

Jakarta expels foreign critics: a new attack on democratic rights

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Earlier this month the Indonesian government expelled the staff of the International Crisis Group (ICG), a Brussels-based thinktank that has been critical of the repressive activities of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), in Papua and Aceh in particular. This anti-democratic move was aimed not just at the ICG but at intimidating critics as the election campaign for the Indonesian presidency commenced.

The ICG's South East Asian director, Sidney Jones, was compelled to leave Indonesia on June 6, along with staff member Francesca Lawe-Davies, after the government refused to renew their work visas. Jones, a US citizen, formerly worked for the US-based Human Rights Watch and headed the ICG's office in Jakarta, which was established in 2000.

Jones and Lawe-Davies were compelled to leave after immigration officials delivered a notice to the ICG's office on June 1 stating they were in breach of immigration regulations. While the order gave no reasons, the expulsion took place after National Intelligence Agency (BIN) chief Ahmad Hendropriyono criticised the ICG at a parliamentary commission responsible for national security. He subsequently told the press that the ICG's reports "were not all true" and "damage the country's image".

Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda joined Hendropriyono in denouncing Jones and defending the expulsions. According to the *Australian* newspaper, Wirajuda told journalists on May 26 that "Indonesia has a right to expel whoever it considered disadvantages Indonesia." Megawati gave her seal of approval to the decision when she told a press conference on May 31 that the case had been carried out "according to government procedures".

In response to local and international criticism, the government has stepped up its attack on Jones and the ICG. On June 7, Hendropriyono was cited on the *Laksamana* website as saying that those in Indonesia who were defending Jones had been paid by her to do so. On the same day, the country's taxation director-general, Hadi Purnomo, declared that Jones had breached tax laws by failing to lodge

a tax return for 2003.

In a scene reminiscent of the Suharto era, a group of 100 "protesters" gathered outside the national parliament building, denouncing Jones and the ICG as "provocateurs" and calling for their permanent exclusion from the country. The protest was organised by two previously unknown organisations—the Alliance against Rotten NGOs and the Community Forum to Rescue the Nation. The Suharto junta was notorious for staging such "protests" using close supporters and thugs.

That such treatment should be meted out to the ICG is a further sign of the erosion of the limited democratic rights that were established in Indonesia following the fall of Suharto in 1998. While the ICG has identified instances of thuggery and corruption by the TNI, particularly in outlying provinces, its reports have always been very cautious politically and couched in terms of recommendations to Jakarta and various international bodies.

The ICG has high-level connections in the US and Europe and receives funding from a variety of governments and large corporations. Clearly, even its limited criticisms have now become intolerable to the military and the Megawati administration.

It is no accident that the decision was initiated by Hendropriyono, a former general who is closely associated with the Suharto dictatorship's repression. He spent two decades in the notorious Kopassus special forces, becoming its top intelligence officer specialising in "counterinsurgency". As a regional military commander in southern Sumatra, he was responsible for an attack on the village of Talangsari in 1989 in which heavily armed troops butchered more than 200 people, who were accused of harbouring Islamic fundamentalists.

Hendropriyono has a long association with Megawati, stretching back to the early 1990s, and is a member of the advisory board of her Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P). After the ouster of President Abdurrahman Wahid and the installation of Megawati in July 2001, Hendropriyono was appointed as the head of BIN, a cabinet-

level post that involves the coordination of all Indonesian intelligence agencies. He reports directly to Megawati.

In comments to the media on June 3, Hendropriyono made clear that the ICG was not the only target. He stated that 20 Indonesian and foreign-based non-government organisations (NGOs) were under surveillance but named only one other—the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy. The BIN chief also said a watch list had been established, which included Australian academic Max Lane, who has been critical of the role of the Indonesian military.

The ICG has been quite muted in its criticism of the expulsions. ICG president Gareth Evans attempted to portray the decision as an aberration rather than a serious attack on democratic rights. It was “a little bit of a last twitch of the dinosaur,” he said, “rather than any larger slide into authoritarianism in Indonesia”. Evans was Australian foreign minister under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, which enjoyed close relations with the Suharto junta in the 1980s and 1990s.

Hendropriyono, however, is quite explicit about the government’s agenda. In a none-too-subtle reference to the methods of the Suharto dictatorship, he told the press: “Should we find these people [the NGOs] are continuing to sell out their country, we may return to the old measures.” The very fact that only one of the 20 NGOs under surveillance has been named is an ominous warning to anyone who criticises government policy or the TNI’s activities.

In part, the timing of the expulsions is related to the presidential elections. Megawati is currently trailing in the polls behind the leading presidential contender—the Democratic Party’s Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a retired general and Megawati’s former security minister—by 11 percent to 40 percent. The branding of the ICG as a “threat to the nation” is in line with Megawati’s attempts to stir up nationalism to divert attention from the failure of her administration to address the pressing social needs of the masses.

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But the incident also reflects a far more dangerous trend: the reemergence of the Suharto-era military to political centre stage in Indonesia and the trampling on basic democratic rights. In its statement on the expulsions, Amnesty International noted that in 2003 alone 30 people who could be considered prisoners of conscience were jailed. These included newspaper editors, political leaders and other activists.

Amnesty stated that the most sensitive issue seemed to be reports on human rights abuses in Aceh and Papua. Megawati was responsible for the presidential decree which

imposed a state of emergency in Aceh in May 2003 and gave the green light to the military to launch a major crackdown against separatist rebels in the province, involving more than 40,000 soldiers and paramilitary police. Megawati’s decree sanctioned the muzzling of the press and summary detention. There is growing evidence of the widespread use of torture and summary executions by the military.

Far from the expulsions being “the last twitch of the dinosaur,” all the Suharto dictatorship’s methods are being revived—with the direct support of those, like Megawati, who were hailed in 1998 as “reformers” and “democrats” in the local and international press. All of this simply highlights the fact that no genuine democratic change took place following the fall of Suharto.

Under the pressure of a movement of workers, students and sections of the middle class, the military and its political wing Golkar were forced to make a tactical retreat. Suharto’s cronies were saved from the wrath of the masses and any accounting for their crimes by the so-called reformers—Megawati, Wahid and Amien Rais of the National Mandate Party.

As the protest movement was reined in, the military increasingly came to the fore. Megawati was installed as president in 2001 after Wahid fell out of favour with the military over his attempts to negotiate with separatist rebels in Aceh and Papua, and his tentative moves to ease the ban on the Indonesian Communist Party. The TNI top brass and Golkar played the key role in the protracted impeachment process that finally resulted in Wahid’s removal.

The ascendancy of the military is underscored by the fact that two of the three leading presidential candidates—Yudhoyono and Golkar’s former TNI chief Wiranto—are former Suharto-era generals. Both are implicated in the violent attacks on pro-independence supporters in East Timor in 1999 by militia groups, organised and assisted by the Indonesian military. The other main candidate in contention—Megawati—is collaborating with military in the current attacks on democratic rights.

The expulsion of the ICG staff is a clear warning that whoever wins the presidential election will further crack down on anti-government opposition and protests. Above all, these measures are directed against the working class and impoverished masses, whose living standards have continued to deteriorate since the fall of Suharto.



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