

Amid signs of widening impoverishment

Student protests grow in Indonesia

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Student protests, forums, hunger strikes and rallies against the Suharto regime have spread to universities, colleges and educational institutions across Indonesia in recent weeks.

The demonstrations began among more privileged layers of students at the prestigious University of Indonesia during the sitting of the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) in early March. That body rubber-stamped another five-year term for General Suharto as president.

But the political ferment has extended to encompass at least 100 universities, from the west of Sumatra to Bali, including major cities such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bandung and Surabaya. Protests have ranged from small meetings to sizable demonstrations involving tens of thousands of students.

The unrest is being fueled by Indonesia's deepening economic, political and social crisis. The chief target of the protests is Suharto himself and the corruption and cronyism of his regime. Students are demanding Suharto's ousting, greater political freedoms, the release of arrested students and lower prices for basic commodities.

The regime has taken little action, as yet, against demonstrations that have remained on the university grounds. But where students have tried to leave the campuses and engage in street protests, the response by the army and police has been swift and brutal.

* On March 19 police and troops attacked a demonstration of about 5,000 from the University of Lampung in South Sumatra and surrounding universities and high schools. The assault came when students attempted to leave the campus. More than 100 students were injured, about 70 were arrested and a number of others remain unaccounted for.

Clashes continued the following day when truckloads

of anti-riot troops blocked the path of students attempting to leave the campus and march to the city. When protesters surged forward, chanting, "One command, one action: overthrow Suharto!" and "Reform or death—Long live the people!" they were attacked with water cannon, batons and tear gas. Onlookers screamed at the military, as troops beat and arrested students.

* On March 25, security forces attacked a demonstration of about 1,000 students with tear gas, sticks and clubs in the central Javan city of Solo. The students had managed to enter the city's streets. At least 39 protesters from the March 11 University were injured, along with a number of police officers, and others are missing.

* The following day, about 2,000 students rallied on the campus of the IKIP Teachers Institute in the West Sumatra capital of Padang to protest the disappearance of nine fellow students in Solo and Lampung. The students lowered the Indonesian flag to half-mast and marched around the campus carrying banners, posters and a coffin draped in a black cloth.

As the wave of student protests continues, the regime is carrying out a crackdown against opposition political groups. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that scores of students and political activists arrested in recent weeks were being held incommunicado. A number of others have simply disappeared.

According to the civil rights group, Human Rights Watch, three students associated with the banned Peoples Democratic Party (PRD) have been repeatedly tortured with electric shocks after their arrest by the military on March 13. Andi Arief, head of the PRD's Students in Solidarity for Democracy in Indonesia, was arrested in Lampung on March 28 and his whereabouts

is unknown to family members.

Two students, M. Khairil Syarif and Hamdani, were arrested on March 27 after taking part in a demonstration at the Raden Intan State Islamic Institute in Bandar Lampung. They were subjected to intensive police interrogation. Both are activists with opposition political groups—the Indonesian United Democratic Party (PUDI) and the Peoples Party for a Democratic Republic of Democracy (PRRD), respectively.

Human Rights Watch also reported that more than 140 people are under detention in Jakarta for engaging in peaceful protests against the Suharto regime. They include journalists, lawyers and activists with various opposition and human rights organizations.

At the same time that it steps up arrests, the Suharto regime is seeking discussions with sections of the student leadership. Two weeks ago armed forces chief General Wiranto opened the door for talks by describing the student demands as “normal” and pledging that the army would “respect their demands as long as they are constructive.”

Student leaders from a number of major universities appear to have rejected a meeting with Wiranto scheduled for April 4, but have not ruled out talks with Suharto and his ministers. *Time* magazine recently reported that senior army officers had already held secret meetings in Jakarta with a group of intellectuals with links to student groups.

Anti-Suharto layers within the country’s economic and political elite are also seeking support from student leaders. Last month, Amien Rais, head of the Islamic Muhammadiyah organization, attended a demonstration of 30,000 students at the University of Gajah Mada in Yogyakarta, which culminated with the burning of Suharto’s statue. But when he told the protest that Suharto should be given another chance, he was booed by students who shouted “the masses will win, oppose Suharto.”

What concerns all sections of the capitalist class—those backing Suharto, as well as those seeking to prepare an alternative regime—is the potential for the student protests to trigger a broader eruption of strikes and demonstrations by workers, small farmers and the urban and rural poor, all of whom are being devastated by the economic crisis.

Even according to the Suharto regime’s grossly understated figures, unemployment has more than

doubled since the beginning of the year to 8.7 million people. Another 18.4 million are classified as “underemployed”—that is, eking out a living on the basis of occasional, casual work. This means that the 30 percent of the work force has insufficient work to adequately feed, house and clothe themselves.

Indonesian Manpower Minister Theo Sambuaga announced at the end of March there would be no increase in the minimum wage for workers, even though the official inflation rate for the first three months of the year was more than 25 percent. Prices for some items such as basic medicines have doubled and trebled.

The current minimum wage for Jakarta is 172,500 rupiah a month, worth US\$22, and less in most rural areas. Even prior to the collapse of the rupiah, it was calculated that the minimum wage—then worth \$65—covered only 92 percent of the cost of basic needs, such as rice. The same wage, which last year bought 6.2 kilos of rice, buys just 4.7 kilos today despite food subsidies, and much less of other basics such as cooking oil and noodles, according to a recent study by the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The ILO study estimated there are 10 million new poor in Indonesia as a result of the economic crisis, increasing the numbers in poverty from 22.5 million in 1996 to 32.5 million in 1998.

In many rural areas, the impact of the economic collapse has been compounded by a severe drought caused by the El Niño weather pattern. A recent UN study warned that as many as 7.5 million people were at risk of suffering food shortages, and that 500,000 tons of rice a month would have to be imported.

Other estimates are worse. The British aid agency Oxfam warned that the level of poverty could increase four-fold this year. It reported that in West Timor, 75 percent of families are down to one meal a day, which frequently consists of putak, the bark of a tree normally used as cattle feed. Australian aid workers returning from East Timor reported that 85 people had already died from starvation in the village of Fefudin alone.



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