

This week in history: June 5-11

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

4 June 2023

25 years ago: Indonesia's Habibie pledges to implement IMF austerity

The weekend of June 5, 1998, Indonesia's President B.J. Habibie addressed the media to reiterate his determination to cling to office until at least the end of 1999 and to carry out the tough measures called for by the \$43 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout package. Suharto's life-long protégé outlined a plan to introduce limited changes to the puppet Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) that year and to stage elections sometime before the end of the following year.

Above all, he emphasized his commitment to the IMF's program. Its measures, which included scrapping price subsidies, privatizing state-run enterprises, and dismantling monopolies held by the Suharto family and its associates, were designed to boost the profit opportunities of the transnational banks and corporations at the expense of the Indonesian masses.

As Habibie spoke, there were indications of intensifying hostility to the regime in the working class. In Surabaya, the second largest city, up to 30,000 workers at a household appliance manufacturer went on strike the previous week for a 50 percent rise in pay and other benefits. Striking workers threw rocks and scuffled with anti-riot police who attempted to prevent them from marching to the provincial parliament.

In Jakarta, hundreds of government bus drivers went on strike to protest against corruption and to demand higher wages. The drivers only restarted services the following day after management promised them a 15 percent increase. That increase did little to compensate for soaring prices caused by the collapse of the currency, the rupiah. Emboldened by the ouster of Suharto the previous month, the drivers also revived wider demands, complaining about corruption in the state Jakarta Transportation Company.

Other protests called for the Suharto family to be placed on trial. In one demonstration at the national assembly, about 3,000 students and supporters of bourgeois opposition figure Megawati Sukarnoputri demanded that Suharto face trial for corruption. Some of the protesters carried banners proclaiming: "Reject Habibie, take Suharto to court," while others called for a special session of the MPR to convene new elections. The protest temporarily blocked traffic on the main road to the airport.

The demonstration went ahead despite demands by armed forces

chief General Wiranto for people to respect Suharto and restrict calls for reform. Hundreds of troops were stationed inside the parliament, keeping the compound gates closed and denying protesters access to the building.

50 years ago: Franco appoints confidant as prime minister of Spain

On June 9, 1973, Spanish dictator Francisco Franco appointed his confidant Luis Carrero Blanco as prime minister. While Franco would formally remain the head of the Spanish state, by 1973 he was 80 years old and in poor health and had already stepped back from the daily management of the military regime that ruled Spain.

Carrero Blanco, a viciously right-wing Franco loyalist, had served as deputy prime minister to Franco since 1967. By the time he became prime minister he had already assumed most of the duties that Franco was no longer capable of performing. Carrero Blanco had served Franco since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, when as a high ranking naval officer he gained a reputation for fierce anti-communism.

Francisco's decision to appoint Carrero Blanco was an attempt to shore up his regime, which was beginning to collapse. The Spanish regime sought to address their crisis differently than in Greece, where the week prior the junta leader Georgios Papadopoulos had announced the formal establishment of a republic, ousting the exiled king, hoping that by promising token "liberalizations" the regime could placate the masses of workers who were coming into open struggle against military rule.

The Francoists had no intention of providing any democratic process to the population. Instead, they looked to refresh their authoritarian measures and prepare the population for the re-establishment of the monarchy.

Francisco had chosen Prince Juan Carlos, one of the remaining members of the Spanish royal family, to replace him as head of state and become King of Spain after his death. To make this ascension possible, Franco needed the government to be run by someone who would not make any concessions to the working class.

Carrero Blanco had proven himself to fill this reactionary role by his leadership in suppressing strikes and other uprisings among the

Spanish population, particularly against the Basque nationalists. In a national address after suppressing protests in 1968, Carrero Blanco said he would, “let nobody, neither from outside nor from the inside, harbor the slightest hope of being able to alter our institutional system in any aspect.”

Deeply hated by the masses of the Spanish population, Carrero Blanco’s rule would last only six months. On December 20, 1973, a member of the Basque nationalist paramilitary organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) assassinated him in a bombing in Madrid.

75 years ago: Israeli forces defeated at Nitzanim

On June 7, 1947, an Egyptian offensive targeting the city of Nitzanim rapidly broke through, with its army overwhelming Zionist forces associated with the newly proclaimed state of Israel within 24 hours.

The battle occurred in the early stages of the Arab-Israeli War, triggered by the declaration of an Israeli state the previous month. That declaration had been issued with the support of the US and the other major powers, coinciding with the end of a British mandate over Palestine. The Arab states, viewing a Jewish state in Arab-majority Palestine as a colonial-settler regime, and fearful it would become an imperialist beachhead targeting them, responded with a joint declaration of war.

The United Nations, which had endorsed the reactionary ethno-communist partition of Palestine with the support of both the United States and the Soviet Union, called several ceasefires in the initial stages of the Arab-Israeli War, above all aimed at providing the new imperialist-backed Zionist state with a fig leaf of legitimacy.

Despite these maneuvers, the Egyptian army pressed ahead with an offensive against Israeli positions in Nitzanim, now in southern Israel. Beginning late on June 6, Egyptian forces bombarded Zionist forces guarding the city with artillery and aerial strikes, followed by the entrance of armored and infantry divisions.

Zionist forces defending the city would twice retreat to secondary positions in response to the onslaught. But these maneuvers had no substantive consequences and Egypt would secure control of the city late on June 7. The battle henceforth would be for control not of the city, won by Egypt, but of a strategic hill nearby, which was captured by the Arab army on June 10.

The battle was notable not only for its immediate consequences. Israel viewed the loss of the city, so early in the war, as a serious blow, with right-wing Zionist forces demanding a major military build-up in response. That Egypt conducted the offensive on its own also pointed to the fact that there were substantial divisions among the Arab states, each of which was using the conflict with Israel to advance the interests of its own ruling class.

100 years ago: Military coup overthrows elected government in Bulgaria

On June 9, 1923, a group of army officers led by General Ivan Valkov overthrew the government of Aleksandar Stamboliyski, the

leader and chief theoretician of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU), a party that claimed to orient itself to the interests of the Bulgarian peasantry. Bulgaria’s population was at the time about 80 percent agricultural.

The country was deeply in debt to the Allies for war reparations—Bulgaria had participated in World War I with the Central Powers and shared in their defeat in 1918—and inflation was at record levels.

The right was increasingly afraid that Stamboliyski would abolish the monarchy of Tsar Boris II. Former army officers, organized in the Military League, were deeply hostile to his government. Not only had Stamboliyski himself opposed Bulgaria’s entry into World War I, but the election of BANU in 1919 represented a growing radicalization of the masses. As one historian noted, that election “registered massive popular anger with the system which had taken Bulgaria into the war and approval of those parties which had opposed it.”

In 1920, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) led a general strike in the cities, which BANU attempted to suppress. Stamboliyski then called elections to solidify his rule, and while one in three voters supported BANU, one in five supported the BKP.

The BANU government began to implement agrarian and legal reforms, and, while Stamboliyski renounced Bulgarian territorial claims in other countries, his government suppressed a Macedonian insurgency that was fighting the Bulgarians, the Yugoslavs, and the Greeks.

The capitalist opposition parties met with the Military League after BANU electoral reforms resulted in an overwhelming BANU majority in parliament in the April 1923 elections, and prepared Stamboliyski’s overthrow.

The Military League and its allies dismantled the BANU government quickly and captured Stamboliyski. On June 14 he was found dead, having been tortured first. The coup established the presidency of the far-right professor Aleksandar Tsankov, who was later to lead a brutal repression of the BKP.

But the immediate result of the coup was an armed uprising of the Bulgarian peasantry that was put down by the military because it was largely leaderless. In his book *Lessons of October* (1924) Leon Trotsky remarked that [the BKP] “let slip an exceptionally favorable moment for revolutionary action on account of fatalistic and doctrinaire considerations. (That moment was the rising of the peasants after the June coup of Tsankov).”



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