

Indonesian military puts generals on trial

Peter Symonds
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Three of Indonesia's generals, including former president Suharto's son-in-law Lieutenant-General Prabowo Subianto, are to be investigated by a military court over the abduction, detention and torture of political activists. Another 10 more junior officers have already been charged and face court martial by a body known as the Officers Honour Council (DKP).

Prabowo was in charge of the notorious Kopassus special forces before being promoted after the March elections to head the army's entire Strategic Reserve Command. The other two senior officers to be investigated are former Kopassus chief Major-General Muchdi Purwopranjono and Colonel Chairawan who was in charge of the Kopassus intelligence unit.

The military court will examine the disappearance of 24 activists prior to the presidential elections in March which rubberstamped Suharto for a further term of office. Some of those released have publicly accused the military of organising their kidnapping and have recounted details of the torture methods used. A number of those abducted are still missing, feared dead.

In announcing the investigation on August 3, the Defence Minister General Wiranto said the DKP would also examine allegations that the military was responsible for the May 12 killing of four students at Jakarta's Trisakti University and that it encouraged the riots which erupted subsequently on May 13 and 14. Several human rights groups charge that soldiers took part in the looting of stores owned by ethnic Chinese and the brutal rape of dozens of Chinese women.

Undoubtedly the Indonesian military is responsible for the abduction, torture and murder of activists as the Suharto dictatorship sought to stamp out any opposition prior to the presidential elections. The military regime, which came to power in 1965-66 in one of this century's bloodiest military coups, has never hesitated to use the most anti-democratic and brutal methods against its political opponents.

But the truth about the abductions, the murder of the Trisakti students and the army's role in whipping up anti-

Chinese sentiment is not going to emerge from military court which has already started meeting behind closed doors. Wiranto has convened the DKP for entirely different purposes: to further weaken his opponents in the military and to bolster the democratic image of present Habibie regime.

Habibie has been under pressure from the US administration, in particular, to give his regime a more democratic façade by conducting an inquiry. Wiranto announced the military court just two days after visiting US Defence Secretary William Cohen called for a 'professional, thorough, open and honest' probe into abuses.

But a recent article entitled 'Our Men in Jakarta' by writer Allan Nairn in the US magazine *The Nation* reveals that the US was intimately involved in the very abductions, which it is now denouncing.

According to Nairn, 'As one [US] embassy official described it for me at the height of the disappearances: 'Prabowo is our fair-headed boy; he's the one who can do no wrong.' In fact, Prabowo's units that participated in the disappearances -- particularly Kopassus Group 4, which US officials singled out for blame in the [Washington] Post -- were, from the start of the abductions, in close and friendly contact with US intelligence.'

The ties between the US and Indonesian military go back to the 1965-66 coup which was orchestrated with the assistance and direct involvement of the CIA. The Kopassus special forces units have received substantial US military training and were expanded last year from 3,000 to 4,800 troops with US support.

Nairn also points out that Wiranto himself was directly associated with the kidnappings this year. The military intelligence unit, BIA, which operated under Wiranto's daily supervision, seized and tortured five labour activists in March who had been calling for an increase in the minimum wage.

In the events leading up to the resignation of Suharto on May 21, Wiranto played a crucial role in orchestrating the hand-over of power to Habibie and in silencing Suharto's

closest supporters in the army. Only days after the resignation, he transferred Prabowo from the key post at the Strategic Reserve Command to a position in a staff college in Bandung. Now Wiranto is seeking to finish with his long-time rival by blaming Prabowo and his closest associates for a few of the many crimes of the Suharto regime.

The new Habibie regime is stacked with previous Suharto ministers and with military chiefs who hold a number of key posts in the present government. Wiranto is both Defence Minister and head of the military, while former armed forces chief General Feisal Tanjung is the co-ordinating minister for political affairs.

Information Minister General Yunus Yosfiah commanded a marine corps unit during the 1975 invasion of East Timor and is implicated in the murder of five journalists during the campaign. Interior Minister General Syarwan Hamid was responsible for orchestrating the ousting of opposition figure Megawati Sukarnoputri from her position as head of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) in July 1996.

None of the opposition leaders such as Megawati or Amien Rais have challenged the continuing abuses of democratic rights by Habibie and his military backers. Scores of political prisoners remain in jail. Last month, the military shot and killed demonstrators both in East Timor and Irian Jaya and broke up a major trade union rally in Jakarta. Yet no mass protests have been organised against the Habibie regime over these outrages or the collapse of living standards. Rais, Megawati and other bourgeois leaders are just as terrified as Habibie that any demonstrations would threaten to trigger off a social explosion.

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