Indonesian president lashes out at Singapore as 'racist'

Peter Symonds
19 February 1999

Recent remarks by Indonesian President B.J. Habibie openly accusing the Singapore government of racism have sparked a regional furore and drawn sharp opposition from Malay politicians and newspapers in Singapore, Indonesian human rights groups, politicians and others.

During an interview with Taiwanese media in Jakarta on February 6, Habibie claimed he had rid Indonesia of "certain discriminatory policies" directed against the country's ethnic Chinese. He said he would arrange for the group of journalists from the *China Times* and China Television Network to meet and talk to some high-ranking Chinese in the Indonesian military.

But when pressed on the point, he lashed out at Singapore, saying: "In fact, the situation in Singapore is worse. In Singapore, if you are a Malay, you can never become a military officer. They are the real racists, not here. You can go and check it out."

The comments were broadcast on TV in Taiwan that night, and published in the mass circulation *China Times* on the following Monday. By attacking the racial policies of predominantly Chinese Singapore, Habibie was giving a green light to right-wing and racialist elements within Indonesia to step up their verbal and physical attacks on the ethnic Chinese minority.

Habibie's comments were reinforced by remarks made to the Singapore-based *Sunday Times* by his staff and ministers last weekend. Presidential aide Umar Juoro told the newspaper that the statements reflected unhappiness in the cabinet that Singapore was being used as a "refuge" for economic criminals, many of whom are ethnic Chinese.

A cabinet minister told the *Sunday Times*: "There is a certain degree of ambivalence towards Singapore. He respects the Senior Minister [Lee Kuan Yew] and Singapore's accomplishments. But there is also this concern that sometimes Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew are part of a big conspiracy to protect the ethnic Chinese in South-east Asia."

A confidante of the Habibie family was quoted as saying that the president was aiming "pin Singapore down on race issues, so that it would be easier to justify and force the Singapore government to sign an extradition treaty with Jakarta to get these economic criminals and their money back on Indonesian territory... This is only the first salvo he has fired. More will be coming until he and his supporters get what they want."

By singling out Chinese businessmen who fled to Singapore in the wake of racial rioting as "economic criminals," Habibie is engaged in a crude attempt to transform them into a scapegoat for the economic and social crisis wracking Indonesia, and to divert attention from the failure of the military-backed regime and more broadly of the profit system itself.

If Habibie were genuinely interested in dealing with so-called economic criminals, he need look no further than Suharto, his family and business cronies who used their positions of power to accumulate vast business empires worth billions of dollars. Needless to say the none of the official inquiries instigated under Habibie into the business dealings of his mentor Suharto have resulted in any charges being laid, nor are they likely to.

The statements by Habibie are characteristic of the racial politics, which the bourgeoisie in Indonesia and throughout the region has exploited for decades, particularly in times of crisis, as a means for dividing working people against one another. The racial divisions and antagonisms are themselves the legacy of the colonial rule of the British and the Dutch, both of whom used the same tactic of "divide-and-rule".

Singapore Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Abdullah Tarmugi hit out at Habibie's statements, saying they were baseless and an interference in Singapore's internal affairs. The *Straits Times* newspaper pointed out that a number of minority Malays had undergone training as officers and non-commissioned officers in the Singapore Armed Forces. The very fact that any change has only occurred in recent years shows that discrimination against racial minorities exists in Singapore, as it does in Indonesia and neighbouring Malaysia.

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Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad also bought into the argument, saying he did not agree with the Singapore's racial policies, then adding that the Malaysian system was superior to the Indonesian one. His government, Mahathir argued, had not allowed the Malay majority to lag behind ethnic Chinese citizens. "In Indonesia, they didn't do that, that is why the Indonesians attack Chinese. In Malaysia you don't find racial problems during these times, so we are not like Indonesia at all."

Under the New Economic Policy drawn up after racial rioting in 1969, the ruling United Malays National Organisation established a highly discriminatory system of education quotas and business incentives directed in favour of Malays against the ethnic Chinese minority. Far from benefitting small farmers and workers, the NEP fostered a grasping layer of Malay businessmen and middle class closely linked with UMNO and the government. Racial tensions are never far below the surface in a country where all the major parties--both government and opposition--are racially based.

Similarly in Indonesia, the ethnic Chinese, even those whose families have lived in the country for centuries, have always been treated as second-class citizens. National Rights Commission chairman Marzuki Darusman described Habibie's claim to have eliminated discriminatory practices as "misleading". Ethnic Chinese are still required to pay large sums of money for a citizenship certificate needed to obtain an ID card which is, in turn, essential for everything from job interviews to drivers licenses. The ID card still indicates, indirectly, the racial origins of the bearer. It is just one of a number of discriminatory measures against ethnic Chinese established both under Suharto, and also the first president Sukarno.

According to some reports, Habibie is increasingly relying on a group of advisers connected to the powerful Muslim Intellectual Association (ICMI) that he established in 1990 with the backing of Suharto. ICMI, which has its own bank and its own newspaper *Republika*, has been a focus for non-Chinese or *pribumi* businessmen seeking to advance their own economic position by promoting thinly veiled anti-Chinese sentiment.

In the current highly-charged political climate, Habibie's attack on the Singapore government is calculated to inflame racial and religious animosities. Further clashes between Muslim and Christian groups flared up last weekend on the island of Haruku near Ambon in the spice island group. At least 11 people were killed and many more injured after Muslim thugs attacked the predominantly Christian village of Kariu.

Last month more than 100 people were killed and large sections of Ambon town were burnt down when Christian mobs took to the streets. Thousands of people fled their homes and many have left the island of Ambon altogether. Opposition leaders and other commentators claimed that provocateurs, possibly connected to ousted president Suharto, had incited the riots.

Underlying the racial and religious tensions is a deepening social crisis in Indonesia. Millions of workers have been thrown out of a job over the last year as a result of the economic breakdown. According to some government estimates, more than half of the country's population of 202 million is living below the austere official poverty line. Many people simply do not have enough to eat.

The social conditions facing the urban and rural poor are rarely reported in the Indonesian press. In one exception, an article in the *Kompas* newspaper on February 10 reported the findings of a doctor in Lampung in Sumatra, who discovered 15 children under the age of five with bloated stomachs due to starvation. One of them died during treatment in hospital. Health officials in East Java identified further cases of severe malnourishment after a number of elderly villagers died.

Social tensions are certain to intensify as the Habibie regime continues to implement the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to axe price subsidies on food, fuel and other basic items, to cut back government spending on health, education and other services, and to implement extensive economic restructuring. The Indonesian economy shrank last year by about 14 percent.

A recent "interactive dialogue" in Jakarta on the topic of "Preventing Social Revolutions" involving senior political figures and officials highlights the fears in ruling circles of a social explosion. Opposition figure Abdurrahman Wahid told the gathering: "Considering incidents of lawlessness that have occurred in many parts of the country, Indonesia is now on the brink of a social revolution. And if a social revolution really does happen, it would be a truly massive national tragedy."

Clearly the ruling class is concerned of the consequences of such a movement taking a consciously anti-capitalist political direction. The promotion of racism by Habibie and others is aimed at channelling the anger and frustrations felt by many into the dead end of fratricidal violence.

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