

Amid power struggle in Jakarta

# Indonesian security forces fail to block independence rally in Aceh

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Despite concerted intimidation and obstruction by Indonesian security forces, tens of thousands of people took part in a two-day rally in Banda Aceh last weekend to demand a UN-supervised referendum on the future of the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra. Estimates put the numbers involved at between 30,000 and 100,000, significantly less than a huge rally in November last year attended by up to a million people.

Heavily armed police and troops set up roadblocks on the main routes into the provincial capital in order to prevent people from joining the rally. According to a statement issued by the Information Centre on Aceh Referendum (SIRA): "The troops ordered trucks carrying hundreds to turn back. They pointed their guns... after the orders were ignored."

At least 25 people were killed in clashes with the military over the four days up to Sunday, when another six bodies were discovered in the eastern part of the region. Most of the dead were civilians shot by security forces. In Banda Aceh itself, the military patrolled streets in armoured vehicles and conducted random identification checks. Last Friday police raided the offices of the SIRA-RAKAN Secretariat, the rally organisers, and arrested three people.

The show of military strength in Aceh took place in spite of a ceasefire signed in May and renewed in September between the government and the secessionist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) that has been waging a guerrilla war for a separate Islamic state of Aceh since the late 1970s.

The army is continuing to use the same ruthless counter-insurgency methods carried out under the Suharto regime. An article in the *New York Times* on November 11 described a recent incident in the village of Cot Baroh. "[H]eavily armed troops descended on the local café searching for pro-independence guerrillas. The troops herded the men into a truck and sped away. A few days later the mutilated bodies of 10 of the men were found strewn along ravines and river banks."

At least 5,000 people have been killed in the conflict since 1976 and many more have been maimed and left homeless. The truce has not halted the fighting which has claimed another 227 lives, mostly civilians, over the last five months. According to a report released by the Aceh Forum for Human Rights Concerns

in early October, 95 people died, 40 were kidnapped and hundreds arrested in the three weeks following the renewal of the ceasefire.

Sharp divisions exist in Jakarta over policy toward separatist movements in Aceh and other provinces. On November 10, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid publicly lashed out at the military, blaming rogue soldiers for stirring up trouble in Aceh ahead of last weekend's rally. "There were shootings a few days ago in Aceh. And there are still people wearing official TNI [army] uniforms wandering around there. They were once soldiers but now they are making a mess," he said.

Wahid has been attempting to undercut the separatist movements in Aceh and Irian Jaya (West Papua) by offering to implement a special form of autonomy to the two provinces next year. One of the chief complaints of the GAM leadership has been that only a tiny fraction of the royalties derived from the area's substantial oil and natural gas reserves have been returned to the province. Wahid has offered to increase the share to 75 percent of the revenues and to permit the Aceh leaders to impose Islamic or Sharia law on the province.

Further negotiations were due to take place on November 9 between the government and GAM representatives in Geneva but the separatist organisation has postponed the talks citing continuing military repression in Aceh. Neither side is optimistic of reaching agreement. One of the GAM negotiators Tengku Kamaruzzaman commented to the press: "We've fought far too long, and too many people have died to accept promises of autonomy that will never be fulfilled."

Wahid has been under pressure from the military and the major political parties including Golkar, the Suharto-era political machine, and Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) to take a tougher line on separatist movements in Aceh and Irian Jaya. In the wake of the Australian-led UN intervention into East Timor and its secession from Indonesia, there are concerns in ruling circles in Jakarta that any concessions to demands for independence in Aceh and West Papua will fuel separatist sentiment in other resource-rich areas of the country, including Riau and East Kalimantan.

The debate over the future of Aceh is bound up with a broader power struggle as the Wahid administration, pushed on by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and major powers, implements an agenda of market reforms that undermines the economic monopolies and privileges enjoyed by sections of business, the military and the state apparatus under the Suharto regime. Wahid has come under attack over financial scandals and his alleged failure to defend Indonesia's national interests.

On October 25, Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) chairman Amien Rais marked the first anniversary of Wahid's selection as president by apologising "to the whole of the Indonesian people for having proposed [Wahid] for president". He promised to stay on as speaker in order to prepare for a special session of parliament to impeach the president. One of Rais's chief accusations was that Wahid was paving the way for the secession of another two provinces from Indonesia. "There is a risk that Indonesia will break up," Rais declared.

The criticisms were reiterated at an "informal" meeting of some 200 legislators convened by a senior PDI-P figure and former coordinating economics minister Kwik Kian Gie in South Jakarta last Saturday. Comments by former Golkar member Sutradara Gintings indicate the character of the discussions. "We are now in a governmentless situation and on the verge of collapse. It is useless to continue our efforts to build a democratic system while facing disintegration," he declared. The meeting urged Wahid to step down to make way for Megawati to become president. Rais offered himself as vice president.

No formal moves have begun to oust Wahid and Megawati is yet to declare her intentions publicly. But she has consistently pushed for tougher measures in relation to the separatist movements in Aceh and Irian Jaya. Last week she opposed any move that would weaken the Indonesian unitary state, including proposals for a federal structure, which she said "would be threatening to us as a nation."

Wahid is walking an increasingly fine line over Aceh and Irian Jaya. While critical of the military actions in Aceh over the last week, he also made clear that no other province would be permitted to follow East Timor. "I'm not worried about disintegration," he said. "In my opinion there will be no acts of secession because the unity of the nation remains strong. I believe that not a single province will break away from the unitary Republic of Indonesia. I will never tolerate those who try to do so."

Ridhwan Karim, the government's chief negotiator at the planned talks with GAM made clear that the Wahid regime was prepared to end the limited constraints placed on the military in Aceh if its proposals were not agreed to. "If they don't accept wide-ranging autonomy, which is the best we can offer, then we will have to handle things in our way. There will be repressive measures taken against them," he said.

But events in Aceh and Irian Jaya indicate that, in the midst

of the political turmoil surrounding Wahid, sections of the military are already pursuing tougher measures against pro-independence organisations.

In Irian Jaya, a series of sharp clashes have taken place between security forces and the separatist militia Satgas Papua or Papuan Taskforce over the last month. On October 6 at least 30 people died in the town of Wamena after Indonesian security forces attempted to pull down a Morning Star flag—the symbol of Papuan independence. Initially, police killed six Papuans then Satgas Papua militia led brutal revenge attacks on Indonesian settlers, killing 24 people, including women and children.

On November 4, police shot dead three pro-independence supporters in the town of Merauke and seriously injured six others. According to police, they were members of a group who had been rounded up the previous day for "causing unrest" and had been shot while trying to escape. Three days later, on November 7, police in the provincial capital of Jayapura arrested Satgas Papua leader Alex Baransano and two of his supporters on charges of extortion, provoking protests from his supporters.

According to a statement published by the Jayapura-based Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy (ELS-HAM) last month, the Indonesian security forces have been bringing in thousands of troops, including special forces units from Kostrad and Kopassus, backed by tanks and warplanes.

The provocative actions of the security forces in Aceh and West Papua are connected to the ongoing political conflict in Jakarta. Sections of the military top brass are bitterly opposed to Wahid and see in the continuing instability in these provinces and elsewhere the opportunity to further undermine the position of the president and strengthen the hand of those seeking to oust him.



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