementation of US and International Monetary Fund policies aimed at opening up the Indonesian economy to unfettered international exploitation.

In recent days US-trained economist Emil Salim, a former long-serving cabinet member and a senior Golkar member, has been nominated in opposition to Habibie. Salim was closely involved in the 1965-66 coup and served as Environment Minister for 15 years. His intervention is designed to provide democratic window-dressing and also to appease the US. Speaking on Australian television this week, he emphasised that he was not running to win. Instead he expressed the conviction that the Suharto regime would accept his suggestions for a slightly modified form of the IMF’s austerity and deregulation measures.

Salim’s calls for “an end to corruption” and for economic deregulation are little different from those of Rais and Megawati. These calls reflect the demands of international big business for open access to the Indonesian economy. Washington has publicly identified itself with Megawati, sending its ambassador to attend a recent meeting at her compound. These figures are in alliance with sections of the Indonesian capitalist class who have been thwarted by the tight economic and political control wielded by Suharto and his associates.

At the same time, all factions of the ruling class are concerned that the current economic crisis will fuel a social explosion that they will not be able to control. Megawati and

Rais are together seeking to dampen any opposition to Suharto. Neither has called for mass demonstrations to bring down the regime. Rais has declared that he will call “peoples power” protests, but not before Suharto has been given another year to prove himself.

References to “peoples power” are a warning that figures such as Rais and Megawati are hoping to follow the path of Cory Aquino in the Philippines. With the backing of the US, Aquino won the support of sections of the military for the ousting of the discredited and corrupt Marcos dictatorship and its replacement by a regime more amenable to the requirements of the US and other multinationals.

Aquino diverted the legitimate aspirations of the Filipino students, workers, peasants and middle class for democratic rights and improved living conditions into a business-led coalition that has only intensified the exploitation of the masses.

Today, the US and the IMF—which has bluntly threatened to cut off aid to Suharto—are working to create the conditions for a similar outcome in Indonesia. Megawati, Rais and Salim are entirely committed to implementing the demands of the global corporations and banks.

The present crisis, however, is creating a political ferment, particularly among Indonesia’s hundreds of thousands of students. Only the lack of a coherent political program, representing the interests of the vast mass of Indonesian workers, urban and rural poor, has created a situation in which most students continue to look to Megawati, Rais and other bourgeois figures as alternatives to Suharto.

Students and workers in Indonesia need to study the lessons of history and begin to build their own political party, independent of all wings of the ruling class, to fight for a workers government and socialist policies. An important first step will be to open up a discussion on the complex historical and political issues facing the Indonesian masses. The World Socialist Web Site encourages and welcomes questions and comments from all our readers, particularly those in Indonesia.



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