

Indonesian military dismisses Suharto's son-in-law

Peter Symonds
30 August 1998

Top ranking Indonesian officer and son-in-law to former president Suharto, Prabowo Subianto, was dismissed from his post and from the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) on Monday following a three-week military investigation into his involvement in the abduction and torture of political activists.

Lieutenant-General Prabowo was head of the notorious special forces, Kopassus, prior to the presidential elections in March, when 24 activists disappeared. Some of those released have spoken out about interrogation and torture--14 are still missing, feared dead. Prabowo has admitted to some of the abductions, saying that he 'misinterpreted' orders.

Two other senior officers have also been removed from their posts but remain in the army. Major-General Muchdi Purwopranjono became Kopassus chief after Prabowo was promoted to head the army's key Strategic Reserve Command. Colonel Chairawan was in charge of the Kopassus intelligence unit. Another 10 more junior officers have already been charged and face a court martial.

The dismissal has been criticised by Indonesian human rights spokesmen and a group representing the families of the victims for not going far enough. Prabowo was clearly not acting alone. Furthermore, the kidnappings were only a small part of the systematic intimidation, imprisonment and killing of political opponents carried out by the Suharto dictatorship over three decades.

Despite the revelations the new Habibie regime has treated Prabowo with kid gloves. He has not been dishonourably discharged and will receive substantial retirement entitlements. Nor will he face a court martial, as recommended by the military inquiry, unless further evidence comes to light during the trial of the junior officers.

In announcing the dismissal, Armed Forces Chief and Defence Minister General Wiranto made no mention of the crimes for which Prabowo was responsible. He simply stated that the decision had been taken 'in the interests of the armed forces and the State' and justified the leniency shown to all three senior officers by saying that they 'have served their country well in the past.'

The Habibie regime is under pressure at home and abroad to put on a new democratic face. But any examination at all of the brutal crimes of the Indonesian military threatens to open a can of worms. Its long list of crimes go all the way back to Suharto's bloody US-backed military coup in 1965-66 which resulted in the genocide of an estimated one million workers, peasants and members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Indonesia.

The entire Habibie cabinet has close connections to the previous Suharto dictatorship. A number of key ministers are directly implicated in its crimes. Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs General Feisal Tanjung was head of the armed forces before Wiranto and therefore Prabowo's superior at the time of the kidnappings. Information Minister General Yunus Yosfiah commanded the army unit during the 1975 invasion of East Timor accused of carrying out the murder of five Australian journalists.

It is little wonder that Wiranto has treated the dismissal of Prabowo, his long-time rival, with such caution. The initial military investigation was carried out behind closed doors. The last thing the Habibie regime wants is an open public trial in which Prabowo could possibly attack his accusers and tie them to torture and murder. As a close associate of Suharto and the military top brass, Prabowo knows where all the skeletons are buried, literally.

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