

Opposition leader tries to call off Indonesian demonstrations

Military mobilised for mass repression, amid secret negotiations

Mike Head
20 May 1998

Amien Rais, a leader of the bourgeois opposition to the Suharto regime, this morning issued a last minute call for the cancellation of mass demonstrations planned by students and others against the dictatorship. Some student leaders, however, declared that marches would continue, defying tanks and heavily-armed troops.

Rais, a US-backed political science professor and leader of a 28 million-member Islamic organisation, Muhammadiyah, urged students and his supporters to stay at home and pray for the success of political reform. His plea was broadcast on all official radio and television outlets.

One of his spokesmen revealed on Australian radio that Rais was backing secret negotiations underway between Suharto and all the factions of the regime's handpicked national assembly, including the military and ruling Golkar party, to secure Suharto's immediate resignation. Any such plan would involve the installation of a new capitalist administration.

Only 12 hours earlier Rais had urged his supporters to join student marches to reject Suharto's latest bid, unveiled yesterday, to cling to power. Rais predicted that millions would take to the streets. In announcing his about-face, he referred to a massive military mobilisation underway throughout Jakarta, saying the military was preparing for a "big war" against demonstrators.

Overnight, the military high command moved tanks, armoured personnel carriers and thousands of crack troops into Jakarta. Every major intersection was occupied, sealing off all planned march routes. Barbed wire barricades, manned by heavily-armed troops, were erected in strategic locations, including the area around Suharto's residence.

An intensive military cordon was thrown around the national monument, the site of the planned student-led

rally. Thousands of combat-ready troops ringed the national assembly building, where hundreds of students had remained overnight, some sitting on the building's roof.

Student leaders at the national assembly told the international media they were determined to continue their protest, but had abandoned plans to march into the city.

Reports indicate that broad layers of students and others have rejected Suharto's offer to stand aside as president in the indefinite future. They regard it as a transparent political manoeuvre. Suharto announced on Tuesday that he would not resign, but reshuffle his cabinet and appoint a handpicked "reform council" to stage fresh parliamentary and presidential elections. He gave no dates or details. One minister, Juwono Sudarsono, said Suharto might take "at least 18 months" to stand down.

Backed by armed forces chief General Wiranto, Suharto's plan is a bid to buy time for his hated regime, reach an accommodation with sections of the opposition and appease the international money markets and major powers. Suharto and his associates still hope to exercise sufficient political control to protect their immense private wealth and avoid standing trial for their crimes over the past three decades.

At the same time, the capitalist opposition to Suharto -- the corporate figures, professional layers, academic elites, religious chiefs, retired generals and ex-cabinet ministers who have coalesced around figures such as Rais and Megawati Sukarnoputri -- is just as anxious as the military to prevent the mass unrest from getting out of their control.

They are seeking to head off the student protest movement and prevent a repeat of last week's eruption among the impoverished working people and poor. Their

perspective is to restore profitable conditions for big business and to implement the International Monetary Fund's economic restructuring program.

Suharto's 32-year-old military regime has become unviable in its present form. It has been shattered by the collapse of the Indonesian economy since last July and the demands of the major capitalist powers, via the IMF, for the dismantling of the vast economic monopolies maintained by Suharto, his sons and daughters and their immediate business cohorts.

In addition, the events of the past week, particularly the looting and torching of large areas of Jakarta, demonstrated that Suharto can no longer be relied upon to suppress the Indonesian masses and enforce sweatshop labour conditions on behalf of Indonesian and international companies.

By the time that Suharto made his announcement, the World Bank had suspended \$US1.2 billion in new emergency loans. International credit ratings agencies had reduced Indonesian companies and the government itself to junk bond status, cutting off all prospects of commercial borrowing. The rupiah had plunged to 17,000 to the US dollar -- one-seventh of its value of a year ago. Many global companies, including Nissan, Toyota and BHP, had shut down or suspended their industrial operations. Banks were either closed or barely functioning.

In these conditions created by the global markets and financial authorities, both unemployment and prices are soaring daily. The number of working people made jobless or destitute has at least doubled from 20 million to 40 million in recent months.

Fearing a social explosion, the Australian government immediately welcomed Suharto's Tuesday announcement as "an historic process for transition and reform". Canberra, which has collaborated intimately with Suharto's dictatorship over the past three decades -- reflecting the interests of Australian big business -- expressed admiration for General Wiranto and his military command.

However, the Howard government simultaneously warned Suharto that events had moved too far, both economically and politically, to allow a drawn-out constitutional process. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared an 18-month timetable to be untenable. Speaking on Australian television on Tuesday night, Downer said Suharto had to pass two tests to win back the support of global markets: "quick political reform" and "implementation of the IMF program". He

sounded dire warnings of chaos, an unpredictable political vacuum and a bloody struggle for power if Suharto's plan failed.

Suharto's appeal to the Indonesian constitution as a source of legitimacy is unlikely to succeed, given his regime's bloody seizure of power in 1965-66 and its constant use of the constitution as a political device to justify the outlawing of political parties and the imprisonment of political opponents.

Reflecting these concerns, Rais and other disaffected elements from Indonesian elite circles expressed disappointment with Suharto's scheme, especially his refusal to resign immediately. Rais initially maintained support for today's marches, stating that the students had reached "the point of no return" and would demonstrate "again and again" until Suharto departed.

Students interviewed by the Western media called for a restructure of the entire political system, for Suharto to be placed on trial and for the Suharto family's wealth to be used to pay off the national debt.

Rais and others in the bourgeois opposition are seeking to cobble together an alliance that can contain the demands of students and workers, and divert their hostility to the Suharto regime into support for the IMF's program.

Reflecting their agenda, an Australian-based dissident academic Arief Budiman advocated participation in the military-backed "reform council", provided that Suharto quit first. He gave a revealing outline of the council's agenda. He said it needed to resolve the economic crisis, restore political stability and display democracy. To do so, he said, it would have to include economic technocrats respected by business owners and international markets; military generals to maintain order; and "democrats" such as Rais and Megawati to provide credibility.

Under the cover of "political reform" and "democracy", these elements are preparing an alternative regime to ruthlessly enforce the requirements of global investors.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact