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The Post-Suharto Era

Preamble

The groundswell of forces demanding the resignation of President Suharto had proved to be irresistible. The student protest movement, at the forefront of the opposition to the regime, had been joined by many other social sectors, making it impossible for the old despot to maintain his overt grip on power. Throughout 1998 the students’ slogans had been unambiguous: ‘Reduce prices!’, ‘End corruption, collusion and cronyism!’, ‘Overhaul the political system!’, ‘Reform, reform, reform!’ and ‘Get rid of Suharto!’ The movement had spread spontaneously, with its own vital momentum, from city to city; but there appeared to be no centralised leadership. Local organisations (with names like ‘Action of Concern for the People’s Suffering’) were set up; but there seemed to be no detailed scheme that would shape events in the post-Suharto era. Workers, intellectuals, academics and other professionals were joining the students; but, beyond the slogans, there was no detailed agenda for the reshaping of a vast nation.¹

The role of the army (ABRI), as always, remained of crucial importance. To some extent the armed forces had ‘tolerated’ the student protests on the campuses, even if at a campus in Yogyakarta the troops forced their way into the compound to make the students take down their banners because they could be seen outside and were therefore ‘influencing public opinion’.² In Lampung General Dibyo Widodo, chief of police, informed the press that he had instructed the provisional police chiefs to hold talks with the students; in Bandar Lampung, South Sumatra, scores of students were taken into police custody, kicked, beaten, slashed with razor blades, and burned with cigarettes; thirteen were treated in hospital for their wounds;³ in Surabaya hundreds of students

G. Simons, *Indonesia: The Long Oppression*
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were chased by soldiers lashing out with rattan canes and wooden clubs.⁴ The Surabaya force, commanded by Suharto’s son-in-law Lieutenant-General Prabowo Subianto, then began firing at the students; in one estimate 50 students were injured and 15 arrested. A physician, Edi Bintoro, said that the troops had behaved like animals: ‘I don’t know what to say. I thought Indonesian people were not like that.’ The students were forced to flee the area. Said one: ‘It’s not that we are not prepared to become victims, but we do not want to die unnecessarily.’⁵ On the same day as the Surabaya outrage President Suharto was preparing to resign.

On 21 May 1998 Suharto, faced with mounting social chaos and having lost crucial domestic and international political support, announced that he was stepping down from office: ‘I have decided to declare that I have ceased to be the president of the Republic of Indonesia as of the moment I read this statement.’ There had been no choice. At long last the Indonesian parliament had pledged to impeach the president if he did not resign. A long and bloody reign had come to an end. The 1000 students who had slept overnight at parliament variously prayed, wept, screamed or sat dumb in disbelief. In Yogyakarta many students fulfilled a pledge to shave their heads as soon as Suharto resigned. The troops still patrolled Jakarta, but it seemed that the turmoil of the previous week would not now be repeated. A young soldier commented: ‘Of course I support reform. The students are right, but I don’t know what will happen next.’⁶ The Tapol Bulletin, organ of the Indonesia Human Rights Campaign, recorded the momentous event:

21 May 1998 will go down in world history as the day when the bloody and despotic rule of Suharto came to an end. His 32-year rule made him Asia’s longest ruler after World War II. He broke many other world records, as a mass killer and human rights violator. In 1965/66 he was responsible for the slaughter of at least half a million people and the incarceration of more than 1.2 million. He is also responsible for the deaths of 200,000 East Timorese, a third of the population, one of the worst acts of genocide this century.⁷

Suharto had gradually lost control of events. At the end many observers commented on the inevitability of his fall. Thus the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer declared: ‘I was not at all surprised. Suharto was no longer a force for determining the process of change. He was like a small stone that could be kicked around by the feet of the students.’⁸ Suharto’s last Cabinet had been stacked with his cronies, unlike his