

Indonesian student protests defy Suharto's repression

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Student protests and rallies against the Indonesian military regime are continuing virtually daily across the country despite threats of severe repression and demands by President Suharto that students return to their studies.

Students have become bolder, taking to the streets in a bid to involve workers and others hit by rising levels of inflation and unemployment. Riot police and army troops have been deployed to confine the demonstrations to campus grounds.

Last weekend, violent clashes erupted between police and students in the Indonesian cities of Jambi and Mataram as demonstrators attempted to leave the universities and march to local parliament buildings. In the North Sumatran city of Medan, police broke into campus grounds and shot at students, following three days of protests.

One of the most significant demonstrations occurred in the capital Jakarta on April 23, when students from seven universities marched through the streets chanting “lower prices” and “out with Suharto,” calling on drivers and bus passengers to join the protest.

Outside the Indonesian Christian University about 500 demonstrators sat down on the road, confronting hundreds of riot police with automatic rifles, batons and shields lined up nearby, before eventually retreating inside the campus grounds. On the same day, students in at least seven other cities, including Bandung, Yogyakarta and Bandarlampung, took part in rallies and demonstrations demanding an end to Suharto's rule.

On the island of Bali, 12 demonstrators were injured when police attacked a protest of about 3,000 students with batons and tear gas outside the gates of the Udayana University in Denpasar. In the east Javan city of Surabaya, thousands of students held a rally April 20

at the Adhi Tama Institute of Technology and then marched to the nearby Putara Bangas University shouting “Reform or War!” Other protests took place in Jakarta, Bogor, Bandung, and Banjarmasin, the capital of South Kalimantan province.

The Suharto dictatorship has adopted a “carrot and stick” approach to the continuing demonstrations—attempting to woo some student leaders into formal discussions while rounding up and detaining political activists, and maintaining a heavy police and military presence on the streets.

On April 18 a much publicised forum took place at the Jakarta fairgrounds between government ministers and a select group of about 60 students from 39 campuses. No student representatives were present from three of Indonesia's largest and best known institutions: the University of Indonesia, the Bandung Institute of Technology, and the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta.

The student leaders were heavily outnumbered by senior military officers, government officials, university rectors, and political and economic commentators. Those present included social affairs minister Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, the chief economic minister Ginanjar Kartasasmita, and the armed forces head General Wiranto.

Wiranto, who played a key role in organising the forum, has also instructed regional army commanders to open up discussions with student leaders. Rukmana, Suharto's daughter and a wealthy businesswoman, called on students to allow the government more time to implement reforms.

If Suharto and his ministers have been reluctant to use overwhelming force to crush student dissent, it is because they fear such action could trigger a social explosion. Already small numbers of workers and

housewives have joined in student protests against rising prices.

Rama Pratama, head of the University of Indonesia Senate, recently warned: “It is not only us who can blow up the situation, but also hungry people. Unemployed people will be angry and, because we don’t want that to happen, we tell the government to get serious.”

These comments point to a deepening economic, social and political crisis. International money markets have kept the value of the rupiah down to about 8,000 to the US dollar, even though the Suharto regime has met the initial deadlines contained in the latest International Monetary Fund restructuring package. At the present exchange rate, many Indonesian businesses are incapable of repaying foreign debts or engaging in trade. Further talks aimed at rescheduling the country’s huge corporate debt are due to be held in Japan in early May.

Unemployment has reached 18.7 million and is likely to rise even higher as businesses, both large and small, are forced to lay off workers or close completely. Prices have soared and will increase again when the government implements IMF demands for the ending of price subsidies on basic commodities. An estimated 7.5 million Indonesians face “acute food shortages” because of a devastating drought and rising food prices.

The Suharto regime has not, as yet, unleashed the full might of the army against students, but scores of political activists and student leaders have been arrested or have simply “disappeared.” They face draconian sentences under Indonesia’s security laws, which outlaw any political protest or criticism of Suharto.

Over the last week, two of the “disappeared”—Haryanto Taslam, an adviser to opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Andi Arief, head of the Students in Solidarity for Democracy in Indonesia—have been located. Haryanto was found in Surabaya, 670 kilometres east of Jakarta where he was abducted six weeks ago. Andi is in a police cell after his kidnapers took him to police headquarters on April 17.



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