

Which social classes support the struggle for democracy in Indonesia?

The lessons of history

The WSWS Editorial Board
20 May 1998

As the political crisis in Indonesia intensifies and the Suharto regime maneuvers to hold onto power, it is crucial that the mass movement of students and workers not fall prey to the illusion that cosmetic changes in the power structure will signify genuine democratic and social renewal.

Suharto's bloody dictatorship is not an aberration, nor is it simply an expression of the despotic tendencies of an individual ruler. Suharto's tenacious grip on power is indicative of the critical position he occupies in the entire structure of bourgeois rule in Indonesia. In the malignant figure of the military strongman is embodied the acutely antagonistic relationship of the national bourgeoisie to the oppressed masses of workers and peasants.

The very fact that Suharto has ruled with an iron fist for more than three decades, without the emergence of a credible opposition from within the propertied classes, is testimony to the historical bankruptcy of the entire bourgeoisie of the country. The organic cowardice of the present-day bourgeois opposition, which claims to represent the struggle for democracy, was underscored by the last minute declaration by one of its chief spokesmen, Amien Rais, calling off the mass protest scheduled for Wednesday, May 20 in Jakarta and other major cities. Rais' retreat highlights the common fear shared by Suharto's minions and his semi-official opponents, such as Rais and Megawati Sukarnoputri, that the student movement might spark an uprising of the workers and impoverished masses that would threaten the entire structure of class privilege and exploitation.

The half-hearted and treacherous position of this bourgeois opposition opens up the student movement to great dangers, including a renewal of savage military repression, the basic *modus operandi* of the regime since its inception.

At the same time, elements such as Rais, backed by sections of the media and the political establishment in the West, promote the conception that all of the political and social evils that plague Indonesia are incorporated in the person of Suharto, and that his eventual removal will signify a triumph of democratic reform.

Such a naive and superficial approach serves very definite

political ends. To the extent that the attention of the masses becomes fixated on the personal fate of Suharto, the essential class issues that underlie the struggle against the regime become obscured, facilitating the efforts of the international banks, imperialist governments and local ruling circles to fashion, if necessary, a new regime, better equipped to resolve the crisis at the expense of the workers, peasants and dissident youth.

The very fact that the collective memory of the working masses concerning the bitter lessons of history, above all the 1965 coup, seems in the present crisis to be so dim, is in large measure a legacy of the mass murder which attended Suharto's rise to power. In a bloodbath that claimed the lives of 500,000 to 1 million Indonesians, the military, working hand-in-glove with the American CIA, and utilizing the collaboration of the deposed nationalist leader, Sukarno, exterminated the class conscious workers' movement and all socialist elements within the intelligentsia.

What was the fatal political mistake that led to that tragic defeat? It was the illusion, promoted by the pro-Chinese Stalinist leadership of the Communist Party of Indonesia, that the workers and oppressed peasants could place their political trust in a section of the Indonesian bourgeoisie, including a layer of the military, who were characterized as "progressive," "democratic" and "patriotic."

In the current attempt to build up the stature of figures like Rais, a declared supporter of the International Monetary Fund and its "reform" agenda, and even military henchmen such as armed forces chief General Wiranto, a new trap is being laid for the Indonesian masses that would inevitably lead to a bloody settling of accounts with the mass opposition.

If the democratic aspirations of the people are not to be cruelly betrayed, certain historical features of the twentieth century must be taken into account. The experience of this century has demonstrated again and again that countries with a belated capitalist development, like Indonesia, cannot overcome the legacy of social deprivation and authoritarian rule within the framework of capitalism.

In the classic democratic revolutions of Western Europe and

North America, stretching from the 17th to the 19th centuries, the rising bourgeoisie was able to mobilize the oppressed masses in the name of the entire nation against the old feudal aristocracy as well as the domination of colonial powers. In those nations, however, where the emerging class of capitalist owners confronted a world market already dominated by the older capitalist powers, and a native working class whose social power and political organization rivaled or even outstripped their own development, the bourgeoisie has felt the need to curtail or abort democratic forms of rule in favor of military or fascist methods. Such was the case in Italy, Germany, Spain and Japan in the inter-war period of the 1920s and 1930s.

As for the post-World War II period, none of the former colonies of Africa and Asia have evolved along genuinely democratic lines. Even in India, often referred to as the world's largest democracy, the legacy of feudal relations and caste oppression remains an entrenched part of the life of the masses, while political power remains firmly in the hands of a narrow and corrupt elite.

Indonesia is no exception. On the basis of capitalist private ownership of the means of production and the imperialist-dominated setup in East Asia, there are no serious prospects for a truly democratic development. This fact is determined by the very nature of the class relations in the country.

On the one hand there exist a massive working class and an impoverished peasantry, and on the other, a very thin layer of bourgeois exploiters, whose enormous wealth depends on the support of the imperialist financial institutions, with whom it collaborates in plundering the economy in return for a share of the loot. The professional middle classes—traditionally a major base of social support for parliamentary democracy—remains extremely narrow and weak.

Moreover, in Indonesia, as in every other country with a delayed capitalist development, the national bourgeoisie is incapable of mobilizing the masses against imperialist domination. On the one hand it is tied by a thousand threads to international finance and the transnational corporations, and, on the other, it recognizes in the working class at home the greatest threat to its property and political power. Any mobilization of the oppressed masses against foreign domination raises the mortal threat of social revolution.

It is therefore no accident that every representative of the present-day bourgeois opposition is complicit in the crimes of the Suharto regime. These include not only the violent suppression of the democratic rights of the masses within Indonesia, but also the massacres carried out against the people of East Timor.

What are the real aims of the so-called democratic reform proposed by imperialist leaders like Clinton and elements within the Indonesian ruling class? First, to preserve the domination of the military. Hence the attempt to present Wiranto, who, like every other military leader has the blood of thousands on his hands, as a democrat. Second, to maintain the

political power and economic interests of the Indonesian bourgeoisie. Third, and most imperatively, to secure the interests and repay the loans of the imperialist banks.

What then is the way forward in the struggle for genuine democracy? It must first be stressed that the realization of political democracy is inseparable from a progressive resolution of the social issues that confront the masses, i.e., the implementation of a program to end unemployment, poverty and exploitation. The entire economic structure of class privilege and inequality must be replaced by a rational, humane and egalitarian system.

The enormous material resources of the country—and the entire region—must be placed at the disposal and under the control of the laboring masses, rather than a corrupt and privileged elite. The first step is the confiscation of the vast holdings of Suharto, his family and cronies, and their transformation into public enterprises run by and for the working people.

Secondly, the subjugation of the Indonesian people to the imperialist banks and transnational corporations must be ended. The first step in this process is the repudiation of the national debt.

Finally, the struggle for democracy, social equality and an end to imperialist oppression must be conducted not simply on the national level, but rather the Indonesian workers must seek to establish the closest unity in struggle with their brothers and sisters in India, Korea, Taiwan, China, Japan and throughout Asia.

The single social force capable of leading such a struggle is the working class. It is to this powerful and genuinely progressive force that the students must turn. The key to the struggle for democracy is the independent political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for a workers' government. The working class must begin to build up its own democratic political institutions, starting from the factories and work sites and leading to the establishment of workers' councils to fight for a socialist program and workers' power.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact