

TEN DAYS IN JAKARTA: EVENTS SURROUNDING THE RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENT SUHARTO

This eye-witness account by Greg Poulgrain was first published in Dutch in *De Groene Amsterdammer* 24th June 1998.

When I arrived at Soekarno-Hatta airport after midnight on 14 May, violence, flames and rioting had already claimed 2000 victims, most of whom were described as ‘looters’. The pandemonium that engulfed Jakarta also sparked unprecedented domestic and international political pressure which led to President Suharto's resignation one week later.

The official death toll in the Jakarta riots is now given as 1200 but newspapers at that time reported a death toll exceeding 4000 persons. This seems a more accurate estimate considering 40 shopping centres were included in the 5000 buildings listed as destroyed as mostly these shopping centres were set aflame while still being looted. When a death toll of 700 victims was given for just two supermarkets which I visited, large multi-level structures reduced to ash, the official total of 1200 victims for the entire period of political upheaval and social turmoil seems to be a deliberate understatement, a distortion of reality. Welcome to Jakarta...

Only four other passengers and thirteen Garuda flight attendants were on the plane when I arrived, the last flight before the airport was closed because of the violence. All the others were Jakarta residents so my deliberate arrival, at a time when thousands at the airport were seeking flights out, left the immigration officer nonplussed. He suggested I should first walk outside the terminal, take a look and come back for a visa if I wanted to stay. This I did. He stamped my passport dutifully, but incredulously, commenting that I was the last person to enter Jakarta.

The terminal was crowded with persons attempting to flee from the rampaging crowds in Jakarta and from similar but less violent demonstrations in several other major cities in Java and Sumatra. Thousands of ethnic Chinese had converged on the international airport only to find that all flights out - and in - were now cancelled. Also sleeping on the floor, here and there, were some western businessmen and tourists. Truckloads of troops arrived during the night to secure the airport. All services were closed. Taxis and buses had stopped. All government offices, schools and businesses in Jakarta, it was announced officially, would be closed for three days until order was restored. At first light on Friday morning I arranged a ride out of the airport.

Nearby in the industrial area of Cengkareng, many factories were already destroyed. This area in north-west Jakarta contained only a portion of the four million unemployed in the capital city of twelve million inhabitants. Forced out of work by the ‘Asian monetary crisis’ (*Krisis Moneter* or *Krismon*), the unemployed were then pushed beyond the limit of endurance by the price rises in foodstuffs and fuel imposed by the International Monetary Fund's economic aid package.



Suharto signing the IMF package with Michel Camdessus, Managing Director and Chairman of the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund 1987-2000.

The human flotsam saw themselves as victims of the IMF demand for reform in the banking sector. This was typified by the closure of one bank under Suharto's third son, Hutomo (known as Tommy), which simply resurfaced in another form one week later, but the IMF was an invisible target. The anger of the 'little people' focused on their own ruling elite who seemed oblivious of the suffering caused by the increase in basic food prices.

The burnt-out shells of once grand edifices became more numerous the closer I got to Chinatown. The Dharmala Bank was gone, owned by a Chinese businessman. The Bimantara car-showroom for Hyundai, owned by Barnbang Trihatmodjo Suharto, was also gone. So too was Bank Lippo on Jalan Gajah Madah, owned by Riady who achieved notoriety by donating half a million dollars to assist in the re-election of President Clinton. Shops along the full length of Jalan Gajah Madah, a kilometre or two, were heavily damaged, as was the Bank of Central Asia (BCA), the majority of shares only recently sold to President Suharto's daughter, Tutut, by Southeast Asia's wealthiest tycoon, Liem Sioe Liong. Many BCA offices all over Jakarta were targeted. (In the week after the riots, all BCA branches were deluged by customers withdrawing their money, and BCA has now been taken over by Bank Indonesia.) The kampung behind the main thoroughfare, a mix of Chinese and pribumi (Indonesian), was not damaged but the access roads were blocked by members of the community armed with baseball bats, wooden clubs and iron pipes. The irony was that while 'main-street' Chinese were being targeted, poorer Chinese and local Indonesians were working together, only a few streets behind Jalan Gajah Madah. They told me that the destruction of certain buildings was determined by an 'X' marked on the front of the building and a well-organised group had swept through setting them aflame.

Government banks in this area were not touched, and the museum had survived without a scratch. The rioters were selective on Jalan Jayakarta too, Daihatsu and Bimantara car-showrooms were smashed irretrievably, rioters even going to the trouble of bringing the cars out into the street before destroying them, and the building. The personal residence of Liem Sioe Liong (Snr.) in Jalan Gunung Sahari had been torched.

In Southern Jakarta, some large shopping complexes had been razed and many persons had died inside. Similarly, the Goro shopping complex had claimed the lives of several hundred persons, and putrefaction was presenting a daunting task. A few days later I saw fifty ambulances carrying away the dead, three coffins in each vehicle. While they sped past, the small taxi I had hired was caught for a few minutes between an army tank in the front, which looked enormous from inside the taxi, and an armoured personnel carrier following closely at the rear. The sound of wailing ambulances faded, only to be overtaken by the deafening crunch of metal tracks on the road surface as the tank and the APC, also with tracks and full of troops, proceeded along the road with the taxi wedged almost insignificantly between the two.

In some areas of Jakarta there was evidence of total devastation yet other suburbs, where barriers prevented the flow of traffic, had not been hit. When I visited Kelapa Gading Permai on Sunday 17 May, I saw how the residents had blocked the roads using large tree trunks as a barricade, positioning them right across both lanes to limit access. All persons wanting to enter this suburb were closely scrutinised. Adult males from each household had been requested to volunteer for guard duty and there was a crowd of them at the barricades bustling with official purpose and keen to check a person's identification before allowing access. Predominantly populated by ethnic Chinese, this suburb had hastily convened a meeting of its prominent citizens when the rioting had begun a few days earlier. They decided to pay a large, undisclosed sum of money to persons in the Indonesian army as a means of buying protection from future marauding hordes. This payment worked in more than one way. An agreement was reached for two battalions of Kostrad troops and thirteen army tanks to be used to protect Kelapa Gading for two weeks until 28 May, so the army was seen to be providing protection from those who had started the burning rampage. The payment perhaps worked even more directly than this because some already suspected a section of the Indonesian Armed Forces (referred to as ABRI) was involved in starting the riots. On Monday, 18th May, I was able to contact a person from the army, a 'volunteer' brought from Bandung to Jakarta, who had been involved in helping to start the riots and his explanation of the activity he carried out - not in uniform but wearing an armband for identification - is included below.

President Suharto had departed for Cairo on 9 May to attend a 'Group of 15' meeting involving countries linked with the former Non-aligned Movement in which Indonesia (under Sukarno) had a leading role. At a meeting between top-level army commanders soon after Suharto's departure, a conflict of opinion was evident between ABRI Chief, General Wiranto and the commander of the Strategic Reserve (Kostrad), General Prabowo Subianto. The son-in-law of the president, Prabowo had assumed the same command that Suharto himself once held before ousting President Sukarno. Prabowo was not openly critical of Wiranto whose policy suggested a less than head-on confrontation with Indonesia's pro-democracy movement, but (at times claiming that he was acting directly under the aegis of the president) Prabowo was increasingly prone to pursuing his own operations contrary to Wiranto.

The participation of Prabowo in the kidnapping and detention of student political activists, using as his henchmen a group of motor-cycle non-uniformed thugs and assassins, was reportedly confirmed by one activist who was released after public outcry at the brazen kidnapping. The activist was blindfolded throughout his ordeal, which included torture by electric shock, but recognized the voice of Prabowo at the place of detention. In early May,

these henchmen were the most likely culprits in the assassination in Yogyakarta of a young activist, a student who was still attending high school, shot by two persons riding a motorcycle. Such tactics were intended to instil terror as a means of reducing attendance at pro-democracy demonstrations. This group may be a strong-arm faction of the Pemuda Panca-sila which Prabowo had gathered around him from the time when he was in charge of Intelligence in East Timor. Prabowo's direct involvement in the Dili massacre has been explained by observers in Jakarta as a tactic to discredit General Sintong Panjaitan who had the Udayana Command covering East Timor, and who was prevented as a result of the massacre from becoming ABRI Chief of Staff. The same callous disregard for human lives as no more than sacrificial pawns in his own political ascendancy were tactics Prabowo employed at the Trisakti campus on 12 May.

In a pro-democracy demonstration planned for Tuesday 12 May, a handful of students first began to gather at Trisakti on Monday and some stayed overnight. In a report not yet confirmed, henchmen came onto the campus during the early hours of the morning and the small group of students sleeping on the campus were kidnapped. According to reports within student circles in Jakarta, all those who stayed overnight on Trisakti have disappeared. But this event was overtaken by the tragedy which occurred on the Tuesday when snipers (with live bullets) and security police (reportedly with plastic bullets) shot into the crowded campus, turning into mayhem what had been a peaceful demonstration. As it happened, a CNN television team in a helicopter overhead caught on camera the snipers shooting students. ABRI security forces had been surrounding Trisakti for hours while the pro-democracy demonstration proceeded without incident. Official figures state that four students were killed, but the bloody account at Sumber Waras Hospital indicated more than four and possibly eleven students were killed. Nevertheless, the four official deaths are now part of the accepted history. The pro-democracy movement regarded these dead students as martyrs, adding a determination to their demands for reform that came with this 'red badge of courage'. At the burial service the next day, they were described as 'heroes of reform'. The political tension and public emotion at the death of the students proved to be so explosive a mixture that when rioting started on the Wednesday it quickly spread throughout Jakarta.

For the students, their call to action began at 3 a.m. on Wednesday 13 May, when the student electronic communication network began humming with activity. This was the first time I had seen a student network so well linked, co-ordinated and utilising electronic technology to convey basic messages. Students were requested to prepare for a demonstration that Wednesday after the burial of the four Trisakti students. The scene was set for action, but not only by the students. Prabowo also decided to make a move, repeating a formula to provoke civil unrest that had been implemented last year in various localities including Tasikmalaya, Situbondo, Rengasdengklok and Medan where the previous week some rioting had led to fires. In May 1998, it was Prabowo's intention to create no more than a small disturbance, then to step in as the 'saviour of the moment'. He was ready to use force to suppress the rioters in order to show that pro-democracy demonstrations led to violence, and that the continued presence of the army was required to maintain law and order.

The riots began in Jakarta, Surabaya and several other cities in Java, and in Palembang in Sumatra, on the Wednesday. In each instance, blending in with demonstrators but with their actual motivation diametrically opposed, was a small group of men wearing armbands for identification. They started their planned action with an anti-Chinese focus, smashing windows of shops and exhorting passers-by to help themselves to the goods. In the first vital hours, because there was no sign of official intervention, no police, no army, the rioting

gathered momentum. (In stark contrast to this lack of official response which had clearly been pre-arranged, pro-democracy rallies such as those which occurred in Bandung the previous month, had ABRI on site in minutes.) The riot-leaders with armbands then piled up old car-tyres which they had ready, doused them with petrol and set them alight. Still there was no sign of the police. The looting became wilder. Large numbers of people were now entering the supermarkets and stores to take whatever they could carry. The looting had started with foodstuffs but soon reached the stage where television sets, balanced on the head of a looter, were disappearing down the road. Many in the general population had been reluctant to participate in the looting at first, but now after an hour or two they had joined in and people were streaming out of the larger supermarkets with anything they could carry. Suddenly, the men wearing armbands changed tack and using the tyres that had been feeding the flames they now threw the fire into the smashed front windows and set the buildings alight. This same pattern was followed in several areas of Jakarta, particularly outside multi-level supermarkets where there was an abundance of portable goods. Many hundreds of 'looters' were consumed in the flames.

Only in Jakarta did the riots quickly mushroom out of control. Krismon and the IMF intervention which led to massive price increases in fuel and food, particularly cooking oil and flour, precipitated such a crisis that half of the population of Java suddenly were below the poverty line. Suffering the most were Jakarta's urban poor. Millions joined in the rioting, venting their spleen at the high prices, and snatching food while it was available. Larger items like lounge-room sofas and white goods were removed only when all the food had disappeared. The Trisakti burials, the months of student demonstrations, the anger of unemployed workers and the emotion of the general public all contributed to a climate of desperate action, but nobody - not even Prabowo - anticipated the explosion of rioting that occurred on Wednesday night and Thursday.

At 4 a.m. on Friday morning, Suharto returned from Cairo, escorted back to the palace by tanks and armoured cars. His first reaction was to deny an earlier report that he was willing to step down as president. In urging ABRI to crush the pro-democracy opposition calling for his removal from power, he was effectively confirming that his policy and Prabowo's were the same. General Wiranto had seen the devastation in Jakarta and was more fully aware of the level of public opposition to Suharto's continued reign and he urged the president to reconsider his position. ABRI's misgivings about the president's choice of B.J. Habibie as Vice-President were expressed two months before when Suharto assumed his seventh term of office. With pro-democracy spokespersons (from groups and parties such as Pijar and Megawati's PDI) openly demanding resignation and political reform, even presenting the names of a number of prominent persons to serve in a future cabinet, the likelihood of Habibie assuming the top position became an unforeseen option for Suharto. However, the constitutional legality of handing over to his vice-president was debatable, as such a political manoeuvre should proceed only through and with the approval of the parliament. Moreover, such a handover was intended only in the context of the president resigning from ill-health, not when forced out of office by public demand two months after installing himself for a seventh term.

By Monday 18 May, the focus of protest shifted to the parliament building (MPR). Students had settled outside on the lawns and inside the buildings, some even clambering up onto the roof, calling for reform and demanding Suharto's resignation. In the wake of the riots, pro-democracy issues were catapulted into the political arena as never before. But there was a real possibility that a Prabowo-inspired solution to end student protest might yet occur: this would

entail the use of force against the students and given the high level of tension it seemed likely that more deaths would be the outcome if such an approach was taken. Criticism from Washington was directed towards the use of the army for such a purpose, quelling peaceful protest in support of democratic reform. If the army fulfils the wish of Suharto only, it was added, then they are failing in their stated dual-role in Indonesian society, referring to ABRI's security and political functions which has kept Suharto in power for thirty years at the cost of Indonesia's democratic freedom while maintaining regional stability during the Cold War.

US criticism was backed up by the presence of 10,000 troops on two US Navy vessels which had arrived in Jakarta's harbour, ostensibly to airlift any American citizens in the event of more civil unrest. It was becoming obvious to Jakarta observers that even Washington considered Suharto's time had come. In an unprecedented announcement, the House speaker, Harmoko, asked Suharto to resign to maintain national unity, but Wiranto countered (perhaps inspired more by his reluctance to accept Habibie) by commenting that Harmoko's statement was a personal opinion and did not represent parliamentary consensus. Parliament could not convene, it was claimed, because the students, more than 30,000 according to local newspaper reports, were occupying the grounds and buildings.

They had come from universities throughout Java and even from Kalimantan, Sumatra and Sulawesi. At night their numbers were reduced, but keeping up the pressure for democratic reform became a student-led crusade. Supplying the students with food required a massive logistical effort. On Tuesday 19 May, I joined a household that was involved in the preparation and supply of food and drinks to University of Indonesia students occupying the MPR. Lecturers and students worked together. At first, Kostrad units surrounding the parliamentary grounds were reluctant to permit food to be brought in because it would only sustain the protesters. However, other ABRI units on duty, specifically the Indonesian Marines wearing pink-coloured berets, adopted a more conciliatory approach. Prominent prodemocracy spokesperson, Ali Sadikin, a Marine commander two decades ago who became mayor of Jakarta, earned a great deal of public respect by being one of the 'Petition of Fifty' who criticized Suharto's continuous consolidation of power and business interests, not just sacrificing democratic rights but ruthlessly suppressing all political opposition behind the facade of 'the smiling president'. The students at the MPR, intent on remaining there throughout Wednesday night, did not realize they were the subject of the wrangling between Prabowo and Wiranto, but they fully realized they were at the forefront of Indonesia's quest for political reform which could not be achieved as long as Suharto remained president. His glib comment before leaving for Cairo had been that the students should go back to their classrooms and that he would consider introducing reform before the end of his current term of office.

Far sooner than expected, and far stronger, unrelenting domestic and international pressure calling for Suharto's resignation seemed to be leading inevitably towards that outcome. Even the Jakarta Stock Exchange on Jalan Sudirman not far from the MPR, conducted an internal vote. Support for the students was unanimous and all who were working in the Exchange resolved to march to the MPR to express their support openly on Wednesday. More students were arriving from all over Java, and some from other islands, in readiness for the massive rally planned for Wednesday at the MPR, but some who arrived informed the student leaders in Jakarta that bus loads were being stopped by ABRI in towns up to 100 kilometres from the capital. The intention was to restrict access to Jakarta to limit the number of student protesters.

At the same time, Amien Rais, leader of the Islamic group, Muhammadiyah, which encompassed mainly urban Muslim aspirations, planned to hold a rally in the historic Merdeka Square. Rais, who had publicly nominated himself for the position of president and had been outspoken in his criticism of Suharto's reluctance to resign, said that more than one million persons would attend. One week before the crisis, Amien Rais and about twenty other prominent critics, including Professor Soemitro Djojohadikusumo (Indonesia's best known economist and Prabowo's father) and Goenawan Mohamad (writer and editor of Tempo which was banned in 1994) had demanded Suharto step down. Following this very public demand, known as the MAR declaration (Majelis Areatan Rakyat -- the Mandate of the People), Suharto tried to have Rais arrested but the Prosecutor-General refused to follow the President's instruction.

Anticipating a huge protest rally, ABRI made a move at 3 a.m. on Wednesday morning, erecting barbwire barricades around the Square to prevent the planned rally. Rais cancelled the rally early the following morning, saying that he did not want bloodshed. Because troops moved in during the night also blocking off all main intersections and roads leading to it; the dapur umum (public kitchen) supplying food for the students at first had to use back-streets and lane ways. Even the Stock Exchange employees were prevented from getting to their workplace unless they walked a long distance and so they too were unable to march together to the MPR.

Daylight revealed a massive show of strength and apparent unity of ABRI forces, including Kostrad (the elite strategic command), the red-berets of Kopassus troops (Komando Pasukan Khusus, commandos), Marine troops and tanks, police units, members of the armoured force in tanks and armoured personnel carriers, and even units of the Air Force. They were strategically positioned to control all major roads leading to and surround the MPR. On this historic Wednesday, designated in the Indonesian calendar as the 'day of national awakening' in memory of the nationalist struggle that led to Indonesian independence from Dutch colonial rule, negotiations behind the scenes were already preparing for the resignation of Suharto.

The Prabowo-Wiranto rivalry came to a head on Wednesday night. According to a source close to Dutch embassy officials in Jakarta, Prabowo wanted to put an end to student protest and told Wiranto that he could achieve this in three hours. Perhaps because of Wiranto's own former connections with the Jakarta underworld which he made during his long terms of service in the capital, he was well aware of Prabowo's tendency to employ violence first and then let others shoulder the blame. That Wednesday night, when I was on the point of going to the MPR in the food-supply vehicle, I was told it would be too dangerous. This advice proved to be accurate, indicating to me that the source was closely monitoring the kaleidoscope of political factions in Jakarta, changing by the hour.

Troops moved into the MPR at about 2 a.m. to clear out the students. There were no serious injuries, although riot sticks were used at times, because a deal had been made that students would leave if their departure was supervised by the Marines, not the Kostrad. One factor that may have strengthened Wiranto's resolve to rein in Prabowo's head-on approach to dealing with political dissent was the timely announcement by US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, that Suharto should resign.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, continued student protest had helped to initiate the decision by a majority of Golkar representatives in the parliament to convene an extraordinary meeting

on the issue of Suharto's resignation. They were divided on whether or not Habibie should step into Suharto's shoes. On the advice of constitutional law expert Yusril Ihza Mahendra, bringing Suharto before the parliament would end in disgrace and impeachment, in which case Habibie too would be caught in the fallout. A more acceptable alternative, and the one eventually followed, was that the now inevitable resignation should be conducted at the palace, thereby avoiding the parliament (although this was clearly required by Article 9 in the Constitution.)

The reason given for using the palace was that the parliamentary building was filled with students. In fact, when the resignation took place at 9 a.m. on Thursday morning, 21 May, the MPR (the full complement of the Indonesian parliament) was not filled with students. They had been cleared in relatively peaceful fashion, under Wiranto's not Prabowo's supervision, about six hours earlier, and they returned to the building soon after the resignation because Habibie's 'reform cabinet' of 36 members contained 32 persons who were known to be closely allied with Suharto. When I visited the MPR on the night of the 21 May, Habibie's first day as Indonesia's third president, students were again in occupation.

Article 9 of the Constitution clearly states that the new president shall take his oath before parliament. The significance of this gesture is that ultimate authority does not rest in the will of the president, but in the will of the people. Bypassing parliament prevented the real possibility that former pro-Suharto sycophants who held seats might turn the tables against him and, by so doing, launch impeachment proceedings and so prevent Habibie too from taking office. Since 1988, around the time that General Benny Murdani fell out of favour with Suharto for criticizing unrestrained megalomania, Suharto has turned to Muslim groups for support and dutifully made his haj, thereby garnering further support. With Habibie, whose mother Suharto had known and whom he had helped as a teenage son from the time Habibie's father died, Suharto initiated in 1989 the group of Muslim Intellectuals known as ICMI. However, Abdurrahman Wahid (also known as Gus Dur, chairman of the Indonesia's largest and mainly rural oriented Islamic organization Nahdatul Ulama), never joined; and Amien Rais was recently excluded (for comments he made about Suharto's symbiotic relationship with the American mining company, Freeport, which operates the world's largest goldmine in Irian Jaya).

Mahendra and a small group of persons described as 'public figures' met with Suharto on 19 May, but immediately there was public outcry that these did not represent the pro-democracy forces in Indonesia. Gus Dur was present, but not Megawati who is recognized as one of the most popular pro-democracy figures in Indonesia. The group was disparagingly described as 'intellectuals and ulamas' and doubtless the option of Habibie taking over the presidential reins was discussed and a small-group consensus reached. Suharto had previously intimated an intention of 'stepping down to become a religious elder or holy-man' (lengser keprabon madeg pandito) on the occasion of his presidential re-nomination in October 1997 by the executive council of Golkar. He reiterated this intention on the 19 May 1998 in discussion with Nurcholish Madjid.

In Golkar, the government-oriented party whose continued political existence alongside Suharto has been mutually beneficial, Muslim influence now has predominance, but at the same time is more or less equally divided into pro-Suharto and pro-reform factions. Mahendra stressed repeatedly in the television interviews that followed Suharto's resignation, perhaps protesting too much, that the procedure was constitutionally acceptable. On Thursday morning television in Jakarta, broadcast live, reading the speech which Mahendra helped to prepare, President Suharto announced:

'... Therefore, in line with Article 8 of the 1945 Constitution and after earnestly taking into consideration the views of the leadership of the factions in h, I have decided to declare that I quit being the president of the Republic of Indonesia as of the time I read this on this day, Thursday, 21 May 1998.'

Suharto's swift departure took the momentum out of the protest movement, and allowed the army and established politicians to manage an orderly transfer of power. To the disappointment of reformers it left many Suharto loyalists in top positions, and even allowed the former president to resign with dignity, his family's wealth mostly intact The end of Suharto's political restrictions allowed Islamic parties to flourish, some of them pretty extreme.

Jonathan Head BBC

Loud cheers seemed to echo across Jakarta for the rest of the day. Then the reality set in for the pro-democracy forces: the battle for reform had just begun. Predictably, newspaper editorials were divided on the interpretation of the Constitution in respect of the President's ability to execute his duties of office. Article 8 read: 'Should the President die, cease from executing or be unable to execute his duties during his term in office, his office shall be taken by the Vice-President until the expiry of that term.' Under Habibie, an early compromise seemed to have been reached for elections to be held by the end of 1998, but the persistent demand for reform is only just beginning in a post-Suharto era. For those capable of ousting Habibie, the danger in moving too soon would be that with the Indonesian economy still in shreds, they too might attract the wrath of the people if no improvement is in sight. On the other hand, delay might mean disadvantage in terms of not being able to steer the momentum of reform.

One of the first political effects of Suharto's resignation was the loss of presidential patronage for Prabowo. Wiranto wasted no time in replacing him: on Saturday 23 May, the new Kostrad commander was Major General Johnny Lumintang (a Menadonese, like Prabowo, with command experience in East Timor). But within a day, after a doubtful rumour that two battalions of troops had refused to serve under the new commander, he was replaced by Major (now Lieutenant) General Djamari Chaniago, a Minangkabau from West Sumatra. Ironically, Prabowo was transferred to Bandung to head the military staff college (Seskoad) for officers who have ambitions of being promoted. Lumintang's position prior to the shift was in Kopassus, but the replacement for him there, Major-General Muchdi Purwo Pranyoto, also underwent rapid replacement by Major-General Syahrir, former head of the Udayana command in East Indonesia. Wiranto, implying that the transfers had no connection with events in Jakarta during the last week, said that these changes had been planned some time ahead, but this was, at best, stretching credibility.

Another early sign of the political change was that word spread concerning the possible release of political prisoners from Cipinang prison. Cipinang, that Sunday morning, had never witnessed anything like this before: relatives of inmates were being allowed in -- that was not unusual -- but in addition, there was a crowd of forty or more foreign and local media representatives, pressing against the large, green steel door of the prison, pressing the prison authorities to be allowed in to record any historic release. Any release, they were told, would be on Monday: but they were allowed in nevertheless, and witnessed an extraordinary pro-democracy rally inside Cipinang.

I was singled out by the authorities for not having the required identification, unlike the Swedish, Dutch, German, Swiss, Americans and so on. But the prison authorities were amenable to my idea of participating in this historic moment and I was able to reach the inner courtyard. Here were four of the thirteen prisoners, including Colonel Latief, who had been accused (by Suharto) of involvement in the 1965 coup which was the springboard used by Major-General Suharto, then head of Kostrad, to oust President Sukarno.

I asked Latief about the coup, not only his involvement but Suharto's too. President Suharto's account of the coup has been that agents of the Indonesian communist party (PKI) kidnapped and killed six top generals in the early morning hours of 1 October 1965. The troops that collected the generals from their homes came from President Sukarno's palace guard, the Cakrabirawa regiment. One of the generals, at that time Minister of Defence, Nasution, escaped this fate but his lieutenant was taken in his place. Suharto has never satisfactorily explained how it was that he himself was not targeted, nor how Kostrad headquarters (whose job it was to quash such army rebelliousness) was bypassed by the 'coup plotters'. In subsequent prosecutions of persons involved, the most serious category (Category A) was designated for persons who had prior knowledge of 'the coup' and did not act to prevent it. Most of these were given death sentences. Perhaps because Latief was close to Suharto during the 1945-49 struggle, or perhaps because Latief was not involved in the actual kidnapping and killing in 1965, he was sentenced to 'life'. In evidence at his trial -- which was delayed for thirteen years -- and in his interview with me, he claimed that Suharto himself had far more than just 'prior knowledge' - he was on intimate terms with the coup-plotters and used this trust to gain the ascendancy after the 'coup' had taken place.

Latief, Colonel Untung and General Supardjo were accused of being the three main conspirators. Latief told me the plan he had with Untung and Supardjo did not involve any killing whatsoever. Their intention was to take the generals to President Sukarno in order to have them explain their alleged links with foreign intelligence services. To this extent, Sukarno may have had some prior warning, although Latief did not confirm this. Latief, having spoken with Untung and Supardjo on 30 September 1965, explained that then he went to inform Suharto of these plans, and they met in the hospital where Suharto's son, Tommy, was recovering from a minor burn injury. 'That evening I went to the army hospital to report that the generals were to confront Sukarno [to explain themselves] the next morning.'

Question: 'Did Suharto know about this already?' 'Yes, he did.' Latief had met with Suharto in his home, in the presence of Suharto's wife, Tien, a few days before. Latief had been closely associated with Suharto for two decades, since the Indonesian independence struggle. Suharto and Untung also were close friends. Latief said that when he told Suharto at the hospital that the plan to take the generals to Sukarno would proceed the following morning, Suharto acknowledged this without reply.

Latief added, however, that Suharto was also closely aligned with another figure in the 1965 coup, Kamaruzzaman (whose alias was Sjam). He and Suharto had been close since the early 1950s when Suharto was the commander of the Diponegoro Division in Central Java. Latief claimed that he did not even know Sjam until after the events that occurred that night. 'Sjam did not know me. I did not know him at all. I only knew Untung.'

Latief said that he himself had nothing to do with the collection of the generals, this was left up to Untung and Sjam. To the question 'Who killed the generals?', Latief replied: 'This was done following the orders of Sjam.' Sjam had a long history of acting in the role of a double agent, going back as far as the Indonesian independence struggle when Sjam was an undercover police informer working under Police Commissioner Mudigdo in Central Java. Moreover, in the late 1950s, Sjam also worked as an informant to Colonel Sutarto of Seskoad, in Bandung, also renewing his friendship with Suharto at the same institute. (In a previous interview, General Nasution informed me that Sutarto was known to be closely linked with the Central Intelligence Agency, specifically with Guy Pauker.) At the same time, Commissioner Mudigdo's daughter was the wife of Aidit, who in 1965 was the head of the PKI. Aidit and Sjam had been linked for two decades, as had Sjam and Suharto.

Probably through the intercession of Sjam, Aidit was present at Halim airforce base where the generals were taken after the kidnappings. However, Aidit was kept in the background at Halim, apparently in a closed or locked quarters, and separate from the area where the remaining three generals were killed before all six bodies were deposited in a well. During the court proceedings, Latief was accused of ordering the killings of the generals, but this was quashed because Sjam admitted in court that he ordered the killings.

My interview with Latief -- the first since his imprisonment more than three decades ago -- revealed that Suharto was fully informed of the plan by Latief, Untung and Supardjo. During his trial in 1978, Latief drew attention to his meetings with President and Tien Suharto, but the request that they appear as witnesses was declared 'not relevant' by the court. Because Suharto himself had foreknowledge of the alleged 'communist coup', he too should have been placed in 'Category A' involvement; he too was 'terlibat' (involved) and should be brought to account for his role.

Before catching my flight -- my ten days in Jakarta were over -- I met Madam Supeni, whom I had not seen since her 70th birthday party which had been held in one of Jakarta's historic buildings where, in the early 20th century, young Indonesian doctors had formed a group to promote Indonesian nationalism. In the 1960s Madam Supeni was third in line in the Foreign Ministry and a personal appointee of President Sukarno to be Indonesia's 'roving ambassador'. Now, nearly eighty years of age, she was first in line to form a new political party, the PNI, the National Unity Party of Indonesia. Her approach to reform is typical of so many in Indonesia, young in spirit and looking to the future, attempting to loosen the grip of Suharto, his 'extended family' and the supporting elite. It remains to be seen how tenaciously the army will hold onto the political power it acquired four decades ago. From the mid-1960s Suharto utilised this power, until the 1990s. However, the dynamic of power then changed when the 'extended family' began to impinge on the traditional largesse which the army considered its own.

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