

# The struggle for democracy in Indonesia: What are the social and political tasks facing the masses?

The WSWS Editorial Board  
23 May 1998

As this politically charged and eventful week draws to a close, the essential political and social issues underlying Indonesia's crisis are being brought into sharper relief. The formal resignation of Suharto has underscored the fact that the problems of political repression, unemployment, poverty, ethnic and religious discrimination and imperialist domination have far deeper roots than the avarice and corruption of an individual ruler.

Suharto's hand-picked successor and long-time crony B.J. Habibie has announced a cabinet which contains many of the principal ministers of the former government, including both the armed forces chief General Wiranto as Defense Minister, and former military head Feisal Tanjung as Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs. One of the first decisions of this military regime was to order army troops into the Parliament House in Jakarta to forcibly remove thousands of students occupying the building and demanding broad democratic changes.

It is indeed difficult to argue with a straight face that Habibie embodies in the slightest degree the democratic aspirations of the Indonesian people. Bankers and politicians in the West, as well as many elements within the military and business circles of Indonesia, are skeptical that the new President will be able to impose the austerity policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund, quell the tide of social protest and restore economic and political stability. That is why, from the White House in Washington to the offices of bourgeois oppositionists in Jakarta, appeals are being made for a rapid transition to what is generally called meaningful democratic reform.

But what is the content of the "democracy" prescribed for Indonesia by capitalist leaders in the West and Suharto's bourgeois opponents at home? They all take as their starting point the necessity for Indonesia to pay off

its loans to the imperialist banks and the IMF. The heart of the so-called reform program demanded by these financial institutions is the lifting of all restrictions on the exploitation of the country's natural resources and cheap labor by the transnational corporations.

For Suharto and his cronies, the IMF reforms may impose limitations on the looting of the national economy, but no one should doubt that their vast fortunes will be protected. General Wiranto has already pledged that the army will safeguard the Suharto family and their businesses.

For the masses of workers, peasants and poor people, on the other hand, the measures entail an end to price subsidies for basic commodities, a continuation of mass layoffs and, in general, an incalculable intensification of social misery. Western sources openly predict a rapid rise in the official unemployment rate to 20 percent.

The task of political reform, as defined by those who accept the claims of the international banks, is to make such brutal austerity measures more palatable—and enforceable—by adopting the rhetoric and some of the outer trappings of democracy. But even as they talk of "people power" and the like, they insist that real power remain in the hands of Suharto's military—an institution that has the blood of hundreds of thousands of citizens on its hands.

This travesty of democracy highlights the glaring contradiction between the deeply-felt democratic and social aspirations of the broad masses of Indonesia, and the selfish interests of a very narrow layer of bourgeois and upper-middle-class elements, who are bound hand and foot to the imperialist financial institutions and governments.

Democracy for the masses of workers, peasants and youth means political freedom, an end to ethnic, religious

or racial discrimination, and liberation from the crushing yoke of economic exploitation and poverty. Its realization is impossible without addressing and resolving in a progressive way the basic social issues confronting the masses of people. What are the measures that must be taken to lay the basis for such a democratic development?

1. **Convene a constituent assembly**, elected democratically on the basis of universal suffrage, to draw up the political framework for genuine reform. Such a body would express the aspirations of workers, peasants and the downtrodden masses as opposed to Suharto's rubber-stamp national assembly, the majority of whose delegates are hand-picked appointees or the vetted candidates of the three official, state-run political parties. For democratic elections to take place, all of the regime's anti-subversion laws and restrictions on political parties, free speech and free assembly have to be repealed. All political prisoners must be freed immediately.

2. **Liberate the peasantry** from the yoke of political and economic oppression. Millions of small farmers lead a marginal existence, in debt to the money lenders, lacking tools, machinery and fertilizers, and facing extended drought. Many have been forced off the land altogether by the spread of agribusinesses. The big landed estates and plantations must be nationalized, under the control of the peasants and agricultural workers, so as to provide the means of support for the small farmers.

3. **Economic security** for the workers and urban poor. Millions of workers have been thrown out of work over the last year, greatly swelling the ranks of the impoverished in the shanty towns of Jakarta and other major cities. Every worker must be guaranteed a job with decent wages and conditions. A vast expansion in welfare, public health care and housing is necessary to provide for the elderly, the disabled, and the economically displaced. All young people must have access to free, high quality education.

The first step is the confiscation of the billions of dollars in assets of Suharto, his family and his political cronies, and the transformation of their corporate holdings into public entities under workers' democratic control.

4. **Full equality** for all religious, ethnic and racial groups within Indonesia. Since the formal independence of Indonesia, the ruling class has, time and again, deliberately inflamed racial and religious differences to set working people against each other. All laws and regulations discriminating against ethnic Chinese and other groups in relation to job appointments, citizenship, education and other rights must be abolished.

**Immediate withdrawal** of all Indonesian troops from East Timor and the establishment of fraternal relations with the people of the country. Hundreds of thousands have died in the protracted war waged by the Suharto junta to assert its domination over the people and resources of East Timor.

6. **Liberation** from the oppression of the imperialist banks and governments. The IMF's demands are aimed at intensifying the exploitation of the Indonesian working class to greatly expand the profits flowing into the coffers of the transnational corporations. The IMF's plan must be repudiated along with the billions of dollars in foreign debt owed to the international banks and finance houses.

None of these measures will be carried out by any faction of the Indonesian bourgeoisie or any of the bourgeois opposition forces, least of all by Amien Rais, whose Islamic Muhammadiyah organisation is thoroughly steeped in racism and played a direct role in the bloody massacres during Suharto's 1965-66 military coup.

The entire history of post-war Indonesia demonstrates the utter incapacity of the capitalist class to meet the needs and aspirations of the working masses for democratic rights and a decent standard of living. Completely subservient to international finance capital, the bourgeoisie has repeatedly resorted to dictatorship, in one form or another, in order to enforce its rule. Under today's conditions of economic and political turmoil, it has no choice but to use the most brutal methods to impose its economic dictates.

Only the working class is capable of leading the masses of the oppressed on the road to genuine democracy, and that is inseparable from the struggle for socialism. The workers must begin to build up their own democratic organs, forge an alliance with the poor peasants, the urban poor and the hard pressed professional layers, and fight for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**