

The real face of the Habibie regime

Indonesian security forces kill students in Jakarta clashes

Peter Symonds
14 November 1998

Indonesian security forces killed at least three anti-government protesters on Friday afternoon when they fired at point blank range and drove armoured vehicles into a march of tens of thousands on Jalan Sudirman, a major thoroughfare in central Jakarta. Four more people including a woman reporter from a local radio station died as clashes with the police and military continued into the evening in the same area.

A Reuters news agency report described the situation as a war zone: 'Troops dropped down on one knee and carefully aimed their shots. Some danced a victory jig when the protesters were temporarily beaten back, others picked up the stones thrown at them and hurled them back. One woman wept inconsolably right next to the soldiers firing at the crowd, crying out that her young son had been hit and dragged back.'

Another student and a policeman died during violent clashes on Thursday night. The full extent of the death toll is unknown as protests continued early on Saturday morning. Scores of people had been injured, some seriously, after being shot with rubber bullets or beaten with batons and bamboo sticks. In one incident, a soldier shouted, 'Show me you're a hero,' as he repeatedly kicked a female student.

Defence Minister General Wiranto gave the green light for the assault on anti-government demonstrators when he publicly warned on Friday morning that his troops would take 'stern action' against those who violated the laws or disturbed the peace. He called on Jakarta residents to stay off the streets.

The deaths expose the real character of the regime headed by president B.J. Habibie and the proceedings of the special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) which began on Tuesday in the

national parliament. Since May Habibie and the ruling Golkar party have sought to cultivate a more democratic image but the military continue to dominate the government.

The Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) prepared for this week's MPR session as if for a major military battle. More than 30,000 heavily armed troops and police backed by light tanks, armoured vehicles, water cannon, horses and attack dogs were deployed around the capital. The parliament building itself was encircled with razor wire and barricades. Fifteen warships were stationed in Jakarta harbour.

In addition, the military recruited more than 100,000 so-called volunteers from among government supporters in rural areas, luring them with the promise of \$2 a day--more than the wage of a factory worker. Armed with sharpened bamboo sticks and organised into paramilitary groups, these young thugs were let loose in Jakarta in a bid to intimidate students and their supporters. At least two of the 'volunteers' were reportedly surrounded and beaten to death on Friday by irate residents.

The student protests--the largest since the ousting of Suharto in May--have steadily grown in size and intensity since the beginning of the week. A number of students have come to the capital from universities in other parts of Java.

On Thursday, banks, shops and offices in central Jakarta closed their doors early and sent workers home. Thousands of people looked on and applauded as the protest marches moved along the streets. One column of students marched through the poorer areas of Jakarta gathering support from workers, the unemployed and urban poor whose living standards have been

devastated by the country's continuing economic crisis.

Anti-government student demonstrations have also taken place in other major Indonesian cities throughout the week including Surabaya, Medan, Bandung, Solo, Pekanbaru, Pontianak, Banda Aceh, Padang, Jember, Samarinda, Yogyakarta, Lampung, Semarang and Ujung Pandang.

In Yogyakarta, thousands of students protested against the brutal actions of the armed forces in Jakarta. In Solo, students occupied the national radio station and in Ujung Pandang, the international airport. In Banyumas, hundreds of university students took over the office of the Provincial Legislative Assembly for three days. They then proceeded to the national radio station to announce their dissatisfaction with the MPR special session.

The students have repeatedly denounced the special session of the MPR which is comprised of military representatives, pro-Suharto appointees and delegates elected last year under highly restrictive electoral laws. They are demanding that Suharto be put on trial for corruption and that president B.J. Habibie resign to make way for a transitional government including opposition figures such as Megawati Sukarnoputri and Amien Rais to oversee next year's elections.

Student leaders have also called for an end to the 'dual role' of the military which stems from the bloody 1965-66 coup that brought Suharto to power. The armed forces hold a substantial block of votes in the MPR and key posts in the Habibie cabinet as well as positions of power at regional and local levels.

Opposition leaders Megawati, Rais, Abdurrahman Wahid and Sultan Hamengku Buwono X met with some student leaders on Tuesday in the south Jakarta suburb of Ciganjur in a bid to moderate the demands of student protesters. The four insisted that Habibie be allowed to remain in power until the next elections and gave the armed forces six years to end their political role.

On Thursday, some students and their supporters staged a People's Special Session at the Proclamation Monument in central Jakarta despite attempts by security forces to clear the area. Speakers included Matori Abdul Djilil, general chairman of the People's Awakening Party, and Andi Arief, a supporter of the banned People's Democratic Party (PRD).

But the political perspective of all of these political

parties and leaders remains confined within the framework of the capitalist system. Megawati, Rais and Wahid have repeatedly attempted to dampen student protests against the Habibie regime. The main political plank of these figures is the implementation of the IMF's 'free market reforms' and austerity measures which are responsible for worsening the social crisis confronting the majority of working people in Indonesia.

The MPR session concluded on Friday after passing a series of 12 decrees. The body ignored the call by students for the abolition of the military's role, set national elections for next May or June and has given Habibie until the end of next year before he faces any election for president.

The killing of unarmed demonstrators in Jakarta is certain to heighten the political crisis in Indonesia as none of the student demands have been met. Furthermore the protests have revealed that sections of workers, unemployed and the poor also have no confidence in the Habibie regime and are willing to join anti-government protests.

See Also:

Surrounded by armed troops and police

Indonesian assembly discusses national elections

[12 November 1998]

The struggle for democracy in Indonesia:

What are the social and political tasks facing the masses?

[Editorial from 23 May 1998]

Also in Indonesian



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact