

Reader comments on social conditions in Indonesia

8 July 1998

To the WSWWS

My research on Indonesia was in preparation for a forum at our local Unitarian fellowship, and my conclusions about the collapse of the Indonesian economy are that the World Bank and the US through the IMF are fully as complicit in bringing about and maintaining the appalling economic conditions in Indonesia as the Soeharto/Habibie government. I was there when the fuel price increases were announced and read the local English language newspaper explaining that fuel subsidies had to be eliminated in order to comply with the terms of the IMF agreement. Having seen the conditions of extreme poverty in Jakarta and elsewhere in Java, it was immediately clear to me then that the IMF agreement must mean, literally, the death of many Indonesian people, who were already barely surviving before the price hike.

Banks in Indonesia were offering 50 percent interest on savings deposits. My son (I went there to attend his wedding) thought this was great. I thought it was very scary. The day after the price hikes, there were guards blocking entry to the toll road in Jakarta. I thought maybe there was an accident. Later I found out the toll roads are owned by Soeharto family interests, and the roads were blocked to protect against civil uprisings. I went there thinking Indonesia was a democratic country. While there I found out that opposition to the government is illegal and that would-be objectors are kidnapped, tortured, jailed, that political campaigns are limited to little more than a month and that even in seeking election, opponents are prohibited from criticizing the government.

I left Indonesia in the morning of the day the students were shot, the day before major riots broke out. I was galled by cynical news reports of looting at Jakarta malls, as if those malls contained anything relevant to the lives of people who eat nothing but rice and cook it

on kerosene burners and cross 12-lane city streets without shoes. They didn't go there for French perfume and designer clothes. They went in screaming rage and desperation.

I don't know of anything that will heal Indonesia in the foreseeable future. The economy that collapsed was built upon ruthless exploitation of natural resources, including human beings. Frankly, I think lots of Indonesians are going to die, and I have no idea where the leaders are going to come from to keep this from happening or even to set a course for a better future.

The only hopeful sign I saw was in Bali, which is part of the same economy and political organization, and yet seems to have peaceful and pleasant living conditions. There seems to be a strong and inclusive social fabric built upon sharing and cooperation. It seems that a much higher proportion of the population lives in rural areas. There are few signs of gluttonous wealth like those that loom over Jakarta. I am told that the extensive rice cultivation has given rise to cooperatives which manage irrigation water and extend into other areas of people's lives as well. I hear that these cooperatives are immensely successful and considered a world model. Perhaps they account for some of the observable differences between Java and Bali.

Anyway, I'm haunted by my Indonesian experiences, and glad to have found your website, still telling the truth, while the rest of the 'developed' world has gone back to buying more stuff.

JS

See:

The political crisis in Indonesia - analysis and comments by the WSWWS



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