

Habibie's selective prison releases

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An unknown number of political prisoners -- thousands at least -- languish in the Indonesian dictatorship's jails, including those in East Timor and Irian Jaya (West Papua). Whereas the regime and the corporate media speak of 200 political prisoners, even official legal aid spokesmen admit the numbers are far greater.

The Habibie government's decision to release two prominent political prisoners, and the associated media fanfare therefore requires some examination. Why has the military-backed regime chosen these two detainees -- unofficial trade union leader Muchtar Pakpahan and dissident former MP Sri Bintang Pamungkas?

There may be a trickle of such releases in coming days. Justice Minister Muladi said the cabinet would discuss the release of 10 to 15 prisoners jailed for criticising Suharto. But he ruled out the release of "criminals" and those who oppose the Jakarta regime's state ideology (known as *pancasila*).

He specifically rejected the release of 10 members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), jailed 30 years ago following Suharto's bloody military coup of 1965, and several members of the outlawed Peoples Democratic Party (PRD) who were imprisoned in 1996 after the state-organised raid on the headquarters of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) to enforce the ouster of that party's leader, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Foreign Minister Ali Alatas declared that East Timor leader Xanana Gusmao would not be freed, because he was classified as a "criminal".

The Western response to Muladi's announcement was typified by Australian Prime Minister John Howard who said there were encouraging signs that up to 15 Indonesian political prisoners might be released. He insisted that Habibie's priority had to be to restore "stability" and "investor confidence".

What then do these selective releases reveal about Habibie's regime and the "political reforms" demanded by the International Monetary Fund and the governments in Washington, Tokyo, Berlin and Canberra?

The political records of both Muchtar Pakpahan and Sri Bintang Pamungkas indicate that they are regarded by many in high places as crucial to erecting a token "democratic" facade in Indonesia and to heading off the development of an industrial and political movement by the Indonesian working class.

The creation of political safety valves -- in the form of alternative parties and trade unions -- is seen in these quarters as essential to enforce capitalist rule, particularly as economic conditions deteriorate, throwing millions of factory and construction workers out of work and sending prices for food and other essential items soaring.

At the heart of the political crisis are vast changes in the economy, which have undermined the Suharto dictatorship. In 1965 Suharto was installed by a coup, followed by an anti-communist pogrom, backed by the United States and its allies -- the very same forces now presenting demands for "democratic reform".

For more than two decades the military dictatorship sustained itself through oil revenues and the development of a highly protected and regulated economy. Over the past decade, however, these conditions broke apart as transnational corporations shifted their operations globally to seek ever-cheaper sources of labour.

Indonesia has increasingly become an export assembly platform for the multinationals, particularly from Japan, the US, Germany and South Korea, often operating in partnership with the Suharto family and its associates. By 1996 Nike, for example, was producing one-third of its sports shoes in Indonesian sweatshops.

Conditions in these factories are horrific, with 12-hour shifts and 50-hour weeks, compulsory unpaid overtime and no annual leave. The 1997 minimum wage used to be the equivalent of a miserable \$US2.46 a day but following the collapse of the rupiah last year it is not even worth 50 cents today. Many companies, including state-owned enterprises and transnational corporations, such as Nike affiliates, routinely pay less, particularly in the textile and footwear industries, where most workers are female.

Backed not only by outright military repression but also its official trade union apparatus, the All-Indonesia Workers Union (SPSI), Suharto's government enforced these conditions as it vied with other Asian regimes, China and Vietnam notably, to provide the most profitable conditions for global investors.

Millions of Indonesian peasants have been driven by poverty and landlessness into the cities and the factories, to be exploited as wage labour, producing commodities for export to the US and other Western markets. The Indonesian working class now numbers up to 90 million, after expanding by some 2.5 million every year in the 1990s.

As a result, the 32-year-old military dictatorship of General Suharto faced growing strike action. Even according to its own figures, there were 251 strikes in 1992, involving more than 100,000 workers, compared with only 19 stoppages in 1989. In more recent years, major strike struggles erupted in Medan, north Sumatra, in 1994 and repeatedly in the industrial areas surrounding Jakarta. Last year, 16,000 Nike workers struck against their conditions.

In recent months, in the midst of the economy's collapse, few reports have appeared of strikes and political struggles by workers. Instead the pent-up class hostility to the regime initially took the form of rioting and looting in Jakarta and other cities. But strikes have reportedly re-emerged in recent days.

Just after it released Muchtar Pakpahan, the Habibie government lifted the ban on the trade union body he has headed for six years, the Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia (SBSI, or Indonesian Prosperous Labour Union).

Since 1992, the former university law lecturer has been at the centre of US-backed demands that the Indonesian regime allow the formation of Western-style trade unions to contain the working class.

In June 1992 the Clinton administration threatened trade sanctions against Indonesia, backed by a petition filed by Asia Watch and the International Labour Rights Education and Research Fund, both US government-funded bodies with close links to the CIA and the American trade union bureaucracy, the AFL-CIO.

The petition pointed to the fact that retired military commanders and members of the ruling Golkar party dominated the leadership of the official SPSI union and observed that its reported one million members made up less than 6 percent of the workforce. It referred to a growing number of strikes erupting outside SPSI's control.

"Precisely because existing procedures for resolving labour disputes do not, for the most part, allow for a real expression of worker demands, many workers have resorted to strikes and work stoppages to draw attention to their grievances, particularly in West Java and the industrial area around Jakarta... These are wildcat strikes."

In a reply to the US petition, the Suharto regime defended the use of the military to suppress strikes, precisely in order to prevent a political movement developing among younger workers.

"One of the military's roles with respect to strikes," it said, "is to determine if there are any outside forces at work... One possible inroad for communist subversion is through worker unrest. The Government especially fears that the communist ideology might be attractive to young people who did not live through the national distress of the 1960s, and many of these young people can best be reached on the job through labour disputes."

The Suharto government banned the first SBSI national congress in 1993, prompting a public condemnation by the US embassy in Jakarta. Evidence of direct US government involvement in SBSI had earlier emerged on October 28, 1992 when police in Tangerang, West Java, broke up a meeting in which nine members of SBSI, headed by Muchtar Pakpahan, were discussing how to open a branch office.

Among those detained was Greg Talcott, the US embassy's Labor Attache, who said he was present as an observer. It has long been US policy to place CIA officers in other countries as labour attaches. Talcott was released after an hour. The others were interrogated overnight and released the following morning.

Eighteen months later, Pakpahan was held responsible for workers' strikes and demonstrations in Medan in April 1994 and sentenced to four years jail. The Medan events began when some 25,000 workers from 42 outlying factories rallied in the city's main square. They defied the military and local authorities, demanding wage rises; trade union rights; an investigation into the death of a worker. The next day, rioting and looting broke out, including attacks on Chinese businesses.

In a 1995 interview with *Tempo*, an Indonesian magazine, Pakpahan said he tried to stop the initial demonstration in Medan. He declared that he was an anti-communist who abided by Suharto's official pancasila ideology. Speaking like a trade union bureaucrat anywhere in the world, he said unions instilled discipline among workers and SBSI had the task of increasing production. He appealed for a dialogue with the government and employers.

In 1995 the Supreme Court released him on appeal but that order was cancelled by another Supreme Court Judge in October 1996. He also faced subversion charges in relation to riots in Jakarta in July 1996.

On his release, Pakpahan urged Habibie to convene the puppet Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) to elect a transitional president. Like other bourgeois opposition figures, he insists that all demands for reform must be confined within this narrow political framework.

In addition, he spoke of forming a labour party. Other figures, including bureaucrats of the official SPSI union federation, have reportedly established an Indonesian Workers Party. Such formations will seek to divert workers into reformist and trade union channels that tie them to the dictates of the profit system.

This process can be seen in South Korea, where the former underground KCTU unions have sought to curb resistance to the Kim Dae Jung government's IMF program. Earlier this year, the KCTU blocked with the official "yellow" unions sponsored by the former military dictatorship to allow the passage of laws providing for mass sackings.

Sri Bintang Pamungkas, a former engineering lecturer at the elite University of Indonesia, has for some years been a key figure in attempts to forge a bourgeois "Islamic" opposition to the Suharto regime.

Once an MP for the officially constituted Islamic party, the United Development Party (PPP), he was witchhunted after March 1994 when he exposed a credit scandal, involving a state bank, the Suharto family and the then Information Minister Harmoko at PT Sritex, a large textile factory near Solo, central Java.

He was expelled from the PPP after his involvement in anti-Suharto rallies in Germany in April 1995 and also dismissed from parliament. He was not, however, expelled from ICMI, the Suharto-supported Islamic scholars association headed by Habibie.

In 1996 he formed an illegal political party, the United Democratic Party (PUDI). He was arrested in March 1996 and jailed for 34 months for insulting the President (maximum penalty six years). Arrested with him were fellow PUDI office bearers Saleh Abdullah and Julius Usman.

His perspective is to form a non-military nationalist government similar to those in Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand. In a March 1994 interview with *Inside Indonesia*, an Australian-based magazine, he described the Mahathir government in Malaysia as his political model of professional, technocratic Islamic politics. He hailed South Korea and Thailand as "very encouraging examples" of "strong and advanced nations" because they had reversed decades of military rule.

In August 1995, speaking on the 50th anniversary of Indonesian independence, he appealed for a return to "the real democratic principles" of pancasila and the 1945 constitution. The 1945 constitution gave the country's first president, Sukarno, virtually unchecked power. Pancasila is the doctrine adopted by the Suharto regime to legitimise the military's domination of economic and political life.



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