

Indonesia:

A growing loss of confidence in the Habibie regime

Peter Symonds
9 December 1998

Six months after B.J. Habibie was installed in place of Suharto as Indonesian president, growing concerns are being expressed in ruling circles both at home and internationally over the continuing anti-government student protests, the eruption of racial and religious rioting, and the signs of political disarray and paralysis within the military-backed regime itself.

Opposition figure Abdurrahman Wahid, head of the conservative Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), warned on Sunday: 'The Habibie administration is losing control while our nation is now on the brink of a social revolution. Our situation is critical. A social revolution is where people are revolting against everything--there will be no more government, no more control.'

Wahid, like other opposition leaders Megawati Sukarnoputri and Amien Rais, has publicly opposed the demands of student protesters for Habibie's resignation, an immediate end to the military's political role, the arrest and trial of ex-president Suharto and substantial changes to the Suharto-era state apparatus.

Wahid called for closer collaboration among all political leaders, saying: 'Because the present government has no political sense, is lacking leadership and is losing control, then the whole political elite either inside or outside the government should hold meaningful dialogues to stop the conflicts. Otherwise we may not be able to make it to the upcoming general election.'

On the same day, Megawati expressed similar sentiments to a 10,000-strong rally in Jakarta of her faction of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI). She urged her supporters to shun violence and seek democratic reforms peacefully. In the central Javan town of Brebes, however, at least 11 people were injured and several cars damaged as thousands of PDI supporters clashed with members of the ruling Golkar Party.

Students have continued their demonstrations against Habibie despite the killing of protesters by troops on November 13. Throughout last week, students have attempted to march on Suharto's residence in the elite inner suburb of Menteng to highlight their demands that he be arrested and tried on charges of corruption and abuse of human rights. On Saturday, hundreds of demonstrators blocked traffic in central Jakarta but were prevented from reaching Suharto's home by armoured personnel carriers and troops manning barricades.

Suharto came to power during the 1965-66 US-backed military coup which led to the massacre of at least 500,000 workers, intellectuals and members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) by the army and groups of right-wing thugs. For three decades, the military junta has repeatedly suppressed political opposition as well as separatist movements in East Timor, Irian Jaya and Aceh in northern Sumatra.

Investigations into the past actions of the military and the vast business empire accumulated by Suharto and his family have been little more than officially organised cover-ups. Less than three months ago the attorney general's office questioned Suharto over his family's assets--estimated to be worth as much as \$40 billion--only to proclaim that there was no evidence of wrongdoing. In the past six months, the government has tracked down only \$3 million in Suharto's name--money that he claimed was honestly obtained from his salary and the rental of two of his houses.

Under pressure from protesters, the government has instigated another inquiry into allegations of corruption. Suharto is to due to meet with the Attorney-General Andi Muhammad Ghalib today for further questioning. But such inquiries are unlikely to go much further than the previous ones. Habibie's entire cabinet consists of former

Suharto ministers and army generals who fear that any serious investigation into Suharto's affairs will inevitably implicate them.

A recent editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Still living dangerously' expressed the fear that 'politics in Indonesia is now at a critical point'. Urging a full investigation of Suharto's wealth, it stated: 'There is no better way to rule off that [Suharto] era than by establishing the facts. This may be too much to expect from Dr Habibie's attorney-general alone, and those who wish Indonesia well should be urging the President to augment the inquiry with expert and impartial help.'

The article applauded Habibie for announcing the date for the national elections on June 7, to be followed by a session of the People's Consultative Council (MPR) on August 29 to appoint the president and vice-president. Wahid and other opposition leaders had been urging that Habibie to set an early date for the presidential changeover to placate student protesters. But no sooner had the announcement been made than the government switched the date to October 28 in line with its plans to delay any handover as long as possible.

A comment in the *Australian* newspaper last weekend by its international editor Paul Kelly also revealed ruling class nervousness about the political future. After considering the possible outcomes of an election next year, including the formation of a coalition government, Kelly continued: 'This is the optimistic scenario, because it assumes Indonesia will stumble towards political liberalisation. There is a terrible alternative: that it descends into chaos, religious warfare or fragmentation which forces ABRI, the armed forces, to take command amid an international outcry. It is a horror scenario for Australia.'

The commander-in-chief of the US Pacific forces Joseph Prueher also warned: 'Politically, economically and militarily, Indonesia is very fragile and there are no constraints... There needs to be a plan of reform that the students can see, not just words of commitment to reform.'

These remarks reflect deep-going concerns over the mounting social tensions in Indonesia. The economy has stagnated, large sections of industry, particularly those reliant on imported parts or products, have shut, millions of workers have been thrown out of a job, and an estimated 80 million people now live below an official poverty line calculated in calories rather than dollars.

In this highly volatile political climate, sharp religious conflicts are taking place. In response to the killing of

Christians and the burning of churches in Jakarta on November 22 by Moslem mobs, Christian rioters set fire to mosques in Kupang in West Timor and in West Kalimantan last week. Last Friday a Roman Catholic church in the capital of the South Sulewesi province was burnt.

Opposition leaders such as Wahid and political commentators have warned that provocateurs are involved in stirring up racial and religious animosities that could provide the military with the pretext for a further crackdown. Any such action by the military against anti-government protesters could have explosive social consequences.

There is no doubt that in Jakarta as well as in Canberra, Washington and other capitals, there are grave concerns that the political and social crisis is rapidly slipping beyond the grip of the Habibie regime. As Kelly makes clear in his calculations, the preferred option, at present, is to install a government including opposition figures such as Rais or Megawati to impose the demands of the IMF and international financiers.

But he also makes just as plain that the alternative is a return to direct military rule. It is significant that he recommends that 'Australia's close links with ABRI should remain along with the security agreement between the countries.' The agreement signed between Suharto and the previous Keating Labor government provides for the intervention of the Australian military in times of social strife.

The danger facing workers, students, intellectuals and others striving towards genuine democratic reform and social equality is that the political perspective guiding the protests and demonstrations remains narrowly circumscribed by the framework set by the bourgeois opposition--leaders like Megawati and Rais who fear the threat of social revolution far more than another military takeover.

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