Indonesian students demand Habibie's resignation

Mike Head
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Students from some 40 universities across Jakarta are planning to resume a protest outside the national assembly building to demand the resignation of President B.J. Habibie after troops violently evicted several hundred students from the building's grounds before dawn yesterday.

Later in the day, 200 students marched to nearby Atmajaya Catholic University after several hundred riot police blocked their path to parliament. Other students were stopped at military roadblocks on major roads leading to the assembly compound.

Students are also planning a major demonstration today in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, where Habibie is due to visit. Some 2,000 students marched and rallied in that city, about 600 kilometres east of Jakarta, yesterday against soaring food prices, in what students described as a 'warm up' for Habibie's visit. A spokesman told reporters that students would hold Habibie hostage until he agreed to quit.

Several students were injured, some seriously, when security forces used batons, bayonets, shields and tear gas to drive them out of Jakarta's parliament precinct at 4.30 am yesterday. At least two students underwent emergency surgery at Atma Jaya Hospital for bayonet wounds to the stomach. Others were treated for head wounds and tear gas inhalation.

The brutal action underscored the continuing repressive character of the military-dominated regime headed by Habibie. On Monday, troops initially put on a show of restraint when some 2,000 students pushed down the assembly's main gate and occupied its surroundings. Some 300 students remained overnight, before the troops attacked in the early morning.

Monday's demonstration was the first major student protest in the capital since May, when students sat in the assembly building during several days of marches, rioting and looting that precipitated the resignation of Habibie's mentor, General Suharto.

The students are demanding that Habibie stand down because of his handling of the country's economic crisis and his failure to lower soaring food prices. In addition, they are calling for Suharto to be placed on trial for corruption and repression during his 32-year rule. Their demands include reduced prices for food and other essentials, the withdrawal of the military from politics, and new members of parliament.

'The stepping down of Suharto has not improved things... It is quite clear that Habibie is a puppet of Suharto,' said a statement distributed by the students.

One report quoted a student leader saying the students' movement would return and join with 'the people' to push for a transitional government to oversee new elections. There was no detail of what sort of government that would be. One student activist told reporters that their aim was to prevent a 'social revolution'.

The student statement pointed to dissatisfaction with the proliferation of opposition parties. It described Indonesian politicians as 'clowns' and said the formation of new parties had not solved the country's economic problems. 'Babies need milk, not parties,' read one banner.

Various bourgeois opposition figures, including Islamic leader Amien Rais and ousted Indonesian Democratic Party leader Megawati Sukarnoputri, have announced the formation of political parties in recent weeks. None have challenged Habibie's plans to retain the regime's tightly-controlled national assembly in a slightly modified form.

Instead, they have said they will participate in Habibie's planned elections next year, allowing Habibie to cling to office until at least the end of 1999. These

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parties represent the interests of different capitalist layers, most of whom are vying for the support of the US and other powers, that seek to replace the military and its business associates in control over the economy.

Monday's protest sent the rupiah falling from 10,800 to the US dollar to 11,050, puncturing a recent rise. The fall reflects heightened fears in the financial markets that Habibie will not prove capable of containing the social unrest caused by mounting unemployment and hunger. Apart from the student demonstrations, recent days have witnessed a growth in starvation-driven looting in various parts of the Indonesian archipelago.

In the wake of the military action at the national assembly, the armed forces chief and Defence Minister General Wiranto declared that the student protest had harmed Indonesia's image. By that he meant, the regime's reputation in the eyes of the money markets. 'We had begun receiving confidence from international circles, which was very positive to restore monetary and economic stability,' he told reporters in Jakarta. 'Certainly with a situation like this, it will be disturbed.'

Habibie also warned that worsening social unrest would 'prevail' if protests continued. Addressing a human rights conference, he argued that opposition would damage the economy and lead to further abuses of human rights. 'Crime will rise. The feeling of being safe and tranquil will be further away,' he said.

While the confrontation at the national assembly building was developing on Monday, a senior International Monetary Fund official said Indonesia was 'on track' with programs aimed at overcoming its economic crisis, and was working on a new agreement intended to help companies obtain credit.

Hubert Neiss, IMF director for Asia and Pacific affairs, cynically added that Indonesia must address the sharp rise in the price of rice, which has contributed to the threat of malnutrition facing up to two-thirds of the country's more than 200 million people.

While the IMF has authorised the Habibie regime to temporarily maintain subsidies on the price of rice, it has insisted that other food and fuel subsidies be lifted, together with the opening of all markets to multinational exploitation. Through the IMF restructuring package, the international banks and companies intend to profit from the breakdown of the Indonesian economy, regardless of the consequences for millions of working people.

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