

Bomb blasts in Indonesia: a sign of escalating political instability

Peter Symonds
3 January 2001

A series of bomb blasts at churches in Jakarta and other cities across Indonesia on Christmas Eve underscores the country's political fragility and the tenuous character of President Abdurrahman Wahid's grip on power.

At least 15 people died and dozens were injured in the attacks aimed at Indonesia's Christian minority. According to police, 18 bombs were placed in eight cities. Some were found and defused. Others went off, all around the same time, indicating a co-ordinated campaign of terror.

Two people were killed in a blast at the Santo Yosef church in East Jakarta. In Sukabumi, West Java, a woman, a young boy and a baby died when a bomb exploded in their car after they attended a church service. In Pekanbaru in the province of Riau, three church officials were killed in a bomb blast along with two police officers guarding the church.

In Mokokerto in East Java, a member of Banser, the youth group of the Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), was killed trying to take a bomb away from a church. Members of Banser and Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) voluntarily guarded churches in the city on Christmas Eve.

In Bandung, three people were killed when a bomb exploded in a small welding factory. Police claim that the workshop was being used to manufacture bombs and two of the survivors have been detained. No group has claimed responsibility. Both the Islamic extremist organisation, Laskar Jihad, notorious for having dispatched armed militia to the Malukus to fight Christian groups, and the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) have publicly denied any involvement.

President Wahid said that those involved in the bomb

blasts were aimed at destabilising his government. "They want to undermine the government, to instill fear and panic among the people so that the government cannot work. Several groups are out to create a chaotic situation," he said. While Wahid did not indicate who might be responsible for the latest blasts, in September he publicly accused former president Suharto's son Tommy of being behind the bombing of the Jakarta Stock Exchange.

Other groups went further. Indonesian Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI) chairman Henardi accused the military, the Suharto family, and its supporters. "Elements of the old political forces are the ones who have the most at stake in undermining the political situation towards democracy. And they are also the ones who have the foremost means to carry out such a despicable act," he said.

There is no direct evidence of the Suharto family's involvement in the blasts but the timing of earlier bombings appeared to coincide with the trial dates of Suharto on corruption charges. The attack on the stock exchange, for instance, came a day before the former military strongman was due to appear in court. The charges against Suharto were eventually dismissed on the basis that he was too sick to stand trial.

Moreover, the police have been unable to halt the bombings, fueling widespread speculation that sections of the security forces are directly involved in an attempt to undermine the government. Plenty of people have an axe to grind with Wahid.

Political conflicts are raging, not simply between the president and the old Suharto apparatus, but within the government itself—an unstable alliance of parties and factions that includes sections of the armed forces and Golkar, the ruling party during the Suharto era. Wahid has been heavily criticised for his erratic public

statements and partiality for overseas trips. He also faces the threat of impeachment proceedings in parliament over a financial scandal involving his former masseur.

On December 21, Golkar chairman Akbar Tandjung launched a broadside against Wahid describing his administration as ineffective and “starting to lose its legitimacy”. Asked if Golkar was setting a deadline for the government Akbar said that the party would wait until the annual parliamentary session in August before taking any action. But he added that Golkar would reject positions in the cabinet in the upcoming ministerial reshuffle unless the president changed his management style.

Sharp differences exist over the government's attitude towards separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua. Under pressure from Megawati and her allies to protect national unity, Wahid has been taking a tougher line. Last month he was forced into an embarrassing backdown after he twice ordered the release of arrested Papuan separatist leaders only to be ignored by the police.

Bowing to his opponents, Wahid, during a visit to West Papua over Christmas, affirmed that Papua Presidium chairman Theys Eluay would remain in custody “because of his actions against the law”. He also stated: “I will allow the people here to freely express their opinions but if there is any attempt to declare independence, I will take action against it. Irian Jaya must remain part of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia”

The divisions surfaced again on Tuesday when Administrative Reform Minister Ryass Rasyid, the architect of the government's decentralisation policy, resigned, saying he had “irreconcilable differences” with the president. The regional autonomy plan, which came into effect on January 1, is aimed at undercutting secessionist movements by giving greater financial and administrative powers to the provinces.

Rasyid, who several months ago was stripped of the responsibility for the plan's implementation, has criticised its potential for creating corruption and inefficiency. Similar criticisms have been made by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and Megawati.

Underlying this political instability lie growing concerns about the state of the Indonesian economy. Its

limited recovery since the Asian financial crisis has been largely dependent on exports that are threatened by any downturn in the US and Europe. The corporate sector is heavily indebted, to the tune of about \$US65 billion, the rupiah dropped by about 25 percent against the US dollar in late November, and share values have also been falling. Foreign investment has been stagnant.

The Wahid government is under pressure from the IMF to press ahead with a range of measures including bank restructuring and the privatisation of state-owned assets. Discussions with the IMF in Washington are due to go ahead in mid-January over the signing of another letter of intent which will undoubtedly set out a fresh series of demands.

An acerbic comment entitled “What a Mess!” in the *New York Times* several months ago spelled out the dissatisfaction in international ruling circles with the Wahid government over its failure to create the necessary political and economic climate for foreign investment. After categorising Indonesia as “a messy state” along with Russia and Pakistan, the writer went on:

“[I]n messy states you never know—when arms are sold, people murdered or payoffs demanded—whether this is by design of those ostensibly in charge or because no one is in charge. Indeed, we are going to have to retrain US diplomats to deal with messy states. The first course would consist of film of a US ambassador going to see a senior official of a messy state and asking him to do X. The official of the messy state agrees, gets up and pulls the lever the US ambassador wants, and the lever comes right off the wall. In messy states, levers get pulled but they come off in your hand.”

The article articulates the frustrations building up in Washington over the failure of Wahid to stabilise Indonesia following the downfall of Suharto and his evident lack of control over the state bureaucracy, the security forces and his own cabinet. As the latest spate of bombings indicates, the tensions within the ruling elites, far from lessening, are intensifying.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact