

Indonesian police seize eight students during a Bandung election rally

7 June 1999

The WSWs received the following information from an Indonesian reader. Eight students were seized during an election rally last Thursday in Bandung, one of the country's largest cities. The details of the incident make clear that the police and armed forces, including their intelligence units, have been active in the course of the Indonesian election campaign. The detentions point to the real character of the military-backed regime just below the veneer of democracy so carefully cultivated during the election campaign. It is also a sharp warning of the type of police treatment that will be meted out after the poll to anti-government protesters.

“Today eight of my friends were detained for holding an anti-Golkar rally in Bandung. And by 'detained' I don't mean they were taken away with due process, etc. We were holding a rally and from the beginning we were 'escorted' by one Dalmas unit (Dalmas means mass control police unit, or public control), but through the whole rally all they did was follow closely behind us. We were joined by several groups of [Megawati Sukarnoputri's] PDI Perjuangan supporters who were campaigning. Then at one point we split ways with the PDI-P group and that's when the police came down from their vehicle and started to 'disperse' us, beating and chasing us.

“Most of us were in panic, because we have a rule that if one of us were to be detained we would all have to be detained, but this was hardly the case now. The police didn't issue a warning or anything. They just yelled and started to chase us. We never expected anything like this to happen, especially now in the 'reformasi' times. We have held rallies before and this has never happened. I think they must have gone beyond their chief's commands, because my friend remembers seeing the chief trying to block some of them.

“Anyway, most of us managed to escape. But they got eight students who are still at the station now. A team from the LBH (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum—a non-profit legal aid organisation) is trying to lobby for them. It's quite hectic so I don't really know what's going on with the paperwork. I am sure my eight friends are fine, they're tough, but the thing that amazes me most is the unexpected moves the police made.

“It has been a long time since we students have seen brutality like this in the streets of Bandung. It was a shock to us. We have contacted the press and we will have a press conference tomorrow; we do not know how the press will react to this... maybe they will decide to ignore it because it was truly a blunder on the police's part. I know this case will probably get lost in the wind, but for us students it is a startling slap in the face. The security measures being used on us have taken a different turn, and we can no longer be carefree with our actions. We hate to think of what will happen to us in the future after the elections.

“I can't quite say what happened back there today. It's too early to tell, and after all, I am emotionally worn out, and physically exhausted. But all I know is things are getting strange. It is quite abnormal for them to visibly terrorise us like that, with everything out in the open. Even the cameramen of the intelligence officers didn't bother to hide their handycams, and some of the intelligence cars actually chased one of my friend's cars all the way up to campus—that is NOT likely of them.”

The eight students are from the United Students Communication Forum (FKMB) which is active on six university campuses in Bandung. They have since been released. But as the reader commented in a further communication: “They are in quite bad physical condition. The police assaulted them in the truck before they were taken to the station. They purposefully took my friends on a 'joyride' before actually taking them to

police headquarters because they knew once they got to the HQ they wouldn't be able to lay their hands on them anymore.

“The press coverage on this event has been terrible. One paper mistakenly (or purposefully?) called us MPR (Mahasiswa Progresif Revolusioner) which means Progressive Revolutionary Students. Where did they get that? A name like that is sure to scare away the people from our movement. Republika, a prominent right-wing Muslim paper, said we provoked the police into getting down from their vehicles (why on earth would we do that?) and that we were 'provocateurs' who tried to instigate chaos among the campaigning masses, etc, etc...”



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