

Fighting in the Malukus heightens tensions across Indonesia and within the Wahid cabinet

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Continued intense fighting between Christian and Muslim groups in the Indonesian provinces of Maluku and North Maluku is fueling religious antagonisms in other parts of the archipelago and threatens to open up divisions within the fragile “national unity” government of President Abdurrahman Wahid.

Speakers at a large rally in the capital of Jakarta on Friday threatened to call for a holy war or “jihad” to defend Muslims in the Malukus unless the government ends the recent fighting that has cost hundreds of lives. The demonstration, organised by Islamic groups and parties, was variously estimated at between 50,000 and 300,000. One large banner read “Tolerance is nonsense, slaughter Christians”.

Husain Umair, chairman of the Muslim Committee for World Solidarity, blamed Christian officers in the army for trying to “Christianise Indonesia”. He called for three million Muslims to be sent to Ambon (in the Malukus) for a holy war if military personnel were not replaced. Another speaker warned that militia would be dispatched to the area in a month if the killing of Muslims was not stopped. Hamzah Haz, leader of the Islamic United Development Party (PPP) said it was time for a military emergency to be declared and for Muslim parties to unite.

The rally puts pressure on the Wahid government to find some means of ending the fighting, which began last January but has greatly intensified over the last two weeks. According to the police, more than 700 have been killed over the last week or so but unofficial estimates put the figure as high as 2,000. The human rights group Kontras said last Thursday that more than 4,000 people had died on Halmahera island since August. About 17,500 refugees have fled Halmahera island to neighbouring Ternate island.

Over the last year, more than 1,700 people have been

killed, 2,300 injured and over 8,500 buildings burned or destroyed. Large sections of Ambon city, the capital of Maluku Province, have been laid waste. What remains is divided along religious lines and patrolled by militia groups. Other towns and villages have been completely razed. An estimated 200,000 people out of a population of two million have fled or been displaced.

The latest round of fighting was triggered by a traffic accident in Ambon. A Christian bus driver ran over a Muslim child setting off a series of reprisals, including the destruction of Ambon's oldest church. The violence rapidly escalated and spread to other parts of the Malukus, in particular the predominantly Christian Halmahera island where many of the recent deaths have taken place.

Underlying the sharp tensions in the Malukus are longstanding religious enmities that have been intensified by Indonesia's economic crisis over the last two years. The Malukus, formerly known as the Spice Islands, were one of the areas of Indonesia longest under Dutch colonial rule. In 1950, after independence, the largely Christian ruling elites made an abortive attempt to form their own Republic of the South Moluccas (RMS), which was quickly crushed by Indonesian troops. Many Ambonese Christians fled to the Netherlands where a self-styled government-in-exile still exists.

Over the last 50 years, the position of the Christian elites has increasingly been eroded, firstly by the influx of mainly Muslim immigrants from the Sulawesi, and secondly, in the 1990s, by the Suharto regime's policies of favouring Muslims over Christians for civil service jobs. Rivalry over business interests and political positions, exacerbated by the impact of the economic crisis, has created the atmosphere of deep suspicion and hostility, which is being exploited by the ruling class both locally and nationally to further their own interests. Accusations

of bias by the largely Muslim army are countered with arguments that the local police force is favouring the Christian community.

According to some commentators, the TNI leadership has encouraged the violence, or is at least exploiting it, to strengthen their hand in an increasingly open feud within the government. The army has an estimated 6,500 troops in the region and has called for the declaration of a state of emergency in the Maluku and also in Aceh in northern Sumatra to suppress the secessionist “Free Aceh” movement. Wahid has so far refused, prompting rather open hints by the military that it would assume power in the event that government policies failed. Just last week, TNI spokesman Major-General Sudradjat argued that the Armed Forces should give their loyalty to the people and the state, but not automatically to the president.

An article in the latest issue of *AsiaWeek* speculated that the sharp rise in violence in Ambon is connected to a power struggle within the government. “There is suspicion that elements of the Indonesian military are involved in the unrest. Police sweeping operations have netted not only homemade firearms and machetes, but also French-made assault rifles and grenades, which are only available through the army. It may well be that disgruntled members of the military are provoking the riots in order to weaken President Wahid's position.

“The relationship between the government and the army has been uneasy lately, as typified by the souring relations between Wahid and Gen. Wiranto, formerly the armed forces chief, now the coordinating minister for security and political affairs. Wahid has pursued the investigation of the military's role in East Timor's violence last fall, and several top figures have been questioned, including Wiranto. Many inside the army are said to be deeply unhappy at the probe and at the new democratic climate in which the soldiers are being portrayed as human rights abusing brutes. According to intelligence sources, the army is now determined to swing the balance of power back in its favor. The Maluku unrest, they say, is an effort to distract the attention of the navy and the marines, who are Wahid's allies, leaving the army with a freer hand in Java and the national capital Jakarta.”

Rumours have been rife in Jakarta that Wahid has been considering a cabinet reshuffle in which Wiranto would be removed. Wiranto, and another key political powerbroker Golkar leader Akbar Tanjung, both of whom played central roles in the manoeuvres that led to Wahid winning the presidency, have publicly denied that any change to the cabinet was imminent. In spite of the fact

that martial law has not been imposed, Wiranto announced on January 5 that press coverage of the Maluku would be restricted.

The military appears to have garnered some support from another key political figure—the “reformer” Amien Rais, head of the National Mandate Party and People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) chairman, and one of the speakers at last Friday's rally. The previous day Rais had lashed out at the National Commission on Human Rights for turning a blind eye to the bloodshed. In a calculated appeal to the military, he accused the commission of spending too much time serving international interests with its investigation into atrocities in East Timor and the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI).

Wahid, who was chosen as president only last October, sits uneasily astride a precarious coalition of parties including the military, Golkar—the party of the Suharto regime, PAN, his own National Awakening Party and Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), all of which are represented in the cabinet. Wahid and Megawati, who is charged with the responsibility of resolving the Maluku crisis, visited Ambon in December. The failure to end the fighting will further heighten the pressure on both of them. At Friday's rally, calls were made for Megawati's sacking—“Mega—your silence is poison for Ambon,” one banner pointedly said.

The tensions within the government will only heighten should pressure mount for an international intervention. Christian leaders in the Maluku have called for the replacement of the army with an international force along the lines of the UN force in East Timor. The demand has received some support from the Netherlands where the Dutch Foreign Minister Yozias van Aartsen recently called for an international taskforce to be stationed in the Maluku and indicated that the Dutch government was willing to contribute to it. The Indonesian government has categorically opposed the suggestion.



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