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Indonesia: Suharto's Opposition

Although Indonesian President Suharto seems assured of reelection this March, the rising, more strident level of opposition and the government's recent adoption of harsh measures to blunt this dissent suggest that Suharto's support has reached a new low. It is unlikely that the President's opposition will decline after his anticipated reelection, and this could affect his ability to complete a third five-year term. Opposition groups, however, are limited by their own internal weaknesses and lack of military support. Nevertheless, should public disorder result because of their efforts, high military circles might begin to give serious consideration to replacing Suharto.

The most vocal and publicized opponents of Suharto are the students, who criticize him for his tolerance of corruption, increasing neglect of the country's basic economic and social needs, and refusal to delegate more power to civilians. Earlier, these students simply wanted Suharto to respond by making changes; recently, however, some have begun calling for his ouster. Students actively opposing Suharto, a minority of the total student population, generally compose three groups:

- Officially organized student councils, most notably those of the University of Indonesia in Jakarta, Gajah Mada University in Jogjakarta, and the Institute of Technology in Bandung. These groups transcend the various religious and ethnic divisions in the country, and apparently have been the prime movers of recent large-scale demonstrations.
- Unofficial student organizations which are divided along religious and ideological lines. Among these groups, the Muslim Islamic Student Union (HMI) is the least factionalized. It reportedly is receiving aid from the Moslem-dominated Unity Development Party (PPP) to finance anti-Suharto activities.

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- Underground student activists who distribute pamphlets critical of the government.

The government's closure last weekend of eight newspapers in Jakarta and the arrest of approximately 100 students suggest Suharto's increasing apprehension of the impact of the press and the students on the general populace. Although Suharto's moderate tendencies continue to prevail--many of the students have been released--continued student disruption and the accompanying decline in Suharto's prestige will probably lead to more hard-line actions.

A second, and perhaps potentially more dangerous opposition group, could develop in the devout Moslem community. Until now, Muslim opposition to Suharto has been limited to fanatic militant terrorist groups and the PPP, although PPP leaders have not been immune to blandishments of government posts. Suharto's insistence, however, on recognizing mysticism as an official religion may incite many otherwise nonextremist Muslims to take to the streets. Such an event, combined with further student demonstrations, would probably create sufficient public disorder to erode some support for Suharto within high military echelons. Suharto is reportedly trying to compromise on this issue.

Some well-known civilian and retired military leaders also are speaking out or working against Suharto:

- Sawito Kartowibono, a former government official who last year managed to obtain the signatures of the highly respected former Vice President Hatta and four influential religious leaders on a letter critical of the Suharto regime. The government has taken Sawito to court on charges of conspiracy, a bizarre event which has redounded to Suharto's disadvantage. The trial has exposed detailed allegations of corruption on the part of Mrs. Suharto.

- General Abdul Haris Nasution, the only senior general who survived the slaughter of generals during the abortive Communist coup of 1965.

[REDACTED] The government has so far tolerated Nasution because

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of his stature and apparent reluctance to participate in any opposition movement espousing the use of force.

- Major General Ishak Juarsa, a former Chief of Staff of the Siliwangi Division who was recalled last year from his post as Ambassador to Yugoslavia on charges of publicly expressing discontent with the government.

- Former Jakarta mayor Ali Sadikin, a popular figure in the capital who is working with the HMI to publish economic reports embarrassing to the government.

Since none of these figures control troops, they do not directly threaten Suharto's position. Nevertheless, he is probably concerned that their efforts might encourage dissent among middle-echelon Army officers, Suharto's principal support.

Suharto's future thus depends ultimately on whether he can maintain sufficient public order to command the confidence of the military.

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