

Surrounded by armed troops and police

Indonesian assembly discusses national elections

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Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) was convened for a four-day special session on Tuesday amid an extraordinary show of force by the Armed Forces (ABRI), designed to intimidate and suppress opposition protests.

As the 1,000 hand-picked MPR members discussed modifications to the country's Suharto-era electoral laws, thousands of heavily armed troops and soldiers ringed the national parliament building, which was also protected by a series of barricades, road blocks and razor wire.

As many as 30,000 army troops and police were stationed throughout Jakarta, backed by more than 100,000 so-called volunteers in paramilitary gear armed with knives and bamboo sticks. A number of clashes erupted with student protesters and local residents as the government's thugs roamed the city. In East Jakarta, several people were injured in a conflict between residents and hundreds of pro-government private guards.

Soldiers and police prevented around 5,000 students from approaching the national parliament. Hundreds more students, who were protesting against the anti-democratic character of the MPR session, held rallies at individual campuses including the Salemba Campus of the University of Indonesia and Persada University.

In May the parliament building was occupied by students and became a focus for the widespread opposition that finally forced Suharto to resign and hand over power to his close political associate B.J. Habibie.

The military commanders, who occupy all the key security posts in the Habibie cabinet, even stationed 15 warships in the city harbour. By flexing their muscles,

the generals were sending a message that ABRI would not tolerate any opposition to its central position in the government. Defence Minister Wiranto has insisted that the armed forces continue to have parliamentary appointees.

The political role of the military is one of the key issues facing the MPR delegates. Marzuki Darusman, chairman of the ruling Golkar party, said the socio-political function of the armed forces was 'a temporary role', but refused to set any timetable for ending the appointment of military officers to parliament and the cabinet. The only proposal before the MPR is to reduce the current ABRI representation from 75 to 55.

Since the Suharto dictatorship was installed in the bloody 1965-66 coup, ABRI has exercised its 'dual-role' in Indonesia through a bloc of military appointees in parliament as well as its direct involvement in all levels of the regime. Parties and candidates were all vetted and rigidly controlled in national elections, which inevitably resulted in the overwhelming domination of Golkar and Suharto appointees in the MPR.

Habibie has called for national elections to be scheduled next May and proposed some changes to allow for the formation of new political parties. But much of the electoral machinery set up by Suharto to ensure the domination of Golkar would remain intact under the proposals being considered in the MPR.

Student protesters have called for an end to the military's political role, the resignation of Habibie and the appointment of an interim government, including opposition leaders, to set the framework for next year's national elections. They point out that the present MPR is the same body which rubberstamped Suharto for a

seventh term as president in February this year.

In the lead-up to the MPR session, students defied the massive military presence in Jakarta to hold a number of rallies and demonstrations. Last Thursday 500 demonstrators gathered at a roundabout outside the Indonesia Hotel and called for a transitional government to replace Habibie. Another protest took place at the Proclamation Monument in central Jakarta, with banners proclaiming 'Reject the Special Meeting of the MPR' and 'Stop ABRI's Dual Function'. The following day about 10,000 students assembled at the University of Indonesia campus in central Jakarta.

On Monday, several hundred people demonstrated outside the offices of the Jakarta Stock Exchange at lunchtime demanding that the MPR session be scrapped. Another 2,000 attempted to march on the parliament building before being blocked by police and troops. Two students were critically injured and 11 more suffered minor injuries after a clash with police in front of the Supreme Court Office. About 1,000 students blocked a major highway for two hours, unfurling a huge banner that read 'Reject the Special Meeting of the MPR '98, Form a Committee for the Indonesian Masses'.

Substantial protests against the MPR session have taken place in other major cities, including Medan, Semarang, Bandung, Tasikmalaya, Samarinda, Ujung Pandang and Palembang. In Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, nine students were wounded after being beaten by security forces during a protest outside the governor's office.

The parliament and the Habibie regime have been widely discredited by their close association with Suharto and the military. Increasingly the government is reliant on bourgeois opposition leaders such as Megawati Sukarnoputri, Addurahman Wahid and Amien Rais, who have opposed any widespread mobilisation to bring down the Habibie regime. Even though excluded from the MPR, they have legitimised its deliberations by calling on their supporters to accept its decisions on the next elections.

Last week Rais, who heads the Islamic-based National Mandate Party, called on students to support the MPR session, warning that the call for a transitional government would lead to anarchy. 'I don't believe revolution is appropriate now for the Indonesian people,' he said. Rais, Wahid and Megawati have

turned down calls by student leaders for them to form such a government. Instead, they are calling on the MPR to make minor modifications to the government's electoral framework and the timing of elections.

On Tuesday, the trio joined the Sultan of Yogyakarta for a meeting with some student leaders. They jointly issued a series of demands that would leave the Habibie regime and the MPR session intact. They called on the MPR to declare Habibie to be a transitional president, to hold presidential elections three months earlier than the timetable outlined by Habibie, and to phase out the military from politics over six years.

As in May, these opposition leaders are concerned to stabilise Indonesian capitalism. They fear that the opposition of students will trigger strikes and protests by workers, shopkeepers, small farmers, and the urban and rural poor, whose living standards have been devastated by the country's continuing economic crisis.

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