

Indonesians protest against security bill and Timor atrocities

Mike Head
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In events little reported outside Indonesia, security forces this week fired shots and tear gas at hundreds of demonstrators protesting in Jakarta and other major cities against a draft bill on state security and the military terror in East Timor.

Police and anti-riot troops blocked students marching from campuses in East Jakarta to the national parliament on Tuesday. A police official said: "Our men were trying to prevent the students from joining forces and holding a mass rally on the streets." She claimed that students retaliated with stones, bottles and pieces of pavement.

In Cawang, also in Jakarta, police attacked more than 600 students and beat up passersby and hawkers, sparking anger among local people, who joined the students in pelting the troopers with stones and other debris. An AFP photographer said police fired several warning shots and teargas canisters.

Near Borobudur university some 200 students clashed with police and at least one police vehicle was torched, according to an eye-witness. The students had planned to join 500 others who had protested near the parliament against the security bill and to demand that former military dictator Suharto be placed on trial. "Arrest and prosecute Suharto" and "We reject the state security bill" read some of their placards. They took over a toll road on the way to parliament, before being dispersed by hundreds of riot troops and military police.

On Wednesday security forces opened fire on people protesting outside the United Nations building in Jakarta against Indonesian military atrocities in East Timor. At least three demonstrators were injured—one in a serious condition with a bullet wound. Others were injured when riot police chased them with sticks. About 60 protestors had been trying to march to the defence ministry to condemn military "genocide" in East Timor and Aceh. After being halted by the police, they rallied outside the UN building instead.

Clashes also erupted near the parliament on Wednesday when troops ploughed into about 150 demonstrators, attacking them with boots and sticks. Banners were held aloft reading "Beware the military threat" and "The state security bill is intended for a military coup". At least 19 were arrested, including Gunawan Muhamad, a former chief editor of *Tempo*, a leading weekly magazine.

By contrast, police allowed pro-military demonstrations against the UN intervention in East Timor to be staged outside the Australian and British embassies and the defence ministry.

Elsewhere across the country, protests and petitions described the security bill, due to be passed by parliament next week, as a return to Suharto-era rule, with some of its clauses even harsher than Suharto's laws.

In Semarang, about 100 law students of Diponegoro University urged legislators to reject the bill. Speaking in front of the Central Java provincial assembly building, group coordinator Asep Muhammad Ridwan said: "The planned bill is against every value of human rights and clearly against reform. If it is endorsed, the military will have the justification to intimidate, torture, arrest and even kill."

In Yogyakarta, 32 newly-appointed legislators signed a petition rejecting the bill. They came from Amien Rais' National Mandate Party (PAN), Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI Perjuangan), the National Awakening Party (PKB) and also Golkar, the ruling party of President Habibie.

Student rallies continued in Surabaya and Yogyakarta on Thursday. In Surabaya, hundreds of students took part in two demonstrations. Members of the Arek Surabaya Association gathered outside the local council to demand that representatives reject the bill. Another 400 attended a free speech event organised by the Communication Forum of Surabaya Students in front of the provincial assembly. Speakers accused the military of seeking to strengthen its

grip on power.

About 200 students from the Indonesian Front for Youth Struggle marched through Yogyakarta, causing traffic congestion. They burned tyres and carried a red coffin covered by a red cloth inscribed with the signatures of students opposed to the bill.

General Wiranto's Ministry of Defence and Security first submitted the draft security bill to parliament in May. It allows the president to declare a state of emergency nationwide or in troubled territories. The president could hand authority to the military, which is given virtual free rein to suppress threats to "state security".

The military could carry out raids and investigations, take over all mail, telecommunications and electronic facilities, ban demonstrations and censor the print and electronic media. The military chief—presently Wiranto—could resort to measures that violate existing laws. He could stop individuals from entering or leaving the country, isolate "troublesome individuals and areas" and set curfews.

Responding to the protests, Agus Muhyidin, a former general who chairs the parliament (DPR) working committee, claimed that the bill had been substantially amended. But the only real change is that the President must consult or obtain approval from the parliament before declaring a state of emergency or a state of war. A state of emergency can last only six months, but that time can be extended with parliamentary approval.

In the meantime, the military would take over the running of the country or a province. In Agus' own words: "The military administration would be allowed to carry out investigations and operations, recruit individuals for military duty, and regulate land, air and sea transportation in an attempt to restore law and order."

Wiranto, who is both Defence Minister and military chief in Habibie's administration, defended the bill on Wednesday, arguing that such a law was commonplace in many other countries, including democratic countries such as the United States.

The bill's timing has raised concerns about the military's plans. The measure is due to be passed into law on September 23, just before the scheduled session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the expanded parliament to be formed after general elections in May.

"Regardless of all significant changes made to the bill, we are worried that the bill will only justify the government in preventing the people from holding demonstrations and protests before and during the MPR General Session," PAN secretary-general Faisal Basri told

the parliamentary committee on Thursday.

A speaker from the Democratic Peoples Party (PRD) joined PAN in also urging the parliament to annul the 1959 emergency law, used to declare martial law in East Timor.

Mass demonstrations are expected to mark the opening of the MPR because of anger over Habibie's handling of East Timor, his failure to resolve corruption allegations against Suharto, and Habibie's own involvement in the Bank Bali corruption scandal.

On Thursday, Wiranto warned that the prolonged disputes among the political elite could be a source of violence at the MPR session. "Many media have made various predictions about the session, but for me it is obvious that political factors will incite violence," he said.

Earlier, General Widodo, the army deputy commander, suggested postponing the MPR meeting, which is scheduled from October 1 to 3, with a second session from November 1 to 10. Widodo said the MPR should be delayed until the Bank Bali scandal was settled. Widodo's comment, combined with news of a World Bank-IMF delay in disbursing funds to Indonesia, caused heavy selling on the Jakarta Stock Exchange on Tuesday.

Habibie's already shaky administration has been further discredited by the Bank Bali affair, probably ending any chance that Habibie had of formally clinging to office when the MPR votes for a president for the next five years. The scandal centres on the Bank's transfer of 546 billion rupiah to a Golkar Party-controlled private company, PT Era Giat Prima. Some of the funds were allegedly used to bankroll Habibie's presidential campaign.

Through the security bill and other means, Wiranto appears to be positioning himself to dominate the next administration, whether as president or vice president.

Some commentators have cautioned, however, that any move to delay the MPR could fuel unrest. Legal expert, Mohammad Mahfud from the Indonesian Islamic University said: "Waves of protest will mount as people are anxious to hear Habibie's accountability speech in the session."



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