

Student protests call for Indonesian president to resign

Peter Symonds
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An estimated 8,000 students rallied outside the Indonesian parliament on Wednesday in what was the largest protest against president B.J Habibie since he took office in May after demonstrations and social unrest forced former president Suharto to step down.

Students converged on the parliament building by bus and on foot, evading road blocks set up to prevent any protests on the country's Youth Day. More than 800 armed police and soldiers kept most protesters out of the parliament grounds and the demonstration broke up peacefully in the early evening.

Student leaders called for the resignation of Habibie and the cancellation of a special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) due to meet on November 10-13 to consider the legislative framework for next year's national elections. Other student demonstrations were held on the same day in Surabaya and Bandung.

Students are highly critical of the Habibie cabinet and the MPR, both of which are stacked with former Suharto appointees, army generals and those elected under the existing grossly undemocratic electoral system. Habibie himself was one of Suharto's closest political cronies and previously served as a minister and then vice-president.

'We want a transition government that is democratic... (it) should be made up of leading politicians and figures from society who are free from (corruption)...,' student activist Gustaff Harriman said. 'The new government members must be civilian because we are fed up with the military.'

Students warned that the demonstration was only a dress rehearsal for far larger protests being organised to coincide with the MPR session. Just last weekend the government staged a parade of police and troops in Jakarta, and announced that 30,000 security personnel

and 100,000 'volunteers' would be mobilised to crack down on protests while the MPR met.

Wednesday's demonstrations follow a series of smaller student protests in recent weeks. On Monday, hundreds of University of Indonesia students protested on campus with banners proclaiming 'Put Suharto and His Cronies on Trial' and 'Speed up the Process of Independent and Fair Elections'. Veky Verdiansyah, head of the university's student senate, said the student movements had been able to destroy Suharto as an individual dictator but had failed to deal with Suharto's military regime and single party system.

On Bali, more than 100,000 people including the island's governor, held a protest rally to demand the sacking of Food and Agriculture Minister A.M. Saefuddin for insulting Hinduism, the main religion on the island. Saefuddin recently stated that opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri should not be president of predominantly Muslim Indonesia as she was a 'Hindu'.

Underlying the growing political opposition to Habibie are sharp social tensions produced by plunging living standards. Although the Indonesian rupiah has temporarily strengthened against the US dollar, working people have been hit by soaring prices for basic items such as rice, cooking oil and fuel. Millions of workers have lost their jobs this year leading to predictions that over half the country's population will be living below the poverty line by the end of the year.

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