

Huge military mobilisation to block Indonesian protests

Peter Symonds
29 October 1998

The Habibie regime in Indonesia is mobilising tens of thousands of army troops, police and so-called volunteers to crack down on protests and demonstrations during a special plenary session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) to be held in Jakarta on November 10-13.

Jakarta's military commander Major General Djaja Suparman told a mass parade of thousands of soldiers and police in the capital last weekend that harsh measures would be taken against any attempt to disrupt the MPR session. 'We'll arrest those who breach public order and the existing laws, even if they are trying to convey good messages,' he said.

In addition to deploying 30,000 police and troops, Jakarta police chief Major General Nugroho Djajusman told the parade that 100,000 civilian 'volunteers' would be organised into 'self-defence units' for the occasion.

This massive mobilisation is deliberately aimed at intimidating and terrorising any protests or opposition to the MPR proceedings. The use of 'volunteers,' the majority of whom will undoubtedly be drawn from the ruling Golkar party, its youth groups and associated organisations or from the security services, is particularly sinister. In the past, Suharto and the army repeatedly resorted to the use of such gangs of thugs to harass and beat up their political opponents.

Their first target will be student protesters who in recent weeks have staged relatively small demonstrations in Jakarta calling for Habibie's resignation. Protest leaders have denounced the MPR, pointing out that the body remains stacked with the old appointees of former president Suharto who was forced to step down in May.

Only Golkar and the two state-approved opposition parties--the Islamic-based Indonesian Peoples Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party

(PDI)--have MPR members. None of the estimated 80 newly formed parties--including the unofficial PDI faction headed by opposition figure Megawati Sukarnoputri or the National Mandate Party (PAN) led by Amien Rais--have representatives.

The MPR session will discuss the framework and preparations for national elections due to be held next May. The Habibie regime has been compelled to propose some reforms to the rigid political framework through which Suharto and the military clung to power for 32 years. But the proposals are nevertheless heavily weighted to favour Golkar and those opponents such as Megawati and Rais who are acceptable to the ruling class.

Opposition parties have questioned plans to reduce the number of parliamentarians elected on the basis of proportional representation to 68 and to establish 428 individual electorates--a move which is certain to favour Golkar, which under Suharto was the only party permitted to organise outside the major cities. Golkar's opponents are also demanding the right to organise throughout Indonesia. In addition to the elected representatives, the new parliamentary body will also retain many appointees--81 nominated by provincial governments and another 55 by the military.

Student protests have called for an end to the direct involvement of the armed forces (ABRI) in Indonesian politics. But the military, which was the basis of Suharto's 32-year rule and still retains key posts in the Habibie cabinet, is reluctant to give up its power. Defence Minister and ABRI head General Wiranto recently ruled out any change to the military's role, saying that to do otherwise 'would be treachery'. He and other senior generals have repeatedly warned since May that the security forces are prepared to crackdown on protests and social unrest.

Ryaas Rasyid, the government official in charge of establishing new electoral laws, has already hinted in comments to the *Australian* newspaper early this week that the government may be forced to delay national elections until the end of July or later unless the debate over the legal changes is concluded on time and opposition parties accept the shift to individual electorates.

But Habibie is under considerable pressure from the ruling class, both in Indonesia and internationally, to hold the elections without delay as a means of staving off social unrest. Their fear is that without a government in place with at least some legitimacy in the eyes of the masses, worsening economic conditions will lead to a political revolt against the regime and the policies required by big business.

Rosihan Anwar, a retired Indonesian editor and columnist, quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* this week, drew a parallel to the French Revolution of 1789 which toppled the old feudal order. 'If you look at the situation of the people, they cannot buy food. There is enough food, enough rice. But they cannot buy it because of the currency problem. So what are they going to do? They grab it... You remember... about the French Revolution, about Napoleon? That is what I am afraid of. Of course not directly. But things will get out of hand,' he said.

The opposition leaders--Rais, Megawati and Abdurrahman Wahid, head of the Islamic Nahdlatul Ulama organisation and its newly formed National Awakening Party (PKB)--are being cultivated as potential replacements for Habibie and as the means for suppressing popular opposition to the lack of democratic rights and plunging living standards.

Throughout what has been a tumultuous year in Indonesia politics, all three have repeatedly opposed any widespread mobilisation of the working masses, fearing that such a movement may quickly slip out of their control. Rais in particular has publicly attacked students and other groups who have sought to organise widespread protests to force the resignation of Habibie and establish an interim government to oversee elections.

In any elections with an element of free choice, the vote for the ruling Golkar formation is expected to slump from over 75 percent in previous rigged polls to anywhere between zero and 30 percent. Rais, Megawati

and Wahid, who are hoping to benefit from the elections, have been busy testing out possible alliances for a future coalition government and seeking to garner political support within ruling circles in Indonesia and internationally.

See Also:

On-the-spot report: Mega fever in Bali

[17 October 1998]

Portrait of a political operator:

Australian tour by Indonesian opposition leader Amien Rais

[7 October 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact