As bomb blast kills 15 in Jakarta

Suharto fails to appear for corruption trial again

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Yesterday, for a second time, a court in South Jakarta attempted to begin the trial of former Indonesian military strongman Suharto on charges of corruption. The proceedings took place amid speculation that supporters of the ex-president were responsible for the car bomb blast that rocked the Jakarta Stock Exchange building on Wednesday, killing at least 15 people and seriously injuring another 26.

Not unexpectedly Suharto failed to appear in court. As at the previous hearing on August 31, his lawyers claimed that the 79-year-old was too sick to stand trial. A team of doctors employed by Suharto gave evidence that mild strokes have impaired the former president's sight, speech and mental functioning and that the tension of the trial could produce a heart attack.

Wrangling over Suharto's state of health could continue for weeks, if not months. Judge Lalu Mariyun, who heads the panel of five judges appointed by the South Jakarta District Court, called for a team of doctors from the health ministry, the Indonesian Doctors Association and three major universities to conduct a "comprehensive medical examination" for the next hearing. He also ordered the prosecution to produce Suharto in court on September 28.

For security reasons, the case is being heard in an improvised courtroom in the Agriculture Department. At the previous session, more than a thousand police ringed the building and a helicopter was available to ferry Suharto in. Following his failure to appear yesterday, clashes took place near Suharto's residence between police and student demonstrators, outraged at the kid-glove treatment afforded the aging dictator. Heavily-armed police fired tear gas and warning shots to break up the protest.

Suharto is charged with stealing $US570 million in state funds by funnelling money to seven tax-free charity foundations that he controlled and then into businesses run by family members and business associates. In 1995 he signed a decree ordering the government to transfer two percent of the total tax revenue paid by Indonesian companies into one of the foundations. In another decree he ordered state-owned banks to contribute a proportion of their revenues to two other foundations.

Lawyers have raised doubts that Suharto will be found guilty even if he is finally brought to the court. Under laws framed during Suharto's rule, corruption is hard to prove in court and the case may be construed simply as the mismanagement of state funds. Recent corruption cases, including that of Suharto's son Hutomo "Tommy" Mandalaputra, have all ended in acquittals.

The case against Suharto covers only a fraction of the Suharto family's wealth amassed over 32 years in power in collaboration with a network of business cronies. Last May, during the lead-up to the national elections, *Time* magazine published a cover story which claimed that "at least $73 billion passed through the family's hands between 1966 and last year".

Moreover there have been no official moves to investigate the systematic murder of an estimated half a million workers, peasants and Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) members instigated by Suharto and his generals in the wake of the 1965-66 US-backed military coup that brought him to power. Nor is Suharto being put on trial for the murder, torture and imprisonment of political opponents and the brutal suppression of separatist movements in Aceh, West Papua and East

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Timor during his three decades of rule.

The limited character of the trial reflects the precarious position of the government of President Abdurrahman Wahid. It is pressing ahead with the case both to appease widespread popular sentiment that Suharto be brought to account for the crimes of his dictatorship and to satisfy international investors that a definitive break has been made with the "cronyism" of the Suharto years. Having backed Suharto for decades as a key regional bulwark of anti-communism, in the 1990s the major powers and international financial institutions, such as the IMF, came to regard his grip over the economy as a major obstacle to foreign investment.

At the same time, however, Wahid only won the parliamentary vote for the presidency last year with the backing of the military and Golkar—the ruling party of the Suharto junta—and still rests heavily on their support. Investigations into Suharto's wealth threaten to open up a can of worms that could engulf business associates, generals, state officials and Golkar leaders.

As a result even Suharto's limited trial has aroused sharp opposition from layers who benefitted from his rule. Small groups of pro-Suharto supporters have held brief protests against the trial. On Wednesday about 100 people from the previously unknown "Peace Loving Communications Forum" demonstrated at the South Jakarta court with a 20-metre banner that read "Do not try Suharto, Suharto has given an immense service [to the nation]". Bystanders have been openly contemptuous of the demonstrations, shouting, "paid demonstrators" at the participants.

Wahid and Attorney-General Marzuki Darusman have both accused supporters of Suharto of responsibility for the explosion at the Jakarta Stock Exchange. "There is a perception that any time the government raises the pressure on Mr Suharto or any of his cronies, then these things happen in Jakarta or in the regions," Darusman said. "I think there are elements connected to the military establishment who make these incidents happen. Those bombings could only have been executed by experts."

No one has claimed responsibility for Wednesday's explosion or for the planting of other bombs in recent weeks. Police have detained five people for questioning over the latest blast and have said that it could be related to the trial but have released no details.

Nevertheless the coincidences are striking. A bomb exploded at the Attorney General's office on July 7, shortly after Suharto's son "Tommy" had been questioned in connection with corruption charges. The following day police defused a second bomb in the building and announced that forensic evidence suggested that the explosives were from the army.

Formal charges were laid against Suharto on August 3. The day before, a small bomb exploded in an unoccupied bus, less than 300 metres from the courtroom. Jakarta's chief detective Colonel Hair Mantilla said at the time: "It is an act of terror to intimidate people before the trial starts."

Following the latest bombing, the Indonesian rupiah fell sharply to 9,000 to the US dollar. Trading was suspended at the stock exchange, where share values have plummetted in recent months. Whether supporters of Suharto were responsible for the blast or not, it highlights sharp divisions in ruling circles in Jakarta and deepening political instability in the country as a whole.

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