Students massacred in Indonesia

The Editorial Board
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The murder of six student demonstrators Tuesday in Jakarta, deliberately shot down by riot police mobilized by the Suharto dictatorship, marks a new stage in the political crisis in Indonesia. The six young people died of bullet wounds when police opened fire on students who were peacefully demonstrating against price increases ordered by the IMF and against the military dictatorship which has ruled Indonesia for 32 years. At least 16 students and teachers were wounded in the attack.

For three months the Indonesian regime has refrained from any large-scale violent crackdown against the mounting student protests. The victims of the May 12 massacre were the first students killed in the wave of demonstrations which has hit most of Indonesia's major cities.

The sharp change in policy by the dictatorship was apparently ordered by Suharto himself before he left the country to attend a summit conference of Asian, African and Latin American heads of state in Cairo, Egypt. Suharto warned, "The security forces will take action against whoever disturbs and ruins national stability."

The decision to carry out the attack at Trisakti University is a clear expression of the regime's desperation. Trisakti is a private Christian college for the sons and daughters of Indonesia's ruling elite. A mass protest against the government on that campus signals that the popular opposition to the Suharto regime has become so widespread that even youth from the most privileged families have been pulled along by the tide.

There was more violence and more protest the day following the massacre. Police opened fire on crowds in Jakarta after the memorial service Wednesday for the victims of the previous day. At least one youth was killed after he ran into the street, fleeing police bullets, and was struck by a passing car.

Other student demonstrations took place in Bandung, 90 miles east of the capital, and in Kupang, 1,000 miles to the east. In Surabaya, the country's second-largest city, students from dozens of colleges and universities gathered at two campuses, then marched through the city 30,000-strong, as police stood by without interfering. In Yogyakarta, in central Java, some 5,000 students clashed with police who fired water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets.

The rising social anger over mass unemployment and the collapse of living standards boiled over into mob attacks in the central business district of Jakarta, in which the main targets were stores owned by ethnic Chinese shopkeepers--who have been scapegoated by the Suharto regime and by Moslem fundamentalist demagogues--as well as several symbols of the ruling family. The car dealership owned by one of Suharto's sons was gutted and the vehicles burned.

Workers organized by an unofficial trade union marched on the downtown Jakarta offices of the International Monetary Fund, protesting the terms of the adjustment program adopted by the Suharto government under IMF pressure. Last week the government began slashing subsidies on fuel and public transport, one of the key IMF demands. The price of kerosene jumped by 40 percent, diesel by 35 percent, gasoline by 70 percent, train tickets by 100 percent, bus fares by 70 percent, and electricity by 20 percent.

Last year's collapse of the Asian "miracle" has undermined Suharto's regime. The Indonesian economy is expected to shrink by up to 15 percent this year, throwing millions into unemployment and poverty. The rupiah has slumped to around one-third of its value against the US dollar. At that level, few local companies can trade or service their huge US-dollar denominated debts. Most of the country's 220 banks are out of cash.

Talks in Tokyo with the international banks--Indonesia's major creditors--have failed to produce a plan for restructuring private loans, calculated to be at least $68 billion. Bad debts are estimated at between 50 to 75 percent of Gross Domestic Product.

There are concerns in the international financial centers that Suharto is incapable of imposing the IMF's measures and stemming the opposition to his regime. An Indonesian economist, Syahrir, told the *Financial Times* in Britain: "Stability is still far away... The money market is in deep trouble. There is no investor confidence in the bank restructuring."

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issued a statement deploring the Jakarta killings and urging dialogue between the Indonesian government and its political opponents. The cynicism of the American position is demonstrated both by its role in the IMF bailout and the whole history of US intervention in Indonesia.

The Clinton administration officially deplores the Jakarta massacre and the Suharto regime's suppression of democratic rights. Meanwhile it demands policies of slashing jobs, subsidies, living standards and social benefits, to meet the conditions of the IMF loan package, which cannot be imposed democratically, and in fact require an even more savage dictatorship in Indonesia.

Suharto came to power with CIA backing in a bloody 1965-66 military coup in which one million workers and peasants were massacred. For the past 30 years, with the full support of the United States and the other imperialist powers, he has suppressed all popular opposition while his own family members enriched themselves at the expense of the state and the Indonesian people.

Over the past decade, however, the domination of the Indonesian economy by Suharto and his business cronies has become a barrier for the transnational banks and corporations. Globalization means

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not only obtaining access to Indonesia's cheap labor and natural resources, but opening up the country's markets in banking and finance, telecommunications and information technology. Hence the demands incorporated into the IMF austerity plan for the dismantling of all forms of national economic regulation, particularly the tax breaks, monopolies, and trade controls enjoyed by the Suharto family and its associates.

The White House has reportedly held urgent discussions over the options for dealing with the crisis, although official administration statements denied there would be any US attempt to push Suharto out. Nor is it clear that American imperialism has any ready-made alternative to Suharto's one-man rule.

The bourgeois opposition to Suharto is rooted in those sections of the Indonesian capitalist class who feel themselves shut out of the most profitable sectors of the economy by the Suharto family. These layers have looked to Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of Suharto's predecessor, Achmed Sukarno, and to Amien Rais, leader of the country's main Islamic organization, Muhammadiyah.

Sukarnoputri has been compared to Corazon Aquino, who became the instrument of a successful US-backed operation to replace the Philippine dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos with the current regime, which provides a more democratic facade behind which American imperialism and the Filipino capitalist class maintain their rule. Other than sharing Aquino's sex and class, however, Sukarnoputri has little prospect of copying the Filipino model.

In particular, the economic circumstances are the diametric opposite. Aquino came to power in 1986, at the high point of the economic upsurge in southeast Asia. While the Philippines trailed well behind the so-called Asian Tigers, like Thailand and Malaysia, its economy nonetheless showed considerable growth over the next decade. Indonesia today is in the midst of an economic collapse on a scale which has rarely been seen in history.

Suharto responded to the Jakarta massacre by cutting short his visit to Egypt and returning home with an appeal for "calm." It is not excluded that a few heads may roll in the police and military if the longtime ruler feels the need to sacrifice a scapegoat or two to appease popular outrage over the killings.

At the same time Sukarnoputri and Amien Rais stepped up their public activity, speaking at the memorial service for the students murdered by the police. The previous week Rais had urged Suharto to step down as president, saying the government had lost the trust of the people. In the crisis, however, he pulled back from this statement, telling students at the memorial service, "The president must change his attitude, or the people will force him to change." Students answered him with the chant, "Down with Suharto."

Rais is clearly putting himself forward to head a "clean" business regime to impose the IMF's requirements. "Indonesia must implement big and comprehensive reforms in the fields of the economy and finance with co-operation of the International Monetary Fund," he said. "For this to be accomplished we must make huge sacrifices."

During a visit to the US last month, Rais appeared before a Congressional Human Rights Caucus and undoubtedly held private talks with the Clinton administration and political and business leaders. Since the beginning of the year Rais has held private talks with senior Indonesian military leaders.

Students and workers in Indonesia can place no confidence in either the bourgeois opposition leaders or the United States government. Their maneuvers have only one purpose: to implement the IMF restructuring and austerity measures while bringing to an end the strikes and protests provoked by the economic crisis.

The elements of a revolutionary situation are accumulating in Indonesia. The ruling class lives in constant fear that student protests will trigger action by workers hit by inflation and high levels of unemployment, leading to a social explosion. In recent weeks, students have been joined by housewives, street vendors, taxi drivers, workers, academics, and others. Strikes have broken out against high prices.

The same economic processes which are undermining the Suharto regime have created a powerful working class in Indonesia. Huge new industrial centers exist in cities like Jakarta, Surabaya and Medan, where factories have sprung up to produce parts and products for international corporations. This working class, as part of the international working class, is the only force capable of challenging and overturning the economic system--that of private profit--that has created the financial and social crisis gripping Indonesia and the rest of Asia.

Just as the crisis in Indonesia is the outcome of global processes, so it can only be resolved on a progressive basis by the adoption of a global strategy. The needs of the peasants, rural and urban poor, as well as workers, for democratic rights, agrarian reform and improved living standards can only be met by unifying the struggles of Indonesian workers with those of their fellow workers worldwide.

The working class must begin to organize independently of, and in opposition to, figures like Rais and Megawati, drawing in the support of the unemployed, small farmers and smallholders in the fight to take power and establish a workers' and peasants' government that will reorganize society on the basis of social need, not private profit.

A political party must be built to lead the fight for such an international and socialist perspective. We urge students, intellectuals and workers in Indonesia and elsewhere to seriously consider these political issues and to open up a dialogue with the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution.

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