Protests continue despite military crackdown in Indonesia

Peter Symonds
17 November 1998

Large protests continued yesterday in Indonesia, with demonstrators calling for the removal of Defence Minister and Armed Forces (ABRI) chief General Wiranto after last week's military violence, which left 14 people dead and 448 injured. Mass demonstrations were held on university campuses in Jakarta to mourn the deaths of at least seven students shot down by troops, who fired at close range into protesters last Friday. Thousands of students also gathered at Bandung in West Java and at Palu in central Sulawesi.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets in cities across Indonesian to vent their anger at the military and the Habibie regime. In Jakarta, a crowd swelled to an estimated 50,000 outside the national parliament building--the focus of last week's protests against the special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). In other parts of the capital, shopping malls, banks, showrooms and stores, including those of ethnic Chinese, were looted and set alight. One of the chief targets were the security forces themselves--military vehicles and police posts were set on fire, and an attempt was made to burn down two police headquarters.

In the industrial city of Medan in north Sumatra, 10,000 students moved onto the city's airfield, halting all air traffic for four hours as they listened to speeches protesting the military's actions in Jakarta. In Bandung, 20,000 students gathered in two locations--at the West Java parliament building and the Siliwangi military headquarters--before marching around the city. Large protests took place in 14 other centres, including Bogor, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Solo, Denpasar, Semarang and Padang.

President B.J. Habibie has reacted to the widespread anti-government protests by ordering the military to crack down on 'subversive' groups. Over the weekend police rounded up a number of people who had signed a signed a joint communiqué last Thursday calling for his resignation and the formation of a popular 'presidium' as a transitional government to oversee national elections.

Those taken in for interrogation include retired marine general Ali Sadikin, retired army general Kemal Idris and Sri Bintang Pamungkas. Sadikin and Idris are members of Barisan Nasional, a group of former military officers, politicians and academics critical of both Suharto and Habibie. Pamungkas, a former political detainee, is head of the Indonesian United Democratic Party (PUDI).

Habibie is seeking to make these rather moderate critics the scapegoat for last week's shootings. He and other ministers claim that the call for a 'presidium' to run the country is tantamount to subversion and that the group was attempting to use student demonstrations to overthrow the government. Those detained could face serious charges under the country's security laws.

The killing of unarmed demonstrators was a calculated decision by the military and by the regime itself. Protests in the capital against the MPR session grew rapidly in both size and intensity last week--from hundreds to thousands and tens of thousands. In some cases, students were joined by workers, unemployed and the urban poor, who have suffered a drastic decline in living standards during the six months of Habibie's rule.

After sharp clashes between security forces and protesters on Thursday, Wiranto took direct operational control of the 30,000 troops and police deployed around Jakarta. On the following morning he issued a public warning that 'stern action' would be taken against anyone who disturbed the peace and called on residents to stay indoors. That afternoon troops took

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deliberate aim and fired into thousands of protesters gathered in a main thoroughfare in central Jakarta.

The bloody events in Jakarta have set the stage for a rapid deepening of the political turmoil in Indonesia. Habibie is desperately trying to retrieve his position by offering a dialogue with student leaders and also hinting that a new president could be chosen soon after next year's national elections in May or June, rather than at the end of next year as previously proposed.

Habibie and the military are relying politically on key opposition figures such as Megawati Sukarnoputri, Amien Rais, Abdurrahman Wahid and Sultan Hamengku Buwono X who have repeatedly opposed the call by students for the replacement of the present regime with a form of popular committee.

The four met last week and issued a joint declaration appealing to the MPR to slightly modify its decrees, so as to declare Habibie a transitional president and to speed up the timetable for his replacement. But they rejected calls for a repudiation of the MPR session and students' demand for an immediate end to the military's pervasive role in Indonesian political life, saying it should be phased out over six years. Not only does ABRI hold the key security posts in cabinet and a bloc of military appointees in parliament, but tens of thousands of officers fill government posts at the national, regional and local levels throughout the country.

Throughout the protests in May that ousted Suharto and now again during the anti-Habibie demonstrations, Sukarnoputri, Rais and Wahid have refused to mobilise their millions of supporters. In doing so they act as a direct political prop for the present military-backed regime. On Saturday night, Rais held private talks with Habibie and offered him a further breathing space of eight weeks.

At a press conference on Monday, Rais warned: 'If, within eight weeks, nothing happens and, like the Suharto era, the MPR decrees are just put away in a drawer... then all that remains for us is to say goodbye to this transitional regime.' Like the other political representatives of the ruling class, Rais fears that the protests will set off widespread social unrest among workers, small farmers and the poor which will rock the foundations of Indonesian capitalism.

Those students who are pinning their hopes for social reform on bourgeois opposition figures like Rais are being led down a political blind alley. Genuine democracy, social equality and decent living standards can only be realised by turning to the working class and building a mass political movement along socialist lines that draws in the impoverished layers of society.

See Also:
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