

A warning sign of a resurgent rightwing

Indonesian police and thugs break up anti-globalisation conference

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14 June 2001

A police raid on an anti-globalist conference in Jakarta last week is a provocative attack on democratic rights and marks a dangerous new turn in the political situation in Indonesia.

Forty people, including the main organisers and 32 international participants, were detained as dozens of heavily armed police broke up the meeting of about 100 people at the Sawangan Golf Inn on the outskirts of the capital on June 8. At least seven Indonesians were injured, including one who was hospitalised, after they were attacked by a gang of Islamic thugs armed with swords and sticks who accompanied the police.

The attack heralds a return to the police-state methods routinely employed by the Suharto dictatorship to intimidate and terrorise its political opponents. While sections of the Indonesian press have criticised the operation, neither President Abdurrahman Wahid nor Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri have condemned the police actions even though the authorities have found no evidence of wrongdoing by the organisers or the participants.

The organisers, including the chairman of the leftist Peoples Democratic Party (PRD) Budiman Sudjatmiko, were freed on June 8. The international participants along with a four-year-old child were released from police custody the following day but their passports were seized and they were compelled to attend interviews with police and immigration officials on Monday.

Police spokesman Senior Commander Anton Bachrul Alam claimed that the reason for the detentions was that by attending the conference the foreigners had misused their tourist visas. Citing a section of Indonesia's immigration law, he warned that those found in breach could be either deported, or face court with possible fines of up to 25 million rupiah (\$2,232) and a maximum jail term of five years.

But the decision to target the conference was clearly political. Even though the conference had been publicised for more than six months, neither the organisers nor those who attended were warned by police that they might be infringing the law. Moreover, the trumped-up character of the allegations was highlighted by the comments of a senior immigration official, Mursanuddin Gani, who denied his department had any prior knowledge of the raid or alleged immigration breaches.

Gani told the *Jakarta Post*: "The police could have contacted our office prior to the raid, but as far as I know there was no notification. We have undertaken a series of joint operations targetting foreigners who are believed to have breached immigration laws, but not in this instance." He pointed out that visitors to Indonesia for special events like conferences do not require special visas but can utilise the same visa-on-arrival facility as ordinary tourists.

With one exception, all the foreign participants had their passports returned and were told they were free to leave or remain in Indonesia as they wished. Most of the international participants were from Australia—a

number of them from the radical organisation, the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), which has close political relations with the PRD. The others came from New Zealand, Japan, United States, France, Belgium, Canada, England, Pakistan and Thailand and included Pierre Rousset, a French member of the European parliament and the author Eric Toussaint.

The police raid provoked sharp protests in Jakarta in the media and from human rights groups, reflecting concerns in sections of the middle class and the ruling elite that the methods of the Suharto dictatorship are coming back.

The *Jakarta Post*, in an editorial headed "Democracy in peril," drew the parallels with the Suharto junta. "The police and its thug friends have made a complete mockery of every value and principle that this nation has been struggling to establish in the last three years, along with the sacrifices that have gone with this struggle," it stated. "The day the nation turns a blind eye to its own law enforcement institutions breaking the law and the constitution is the day this nation kisses goodbye to democracy."

In Australia, the instinctive response of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which for three decades had the closest relations with the Suharto junta, was to side with the Indonesian police and solemnly warn about the dangers of breaching Indonesian immigration laws. Only some days later did the Australian embassy in Jakarta make a formal protest over the incident.

But as in Indonesia, there are also concerns in ruling circles in Australia. In a comment entitled "A chilling portent for liberty, as we fawn over Jakarta yet again," the *Sydney Morning Herald* warned: "A score of Australians have just been caught up in a nasty example of the repressive violence that could easily become the norm in Indonesia as Suharto-era forces regroup behind Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri's push for power."

While the raid last week was particularly provocative, there have been growing signs of a resurgence over the last year of anti-communist groups connected to Suharto's party Golkar, the military, the police and rightwing Islamic organisations. As a small but vocal group that attracted a following among layers of radicalised students in the 1990s for its anti-Suharto stance, the PRD has become a prime target.

Police spokesman Anton Bachrul Alam admitted to the *Jakarta Post* that the conference had been raided because of the involvement of the PRD. He alleged that PRD chairman Budiman was planning to disrupt the special session of Indonesia's Peoples Consultative Council (MPR) due to meet on August 1 to consider the impeachment and removal of Wahid. "We have been following Budiman for a long time. We have information that he plans to disrupt the special session by creating chaos in Jakarta," he said.

As the *Jakarta Post* noted in its editorial, "The police explanation sounded all too familiar to those who lived through the Suharto era. Then,

as now, security was always the overriding reason why basic democratic rights could be waived, or repressed.” If the police, and behind them the military, feel bold enough to act against a PRD conference on such a flimsy pretext, it indicates a marked shift in the political situation.

In the immediate aftermath of the ousting of Suharto in May 1998, the military and the state apparatus were on the defensive. Overnight generals, state bureaucrats and Golkar hacks were forced to change their political spots and proclaim themselves in favour of “reformasi” and democracy. Their ability to do so depended in large part on the complicity of “democrats” such as Wahid and Megawati, who always had close links to the military even under Suharto and opposed any significant challenge to their entrenched power.

Over the last three years, the military and Golkar have clawed their way back. Following national elections in 1999, they were in no position to openly vie for the presidency and threw their numbers in the MPR behind Wahid assuring his victory over Megawati. Their choice reflected concerns in ruling circles not over Megawati personally, but over the fact that the significant numbers of working people who voted for her party would expect an improvement in their social position. Wahid, with no significant social base of his own, did not present the same difficulties.

But within a matter of months, those who had backed Wahid began to shift their support behind Megawati, who in response to her defeat began actively courting the armed forces and Golkar. The hostility to Wahid grew as, under the pressure of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the major powers, his administration took a few timid steps towards prosecuting Suharto and his family, asserting civilian control over the military, selling off the assets of failed banks and negotiating with separatist groups in Aceh and West Papua. Under the banner of “defending the nation,” Megawati gathered the support of those connected to the Suharto apparatus whose business and political interests were threatened.

A turning point came in March last year when Wahid made two rather modest proposals aimed at boosting his democratic credentials. He called on the MPR to overturn its 1966 decree outlawing communism which had been the basis for Suharto's subsequent ban on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the military-orchestrated massacre of an estimated half a million PKI members, workers and peasants. The president also tentatively announced an investigation into the murders.

Wahid's suggestions provoked an immediate hostile reaction from Golkar, the military and Islamic groups led by MPR chairman Amien Rais. Any inquiry into the 1966 massacres, even the most limited, threatened to expose the responsibility of all of these groups, as well as other organisations including Wahid's own Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), for the genocide. They were just as antagonistic to any challenge to the crude anti-communism, which, under Suharto, became the state ideology promulgated throughout the media and educational institutions.

The first calls for Wahid to be impeached were made by rightwing Islamic parties over this issue. In April last year, chairman of the Crescent and Star Party, Achmad Sumargono, bluntly warned that if the ban was lifted then “communism will grow robustly”. Wahid's own policies would widen the gap between rich and poor, he said, and turn Indonesia into a fertile breeding ground for communism to flourish.

Such was the ferocity of the criticism that Wahid was left weakly pleading for a hearing in the MPR. “It's allowable for anyone to request,” he said in May last year. “I am just asking, but the anger is explosive. They call me a traitor.” Incapable of mounting a campaign for popular support for democratic reform, Wahid abandoned his proposals soon after. A new pretext for impeaching Wahid was rapidly found, however—two corruption scandals involving the alleged misuse of state funds and a donation from the Sultan of Brunei.

Having garnered the support of the “democrat” Megawati as their new figurehead, Golkar and the military were increasingly emboldened. Last

December, with the vice-president's support, the police arrested a number of prominent separatist leaders in West Papua on charges of sedition and openly ignored Wahid's orders for them to be released. This year under considerable pressure from the army, the president gave the go-ahead for a military offensive against separatist guerillas in Aceh.

In February, the same rightwing coalition, with the backing of Megawati's party, initiated impeachment proceedings against Wahid, provoking angry protests among the president's supporters in East Java who attacked a number of Golkar offices. In response, Golkar chairman Akbar Tandjung singled out the PRD and called on the Justice Minister to institute a “review” into the party. While the PRD had been banned under Suharto and a number of its leading figures jailed, it was legalised after his fall and granted official recognition to stand in the 1999 elections. Tandjung implicitly called for the party to be outlawed again, saying “If the PRD's purpose and principles are no longer relevant to the country, then the PRD's existence must be questioned.”

In the immediate lead-up to last week's police raid, a number of openly anti-communist groups have been formed. In late April, the *Jakarta Post* reported “hundreds of people” signing up to Gepako [Anti-Communist Movement], part of a broader Anti-Communism Forum led by Islamic groups. Its leader Dandung Pardiman, secretary of Golkar's office in Yogyakarta, stated: “Our mission is to fight communism, Marxism and Leninism.”

In May, a group of people known as the Islam Youth Movement threatened to raid bookstores throughout the country on May 20, National Awakening Day, and seize “leftist books”. While parliament formally opposed the move by the rightwing zealots, the major bookstores did not wait for the deadline and removed anything regarded as contentious from their shelves. According to press reports, the police “helped” in the process by collecting the books for “safekeeping”.

The police operation last week underscores the dangers confronting workers, students and intellectuals in Indonesia as a result of the revival of extreme rightwing groups working hand in hand with the military and the police. The attack on the conference is a trial run for a broader crackdown on the struggles of workers and others that are already beginning to unfold in the midst of the country's deepening social crisis.

Even a brief review of the last three years reveals the culpability of the former opposition figures such as Megawati and Wahid in allowing the old Suharto apparatus to regain lost political ground. It also points to another danger: the opportunist politics of the PRD which has played a significant role in promoting the illusion among layers of radicalised youth that the so-called democrats could be pressured to carry out progressive measures.

When it was established in the 1990s, the PRD formed an alliance with Megawati and hailed her in glowing terms as a democrat, a reformer and an opponent of Suharto. The PRD only broke with Megawati when it became all too obvious that this “democrat” had teamed up with sections of the army, Golkar and the extreme rightwing. Far from drawing any political lessons from the experience, however, the PRD rapidly attempted to form another opportunist political alliance—this time with supporters of President Wahid.

An article in the DSP's *Green Left Weekly* in late January reported on a meeting between a PRD delegation led by its chairman Budiman with senior leaders of Wahid's Islamic organisation—Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—proposing a joint anti-Golkar campaign. No explanation was offered either in this or in any subsequent articles as to why the PRD has abruptly shifted its support from Megawati to Wahid or why the so-called reformer Megawati is collaborating with the forces of reaction.

The inveterate manoeuvrer Wahid is no more willing than Megawati of mobilising the masses against the growing threat from the right. The president's response to his impending impeachment is to seek the support of the military in declaring a state of emergency and dismissing

parliament.

Both the PRD and its Australian co-thinkers in the DSP repudiate an elementary truth of Marxism that has been verified by decades of history in Indonesia: the complete incapacity of any section of the ruling class in countries of a belated capitalist development to carry out even the most limited democratic reforms or to improve the social position of ordinary working people.

A genuine struggle against the resurgence of the military and extreme rightwing in Indonesia will only begin when more thoughtful layers of workers, students and intellectuals begin to recognise that the only social force that objectively has an interest in consistently fighting for democratic rights is the working class. For that to take place a political struggle is necessary against the various radical tendencies, such as the PRD, that seek to tie the working class to one or other section of the bourgeoisie.



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