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Globalisation

Hostages of Indonesia's political crisis

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The second day of the meeting of the Asia-Pacific Labour Solidarity Conference. A hundred participants, two thirds Indonesian, a third foreigners. We are discussing the effects of capitalist globalisation when, at around 3 pm, a good fifty police officers storm in, some armed with rifles.

As if they had consulted the agenda of the seminar, since militarisation was scheduled as the next topic of discussion. Pakistan was to have been the illustration, but instead we passed directly to a practical session. Welcome to Indonesia.

After two hours of stand off and negotiations, all the foreigners were placed in a lorry and taken to police headquarters in Jakarta. We seek to understand the reasons for the police raid. We soon get an answer. A little after our forced departure, the cordon of police stood aside, leaving a free hand to an Islamist far right militia, the Ka'abah Youth (AMK) which attacked the Indonesian participants with traditional sickle-shaped knives and machetes.

There were two wounded, money and computer equipment stolen, window panes and furniture broken. An operation of terror like many others recently in the archipelago, where the police force and paramilitary groups act in full complicity. We were not to be allowed to witness it.

The seminar was organised by a recently created association, Increase (Centre for Social Reform and Emancipation), which seeks to coordinate its action with national and international resistances to neo-liberal globalisation. It is largely led by the radical wing of the social movement: trade unionists, peasant or student militants, feminists with a popular base, cultural action groups. It is also supported by Infid, a significant network of development NGOs, and Walhi, the Friends of the Earth in Indonesia. Open to foreign participation (primarily regional), it was the first time that such a conference had met in the archipelago.

Some of the speakers were veritable bÃates noires for the chief of police and the fundamentalist militias: the trade unionist Dita Sari and, especially, Budiman Sudjatmiko, president of the PRD, the young People's Democratic Party. Detained during the last years of the Suharto dictatorship, they found freedom only after the election of the new president of the republic, Abdurhaman Wahid (known as 'Gus Dur').

They remain subject to constant harassment today (Budiman's house was recently subject to an arson attack) They were the first targets of the combined police-militia operation carried out against the conference, as was Kelik Ismunanto, director of Increase, whose great crime was to invite the participation of foreigners via the Internet.

There we were, 32 foreigners, at the central police station in Jakarta. We are accused of having entered Indonesian territory on a tourist visa whereas we intended to take part in the conference. Actually, the majority among us did not need any visa to come to Indonesia!

A protest was organised. Lawyers from the Legal Action Group, the media, the activist networks and the embassies were contacted. Mobile telephones definitely work wonders - we were not dependent on the goodwill of the cops to telephone, which makes a beautiful difference. In the meeting room where we are kept, at the police headquarters, there was a television. Our detention was broadcast on the news. It was, clearly, political.

Volatile situation

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/wahid.jpg>] Wahid

The situation in Indonesia is indeed most volatile. We obviously knew it before going to the country. Forces loyal to the old dictatorial regime, the 'New Order' of General Suharto, driven out of office in 1998, have again taken the offensive. The democratic transition has become bogged down. The heterogeneous coalition that carried Abdurrahman Wahid to the presidency has collapsed. Today in a minority in Parliament, he is threatened with dismissal. He is resolutely opposed by the chief of the police force, who has refused to resign to be replaced by his deputy.

The crisis has more than one face: irredentism at the periphery of the archipelago, new assertions of religious fundamentalism, political factionalism and military activism, a brutal growth of social inequalities are among the factors at work. In this context, the PRD plays the role of scapegoat, denounced on two fronts. It is first accused of being Communist in a country where, in 1965-1966, more than one million 'Communists' were massacred, one of the greatest massacres of the century that set up Suharto's 'New Order'. For 30 years anti-Communism was the cement of the dominant ideology.

The PRD is also accused of supporting President Wahid. Which is to a certain extent true. Indeed, if this party is severely critical of the neo-liberal policy implemented by the government, it is no less actively opposed to the forcible overthrow of the presidency by the forces of the old regime, gathered behind the more respectable figure of Megawati Sukarnoputri (the vice-president, who will become president if Wahid goes).

The participants in the Asia-Pacific Labour Solidarity Conference thus became hostages of the Indonesian crisis. The charges against us were really not very credible. For once, the media turned against the police and the militia. "Democracy in danger" headlined the leading article of the Jakarta Post on June 11. The embassies were mobilised. The state apparatus proved itself divided: the Immigration office delivered a death blow to the police department by revealing that it had never been briefed on the operation, supposedly carried out in its name, and by finally bringing no charge against the foreigners (except the unfortunate Farooq Tariq, of the Labour Party of Pakistan, expelled from the territory under the pretext that he had indeed come with a tourist visa).

On Monday June 11, we were free. If the conference could not complete its work, the business was concluded with a political victory. It is nonetheless very serious. It shows to what point the democratic rights gained after the overthrow of Suharto remain fragile and are called into question.

The police machinery awaits its time and it obviously will not destroy the blacklist of foreigners established on this occasion. Above all, the raid on the conference illustrates to what point our Indonesian friends are threatened today.

Faced with the police, the army and the new fundamentalist militia, they live in a situation of great daily insecurity. A situation which is likely to worsen as the reactionary offensive against the presidency of 'Gus Dur' reaches a climax.

They will need all our solidarity.