

Military repression in Indonesia

Tanks mobilised against Jakarta protests

Our reporter
16 May 1998

Tanks and armoured cars patrolled the streets and major intersections of Jakarta on Friday as 15,000 troops and riot police attempted to crush opposition to the Suharto regime after three days of intense protests and widespread looting. Soldiers were viciously beating demonstrators and looters despite the presence of international news crews.

Suharto ordered the suppression in a desperate bid to cling to power. He cut short a trip to a heads of state meeting in Egypt to return to Jakarta in the early hours of Friday morning. The Defence Minister and armed forces chief General Wiranto ordered troops to take whatever action was necessary to regain control of areas of the city, where people had ransacked stores, attacked banks and stoned and burned vehicles on Thursday. Wiranto stopped short of declaring a state of emergency and imposing a curfew.

Rumours are rife that the notorious 27,000-strong army strategic reserve command, headed by Suharto's son-in-law Prabowo Subianto, is being readied for an even bloodier crackdown in the city of 10 million people, many of them slum dwellers. At the same time, Suharto sought to appease the thousands of workers, unemployed and youth who had joined the rampaging crowds by restoring subsidies on fuel and electricity.

More than 250 people have died in clashes in the capital so far, and scores more have been injured, many seriously. In one incident, 200 or more were killed in a supermarket fire that was not extinguished.

University students in Jakarta and elsewhere have remained defiant. The police massacre of six students at Jakarta's Trisakti University on Tuesday sparked some of the largest protests yet seen in other major cities, such as Bandung and Surabaya.

Also on Wednesday, thousands demonstrated in Yogyakarta, central Java, hurling petrol bombs at

heavily armed police and troops, who attacked with tear gas and water cannon. "We're not afraid because some of our friends were killed. We are right. We want to speak for the people," a student, Poppy, told the press. Some of the demands went beyond merely calling for Suharto's removal. Demonstrators carried banners reading "Bring down the prices. Nationalise Suharto's assets," and shouted "Hang Suharto".

Reports on Thursday from Medan in North Sumatra indicate that looting is continuing in at least four areas of the city despite a heavy military presence. Universities in the major industrial centre were closed last week after police shot dead a number of students during protests which drew support from lecturers and workers.

In the past two days, offices, factories, warehouses and shops have been forced to close their doors, and thousands of Chinese-Indonesian and expatriate business owners and corporate executives have fled the country. Thursday's riots sent the rupiah plunging to near 12,000 to the US dollar -- less than a quarter of its value of a year ago. On Friday, the Indonesian central bank suspended trading in the currency.

Initial speculation that Suharto might stand down and assume a backroom role was soon dashed, but there have been reports of discussion within the regime about Suharto handing over power to a general or appointing a prime minister to control demands for political and economic reforms. Among those touted for such a post are General Wiranto, Economics Minister Ginandjar Kartasmita and one of Suharto's US-trained former economics advisers, Professor Emil Salim.

Parallel discussions have been underway among those factions of the Indonesian capitalist class currently excluded from the benefits of Suharto's crony capitalism. Amien Rais, the head of the 28 million-

member Muhammadiyah Islamic organisation, has labelled the Suharto regime "the most corrupt in the universe" and announced a "people's leadership council" of 50 public figures from "various elements of society".

Rais said his main concern was to prevent a "revolution". He appealed to Suharto to quit gracefully and with dignity. After remaining silent for weeks, refusing to openly support student demonstrations, former Indonesian Democratic Party leader Megawati Sukarnoputri has indicated support for Rais' initiative.

These layers are appealing for the support of military commanders and seeking to channel the student protests into the formation of an alternative "national unity" regime with a slightly more democratic face. Most have close ties to Washington, which installed Suharto in a bloody CIA-instigated coup in 1965 and still maintains intensive military links with the generals' regime.



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