As anti-government protests continue

Indonesian regime resorts to brutal police measures

Peter Symonds
19 December 1998

Scores of Indonesian students were seriously injured on Thursday when riot police fired bullets and tear gas into a gathering of more than 4,000 anti-government demonstrators gathered outside the national parliament building in central Jakarta. According to a press report, at least one student was shot dead and 70 more were in hospital--10 with gunshot wounds.

Just hours before the clash, President B.J. Habibie told a graduation ceremony of new army officers that anti-government protests had to be curbed in order to prevent the disintegration of the nation. The Habibie regime is resorting to increasingly repressive police measures against its political opponents and continuing student protests in the lead-up to national elections proposed for next June.

On Wednesday, riot police fired tear gas and used batons to disperse hundreds of student protesters chanting 'reform or revolution' as they attempted to march to the presidential palace in Jakarta. Dozens of demonstrators were injured during the attack. At least three had to be hospitalised.

More than 1,000 students were involved in scattered protests throughout the capital. In a separate clash, police battled about 500 students who had entered the grounds of the Defence Ministry near the presidential palace. According to witnesses, two dozen protesters, some bleeding, were dragged into army trucks and taken away.

The previous day police surrounded a contingent of demonstrators who were attempting to make their way to a protest outside the national parliament in Jakarta. More than 150 students, mostly from the City Forum Women's Association, were arrested and held for interrogation when they refused the orders of police officials to disperse. Another group of about 200 students from the Pancasila University was prevented from marching on the building by hundreds of riot police and soldiers from the Army's Strategic Command (Kostrad).

Last week substantial protests held to mark the 50th anniversary of the United Nations declaration of human rights on December 10 halted traffic in central Jakarta. Scuffles broke out as police beat demonstrators who attempted to get through police lines. An estimated 10,000 people joined demonstrations at a number of locations including the UN offices and the parliament building where many remained until after nightfall chanting 'Revolution!' and 'Reject Habibie'.

Protests have taken place virtually on a daily basis in the capital since mass demonstrations in mid-November against the special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) held to decide the framework for next year's national elections and the composition of the future parliament. Sixteen people died on November 13 and 14 including a number of students killed when troops armed with automatic weapons fired at close range into the protests.

The MPR is virtually the same body that unanimously endorsed Suharto in February for a seventh five-year term as president. More than half of its delegates are either Armed Forces (ABRI) representatives or Suharto appointees. The rest were elected in 1997 under the existing highly restrictive electoral code, which has enabled the ruling Golkar Party to win an overwhelming majority again and again.

Students and their supporters have been calling for the resignation of the Habibie regime, for an end to the role of the military in government and for the arrest and trial of former president Suharto on charges of corruption and abuse of human rights.

Suharto appeared last week before the Attorney-General Andi Muhammad Ghalib to answer questions over the

© World Socialist Web Site

now defunct state-subsided national car project owned by Suharto's son Hutomo 'Tommy' Mandala Putra. After violent clashes between students and police, the interview was moved from the Attorney-General's offices to another location surrounded by 10 truckloads of riot police.

Earlier the attorney-general's office questioned Suharto over his family's assets and proclaimed that there was no evidence of wrongdoing. Any serious investigation into the crimes of Suharto and his family would inevitably implicate the generals, ministers, business cronies and government officials who profited under his 32-year dictatorship and defended it with the most brutal methods. Ghalib is himself a serving three-star general.

Habibie, himself a life-long associate of Suharto, is performing a delicate high wire political act to remain in power. He has attempted to give his regime a democratic gloss and placate critics, by introducing cosmetic changes to the repressive regulations governing political activity in Indonesia. At the same time, he has taken a number of measures to bolster the security forces and clamp down on opposition.

On December 11, National Police deputy chief Lieutenant-General Nana Permana announced that two retired military officers from the opposition National Front would be charged with conspiracy for signing a declaration on November 12 calling for the replacement of Habibie with a 'presidium' or transitional government to oversee next year's elections.

The National Front is a grouping of former ABRI officers, state officials and intellectuals who have been critical of the lack of change under Habibie. Yet according to Defence Minister General Wiranto, their declaration which, did no more than support the demands of hundreds of thousands of student protesters, constituted an attempt to overthrow the government and was tantamount to treason--a charge which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

Two days later Wiranto announced the formation of a civilian militia of 40,000 within the three next months to be armed with riot shields and batons and given the authority to arrest. Militia members will operate as part of the 200,000-strong police force, itself an arm of the military, and will be paid better than the minimum wage received by workers.

Wiranto claims that the militia is necessary to control rioting and social unrest. But the precedent for such a measure is the recruitment 100,000 so-called volunteers during the MPR session in November. These pro-government thugs armed with sharpened bamboo sticks were utilised as part of the huge military mobilisation against student demonstrators.

Opposition leader Amien Rais, chairman of the Islamic National Mandate Party, warned the government of the dangers of establishing a militia. 'I hope the plan of forming this civilian militia will be postponed because it may trigger a civil war in the country,' he said. Rais is clearly concerned that the army's provocative actions far from containing social unrest will simply add more fuel to the flames, threatening the stability of Indonesian capitalism.

On Monday, the Central Java police chief Major General Nurfaizi announced: 'I have issued an order to shoot rioters on sight'. His instructions followed rioting the previous night in the city of Solo after police intervened to break up races by young motor bike riders. Incensed by rough police methods, more than a 1,000 people drove back riot police, attacked the Solo Police Headquarters, set fire to six traffic police posts and damaged six banks, a supermarket and a theatre.

At a Jakarta business lunch the following day Education Minister Juwono Sudarsono urged the government to ban street rallies during next year's elections in order to halt civil strife. 'The pendulum has swung too much in favour of political openness,' he said. 'This desire for political democracy and openness, juxtaposed with a period of endemic economic deprivation... this combination is the most dangerous possible for political stability.' Sudarsono, a former deputy governor of the military think tank Lemhasas, has close connections to the military.

Sudarsono simply states what is being discussed widely in ruling circles. Unable to satisfy even the most basic demands of students, intellectuals, workers and sections of the middle class for democratic rights and an alleviation of worsening poverty and unemployment, the ruling class is preparing for a crackdown every bit as brutal as occurred under the Suharto dictatorship.

See Also:
The struggle for democracy in Indonesia
What are the social and political tasks facing the masses?
[23 May 1998]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site