

Suharto resigns following large demonstrations

Tanks and troops mobilised across Jakarta

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Despite calls by opposition leaders to stay at home, hundreds of thousands of students, workers and professional people defied a massive military mobilisation to join demonstrations in major Indonesian cities on Wednesday, demanding the immediate resignation of President Suharto.

Just one day after Suharto supposedly committed himself to make way for democratic reform, the capital Jakarta was under full-scale military occupation from dawn. Most of the city was deserted, with major roads and intersections blocked by tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and barricades of steel and barbed wire. Military helicopters whirled overhead.

Between 40,000 and 150,000 heavily-armed troops were deployed, including the murderous Kopassus red berets. Army generals were quoted in the media as having ordered troops to open fire on demonstrators. Banks and businesses were closed, many boarded up in anticipation of violent clashes.

By mid-afternoon, more than 10,000 students had gathered in the grounds of the national assembly building, some arriving in buses from various parts of Java. The area was ringed by troops, but the military allowed students to enter the complex. This decision by the military high command, essentially a move to accommodate and contain a scaled-down student protest, was made at the most senior levels, involving Admiral Sugiarto, a leader of the military's 75-member parliamentary contingent, and armed forces chief General Wiranto, who has backed Suharto's bid to cling to power.

Protest leaders announced that students would remain at the building until Suharto agreed to quit. During the day they were visited by senior lawyers and other bourgeois opposition figures, including Amien Rais, the leader of the Islamic organisation, Muhammadiyah. Rais was cheered

despite earlier calling on students to abandon protest plans. He urged students to continue their peaceful protest and not take to the streets.

In Yogyakarta, central Java, a crowd variously estimated at between 50,000 and half a million people, including students and workers, marched through the city, accompanied by the Sultan of Yogyakarta, a former hereditary leader. All the city's police were mobilised but their presence was barely noticeable.

Tens of thousands of students gathered at campuses in the eastern Javan city of Surabaya, the country's second largest centre. A planned march was cancelled after troops attacked a student protest on Tuesday, injuring at least 60. The streets leading to the business district were closed by troops and tanks patrolled main roads.

Some 10,000 people converged on the provincial assembly in the north Sumatran industrial city of Medan, in spite of the presence of hundreds of tanks. Large demonstrations were reported in Bogor, Solo and Ujung Pandang, on the island of Sulawesi.

In the western Javan city of Bandung about 100,000 people, including students, factory workers, labourers, office workers and housewives, rallied in front of the local assembly building, which was decorated with effigies of Suharto being hanged. Their six demands centred on urging the national assembly leaders to ask Suharto to resign and calling on the armed forces to be "on the side of the people".

These demands seemed to typify the illusions held by most students and other protest participants that elements within the Suharto regime, including the military chiefs, would bow to popular pressure for political freedom. The cheers for Rais at the national assembly also displayed a dangerous political naivete.

Rais has rapidly become the chief spokesman for a layer of businessmen, senior academics and professionals, retired generals and former government ministers -- most of them tied to the Suharto regime for many years -- who are seeking

to contain the student movement and prevent a wider eruption of struggle among millions of impoverished and jobless workers and poor slum dwellers.

These layers are anxious to secure Suharto's resignation to clear the way for an alternative capitalist administration that will break the Suharto family's grip over key sectors of the economy and implement the International Monetary Fund's program of austerity and restructuring.

Above all, these elements fear an explosive movement from below that could challenge not only Suharto but the entire structure of Indonesian capitalism. When students at the national assembly chanted demands for Suharto to be put on trial, Rais initially said "no, no" but then sought to appease his audience. "If you say Suharto must stand down and be put on trial, what can I say? I have to support you." In his speech, Rais praised Suharto for "developing the nation," before criticising nepotism and corruption.

Earlier, Rais suddenly abandoned his support for planned mass protests and broadcast an appeal urging students and his supporters not to leave their homes, in order to avoid a confrontation with the military.

Interviewed on Australian radio, one of his deputies gave a revealing insight into the primary concern behind Rais' manoeuvres. He warned of a repeat of last week's looting and rioting, emphasising that Rais' organisation had been in constant meetings with Suharto's cabinet ministers to seek a settlement.

He said the country would face a social revolution within a week unless Suharto agreed to step down. "People's hunger will drive them into the streets and they will do anything, quite naturally, when they cannot eat," he said.

He expressed the hope that parliamentary leaders would convince Suharto to abandon his plan, announced on Tuesday, to hold onto power under the guise of supervising an orderly transition to a new regime.

Speaker Harmoko and other assembly leaders, including the heads of the dominant military and Golkar party factions, reportedly went to see Suharto at his fortified residence to reiterate the appeal they unsuccessfully issued last Monday, via Harmoko, for Suharto to vacate office.

However, Suharto, backed by the military commanders, continued to rebuff these pleas. After intense discussions with various military and political figures, one of Suharto's ministers, State Secretary Saadilah Mursjid, announced that the dictator would name his proposed "reform council" on Thursday.

This council, expected to include some coopted opposition leaders, could take up to 18 months, working under Suharto's supervision, to draft new procedures for parliamentary and presidential elections. Some prominent opposition figures, supporters of the plan, have indicated

that elections would not be held until March 1999 -- ten months away.

By Wednesday evening, however, these machinations within and around Suharto and the bourgeois opposition had been undermined by the International Monetary Fund's suspension of the next instalment of its \$US37 billion emergency bailout package. The IMF's move was backed by a US State Department statement questioning Suharto's "orderly transition" plan and implying that the US would block further IMF disbursements until Suharto departed.

These moves prompted a shift by the Howard government in Australia, which on Tuesday had hailed Suharto's transition proposals, with Prime Minister John Howard calling them "statesmen-like". Responding to the IMF announcement, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer urged those around Suharto to proceed with "appropriate haste".

By the end of Wednesday, Speaker Harmoko and the leaders of the parliamentary factions stated that they had given Suharto an ultimatum to resign by Friday or they could reconvene the so-called Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) to revoke Suharto's mandate. One leader of Suharto's own Golkar party spoke of impeaching Suharto. The MPR is the same tightly controlled sham body that only two months ago unanimously endorsed Suharto for another five-year term.

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