The Student Movement and the Rise and Fall of Suharto
By Eric Beerkens

In a hospital in Jakarta, the former president of the Republic of Indonesia is fighting for his live. Suharto’s 32 year reign over the archipelago has brought development at a high cost. For most, his name is inextricably connected with corruption, collusion and nepotism. Only few will remember him as Bapak Pembangunan (the ‘father of development’, as Suharto was fondly called in his better days). Among the few bright spots in his dark history is his realisation of near universal primary education. In terms of higher education, his legacy includes the expansion of the Indonesian higher education system by establishing universities in all provinces in the vast country and by allowing private providers.

But the activities in and around these institutions became under increasingly strict control of his New Order regime. Students and academics have played a major role throughout the modern history of Indonesia and especially in the Suharto Era. Many courageous men and women have given their lives in the struggle for change and freedom. First in the movement towards independence from the Dutch, later in the transition from the Old to the New Order that brought Suharto into power and ten years ago, in the Reformasi movement that ultimately led to his fall.

The 1960s: Helping Suharto in the saddle

Suharto’s rise to power started with the 30 September movement, an event surrounded by mysteries, even after more than 40 years. The official Indonesian version claims that the unsuccessful coup was staged by the communist party. Other versions point to the involvement of the army and even western intelligence agencies. At that time, the Indonesian student community was heavily politically polarized. The most prominent student organisations were linked to political organisations. The students aligned with the anti-communist parties played an important role in the transfer of leadership from Sukarno to Suharto. The most powerful of these organizations was Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia (KAMI), a federation of student organisations established on October 27th 1965.

KAMI, backed by the army and encouraged by Suharto, organised many anti-Sukarno protests and these protests played an important role in strengthening General Suharto’s position. Their demands, known as the Tritura, or the three demands of the people, aimed at lower prices, reform of the cabinet and the abolition of the communist party. Legitimate demands, considering that the population almost collapsed from soaring prices on account of the 600% inflation.

On the 24th of February 1966, presidential guards killed two student demonstrators outside the presidential palace in Jakarta. Two days later, KAMI was officially banned by Sukarno. But they continued to protest and this ultimately led to the effective transfer of authority to Suharto on March 11 1966 (through the Supersemar decree) and to the legitimation of Suharto’s formal installation as acting president on March 12 1967 and president on March 21 1968. The New Order had begun. And as the New Order consolidated its power, it progressively tightened controls on the freedom of expression…

The 1970s: Rising Discontent and the Malari Riots

In the early years of the New Order there was little campus-based opposition to Suharto. Leftist students and scholars had been purged and those who remained were largely supportive of Suharto’s commitment to opening the economy to world markets. The tightening control of the New Order however, already became apparent in the early seventies. Its hostility to political life, its embrace of foreign investment, and close relationships with wealthy businessmen, began to draw criticism both from some former campus supporters and from a new generation of students.

On 22 January 1970, student protests were banned following a series of demonstrations against corruption. These were sparked by the findings of a Suharto-appointed commission that found that corruption was widespread throughout government. The commission was shut down soon
afterwards. Later, in 1971, anti-corruption demonstrations were staged again by the students, this time to protest against Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (a park portraying a miniature version of Indonesia), an extravagant project and a brainchild of Siti Hartinah, Suharto’s wife. Suharto declared that he would use all force at his disposal, against whatever activity geared towards opposition against the project. In the next years, student protests continued. These protests were aimed at the increased foreign influence, the government’s open embrace of foreign capital (in the early years, largely Japanese) and the poor economic conditions and also to the ongoing corruption. The ‘rice crises’ of 1972 and 1973 pushed many Indonesians back into hard economic times, and led to political instability, expressed mostly again by student demonstrations.

In early 1974, the protests culminated in to the so-called Malari riots (Malapetaka Lima Belas Januari or January 15th Catastrophe). During a visit of Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, student demonstrations broke out involving tens of thousands and lead to violence, looting and fires. Students targeted the most visible symbol of the Japanese presence in Indonesia: the showroom of Astra, the local firm which imported Toyota cars from Japan. The riots only were brought under control a day later, after the army troops killed about 11 demonstrators. The Malari riots had far reaching effects, especially for the free expression of critique. As Mackie and McIntyre put it:

“Intra-elite politics was henceforth to be quarantined from the masses. In that sense, Malari marked a decisive shift from the relatively open pluralistic phase of political life under the New Order towards one in which society based forces were to be largely excluded and rendered almost powerless to influence state policies or the distribution at the top.”

After the riots, hundreds of Indonesians (among which were many students) were put on trial and prominent student leaders and several faculty were imprisoned. Critical journalists were also imprisoned and six of Jakarta’s most independent and critical newspapers, including two which had supported Suharto in 1965-67, were closed down. Measures were taken to give the central government greater control over student activity. This included a requirement that students obtain a permit for all on-campus activities and enactment of regulations forcing formerly party-affiliated student organizations to join a single organization controlled by the government. Academic freedom and freedom of expression were gradually called to a halt...

**The Campus Normalisation Law of 1978**

A major student protest movement emerged in 1977 in the wake of parliamentary elections in May of that year. Public criticism of the government grew at the end of 1977, with critics continuing to attack economic policies which they saw as favouring a handful of wealthy capitalists with access to Suharto. In the run-up to the general session of parliament scheduled to hold presidential elections in March 1978 (with Suharto up for a third 5 year term), student leaders in the major student cities like Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya and Medan staged a series of rallies. They called for the replacement of Suharto and an overhaul of the economic and political system.

In January 1978, the student council at the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) published the *Buku Putih Perjuangan Mahasiswa Indonesia* (White Book of the 1978 Students’ Struggle). The editor’s note to the translation states that this white book represents “the first systematic Indonesian critique of the domestic policies of the New Order regime”. The White Book trashes the government for endemic corruption, economic policies which facilitate self-enrichment at the expense of social welfare, repression of independent political voices, and losing touch with the people. It didn’t take long before the White Book was banned and student leaders in Bandung, and other cities where student councils had been active, were put on trial.

The government clamped down on the entire campus community following the 1978 protests. Through a policy formally known as ‘Normalization of Campus Life’ (*Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus*) and the establishment of the Campus Coordinating Body (*Badan Koordinasi Kampus*), the government banned political expression and activity from the campuses and placed all student activities under the supervision and control of the university rectors. Student councils ceased to
function, campus newspapers were heavily censored, public meetings on current events were banned. Rectors were made accountable to the military authorities and to the Ministry of Education and Culture for implementation of the policies.

The university became an important site of military intelligence operations. Undercover agents attended seminars and campus-based ‘Student Regiments’ increasingly served as an on-campus intelligence network to monitor the activity of other students. Student rallies were routinely broken up by security forces. After 1978, scores of students were imprisoned for political crimes, many under broadly worded laws criminalizing deviation from the state ideology, disrespect for the president or vice-president, and public expression of hate or insult directed against the government.

**The 1980s: Ongoing Repression, Ongoing Resentment**

During the 1980s, the entire academic community suffered from the pervasive security presence on campus and the government’s hostility to independent political expression. Pressures on faculty to conform to this control and repression were imposed through a variety of measures, including central government control over promotion decisions, denial of travel privileges to critical professors, monitoring academic seminars, and press and book censorship. As civil servants, faculty at public universities were required to pledge loyalty to the Golkar party, and to wear civil servant uniforms on designated days each month.

The economic growth had resulted in sharp increases in overall enrolments and a proliferation of new private higher education institutions to serve the children of an expanding middle class. At the same time, a wide range of Indonesians (including an important segment of the new middle class) was increasingly demanding greater freedom of expression and the opening of the political system to broader citizen participation. Student activists, who had been driven underground and radicalized by the repressive campus policies instituted in the late 1970s, were an important source of pressure.

Throughout the eighties, students in Indonesian universities formed off-campus discussion clubs where they read and debated political and social theories. The first arrests of students associated with such a study club took place in 1988 when three members of the Palagan Study Club in Yogyakarta were arrested and sentenced on subversion charges to prison terms ranging from seven to eight and a half years.

Those arrests helped spur the student movement, particularly in Yogyakarta, whose plethora of colleges and universities facilitated inter-campus organizing. Students began to join forces with NGOs to defend the interests of peasants evicted from their land for development or commercial purposes and workers deprived of the right to organize. The turn of the decade experienced a revival of student activities. In October 1990, demonstrations broke out in Yogyakarta against the conviction of a Universitas Gadjah Madah student for distributing works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia’s most important writer and longstanding Suharto critic (he was jailed or put under house arrest for most of the New Order Era). Yogyakarta students also staged demonstrations in support of families about to be displaced by the Kedung Ombo dam. Students from Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga were detained and questioned in 1991 for distributing a calendar which caricatured government leaders. In 1993, Surabaya students protested against the death of Marsinah, a young female labour activist. And so on…

**The 1990s: ‘Responsible Openness’**

A new higher education law passed in 1989 and a government regulatory decree issued in 1990 (*Peraturan Pemerintah 30*) included guarantees for both academic freedom and scientific autonomy. President Suharto himself publicly endorsed broader openness in Indonesian society. On campuses, this was reflected in a decree allowing the reestablishment of campus-wide student senates for the first time in over a decade. At that time, some government officials and campus administrators informally began to allow more room for campus-based activities. Many academics and intellectuals took advantage of the opening to push for more fundamental reform. One of
them was Mochtar Lubis, novelist, journalist and intellectual. In a 1990 interview with Adam Schwartz he states:

"There is no time to waste. Indonesians must be allowed to develop their critical faculties so they can understand what’s happening to themselves, to their society and in the world. Not just understand, but be able to analyse and make choices. Members of society are not allowed to be critical so how can they be creative? How can you expect people to create, to think, if there is no climate of freedom? Without fostering our intellectual strengths, which means letting people say what they think without fear, Indonesians will remain coolies in their own country. It’s terrifying to think that just to say common things you have to be so careful. When you reach that stage, and that’s where we are, you have to realize we’ve arrived at a critical situation."

The government however repeatedly insisted that the kind of openness that it endorsed was ‘responsible openness’ and because there was no real protection for basic rights, citizens never could be sure what the exact meaning of ‘responsible’ was and how far the opening extended.

Faculty as well as students became more active and more vocal on social and political issues in the 1990s. Faculty spoke out on behalf of academic freedom, joined off-campus human rights and democracy advocacy groups, and lent their expertise to NGO campaigns on a wide range of issues, from women’s rights to legal reform. While students and faculty played an important role in the push for greater openness, they also continued to define the limits of government tolerance. The most prominent victim from the academic community was Sri Bintang Pamungkas, economist at the University of Indonesia and one-time Member of Parliament. He emerged as a leading public proponent of democratic reform but was arrested twice for his actions against the government, first in 1995 and again in 1997.

Public demands for change and openness continued throughout the 1990s. In the run-up to parliamentary elections held in May 1997, students organised the golput (open ballot) campaign calling for an election boycott. The call for reform also increasingly came from social scientists in the universities and even the national research institutes. Political scientist Mochtar Pabottingi for instance (in an interview with Human Rights Watch in 1997) argued that the government’s monopolisation of the truth formed the fundamental obstacle to intellectual freedom.

1998: The Beginning of the End

The monetary crises that raged throughout Southeast Asia in 1997/1998 also arrived in Indonesia. And it hit it hard! The beginning of the end for Suharto really took off in January 1998. The Indonesian Rupiah collapsed and was accompanied by an outpouring of demands for an end to Suharto’s 32 year rule. In early March opposition leaders failed to pose any significant challenge to Suharto and Indonesia’s parliament unanimously elected Suharto for a seventh five-year term. Again, the student protest movement became the nationwide focus of opposition to Suharto.

I happened to be in Indonesia from March until early May in 1998 and the country was moving towards a boiling point at that time. The man in the street was disillusioned with politics. KKN (Korupsi, Kolusi & Nepotisme) and the Krismon (Krisis Moneter) dominated the talk in the streets. People were hit hard by the high prices for basic necessities. In accordance with the IMF packages, government subsidies on commodities like gasoline, rice, sugar and cooking oil were cut, and price hikes occurred on a daily basis. The young were angered and bitter, but at the same time they embodied the aspiration for change. All this anger and hope came together in the student movements that bubbled up in and around campuses across the country.

Like in 1974 and 1978, the campus-based demonstrations once again rose to national prominence against a background of growing public dissatisfaction with the country’s leadership. The movement involved literally hundreds of thousands of students from hundreds of institutions, private as well as public, secular as well as Muslim and Christian, in large and small cities. The movement could not be neglected by the country’s leadership, neither could they suppress it. Change slowly became inevitable.
The students were actively supported by many faculty, alumni, and university administrators. Even the university rectors and senior professors joined the students. In April, Poncol Marjada, Rector of Dr. Soetomo University in Surabaya read a statement formally calling on students to participate in the demonstrations to express their concerns. Loekman Soetrisno, professor at Universitas Gadjah Mada declared that “If Martin Luther King could trigger the birth of a new America, you, too, the young people, can create a new Indonesia.”

On April 16, there were demonstrations at 30 campuses in Jakarta and in Bandung, Surabaya, Malang and Semarang. The day after, Suharto threatened to employ his elite troops (KOPASSUS). But student protests were not only staged in Java. University cities around the archipelago were joining the movement. Late April, 5000 students clash with security forces in Medan on Sumatra. Many get injured, many get arrested. Rallies were held in Padang, Lampung, Medan, Ujung Pandang, Denpassar and other campuses. From Aceh to Irian Jaya, rallies were staged, all attended by thousands of students. But the protests reached a climax in May, when students increasingly were joined by non-academics at rallies...

May 1998: The Student Movement and the Fall of Suharto

On May 8, one demonstrating student was killed in Yogyakarta. Demonstrations in Bogor a day later, demanded another casualty. The two deaths increased the tension between the students and the army. The 12th of May was the day that came to be known as Tragedi Trisakti. Four students lost their lives during a peaceful demonstration at Trisakti University in Jakarta. The Trisakti students - Hendriawan Sie, Hafidhin Royan, Elang Mulia Lesmana and Hery Hartanto - were later dubbed the Pahlawan Reformasi (heroes of reform). Another 18 fellow students were wounded. The next morning, thousands of students gathered at the Trisakti campus for a memorial ceremony where opposition leaders Megawatti Sukarnoputri and Amin Rais addressed the students.

Around noon, the crowds outside the campus grew and so did the unrest. Around the campus, riots broke out and spread to nearby areas and then to all over Jakarta (with little or no participation of the students). Shops were trashed or set on fire after they had been looted and the Chinese community was targeted in particular. The riots went on all night, and the next day they spread all over Jakarta and Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi, the urban areas around Jakarta. These two days - 13 and 14 May - Jakarta was on fire. The city was in chaos. The material damage exceeded 400 million US$. Over 1000 people were killed...

Meanwhile massive peaceful demonstrations occurred in many parts of the country. After the riots, Assembly Speaker and Golkar party head Harmoko asked Suharto to step down. Suharto appears on TV and he states that he will not step down, but that new elections will be arranged in which he will not run. At the same day - May 18 - thousands of demonstrating students occupy the grounds, lobby and roof of the parliament building in Jakarta. On May 20, half a million Indonesians march in Yogyakarta and large demonstrations are held in Surakarta, Medan, Bandung and other cities.

On May 21, 1998 Suharto announces his resignation at 9 AM. Vice-President B. J. Habibie became the new President of the Republic of Indonesia...

Clearly, a modern history of Indonesia is incomplete without emphasising the role of the brave students that put their lives at risk for the sake of freedom. They experienced not one, but more than 30 years of living dangerously. So what better way to end than resonating the words of writer and activist, the late Pramoedya Ananta Toer, spoken in 1998:

“I extend my highest respect and appreciation to the students and other people who succeeded in toppling the dictator last spring. It is only their consistent action, to reform the life of the state and the nation, that can rid us of the New Order's criminal brutality and bring Indonesia to a new life.”
Sources:


