

INDONESIAISSUE

Indonesia's human rights situation since the resignation of President Soeharto in May 1998 is improving. Governmental actions and plans have been impressive, but the culture of human rights violations created by Soeharto's 30 years in power has yet to be rooted out.

BACKGROUND

Following the resignation of President Soeharto after the bloody riots of May 1998, President Habibie's government distanced itself from its predecessor by setting a date for elections, releasing political prisoners, adopting a more flexible approach on East Timor, signing a memorandum of understanding on cooperation with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ratifying the Convention against Torture, and committing to ratify other international human rights conventions. In November, the Special Session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) passed a decree requiring the ratification of all UN human rights conventions, attacking corruption, and revoking special presidential emergency powers. In addition, the police are to be separated from the military (ABRI) and, in the future, placed under civilian control. A flourishing media and a host of new political parties demanding accountability are signs of the new Indonesia. Indonesians are re-learning the art of politics; for example, Parliament revised the government's controversial draft law on demonstrations due to public pressure.

While opening up the political arena and making promises to respect human rights, the government has, nonetheless, shown a willingness to use authoritarian means to suppress dissent, and a limited comprehension of human rights. It was slow to accept the reports of organised rapes against ethnic-Chinese women during the May riots or to protect activists investigating the rapes. The investigation, after the Special Session of the MPR, of 18 prominent political figures for sedition, because they allegedly manipulated the students to bring down the government, is one example of an old practice reborn. ABRI used excessive force against students on November 13, 1998, when it had previously shown a capacity for restraint.

The government has shown increasing willingness to investigate human rights violations, but within certain limits. It appointed a Joint Fact-Finding Team to analyze the violence surrounding the May riots, but follow-up on the Team's report has lacked vigour. The trial of 11 soldiers for involvement in some of the disappearances before the overthrow of Soeharto, and the arrest of 31 soldiers for killing four Acehnese in custody in January 1999 show the change in approach. The lack of progress in the investigation of the Trisakti shootings and the low rank of the soldiers being tried, however, support the charge made by Komnas Ham (the National Human Rights Commission) in its January 1999 statement, that ABRI is failing to investigate soldiers suspected of human rights' violations.

The past year saw increased ethnic and religious violence, with attacks against ethnic Chinese, Christians and Muslims occurring in Jakarta, Solo, Surabaya, Medan, Ambon, Kupang, and elsewhere. There has been conflict in Irian Jaya and Aceh, despite troop withdrawals and an ABRI apology for human rights abuses in Aceh.